The day Alexei Navalny was murdered in a remote Russian prison, Mariinsky ballet first soloist Maria Khoreva did what she does on most days— published a new reel on Instagram. In the video, Maria, known informally as Masha, wears a crop top and short shorts. The camera zooms in on her bare legs as she performs a series of strength building exercises. “I’m definitely not there yet,” reads the caption, “I choose the path of trusting myself no matter what 🤍”

Masha’s path of self-trust has obviously paid off: This week she travels to New York with a now mandatory stopover in Turkey. As the war in Ukraine stretches into its third year, these flights must cost a fortune, but for Masha, price poses no obstacle. She has been invited to perform at the prestigious YAGP gala (April 18-19 at the Koch Theater) where she will grace the stage with some of today's top dancers.

In the dance world, Masha is famous for her prodigious talent as well as her savvy self-promotion skills. The twenty-three-year-old Russian-born dancer has tackled every lead role in the classical repertoire while also amassing 662 thousand followers on Instagram. Her dual role of dancer-influencer makes Masha a valuable addition to the virtually sold-out gala event, which grows more impressive (and more expensive) every year.

The YAGP gala, which bears the title "the Stars of Today meet the Stars of Tomorrow," is more than just a talent show for superstars– it is an event geared towards aspiring dancers, aged 8-18. As the concluding night of a worldwide student competition, the Gala showcases what a young dancer can eventually accomplish with the right amount of training, passion, and perseverance. While only dozens of young dancers will reach the competition's final round, the entire dance world follows YAGP online. The professional gala participants, among which Masha is an invitee, will serve as universal role models.

During her stay in New York, Masha, who speaks English with a near native fluency, will meet with an international group of young competitors as they partake in the week's events. The dancers will express their admiration, ask for autographs, and likely snap a photo for their social media, tagging Masha as well as the YAGP organization. The added value of these social media fireworks will dwarf the cost of Masha's travel from a no-fly zone. Masha will conquer the city with her talent, young dancers will learn from her example, but YAGP will ultimately profit.

Lucrative as it might be, YAGP's decision to feature Maria Khoreva sets a problematic example for dancers, dancemakers, and ballet's wider audience. Unlike some of her colleagues who spoke out against the war and then had to leave their homes and jobs in Russia, Masha has maintained a facade of blissful ignorance since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24,2022. Particularly now, as Ukraine faces an ammunition shortage that threatens to multiply its already debilitating losses, it seems incredible for YAGP to champion a dancer who uses her platform in silent complicity with Putin's regime.

What message will Masha's participation in the YAGP gala communicate to its audience? That the war in Ukraine has outlasted its shock value and we can return to the way things were before? Or that a certain amount of fame and physical ability excuses one's silence in the face of aggression?

Most would agree that it is unreasonable to hold a twenty-three-year-old ballet dancer accountable for the actions of a corrupt, power-hungry and maniacal dictator in a country where dissent comes at a terrible price: In Russia, criticizing the war remains illegal. Just weeks ago (on March 20,2024), poet Alexander Byvshev received a seven-year prison sentence for publishing anti-war poetry. The consequences of speaking out are devastating and the level of risk an individual chooses to undertake is not a matter for our judgement. The onus, in this case, rests on the inviting party. While we may find it difficult justify canceling a young dancer for her nationality, we might forgo shelling out ticket dollars to an organization that chooses profit over principles.

The decision to involve Masha in this year's gala performance seems all the more contradictory considering YAGP's prior efforts to place Ukrainian students in Western ballet schools and companies. Early in 2022, YAGP made headlines for aiding more than one hundred young dancers from Ukraine find new homes during the war. Their stories are displayed proudly on the organization's website along with a fundraising page that is still active.

Among these dancers, is Vsevolod Mayevskyi, who will also appear in Thursday night's gala performance. Mayevskyi, a Ukrainian dancer who left his position at the Mariinsky as soon as war broke out, credits YAGP for helping him reestablish his career outside of Russia and –even more importantly– avoiding the mandatory draft he would have had to face upon returning to Ukraine. When they reunite on the YAGP stage after two years, former colleagues Vsevolod and Masha will have lived two very different realities: Vsevolod, at only 23, fighting to save his family in Kiev; Masha filming ballet routines to K-pop and promoting St. Petersburg nail salons on Instagram. One young dancer had done the right thing, the other had bided her time. Technique alone dictates that both are equally deserving of a feature at YAGP's event. But dance is not just about technique.

Yagp's mission of supporting and developing the next generation of dancers must surely extend to factors outside of pure physical accomplishment. Gelsey Kirkland famously reminded her students that turn out in ballet is more than external rotation, but the dancer's heart radiating outwards towards the audience. A dancer bares their soul on stage. What is inside matters more than a beautiful line, or a clean pirouette. In an ideal world, an aspiring dancer masters those things while also striving to be a humble, honest, and decent human being.

When the war began in 2022, we witnessed a large-scale exodus of Russian and foreign-born artists from all over Russia in protest of the war and the country's leadership. Dancers like Vsevolod Mayevskyi, Olga Smirnova, and Inna Bilash were applauded for their courage and eagerly snatched up by major Western dance companies. They quickly resumed training and performing, even if in different environments. These were the success stories; we didn't always hear about those who fared less brilliantly. As the number of hopefuls naturally outweighed the number of new foreign dancers theaters could employ, dancers lost job stability and eventually, technique.

(Without familial or institutional support, technique just isn't possible. YAGP understands this since they offer scholarships.)

By inviting a current Mariinsky artist to their gala, YAGP minimizes the sacrifices made by dancers who chose to leave jobs in (state-funded) Russian theaters. Instead, YAGP rewards and encourages Masha for the technique she still possess as she prepares for Thursday night's performance. Hers is an immaculate technique, honed by years of meticulous repetition under the watchful eye of legendary masters. It is also the technique of one who stayed safely sheltered in a gold-decked theater while the entire world came crashing down: a technique worth seeing, but not imitating. (As a world renowned dance organization with a considerable social impact, YAGP should know the difference ? )