

# 'Alterum' Dance Troupe to Conquer Middle East

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The collective prior to performing "Mirror for the Soul" at a street festival held in Arkhangelsk earlier this year.

In the mid 1990s, Alexei Chernov was a street dancer whose break dance group "Da Boogie Crew" was so popular that it was shown on MTV Russia and performed alongside leading Russian hip-hop and break dance musicians.

But today, Chernov looks like a changed man, having developed his street dancing into street theater, combining dance and pantomime art. The collective describes itself as performing "nonverbal, physical theater."

Chernov, who established Alterum theater in 2009, has already reaped praise for his festivals of street art. He said he got inspired by an idea while watching a similar performance in France.

The experiment gave birth to "Alterum" theater, meaning "The Other" in Latin. It made Chernov and his crew of eight dancers a welcoming guest at many parties and street festivals, despite the fact that the theater has no permanent base.

"To speak frankly, we are still fully underground," said Chernov, who has recently returned from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. He and his fellow artistes performed at the Russian Consulate office during Russia Day in June.

Video: A trailer for Alterum's performance of "Mirror for the Soul"

The conservative public at the reception was initially astonished; instead of the anticipated classical Russian chorus, they were handed the bizarrely dressed artists, Chernov said.

But after watching the stylish and well orchestrated dancing of Alterum, the mood became cheerful and upbeat, complimenting their jumps and synchronized moves.

"The majority of guests were diplomats, so small clippings [of the audience] remained reserved. Although afterward, many said they were proud to be Russian," Chernov said.

The show was well received by both the local Emirati and the foreigners who attended the reception, said Vladimir Burdun, a Dubai-based boxing trainer-turner-arts promoter who invited Chernov and his dancers to Dubai.

"People who saw the performance were really in shock that Russia has such a modern dancing band. While everyone knows Russian ballet, the show of modern dance was also seen as example of professionalism," Burdun said.

Chernov said the band was impressed with the Dubai reception as a whole, and as a result of the event, Alterum even received an offer from one of the sponsors to do a short video to promote his grocery store.

In the resultant video, Chernov is part of a humorously attired troupe, wearing old-fashioned glasses and a double-breasted hat, which made him look like Inspector Clouseau. It was made in a mere two hours. "I came over and a script was born in my head," Chernov said.

The opening scene of the video shows Chernov and his group members shopping, then spontaneously bursting into dance, in a style reminiscent of Michael Jackson's videos.

But while Chernov sees the video specifically as more of a goodwill gesture, he takes a great deal of pride in one of the group's other trademark performances: "Mirror for the Soul" is a dark and grotesque skit, showing a man, rummaging through his vast collection of memories.

The man is reminiscing as the crew takes on the identities of various strange looking characters, while he carries his suitcase that is trying to attack him. Chernov said he got the idea for the performance after watching a film "Mirror for a Hero" by Russian director Vladimir Khotinenko.

The film, shot in 1987, tells the story of two characters who are taken back in time and given a chance to come in peace with their past and their parents. "We all are in debt to our parents,

but when we start to feel, it often becomes too late already," Chernov said.

The performance was well received at the festival and has been met with further warm receptions in street theaters in Arkhangelsk. "Kids liked it because they saw it as a fairy tale, while their parents were watching it like a fairy tale with a message for adults," Chernov said. More than 12,000 people on YouTube have watched the video of the play.

While the performance is made in a form of pantomime, music plays a leading role, said Chernov, who added that he either takes classical music or takes melodies from armature composers to avoid copyright violations.

Chernov also works in a youth culture center in Moscow, but said the theater artists would use the rest of this summer to travel around Russia. Together with the promoter Vladimir Burdun, they are planning to establish a more permanent studio in Dubai and use it as a base for further traveling around the Middle East.

"Dubai can become a starting place to conquer the world. Cirque du Soleil also began in Las Vegas," Chernov said.

He added that like many projects, the theater might find itself welcomed with open arms in Russia if it gets its foreign address. "It often happens that Russia throws something away and later buys the same product, at three times the price," he said.

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