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"A 'Nutcracker' for Democracy"

Dance: Moscow Ballet dedicates its performances to the memory of a slain Russian reform leader.

By Tamara Ikenberg, Baltimore Sun Staff

The sweet, classic fantasy of "The Nutcracker" ballet is more likely to induce visions of sugarplum fairies instead of repression, assassination and political turmoil. But the Moscow Ballet is dedicating this year's production of the Christmas tradition to the memory of outspoken democratic Russian legislator Galina Staravoiatova, who was assassinated on Nov. 20 while ascending the stairs to her St. Petersburg apartment. "She was the last one who was willing to speak out," says Akiva Talmi, producer of the Moscow Ballet. "Nobody thought this would dare happen. It's like killing a saint. But the fact that there is no limit is a very special Russian condition. Many people say the condition developed over a very long period of being oppressed. Communism gradually denigrated human values."

Seven members of the Russian parliament have been slain since 1993. Staravoiatova, who was 54, was an adviser to Yeltsin. She spoke out for freedom of religion, against anti-Semitism and traveled throughout the West, lecturing about post-Soviet politics. Her assassination is viewed as a major blow to the reform movement. Talmi, who lives in Massachusetts but whose parents were born in Russia, says Staravoiatova's assassination is on the level of that of Gandhi, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or John F. Kennedy. In honor of her, the company is calling this year's tour "From Russia With Hope." "Any kind of artistic work dedicated to an individual heightens that sense of respect and provides an impetus to create some kind of legacy on their part," says Dr. Barry Scherr, a professor of Russian and associate dean of humanities at Dartmouth.

Talmi and the company are employing several methods to draw attention to the tragedy, including making announcements at every concert and mentioning it in their advertising. He especially wants young people to keep faith in democracy and never fear that they will be subject to a regime where they can't speak out and are deceived and oppressed. "The Nutcracker" is a great vehicle to attract children, he says, since it's such a popular family holiday tradition in this country. Talmi says the connection between arts and human rights is inevitable for people caged in unstable, threatening surroundings like

modern-day Russia. "If I was in deep sand all the time, and I found something to hold on to, I would be very intense about it. It's a philosophical position, but it is why we marry art with a political message," he says. "Communism, in my view, gradually became a total lie. Everything you touched was not true. The only thing that remained true was the purity of artistic expression." In a struggling country, witnessing and appreciating the arts is more than recreation. "It's searching for truth," he says. This search for freedom and enlightenment through artistic expression has been going on since the days of Greek playwright Aristophanes, who was prosecuted for his plays poking fun at ancient government institutions. While the Moscow Ballet is making its point through a dedication and auxiliary programs, pieces of politically motivated theater and art through history have incorporated messages into the work itself. Perhaps the most famous artist and political activist of recent years is Vaclav Havel, the Czechoslovakian playwright who created works condemning Communist rule of Czechoslovakia through the '80s. He led 1989's nonviolent overthrow of the government, known as the Velvet Revolution, and became president of his country. Among other noted artistic activists are Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman, writer of "Death and The Maiden"; the late Spanish playwright and novelist Federico Garcia Lorca; and Athol Fugard, the South African playwright who has written anti-apartheid plays. Dorfman was exiled from Chile in 1973, and Garcia Lorca was killed by Spanish soldiers.

Even before Staravoiatova's assassination, the Moscow Ballet was advocating human rights. From 1989 to 1992, Talmi organized the traveling Glasnost Festival, in which premier dancers from assorted countries performed and noted scholars lectured about human rights issues at universities throughout the United States. "Over the last 10 years, we have tried to be an advocate of safeguarding the democratic reform, not because of the abstraction that democracy is a better form, but because of the well-being and the survival of the world," Talmi says. And despite the bleak outlook in Russia, Talmi says that through efforts like this, and the dedication of committed activists, conditions will gradually improve. "They can't kill all of us," he says. "The democratic movement is here to stay."