

The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Written by **BLAIR A RUBLE**

Ballet's Continuing Role in Bringing Ukraine to Audiences Around the World

International ballet star Denys Chervychnko's journey from boyhood poverty in Donesk to international renown demonstrates the power of dance to move people and win backing for Ukraine's future.

Ukraine's twenty-first century ballet dancers have commanded attention and respect as they have moved among the world's best ballet companies. They have come together repeatedly since the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion to bring attention to their country's plight and to raise money for its defense. Their efforts continued this past summer when [Denys Chervychnko](#) joined a roster of leading international dance stars at London's Cadogan Hall.

Chervychnko, who is now a freelance dancer, established himself as a star among stars during his dozen years as a principal dancer at the Vienna State Ballet. He is known for his regal stature, exceptional footwork, and technical precision. He has danced opposite some of our era's most iconic ballerinas including several appearances with Alessandra Ferri. These performances on such storied stages as the Vienna State Opera, Paris Opera, and Teatro San Carlo in Naples must seem far away from his humble beginnings in Donetsk.

As a boy, Chervychnko tagged along with his older sister to her folk dancing classes where he began noticing how people moved as he waited for her lessons to end. He tried folk dancing until, at the age of six, a teacher recommended he audition for the city's prestigious Pysarev Ballet School. His career might have ended had a sympathetic security guard not looked the other way and allowed the underaged Denys into the school tryouts.

Vadym Pysarev graduated from the Kyiv State Choreographic School before heading as the Soviet Union collapsed to Moscow and St. Petersburg for additional training at the Bolshoi Theater and the Mariinsky Theater. He returned to his native Donetsk shortly after winning the competition for "The Best Dancer in the USSR" in 1990. Two years later, in a newly independent Ukraine, Pysarev married the Donetsk Opera and Ballet Theatre's prima ballerina Inna Dorofeeva and opened that company's school which quickly became known as the Vadym Pysarev Ballet School. Within a handful of years, the Donetsk ballet troupe would rank among the top ballet companies in the former Soviet Union, and his school as one of the best as well.

Chervychnko's family had been struggling to make ends meet during the chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet economy. They fell into abject poverty when his father died suddenly. His mother sorrowfully approached Pysarev and explained that the family could no longer afford to pay for her eleven-year-old son's lessons. The director offered a full scholarship. Upon graduation in Donetsk at the age of sixteen, Chervychnko won the first of many international competitions in Kyiv.

His victory earned him a two-year scholarship to Munich's famed Heinz-Bosi-Foundation Ballet Academy where he studied with legendary ballet teacher Alexander Prokofiev. Prokofiev had spent his career in Moscow

training some of the Soviet Union's most illustrious male dancers. Famously harsh, he would break his students before nurturing those who survived back to their highest potential. Chervychenko's introduction to his new teacher was particularly disastrous. The teenaged Denys was warming up when Prokofiev entered the room. Not noticing the fabled instructor's arrival, Denys had his back to Prokofiev. His blunder led to a traumatic near dismissal before taking his first lesson.

Chervychenko thrived under Prokofiev's tutelage despite their unfortunate introduction. He signed with the Vienna State Ballet two years later and, in 2012, went on to be a principal dancer with the company. He recently began dancing as a freelancer to have more opportunity to move among premier ballet companies from Japan to Europe and North America.

Prokofiev's manic perfectionism shaped Chervychenko's notable technical prowess. He nonetheless doesn't want the audience to admire his technique. He believes ballet to be a form of passionate storytelling. The art's power rests on its ability to communicate emotions from performers to audiences. This passion explains why the various all-star performances by Ukrainian dance stars such as Chervychenko have become an important element in the country's campaign to attract international support. It speaks to a Ukrainian future in which the arts will remain central to its survival.

