

# SUNDAY Mirror

# CIRCUS STARS WHO FLED PUTIN'S CARNAGE BEGIN UK TOUR

**EXCLUSIVE**  
BY **GERALDINE MCKELVE**

**EVERY** night, dancer Tetiana Letusia paints on a smile and prepares to wow the crowds as part of a spectacular circus act touring the UK.

The troupe perform daring stunts on one wheel and BMX bikes, juggle with their feet and defy gravity on aerial poles.

But behind those painted-on smiles for the heartache of war.

Because like most of her fellow Circus Cortex performers, Tetiana comes from Ukraine and carries with her not just the love for her family, but guilt too at seeing left them behind.

With tears in her eyes, the 28-year-old says: "You can't smile with a big smile on your face, but your heart is in Ukraine."

"Working helps me for a few hours. It helps that people who come to the circus know we are from Ukraine and they can see we are a talented, strong and hard-working nation."

Ironically the circus, which began its UK tour this week, has been brought back together thanks to the efforts of its Russian-born director Irina Ardeh, 43, who lives in the UK. An Odessa market began to rain down on Ukraine, she immediately signed up to host six acts at her home in Doncaster, West Yorks, under the government's Homes for Ukraine scheme.

She then spent weeks finding volunteers to take in the others and, after months of battling red tape, most are now here.

Many of the male performers needed special permission from the Ukrainian government to leave. There is one notable absence – 30-year-old dancer Nikolay Bilenkiy, from Lviv, has chosen to stay and resist Russian forces.

"I'm sure," the sports host has become good friends, they've all come to see the show.

"But the closure on our poster is not here because his fighting continues."

Tetiana – from Zhytomyr, west of Kyiv – had just arrived in Kharkiv, near the Russian border, to cover a fireworks dance classes and look after her dog when Putin invaded.

She says: "I didn't know what it did. I went to buy food, but after four or five hours of the invasion the big shops [closed] and the cash machines were empty. The second day was very bad. There were explosions and shelling. I was up after down to the basement 20 or 30 times. By the fourth day, I was so exhausted I decided not to go down. I thought,



**BRAVE**  
Circus Cortex  
director  
Irina Ardeh  
& Galina



**JOURNEY**  
University  
Viktor and  
wife Yulia



**COURAGEOUS**  
Irina & her 12  
year old daughter  
Galina in  
Circus Cortex

## As bombs rain down, brave ambassadors showcase strength of a nation under attack



**DANCERS**  
Galina  
and Lina  
performing  
from  
Odessa



**TRAVEL**  
Circus Cortex  
touring the UK

"I should drop on our building. I don't want to die with 20 people near me. It was difficult emotionally. By the sixth day, we were



**TRAVEL**  
Circus Cortex  
touring the UK

**“We hid in the cellar for two weeks with cushions on the sofa against the windows**

**UNCLEY** VIKTOR GOBODILSKYY ON HORRORS OF RUSSIAN

# We go on stage with a smile but our hearts are in Ukraine

old pit dug. Dad, she headed to the railway station. She says: "I wanted to get a train, but I didn't know where – it didn't matter."

All the actors were thousands of people. Women crying, children crying, families looking up before my eyes because women were leaving and men staying."

After two days on freezing, crowded trains, she reached the Hungarian border. Tetiana says: "It was only then I started to cry

like I'd never cried before. I felt very guilty for leaving. Like I was betraying my family, but my mum doesn't want to leave the country."

After to enter the UK more quickly than the other circus stars as she already had a work visa, Tetiana flew to stay with Irina.

She says: "For two weeks I just lay on the bed and did nothing. I had problems with my ears and I found myself in my head."

And while she is grateful for being given sanctuary in the UK, she is not one thing. "The first thing I'll do when it's safe is go home," she

says. Fellow dancer Ksenia Isacova, 26, has been fleeing conflict with Russia for eight

years already – her home town is Luhansk, part of the embattled Donbas region.

She and boyfriend Sergiy Malynivsky, 32 – an aerial artist – were living in Zhytomyr, 80 miles west of Kyiv, when Russia invaded.

Ksenia says: "We slept in corridors or on the bathroom floor for two weeks, too scared to go into the bedrooms."

"We ate there too. My boyfriend went to fly food between air raid alerts but I lost weight because you don't lose hunger."

After a month they escaped to Lithuania where she worked as an ambassador for her country.

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## Journey through Europe to find safety

Crown Edward Thack, 58, and his wife Galina, 54, managed to flee to Hungary on the eve of war breaking out.

The pair, who perform together, had been in the east of the country for the battles of the war. Edward says: "We are just really lost for now."

"I don't know when it is going to stop."

Yuryi Prokopenko, 20, also from

Odessa, made the brave decision to escape to Russia, travelling from the occupied Crimean peninsula to Moscow.

Although his documents were checked by the Russian authorities he was allowed to cross into Latvia where he waited for his UK visa to be processed.

He said: "I didn't stay any longer than I needed to in Russia. I am now living with a nice lady in Doncaster."

Dancer Lina Dubovska, 24, and boyfriend Vlad Nazarov, from Odessa, escaped via Moldova. They sought refuge in Canada before gaining permission to enter the UK.

She said: "I'm being waiting for the war to end but it hasn't happened yet."

Fort jumper Yekaterina Honcharova, 37, refused to leave behind her beloved golden cat Lena when the conflict erupted.

She packed her circus props and made the journey to Poland – and later travelled to the UK when her visa was cleared.

Back in the Ukraine, Dina Bekas, 23, and Micha Lynovetsky, 20, from Zaporizhzhia, were both touring when war broke out but have now come to the UK thanks to another sponsor in Doncaster.

Dina said: "I'm not sure we are ready to go back yet."

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