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Grand Kyiv Ballet brings Ukrainian culture, resilience to NYC stages



People's Artists of Ukraine Kateryna Kukhar and Oleksandr Stoianov. (Grand Kyiv Ballet)



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At 5 a.m. on [Feb. 24, 2022](#), Kateryna Kukhar and Oleksandr Stoianov's nanny called, crying. [Russia had invaded Ukraine](#), she told the terrified parents of two.

The [Grand Kyiv Ballet](#) husband-and-wife principal dancers were touring in France when they learned their young children were [under siege 1,500 miles away](#). The couple were about to fly back home and instead found themselves embroiled in a frantic effort to pluck their children from a war zone.

"It was a shock to us. We couldn't talk, we couldn't eat, we couldn't sleep. They were the most terrible days of our lives," Kukhar told the Daily News recently from the family's [temporary home just outside Seattle](#).

Two years later, [the war surges on](#), and while some of the dancers in their troupe are back in Ukraine, most are scattered around the world.

Kukhar and Stoianov, performers with the National Opera and Ballet of Ukraine, are keeping their art alive — along with their culture — across the United States. Next weekend, they will bring it to New York and the Tri-state area with a group performing "Giselle."

Stoianov is the director of the Grand Kyiv Ballet, a touring company he founded in 2014, and he spends his days overseeing operations and guiding its artistic direction. Kukhar heads the Kyiv State Ballet College (KSBC), enabling young students' studies and traveling back and forth to Ukraine.

"During the first month of the war, my focus was solely on saving people," Kukhar said. "I hardly danced, and even thought that I might not return to the stage. An invitation to dance in a charity performance compelled me to get back in shape."

[Soon after the war broke out](#), the Grand Ballet performed in France, raising more than \$300,000 to benefit Ukrainian non-profit organizations for dancers, the military, troops and hospitals, Stoianov and Kukhar said. They went on to Scandinavia, where they raised money for Ukrainian children through Save the Children. It was a turning point for Kukhar.

"Certainly, when I stepped onto the stage for the first time after a month of war, I felt terrible," Kukhar said. "I wanted to cry right during the performance, and every



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Since that emotional first day, Kukhar and Stoianov have worked hard to keep the ballet afloat and its dancers in top condition. All the dancers suffered from the disruption war brought to their training schedules, compounded by the trauma of their country being under attack, [losing friends and family](#), or being separated from their loved ones. They didn't think it would go on [for as long as it has](#).

"Everyone thought maybe a few months and everything would stop, we would come back home," Kukhar said.



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The ballet company has established new headquarters in Poland, just under 20 miles from the Ukraine border, Stoianov said. He administers mostly from afar.

“All our base is in Poland, and all our costumes, decoration, props, everything, is in Poland now,” he told the Daily News. “It’s a safe place for our artists.”

Those artists include 35 dancers hailing from Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odessa who are touring the world to keep themselves, and their art, alive even as their country is under occupation. They have captivated audiences at Paris’s Opera National, Tokyo’s Bunka Kaikan and Oslo’s National Opera, and they’ll [soon be performing in New York City.](#)



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Royals, politicians, celebrities and other luminaries are among those who flock to see the powerful dancers flit across the stage. Adding to the international flavor are the dancers from other nations who have joined the troupe. Stoianov and Kukhar said keeping this diaspora connected while its heart remains under attack is their way of

Their first U.S. dates were this weekend in Boston. On March 1, they'll be at the [Oceana Theater in Brooklyn's Brighton Beach](#), followed by performances in Trenton, Wayne and Englewood, New Jersey.

The following weekend, they'll be back in New York City to dance at [Kings Theatre in Flatbush](#) on March 9, and March 10 at the [Tribeca Performing Arts Center](#) in Manhattan.



Kukhar periodically travels back home to dance, see family and help oversee the school. She recalled a particular incident as especially trying. Twenty minutes into the first act of one Kyiv performance, an airstrike alarm sounded.

“Everyone had to go to the shelter,” she said, including the entire orchestra and artists, where they waited more than an hour before returning to finish the performance. “It was a horrible day.”

But it’s developing into the new norm.

“Despite the war, students and pupils continue their studies, participate in international competitions, and even perform in productions at the country’s main theater,” Kukhar said. “They have recitals in winter and summer. Life goes on despite the war.”

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