

Dancers on a mission for Ukraine

Principal dancer, artistic director and producer of the Grand Kyiv Ballet of Ukraine Oleksandr Stoianov spoke to **BRIAN BENNION** from New Zealand as the company prepares to tour Australia in the coming weeks.

THE stage has become something of a place of exile for the dancers of the Grand Kyiv Ballet of Ukraine.

Since the outbreak of war last year, at the request of their families, the company has remained outside of Ukraine.

Formed in 2014 by the premier dancer of the National Opera of Ukraine Oleksandr Stoianov, the company has performed on stages throughout Europe, United States, China, and South America and now comes to Australia with a performance at the Ipswich Civic Centre.

Stoianov formed the company as part of the plan for his future but the plan abruptly changed as war broke out.

Renowned for his high jumps and energy, he had risen to become the premier dancer of the National Opera of Ukraine and was named People's Artist of Ukraine in 2019.

"As an artist our career is too short. We can work and dance on the stage just 20 years, and after this many of our dancers they can't do anything," he said.

"This was to be my life after the stage. I didn't want to stop at 40 years.

"Now we have another mission. When the war started, we started dancing for Ukrainians.

"We work with the Red Cross and we support

"Through our performances I hope the world knows more about our country. This is about freedom. This is why all the world is helping Ukraine because it is not just a Ukrainian war. It is really about freedom and democracy."

– Oleksandr Stoianov

medical care in our country.

"We have two missions. First, it is to help our country to win this war and then our second mission is a cultural mission. We want people to know more about our culture."

The Forest Song is the first act of the production which takes audiences through mythological images from Ukrainian fairy tales.

"This is original Ukrainian ballet with Ukrainian costumes, Ukrainian history and



Grand Kyiv principal dancer Oleksandr Stoianov performs the traditional Ukraine ballet Forest Song.

a mix of ballet and Ukrainian folk dance.

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The company is performing the final dates of their tour of New Zealand before they head to Queensland for the first leg of their tour of Australia.

Performing on stages

on the other side of the world as war rages in their country is however a surreal experience for the all-Ukrainian company.

"My wife and my son and daughter are now in the USA with our friend but my wife's parents are still in Ukraine. They say this is our home and we don't want to leave our country. Many of my friends now are on the front line. They are not soldiers. They fight for their country, just normal people.

"I try not to watch the news a lot because it is

really hard. The first two or three months my wife cried every day. No news, bad news, bad news, many people have died. We call our family and friends every day to find out how they are, to ask about our country, what they need, what we can do, and we pray that soon Ukrainians will win and return our lands back."

Back on stage the company's emotional performances are receiving accolades.

"All people are very emotional. After the performance the audience

gives that emotion back to the artists," Stoianov said.

"Our dancers are putting in 100 percent with heart and spirit. It is a very emotional moment when after the performance we have the Ukrainian flag. It is a very emotional moment for us. Dancers still cry on the stage and people get caught in that moment."

The Grand Kyiv Ballet of Ukraine perform the Ukrainian Forest Song and Don Quixote at the Ipswich Civic Centre on May 14.

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