



WHITNEY BROWNE

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sive, in which dancers are cast as humans, never swans—invites her to engage emotionally, based on her personal experiences. Her interpretations of *Esplanade* in particular change constantly. “Right now, I see the comings and goings as the natural progression of things,” she said. “There’s that initial bittersweet moment, but then with change comes a new opportunity.”

That also reflects her stance in anticipation of her May graduation from HMS (see page 20). For now, Ho intends to continue her career with PTDC, holding off on taking up her medical residency for the foresee-

able future. Eventually, she wants to pursue dance medicine, an interest sparked by her recognition of the unique demands dance places on the body and her experience of suffering a dance injury as an undergraduate. In the meantime, she’s figuring out how to continue studying medicine outside medical school—perhaps by spending more time at the Harkness Center for Dance Injuries at NYU Langone Medical Center, where she completed a clinical rotation earlier this year.

“I’m at a place right now where I’m really growing and happy where I am dancing,” she said. “I’ll see where it takes me.”

five-hour rehearsal: running through pieces, learning repertory from videos, or creating new work with an outside choreographer. Then Ho would complete a kettlebell workout—“I call them ‘my moves!’”—as part of her cross-training. On the commute to her Upper East Side apartment, she’d start her homework: reviewing her choreography and reading medical articles to answer questions from the previous day’s clinical round and in preparation for the next one.

Finding the balance has been taxing, but the pursuits have been complementary. “The body is our instrument, and medicine is just understanding the body better,” said Andy LeBeau, the assistant artistic director at Taylor. “Madelyn’s become very vital to a lot of the dancers. Her nickname’s Dr. Ho, and everybody asks her questions.”

Ho’s willingness to chart her path by following her passions mimics how she’s developed as a performer. She trained as a ballerina throughout high school; when she first started as a modern dancer in college, she focused on nailing the technical movements. This tendency carried over to Taylor 2, where LeBeau noticed her determination to be perfect and worried that she might have trouble finding the artistry in the movements, or allowing herself to have fun. Now he sometimes jokes with Ho during the more intense moments of practice that it’s dance, not brain surgery. “She’s grown intelligent enough to realize that it’s about the intention,” he said. “It’s not about the actual step, and that step can change as long as the intention maintains its integrity.”

Ho has embraced the way Taylor’s choreography—at once athletic and expres-

## Not “Mickey Mousing”

*The rigors of accompanying silent films*

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

**A** HUNDRED YEARS AGO, a night at the movies meant live music. Even low-end joints had at least a violinist and pianist; grand-er establishments employed 50-piece orchestras (some of which, by the 1920s, were replaced by massive Wurlitzer organs that supplied surround-sound audio with less manpower). These days, most theaters up-sell their couch-coddled viewers with whiz-bang visuals (IMAX and 3-D)

**Robert Humphreville, a frequent Harvard Film Archive accompanist, says he’s mostly asked to play comedies, especially from “the big three”: Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton. (A scene from Keaton’s *Sherlock Jr.* appears over his shoulder.)**

and amenities fit for imperial Romans (dinner delivered to XXL reclining seats). Sound seems like nothing special.

But decades after the talkie invasion





WOLTEK LASKI/GETTY IMAGES

The Chernobyl nuclear power plant a few weeks after the disaster. In many respects, the fallout lingers.

**Chernobyl: The History of a Nuclear Catastrophe**, by Serhii Plokhii, Hrushevs'kyi professor of Ukrainian history (Basic, \$32). An accessible account of the disaster (one of many, from before World War II through the present tense military skirmishes) visited on Ukraine. The author, who was a student there at the time, weaves together personal stories, the Communist institutional context, and the fallout, literal and metaphorical, from April 26, 1986.

**Unequal and Unrepresented: Political Inequality and the People's Voice in the New Gilded Age**, by Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brady, and Sidney Verba, Pforzheimer University Professor emeritus (Princeton, \$29.95). Prompted by a chance observation that the Hearst Castle in San Simeon dated from one Gilded Era, and the recent ex-crescence of megamansions from a new, continuing one, the authors joined forces anew to build upon their two prior landmark books on the direct connections between income and wealth disparities and rising inequalities in political voice (driven, of course, by rich people's application of their wealth to the conduct of the public's business).

