



## Defenders of Ukrainian cultural identity

Grand Kyiv Ballet's "Giselle" March 15 helps renovate national ballet college

BY CHRISTOPHER BARKER

**S**ome Ukrainians are defending homeland territory. Other patriots are defending national cultural identity.

Georgians who support Ukraine and the art of ballet can show up for both on Friday, March 15, when the Grand Kyiv Ballet dances "Giselle" at Atlanta Symphony Hall. Another performance on the company's tour of 60 cities is at the Miller Center in Augusta March 14.

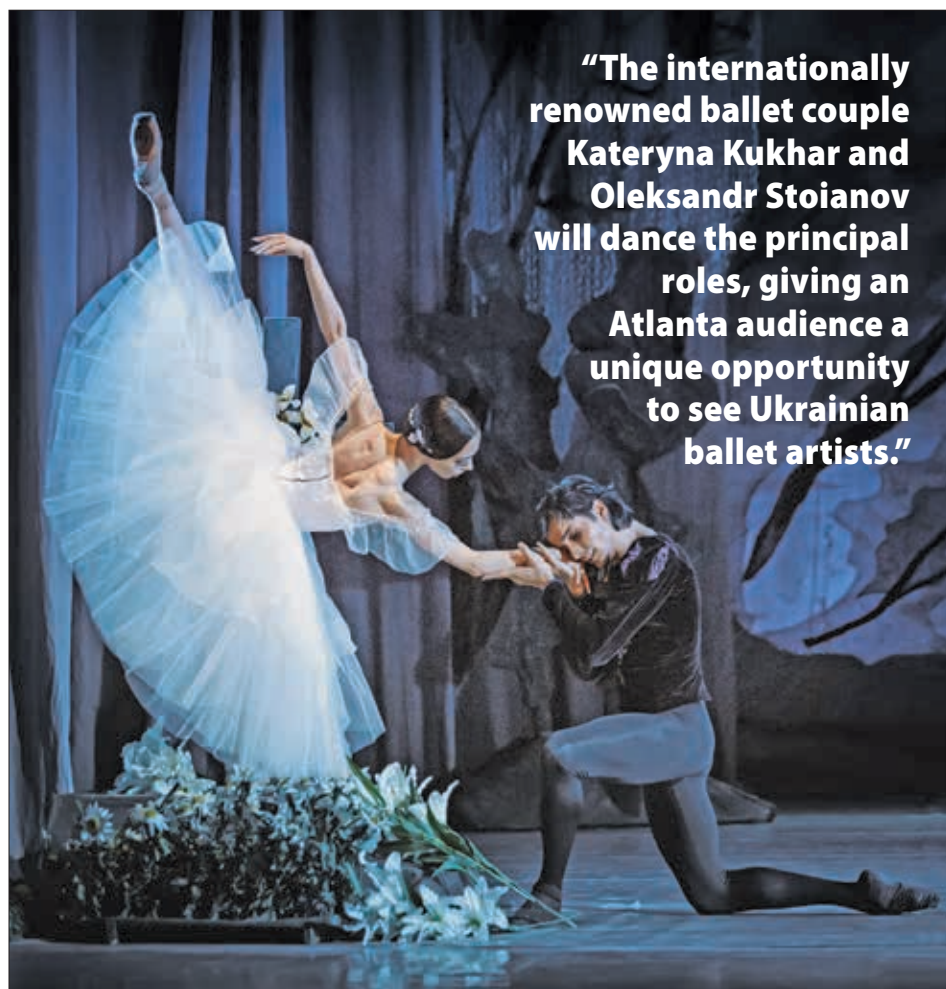
The internationally renowned ballet couple Kateryna Kukhar and Oleksandr Stoianov will dance the principal roles, giving an Atlanta audience a unique opportunity to see Ukrainian ballet artists. Temporarily based at the International Ballet Academy in Bellevue, Washington, the Grand Kyiv Ballet is touring with a troupe of 35 of its 120 dancers, a U.S. tour including 25 Ukrainians joined by other dancers from the United States, Japan, Italy, Kyrgyz and Moldova.

