

Legendary Ukrainian dancers coming to Winnipeg

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Ashley Kushnir (left) and Liana Stecky can't wait to welcome Virsky to Winnipeg.

Ashley Kushnir's eyes widen and her hands shake with excitement at the mere mention of the Virsky National Dance Company.

The East Kildonan resident, like most Ukrainian Canadians, is a longtime fan of the internationally acclaimed dance troupe from Ukraine.

Kushnir will get to meet her dance heroes in person later this month. Virsky will be stopping in Winnipeg as part of its first official Canadian tour and will also be conducting a series of workshops for aspiring dancers.

"I am ecstatic," Kushnir said. "I've been dancing since the beginning of time and Virsky is simply the best. These dancers are my role models."

It's a sentiment echoed by Ken Kachmar of Boen Performing Arts, which is organizing Virsky's Canadian tour.

"My phone has been ringing off the hook," Kachmar said.

"For Ukrainian Canadians, this is a very special occasion. People are calling me from across the country to ask if it's true, if Virsky is coming."

Kachmar said Virsky is known throughout the world and is a favorite not only of the Ukrainian diaspora but of dance fans everywhere.

Virsky was founded in 1937 and has toured more than 60 countries to date. Its dancers have performed for royalty such as Queen Elizabeth II, as well as prominent dignitaries such as Michaëlle Jean, Canada's former governor general.

"Virsky is the best Ukrainian dance group in the world," he said.

"They're the Riverdance of Ukraine. Their technique on stage, their precision, is really amazing. All around the world, people leave their performances saying, 'Wow, that was unbelievable!'"

Kachmar said the Canadian tour will see the 50-member group visit 22 cities. Winnipeg is one of a select few locations to host two performances as well as a workshop.

"Most of the workshops are sold out and I still have people begging to get in," he said, noting the workshops will include Virsky's artistic director, Myroslav Vantukh — a household name in Ukraine.

"For dancers in Canada, this is a chance to learn from the best. It's a prestigious thing to be able to say you took a class with Virsky."

Kushnir couldn't agree more. As a member of the Melos Folk Ensemble, she has spent years dancing and is honoured to be participating in the Winnipeg workshop.

"I'm excited to learn some of their choreography and combinations, to see their style and steps up close," she said.

"A workshop with Virsky? Wow, it doesn't get any better."

Liana Stecky, Melos' artistic director and another resident of East Kildonan, said she's thrilled her dancers will be participating in the workshop.

"These dancers are of a calibre you just can't see anywhere else," she said.

"They'll see the folk costumes and dances of all the areas of Ukraine and everything is so precise, so colourful."

Andrew Popeil, another member of Melos, said Virsky is near to his heart.

"These are the best Ukrainian dancers in the world and they inspire me through music, song and dance to keep the bonds of my Ukrainian heritage alive," he said.

Fellow dancer Felicia Wasylowski added, "Their vibrant artistic performances embrace the beauty of Ukraine, the wisdom of its people, and the folk tradition of humour and optimism."

Virsky's performances are slated for Oct. 22 and 23 at the Pantages Playhouse Theatre. For tickets, call Ticketmaster at 780-3333.

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