

New York City's Koch Theater bows to right-wing pressure, cuts performance of Russian dancers at gala

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On Thursday, the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) announced that guest dance artists Kimin Kim and Maria Khoreva of the St. Petersburg-based Mariinsky Theater in Russia would not be performing as planned. Operators of the David H. Koch Theatre at Lincoln Center had come under pressure from pro-Ukrainian activists and politicians who claimed that allowing the dancers to perform was ideologically “lending support” to Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin.

YAGP was set to celebrate its 25th anniversary gala featuring an internationally recognized roster of ballet dancers, representing a broad range of ethnicities and nationalities. However, hours before Thursday's performance, YAGP founder Larissa Saveliev agreed to cancel Khoreva's and Kim's appearances. Both dancers were set to perform with partners from other renowned ballet companies.

“Art should unite us, not divide us. In a difficult period, ballet should be healing. This is terribly sad,” Saveliev lamented, apparently not acknowledging the institution she serves had ignored this view by buckling to right-wing provocation.

Khoreva, more sincerely, responded on her Instagram account: “We were preparing for today's performance to show you, our dear audience, what we can do, what we have learned since our last meeting with you, but the David Koch Theater made a decision to cancel our participation in the YAGP gala concert. We are very sorry our reunion did not take place, but art will always find a way to human soul.”

Constantine Allen, Khoreva's American dance partner, stated “When situations are handled like this, the conversation is blocked. It's a bit of a shame we

weren't able to share that—me coming from [America], she coming from Russia. I thought it was a beautiful moment to let art prevail.”

The 23-year-old Khoreva is a graduate of the Vaganova Ballet Academy in Russia, one of the oldest and most prestigious ballet schools in the world. After graduation in 2018, she joined the Mariinsky and was soon promoted from a member of the corps to first soloist—the second-highest rank in the company, a feat that takes most dancers years to accomplish, if at all.

Since then, Khoreva has gained an international following of young dancers and admirers. Her colleague, Kimin Kim, was trained in South Korea, where he was born. He, too, joined the Mariinsky after graduating from the Korea National University of the Arts, and quickly climbed his way to the highest-ranking position of principal dancer. The Mariinsky Theater is state-run and its director, musical conductor Valery Gergiev, has close ties to Vladimir Putin.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the performances of numerous Russian artists have been canceled, prompted by virulent anti-Russian rhetoric and propaganda. Gergiev himself, an internationally accomplished conductor holding positions at the Rotterdam Philharmonic and London Symphony orchestras, has been removed from the post of principal guest conductor of New York's Metropolitan Opera since the conflict in Ukraine erupted. He had held the position since 1997.

Opera singer Anna Netrebko has also come under the scrutiny of anti-Russian hysterics for her ties to Putin, despite her open opposition to the war. However, the disinvitation of Khoreva and Kim marks a deepening of the anti-Russian witch-hunt, extending to individuals

who have no apparent political sympathy for Putin or even an interest in politics.

Republican New York Assemblyman Michael Novakhov, encouraging the censorship, wrote a letter to Lincoln Center CEO Henry Timms, citing Gergiev's association with Putin. Novakhov claimed that the performance of the dancers seemed to be "Putin's latest propaganda campaign, using Russia's top ballet performers to promote his fascist regime." He demanded that "Putin's representatives be prohibited from performing."

According to the *New York Times*, a small group of protesters arrived at Lincoln Center Thursday evening holding signs reading, "They laugh, we cry. They dance, we die." Three of the demonstrators wore white tutus smeared with red paint, and another participant wore an ornate headpiece, presumably to represent the Russian state. Ukraine's Ambassador to the United States, Oksana Markarova, was on hand at the protest. She celebrated the disinvitation on her Facebook page, declaring "Putin's ballet has been canceled!"

The removal of the Mariinsky dancers from the gala due to the action of a handful of pro-Ukrainian protesters highlights the hypocrisy of the American ruling class. Roughly three miles away, over 120 students from Columbia University were arrested the same day for protesting the Israeli government's genocide of Palestinians, on the flimsy claim that protesting against the Israeli state constitutes "antisemitism" and is threatening to Jewish students.

The YAGP is one of the largest and well-recognized ballet competitions in the world for young dancers, offering prize winners scholarships at some of the most prestigious international ballet schools. Students from around the world gathered in New York City to compete, including students from Israel. However, no one protested the participation of student competitors hailing from a state engaged in an internationally acknowledged act of *actual* genocide. Furthermore, American artists have not been banned from international stages despite the US government's direct involvement and financing of Israel's genocide against the people of Gaza (much less any of its other illegal invasions and war crimes in recent decades).

However, a small right-wing mob has effectively been allowed to hijack proceedings of one of New York City's premier cultural institutions on the basis of anti-

Russian hysteria.

The claim that allowing Russian performers to appear constitutes an "ideological" victory for the Putin government is absurd. During the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union maintained a program of cultural exchange, begun with the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement in 1958 and lasting until the dissolution of the USSR.

Far from seeking to end "Putin's war," the advocates of censorship seek to isolate all Russian influence and culture in the West, as part of the efforts to build ideological and political support for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. This is bound up with the continued efforts to subjugate Russia to the geopolitical and economic interests of US imperialism and its allies. The attack on Khoreva and Kim should be thoroughly denounced and opposed as an outrageous act of pro-war censorship.



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