

# Defenders

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two to three years forward around the world. We took a lot of [canceled] Russian contracts in New Zealand, Australia, Japan and all European countries. People now know not Moscow or Petersburg ballet; they know Grand Kyiv Ballet. It's our win on the cultural front."

Kukhar is prima ballerina for both the National Opera and Ballet and Grand Kyiv Ballet, while Stoianov now devotes his efforts to the touring company. Kukhar still returns to Ukraine frequently for work with ballet college students, parents and ballet performances at the National Opera and Ballet's Kyiv Opera House home in the center of the city.

Performance audiences are limited to the number who can fit into nearby bomb shelters. Kukhar danced in one performance that was interrupted by air raid sirens six times, including one that sent dancers, audience and staff to a shelter for 90 minutes after 20 minutes of the first act. "These are the lives which everyday people must live," she says.

"One month before Russian rockets destroyed the theater in Mariupol and many people died, we danced in this theater and we were very shocked to receive this message," says Stoianov.

The ballet college hasn't suffered any Russian attacks, but electrical and water outages in Kyiv have affected the education of the college's 200 ballet students. Without heat in cold weather, "it's impossible to study for children," he adds.

Stoianov notes that the college diverted its state financial support to Ukraine's military after the 2022 invasion.

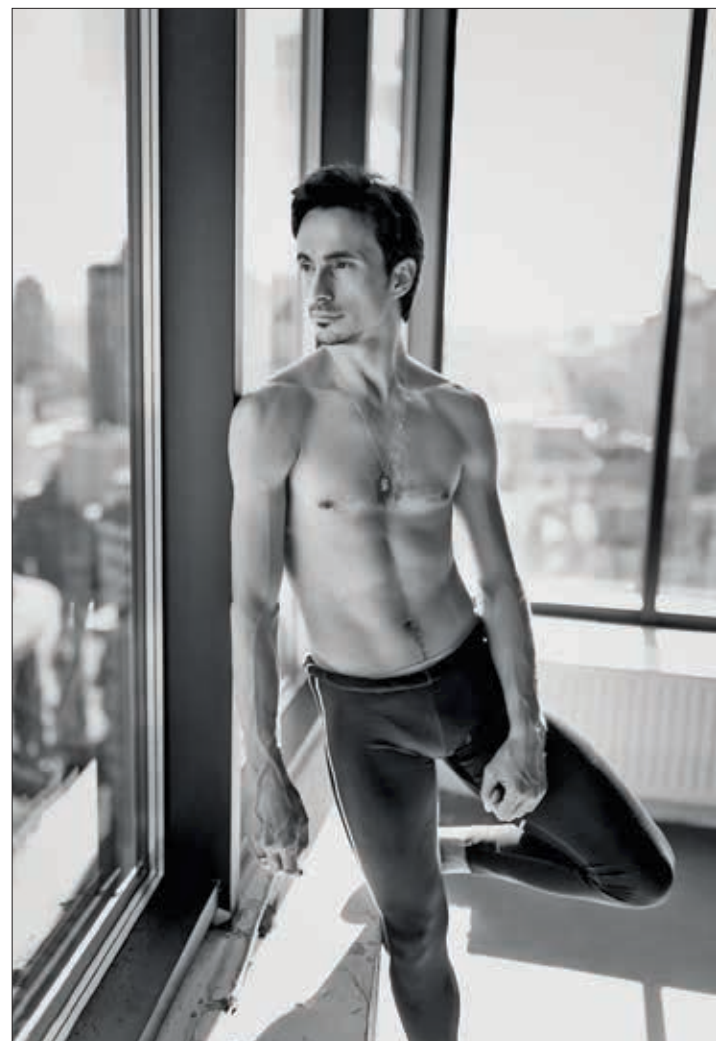
Kiev State Ballet College hasn't been renovated in its 80 years through Soviet Union times, and upgrades to the 100,000-square-foot building had been planned and started before Vladimir Putin's euphemistic "special military operation" to annex Ukraine. Proceeds from the "Giselle" tour will help fund renovations on the campus that includes an old theater, 10 ballet classes and space for general education classes for up to 400 students.

"One of my goals," says Kukhar, "is to make good conditions for Ukrainian ballet children. It's important to finish the campus for the children."

Charity performances, galas and master classes have raised money for a variety of organizations and foundations, but "now our main idea is to support the college directly," says Stoianov.

