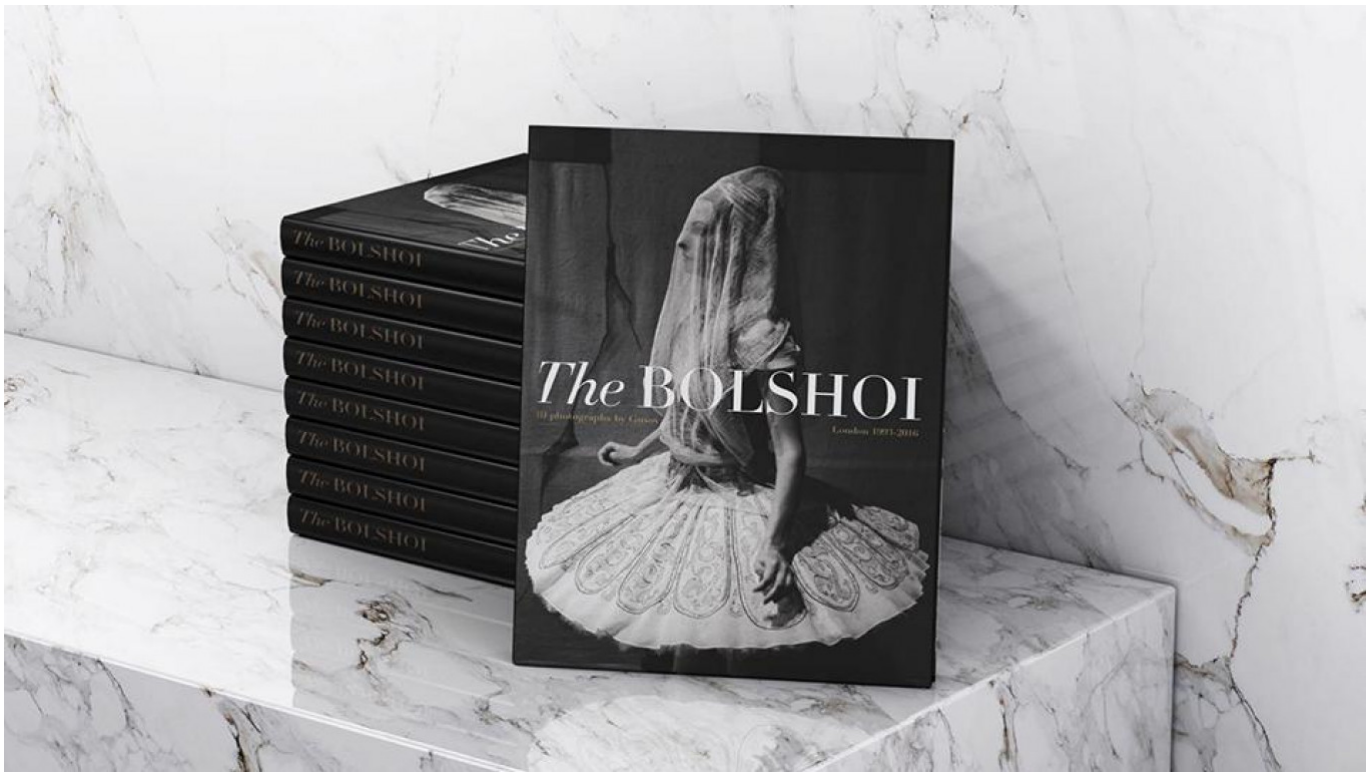
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The Eternal Allure of the Bolshoi Ballet

By Andrei Muchnik

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Courtesy of NR Foundation

Natalya Rotenberg's charity, NR Foundation, has just supported the production of the book "The Bolshoi," a collection of photographs, which was launched at a gala event called "Bolshoi Night" in Moscow. The Moscow Times' Andrei Muchnik caught up with her to find out about the book, foreigners' perceptions of Russia's arts, and philanthropy in Russia today.

What's the idea behind "The Bolshoi"?

Last April Russian photographer Alexander Gusov approached me with a collection of photographs of Bolshoi dancers who had been on tour in London over the last 20 years. Gusov spent a lot of time with them and recorded many historical moments. He wanted to create a book and show the world our art, but he needed a patron to realize his idea. I agreed at once, because it resonated in my heart. When I was a child I did a ballet for many years, and as a little girl I had a dream of being on the big stage, but it never happened. So through this book, "The Bolshoi," and NR Foundation to support young ballerinas, my dream comes true.

Where did you study ballet?

I was born in Kurgan, in the Urals region, where I lived until I was 20. I have three younger sisters. My mother enrolled me in ballet classes at the music school when I was five. And then I went on to study choreography at college. I got a diploma and started teaching dance at the local school. But the salary wasn't even enough to buy a pair of new tights so I quit and went to Moscow to start a new life. By the way, I'm working on a movie script based on my life, so you might soon see my story on the big screen.

Where can we get the Bolshoi book?

It's a limited edition of just 2,000 copies. We gave some to friends and are selling them at museum bookstores around the world. The text of this book was written by Andrei Konchalovsky. It's been a huge hit with foreigners. We conducted a number of events abroad and it made an unforgettable impression.

Why is Russian ballet still such a draw? How is it different from ballet companies in other countries?

Russia has always been famous for ballet and music. I feel that our dancers have a stronger spirit and higher work capacity. I can also tell our dancers right away but how they look on stage. You can immediately recognize the Russian school.

You've lived abroad for a long time: what is the appeal of Russian art in general from the point of view of a foreigner?

I'm familiar with many foreign families, and they use our teachers in music, vocals and ballet. They all speak with admiration about our composers and musicians. I've never heard criticism of our great talents. So as long as we support culture and art, we will be on top.

How does the Bolshoi event fit with the Foundation's mission of helping talented children?

Until now, I was the sole sponsor of the Foundation. But now we need some help. The Bolshoi event included a charity auction where we raised $45,000 for the Foundation. The Foundation is starting to make itself known and show what it's doing and what has already been done. The Foundation organizes sports competitions for children in artistic gymnastics in London and boxing in Russia. We also send child musicians to music festivals abroad, where they can get lessons from the best teachers from around the world. At the same time we support individual talented kids. We help them to get the necessary equipment.

For example, as a result of the charity auction at the Bolshoi we were able to buy an oboe that cost 450,000 rubles for a particular boy. To buy the used oboe he'd been playing on, his parents had to sell a plot of land.

You were married to the businessman Arkady Rotenberg. Do your ex-husband's connections help your foundation's work?

I established this Foundation completely by myself in London. Whatever I do, it's my decision

and what I want to do. I try not to ask for anything from my husband — it's not in my character. But, of course, I would love if he and his companies would contribute to the Foundation's work and help us to carry out good deeds. Together, we can do more.

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