If writing, rather than reading, is your summer thing, **Chance Particulars**, by Sara Mansfield Taber, Ed.D. '87 (Johns Hopkins, \$19.95 paper), is a "writer's field notebook" to guide and structure your observations before you get back inside, to the drudgery of drafting and revising.

and the mass die-off of silent movies, there are niches where the art of film accompaniment survives. In the Boston area, for example, these movies are shown at university art-houses like the Harvard Film Archive (HFA), or in special screenings at independent theaters. But they're also shown in retirement homes and town halls and other unexpected corners:

for customers at the Aeronaut Brewing Company, silent films are served alongside IPAs as a hipster novelty; for members of the New England Vintage Society, watching a Harold Lloyd classic after their annual Jazz Age ball, they're a portal to a more graceful era. The silent-movie scene is a surprisingly diverse ecosystem, and its members aren't shy about approaching the accompanist afterward to say the music was too loud, or off-cue, or contained an anachronistic melody.

Martin Marks '71, Ph.D. '90, might have had this in mind when, at the HFA last summer, he introduced his piano performance for Ernst Lubitsch's *The Young Prince in Old Heidelberg* with an apology. The first half of his score had been carefully prepared, he said: "The second half is *molto improvviso*, and hopefully there are not too many disasters of forgetting what's coming up next."

Marks's painstaking approach is an outgrowth of his scholarship: now a musicologist at MIT who has published widely on film music and contributed to DVD anthologies of classic movies, he started accompanying film while in graduate school, when the HFA's first curator asked him to supply music for Lubitsch's *Lady Windemere's Fan*. Marks likes to pair a film with its original score whenever possible. But at other times, much like the theater musicians of yore, he draws from his extensive repertoire of "incidental music" (short pieces whose titles range from "Andante Agitato, Number 23" to "At the Rodeo"), filling in a "cue sheet" of scenes and music that guides him through the film.

Robert Humphreville '80, also a regular HFA accompanist (and a professional freelance pianist, organist, composer, and conductor), does comparatively little prep. For his own Lubitsch performance, *The Oyster Princess*, he watched a screener, taking notes about the plot and finding period-appropriate melodies for the fox-

trot scene in the middle, something peppy. He landed on a mix of "Ain't She Sweet" and "Hello, My Baby." "It was very 1920s," he muses in retrospect. "Almost a Charleston." In terms of hours worked, these performances are "wonderful distractions," he says. (Such gigs pay between \$250 and \$350.) Even then, he plays so many that he doesn't get attached to any particular film: "I don't develop a real fondness. They sort of come and go pretty fast." Still he, too, is strict about being historically correct. "Nothing—to me at least—is more distracting than somebody who all of a sudden takes some, you know, Beatles theme and sticks it into a silent movie."

Jeff Rapsis takes an entirely different approach to his accompaniments at the HFA and elsewhere: rather than the traditional piano, he usually plays a "just barely por-



COURTESY OF MARTIN MARKS

When he started graduate school, Martin Marks thought he would study Beethoven or Schubert ("my first loves in classical music"), but quickly got hooked on silent-film scores.

table" 75-pound synthesizer. He likes having more sonic tools within reach. With a delicate chime of bells or a deep, thrumming bass, a film "can be such an event," he says. "You can feel what's happening." At the same time, he tries to avoid being too illustrative or onomatopoeic. "If you do it too much, it's called 'Mickey-Mousing,'" he says, "It's considered bad form for an accompanist just to do that. But a little of



**When performing, Jeff Rapsis generally prefers to play his synthesizer (on the “world music setting”), though he’s recently gained facility with theater organs.**

the mind off the action and timing. “The scene changes suddenly—you have to be ready for that,” he says. “You also have to know when the movie starts and the movie ends. If you don’t know when that will be, you can get caught flat-footed.” Rapsis jokingly

CHERYL SENTER

it is really important.”

