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Star Russian Dancer Quits Bolshoi Over War

By AFP

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Prima ballerina Olga Smirnova. **Moskva News Agency**

Prima ballerina Olga Smirnova has quit the Bolshoi in Moscow to join the Dutch National Ballet, it was announced Wednesday, becoming the biggest star to leave Russia over the war in Ukraine.

The 30-year-old's departure from Russia's most prestigious cultural institution carries echoes of defections during the Cold War.

Smirnova, considered one of the greatest dancers of her generation, had already expressed her opposition to the war on messaging app Telegram earlier this month, saying she "cannot remain indifferent to this global catastrophe."

The Dutch National Ballet confirmed the departure in a statement, saying: "Smirnova was outspoken in her recent denouncement of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is making it

untenable for her to work in her native country."

In her Telegram post, Smirnova had said: "I am against war with all the fibres of my soul.

"It is not only about every other Russian perhaps having relatives or friends living in Ukraine, or about my grandfather being Ukrainian.... It is that we continue to live as if this were the 20th century."

Several foreign performers have quit their positions in Russia since the invasion, but Smirnova is by far the biggest local star to leave.

"I never thought I would be ashamed of Russia, I have always been proud of talented Russian people, of our cultural and athletic achievements. But now I feel that a line has been drawn that separates the before and the after," she wrote on Telegram.

At the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union suffered a number of embarrassing defections by high-profile performers, most notably the legendary dancer Rudolph Nureyev who claimed asylum during a visit by the Kirov ballet to Paris in 1961.

Many current stars of the Russian stage have refused to criticize the invasion of Ukraine, including star conductor Valery Gergiev and soprano Anna Netrebko, and have been stripped of their jobs in the West or had tours canceled.

Smirnova said the Dutch National Ballet would be "a good fit" and that she had been considering a move even before the conflict.

"It is a privilege to have her dance with our company in the Netherlands — even if the circumstances that drove this move are incredibly sad," said its director Ted Brandsen in the statement.

Brazilian dancer Victor Caixeta, 22, who had spent five years at the Mariinsky Ballet in St. Petersburg, is also joining the Amsterdam-based company.

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