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Russian Ballet Star 'Followed Conscience' to Leave Bolshoi

By Rana Moussaoui for AFP

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Russian superstar ballerina Olga Smirnova. **Moskva News Agency**

Russian superstar ballerina Olga Smirnova quit the Bolshoi Ballet over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine but says the famed dance company will outlive the vagaries of war.

"History changes, but the Bolshoi stays," Smirnova told AFP as she rehearsed in Amsterdam, where she joined the Dutch National Ballet in March.

Smirnova, who made headlines when she left the Bolshoi, added: "I had to follow my conscience."

The 30-year-old prima ballerina said she feared for the future of dancers, choreographers and artists still left at the Bolshoi, as Russia became increasingly isolated globally because of its decision to attack its neighbor.

"For the Bolshoi 20 years is nothing, but for a dancer, it's their whole life," Smirnova told AFP

in an interview just ahead of a rehearsal for veteran Dutch choreographer Hans van Manen's ballet "Frank Bridge Variations."

For a decade, Smirnova was one of the faces of the company as a prima ballerina, renowned for her slender physique, almond-shaped eyes, and swan-like neck with looks described by a British daily as "the perfect instrument of her art form" evoking a "stunning perfection."

"Now the Bolshoi is also isolated from the world. I had an amazing 10 years working at the Bolshoi, because the best choreographers in the world could come to the stage, to create even original ballets."

"It really felt like I was part of the world. I think all of this ended with this war," Smirnova said in between her busy schedule.

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'Honest with myself'

Even during the Cold War, the Bolshoi's ballet tours to the West were seen as a bridge with the Soviet Union.

But after Russia's Feb. 24 invasion, all tours have been canceled and the Bolshoi's stars are no longer invited abroad.

Choreographers like Jean-Christophe Maillot and Alexei Ratmansky have asked the Bolshoi to suspend the performance rights of their ballets.

Smirnova now fears Russian dancers will lose the chance to "discover new worlds" like she and her generation did with choreographers such as Americans John Neumeier and William Forsythe, France's Pierre Lacotte, or Britain's Christopher Wheeldon.

However, Smirnova refuses to call her decision a "defection" a word used during Soviet times when ballet legends such as Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov crossed the Iron Curtain to the West.

"I think I was honest with myself and just followed my conscience... I thought it was right for me," said Smirnova, becoming visibly emotional.

"I felt so terribly sorry about all this... all these people who... lost their houses," she said.

Smirnova said she was shocked when learning of Moscow's invasion — which has now seen more than six million refugees fleeing Ukraine.

She thought the invasion would end soon.

But "five or six days later," she wrote on the Telegram social messaging platform "I am against the war with all my soul. I never believed I could be ashamed of Russia."

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After leaving Moscow, she traveled to Dubai to treat an injury — and then decided to take the plunge.

"Nobody knew about it, except my husband and the artistic director of the Dutch National Ballet, Ted Brandsen," Smirnova said.

'Too much thinking'

Her decision was a shock for her parents back in Russia.

"For them, it's still not really acceptable that I left the country and left the Bolshoi," she said.

"My colleagues almost didn't react," when Smirnova left.

"I don't know what they think. Maybe they didn't understand my decision. Maybe they are just protecting themselves from the truth... just thinking 'I'm a dancer, I am far from these political things.'"

"I feel like I've lost almost all connection with the dancers from the Bolshoi," she said.

Smirnova said however she was welcomed with open arms in the Netherlands, feeling "more and more at home in Amsterdam" where she moved into a new apartment a day before the interview.

In April, she performed the titular role in a new production of the classical ballet "Raymonda."

"I was put in a ballet routine from the first days. I felt like I'm (back) in my normal life. I was able to rehearse... that made me feel like normal."

Dancing "saved me from too much thinking," she said.

But one dream remains for Smirnova.

"I would love to come to the Paris Opera to dance. I've never danced at the Palais Garnier."

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