Also entertaining royal families, politicians and celebrities in such vaunted venues as the Opera National de Paris, Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo and the National Opera in Oslo, the first ballet company to tour the country has danced more than 30 performances a year around Ukraine. "We danced in small city halls and theaters," says Stoianov, "where people say: 'Wow. Thank you so much. We never saw professional ballet,' and these people are 80 years old."

Performances around their country "had a good result," he adds, "but now it's impossible in Ukraine. Many theaters are in occupied territory where we can't do a performance. And people don't have enough



money to buy tickets.

"The arts still survive in Ukraine because its people want to see something beautiful. They don't want to start every day with bad news, and people need to relax in the theater. They try to survive, but it's not easy."

Kukhar's parents remained in Ukraine and are keeping the family's puppy. "They survive, and they try to smile sometimes, but of course it's difficult," she says. "But I'm glad I can visit them and hug them. It's a small piece of happiness."

Stoianov says no Grand Kyiv dancers have died yet in the war, although a college teacher "who danced with Kateryna many times died near Donetsk." A ballet friend lost his leg, and a Grand Kyiv dancer whose



Kateryna Kukhar and Oledsandr Stoianov will dance principal roles when Grand Kyiv Ballet presents "Giselle" at Atlanta Symphony Hall. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MCGRAW HILL ASSOCIATES

leg and arm were injured in a career-ending bomb explosion is undergoing physical rehabilitation.

Stoianov says Grand Kyiv Ballet has performed "Giselle" more than 500 times since 2014, but that isn't the ballet performed most.

"All theaters around the world want to see 'Nutcracker' from November to January," says Stoianov, expressing frustration that some audiences are now mistakenly boycotting performances of Tchaikovsky.

"My position about Tchaikovsky is that the last name is Ukrainian, he lived in Ukraine half of his life, his best music was created in Ukraine," says Stoianov. "I don't know why some people want to make Tchaikovsky Russian. Tchaikovsky is Ukrainian, and it's a mistake to give Tchaikovsky to the Russians."

What's also Ukrainian, he says, is the unique "Forest Song" ballet, an "old classic that is very interesting because it mixes Ukrainian folk dance and the ballet. Movement is adapted for the ballet stage, and I think this is the only performance in the world to have this choreography.

"It has very interesting, very beautiful Ukrainian national costumes and music, and this is a very important performance for us now as we try to promote this performance in all countries."

The 75-year-old "Forest Song" had never been performed outside Ukraine until last year, when Grand Kyiv Ballet shared this piece of Ukrainian culture with audiences in Australia and New Zealand. The company is taking "Forest Song" back to those two countries from May to July after April performances in Scandinavia, and "I think maybe we'll bring 'Forest Song' to the U.S. in 2025. It's a very beautiful performance."

Stoianov longs for the day when "all our dancers return to Ukraine and again have tours in all our cities. We would like

to raise up our culture in Ukraine but we'll need a long time. What's most important is for all artists and all Ukrainian people who left to return safely.

"It's very scary to be there now with the children; many artists sit a week in a cold basement with children without food and water. Artists in our troupe from Bucha, Donetsk now have no home. They have to support their families to help them survive."

"Nobody knows" is the current sentiment in Ukraine, says Kukhar, where people "live for today and tomorrow with no long plan."

Ukrainians now "adapt for the new reality and try to build a new life with plans and some savings for just a few weeks or months," says her husband.

And Ukrainians are grateful for U.S. support, he adds.

"Without the United States, after two years all Ukrainian territory would be Russian," he says. "Ukraine is a small country with not a lot of weapons and power to fight with a big country."

"It's not just about Ukraine and Ukrainian territory, it's about freedom all around the world. If we can't stop Russia now, Russia can do it to another country, and that's why it's important for all the world. I hope we will win the war; if not, a lot of deaths are in vain."

"I'm proud of our freedom-loving nation, which is fighting for peace not only in Ukraine, but I think for all Europe," adds Kukhar. "The best home-front weapon is Ukrainian culture, and particularly the weapon of Grand Kyiv Ballet is dance. This is our art weapon, and this is the most powerful weapon, I think."

"At the end of 'Giselle,' in the last minute of the second act, is a sunrise that makes all dangerous, bad things disappear. We hope someday to bring this to Ukraine to give all Ukrainian people faith about the future."



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