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Ukraine dancers create beauty, fueled by the fire of defiance | Review



Natalia Matsak, Sergii Kryvokon and Volodymyr Kutuzov perform “Prayer the the Fallen,” the most somber moment in the “Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)” program coming to Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando. (Courtesy Scott Serio)



By **MATTHEW J. PALM** | mpalm@orlandosentinel.com | Orlando Sentinel

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There are multiple emotional layers to watching the [National Ballet of Ukraine](#) and [Ukrainian Shumka dancers](#) perform. There's the beauty, the vitality, the passion of the dancing itself. But there is, of course, also the knowledge that many of these young artists hail from a country that has been weathering a firestorm for years now.

That knowledge makes each beautifully executed pirouette more satisfying, each triumphant leap more thrilling.

The two dance groups are traveling the country together on the "Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)" tour, with the goal of reminding us that Ukraine still needs help, more than two years after a major Russian invasion escalated a war that began a decade ago. They do more than that, though: They also remind us that even in dark times — or perhaps especially in dark times — art has the power to inspire and to heal and to defy the darkness.



Classical ballet repertoire is represented in the “Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)” program by dances from “Giselle,” “Swan Lake,” “La Bayadere” (pictured) and other well-known works. (Courtesy Scott Serio)

The “Hope for Ukraine” show will come to Steinmetz Hall at the [Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts](#) in Orlando on Oct. 30; I caught a recent performance in Jacksonville where Ukrainian pride was on display: Men with yellow and blue rosettes in their lapels, men and women in traditional dress.

The program features excerpts from classical ballet — “La Bayadere,” “Giselle,” “Don Quixote” — all executed with grace and flair.



With 3D projections, Daniil Silkin seems to leap through flames as Fire in Adagio from “Forest Song,” part of the “Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)” program coming to Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando. (Courtesy Scott Serio)

From the old to the new, the production features 3D projections (yes, you wear glasses, like at the movies) that immerse the dancers in the scenery. It's an eye-popping effect in many places: Snow falls around dancers, they move through fire and smoke, or lay in green grass that matches their costumes.

Sometimes, the effect startles: It can appear the dancers are about to hit the screen behind them when, in reality, they are several feet away. I wanted to shout, "Watch out for that wall," during a "Giselle" graveyard scene.

In a few cases, the tech is overwhelming with its color and motion, but on the whole, it's a new dimension for dance. Its most sobering use comes in "Prayer for the Fallen," set to Mozart's "Lacrimosa." The scene opens with the destruction of Mariupol on the screen. Orange and yellow explosions and fires mar the black-and-white news images of destroyed city after city while the dancers reach for the heavens. It's incredibly moving.



Tetiana Lozova and Yaroslav Tkachuk provide lighter moments dancing from “Harlequinade” in the “Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)” program coming to Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando. (Courtesy Scott Serio)

That’s the heaviest moment of the show, counterbalanced nicely by acts such as the pas de deux from “Harlequinade,” in which dancers Tetiana Lozova and Yaroslav Tzachuk convey whimsy and wonder as they flirt and court, seeing moments of happiness.

With its folk dances, Shumka provides comic moments, too — one lively number features two gals for every guy and a merry-go-round of partner trading. It's rowdier fare than the ballet numbers; these dancers clap hands, slap their legs, stamp their boots and shout as percussive accompaniments to the recorded music. They are in constant motion with an exuberance that lights up the room. If ballet dancers pirouette, folk dancers whirl — and whirl, jump, bend and twist they do with the energy that comes from centuries of tradition and homeland pride.

The tour is a fundraiser; the money raised goes toward helping Ukrainians, with a particular focus on getting children back into schools. So, in a sort of PBS-style pledge break, there's an appeal right before the intermission.

In Jacksonville, Jeremy Courtney spoke eloquently about the dangers of “normalizing” a long-running war. He's the CEO of [Humanite Peace Collective](#), which is running the relief efforts.

“The greatest threat may be when the world sits by and watches a group of people suffer too long,” Courtney said. “Maybe we've all just become a little bit numb to the pain and suffering of our neighbors.”

And Courtney gave an impassioned reminder of the power of unity.

National Ballet of Ukraine will return to Orlando's Steinmetz Hall

“If we succeed tonight, at our highest level, it will be because we remember we belong together,” he said. “Ukraine's pain is my pain; Ukraine's suffering is our suffering.”

Unfortunately, the “Hope of Ukraine” tour has suffered setbacks on its Florida leg. As with most shows, ticket sales took a big hit in the run-up to and aftermath of Hurricane Milton, as attention was focused elsewhere. As a result, some engagements, such as Orlando’s, shortened the planned run to a single performance.

Even worse, extensive damage to the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in Sarasota meant that the run there was canceled altogether (the Van Wezel is not expected to reopen until January).



The dancers of Shumka, part of the “Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)” program coming to Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando, are a force of pride, energy and artistry. (Courtesy Scott Serio)

So it was reassuring to see Jacksonville patrons leaving the theater with purchased posters and shirts tucked under their arms. As Courtney said in his speech, every bit helps make change in the world.

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‘Nadiya Ukraine (Hope of Ukraine)’

- **Length:** 2:30, including intermission
- **Where:** Steinmetz Hall at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, 445 S. Magnolia Ave. in Orlando
- **When:** 7:30 p.m. Oct. 30
- **Cost:** \$68.90 and up
- **Info:** [drphillipscenter.org](https://www.drphillipscenter.org)

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