"The directors of International Ballet – our American family – invited us to have a safe place when the war started," says Stoianov. "Some students from this academy work with us, and I like to have a lot of collaboration with American dancers, because Ukraine and the United States ballet schools have a little different style that is interesting to us."

Tickets for the "Giselle" tour at aso.org, ticketmaster.com and 404-733-4800 range from \$39 to \$124, plus fees, with a portion of each ticket donated to the renovation of Kiev State Ballet (or Choreographic) College, which has trained Kukhar, Stoianov and most other world-acclaimed ballet artists Ukraine has produced.

Kukhar now leads Kiev State Ballet College and was at an international ballet competition in Berlin with her college students who won six medals for Ukraine when Russia invaded their homeland Feb. 24, 2022, while Stoianov was in Menton, France, preparing for a final production before planning to return home.

Their children were in Ukraine when Russia attacked their country for the second time – their daughter, now 9 years old, was with a babysitter, and their now 14-year-old son was with his godfather. "It was 5 a.m., the babysitter called and was crying and saying she didn't



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Complicated efforts to extricate the two children were "the most terrible days in our lives," says their mother. "For me, it was shock; I can't speak right, I can't breathe right, I can't do anything."

After walking the last eight hours past 40 kilometers of traffic gridlock, her son reached Ukraine's border with Hungary and the arms of his mother on his 11th birthday. He asked why she was crying, saying "in a few days the war will finish and we have to come back home because I have a birthday and my friends are waiting for me and they'd like to make a party," says Kukhar, adding: "And they cry more and more."

The family has found temporary refuge in Seattle, where Kukhar and Stoianov are teaching ballet students at the invitation of Vera Altunina and the International Ballet Academy.

Their own storied careers began as ballet students in Ukraine. Stoianov is from a small city in now Russian-occupied Crimea where "nobody knows about ballet," and his first interest was ballroom dance, which he had seen on television. He was attracted to "the nice hair and beautiful girls with interesting costumes" and competed in a city ballroom competition where a former ballet dancer in the audience convinced his father that Stoianov had the physicality and skills to change his direction in dance.

At the age of 5, Kukhar found training for the national gymnastics team painful and switched her focus to ballet, which her mother had wanted to pursue before becoming a pianist. Kukhar and her husband trained at their country's ballet college for 7-8 years, earned master's degrees in theatrical arts and have danced together for 15 years.

"A ballet dancer must study every day and be a life-long student," says Kukhar, though the couple's training regimen and performance preparation are vastly different. Kukhar often trains for up to seven hours, while her husband says two hours is his maximum. Kukhar is at performance halls two hours before curtain, focusing in a period of silence, while Stoianov prefers to arrive 30 minutes before show time.

Despite the differences, "we're still together," says Kukhar with a laugh. "We have different styles of preparation, but on stage we stay like one body, one soul, one movement."

"And one brain," adds her husband. Kukhar began dancing with the National Opera and Ballet of Ukraine in 2000, and Stoianov began in 2006, both becoming principal dancers. The National Opera and Ballet of Ukraine has 10 solo ballet artists, with Kukhar dancing prima ballerina roles in more than 1,700 productions.

Kukhar's noteworthy versatility and technique have won awards that include Honored Artist of Ukraine in 2004 and Order of Princess Olga Prize Pride of Ukraine in 2017.

In 2019 also named Honored Artist of Ukraine, Stoianov founded Grand Kyiv Ballet in 2014 with two thoughts in mind. First, "the National Opera is a big theater, and they can't tour a lot," and second, "I'm from Crimea, and before Russia took my home I worked a lot with Russian ballet. They took my home, and I took their territory on the cultural front."

Based in Poland and in search of a home theater when not touring, Grand Kyiv Ballet opened with a small tour in France a decade ago and now has "many contracts

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