If interpretation is an art, playing for a film’s entire running time is an endurance sport. Humphreville reports that after a particularly long film, he feels the strain less in the fingers than in the neck, which gets sore from being craned toward the screen. “The last thing you want to do when you’re playing is look at the clock,” he cautions: it takes

ly compares the experience to flying a plane. “You can’t start thinking about the noise of the engine and where you are in relation to the ground. You have to stay in that zone until you come in for the landing.” When “The End” flashes on the screen, “I can finally taxi to the gate and take a break.”

Silent motion pictures can look baffling today. They seem to operate with an entire-

ly different syntax of gesture and facial expression, antic physicality and sly suggestion. The jumps from scenes to intertitles, and the lack of synced, continuous dialogue, require viewers to exert their imaginations differently. Musical accompaniment, says Rapsis, can help viewers “read” these films. Still, he believes that people intuitively take to Buster Keaton’s melancholic humor, or the almost operatic “Love with a capital L” emotions of silent melodramas. The audience isn’t aging out, in his view: “If anything, it’s getting younger.” (And as *New York Times* writer Amanda Hess has pointed out, today’s audience is continually awash in silent short films—in the form of the GIFs and memes eddying on the Internet.)

Marks advocates for silent film as a distinct art form: with it, “You can create an emotional depth and a rhythmic depth, and a feeling of life, really, and a sense of movement, a sense of time passing.” His music does not aim to *translate* that feeling for viewers; he wants to *transport* them. “Some scores tell you, you are here,” he says. “But others tell you, you are there. They try to put you back there in that world.”

## Cold Comforts

*Returning to Russia in A Terrible Country*

by MAGGIE DOHERTY

**P**ERUSING SOCIAL MEDIA in recent months, you get the sense that Russia once again looms as America’s great antagonist. Russians are meddling in our election and colluding with our president. The KGB is stealing our private data and spreading “fake news.” Anyone who says something controversial on social media can scapegoat a Russian bot. The Cold War is back, this time as farce: rather than a global contest between workers and capitalists, there are oligarchs and thugs on all sides.

In this moment of high-pitched, heated commentary, *A Terrible Country*, Keith Gessen’s second novel, arrives like a cold, welcome wind. Gessen ’97 packs his book with observations about contemporary Russian life. The liberal radio station, Echo, criticizes Putin freely; the trains still run every two minutes, but they are horribly overcrowded;

only older cars, usually driven by Chechen men, pick up passengers on the street.

But *A Terrible Country* is less a travelogue, or a guide to post-Soviet Russia, than it is a novel about life under neoliberalism—a political ideology that dictates that the market, not the state, rules the citizenry. Under neoliberalism, citizens identify primarily as consumers, and competition—for housing, healthcare, employment, even for affection and care—becomes a feature of daily life. Neoliberalism manifests differently in different countries, and Gessen takes care to describe the forms of political and economic oppression specific to the novel’s setting. Nevertheless, to an American reader, life in Putin’s Russia looks more familiar than she might expect.

To show the continuity between these former Cold War enemies, Gessen deploys an ideal narrator: Andrei Kaplan, a Rus-

sian-born American academic, who observes Moscow with a useful combination of knowledge and naïveté. Preparing for his trip, Andrei expects to encounter a country in turmoil. “I had half expected to be arrested at the airport! I thought I’d be robbed on the train.” But when he arrives, he is struck by how copacetic he finds the country, and by how much has changed since he visited as a college student in the late nineties. Russia “had become rich,” he muses. “Looking out the window, it was hard to square all the talk of bloody dictatorship with all the people in expensive suits, getting into Audis, talking on their cell phones. ...For me—and not just for me, I think—Soviet oppression and Soviet poverty had always been inextricably intertwined.” But laissez-faire economics don’t benefit everyone. *A Terrible Country* aims to show how oppression and luxury coexist.

GESSEN, who immigrated to America with his family in 1981, when he was six, has written elsewhere about the country of his birth. A founding editor of the leftist liter-

*A Terrible Country*,  
by Keith Gessen ’97  
(Viking, \$26)