

# Pussy Riot engages Santa Fe audience

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The names of Nadezhda (Nadya) Tolokonnikova and Maria (Masha) Alekhina don't exactly roll off the tongue with the English-language bite that the name of their punk-rock band/arts collective does.

That's Pussy Riot, a political thorn in Russian President Vladimir Putin's side. The band's two founders made a local media splash in Santa Fe on Thursday night as Tolokonnikova, 25, and Alekhina, 26, spoke at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design's Greer Garson Theatre.

Before the formal event, the world's most famous punk-feminism activists were asked what they thought of Santa Fe.

"We were very impressed by the unified style of architecture," they said through a translator during a brief meeting with reporters, sounding very much like typical visitors to the City Different.

The Pussy Rioters became an international cause celebre in 2012 when band members donned balaclava face masks and climbed onto the altar of a Russian Orthodox church in Moscow and sang an anti-Putin song.

Three of them, including Tolokonnikova and Alekhina, were arrested and charged with "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." The two leaders spent 21 months in jail and were released in December 2013.

"Prison is not the worst thing you can have," Alekhina told reporters.

"Political murder is kind of a common thing in Russia," she said. Both women referred to the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, a Putin opponent who was gunned down in February on a bridge in central Moscow.

Tolokonnikova said, "It's Russian Roulette – you can be killed." Despite being on the world political stage, they said the question they get most has little to do with politics.

It's "how often do you change your hair," Tolokonnikova answered when a reporter asked. The answer: "Quite often – a hair stylist is our friend and we are like experience for her."

The 500-plus seats in SFUAD theater were mostly filled as Tolokonnikova and Alekhina engaged in a sometimes disjointed discussion with moderator Ellen Berkovitch. Translator Peter Verzilov (Tolokonnikova's husband) sometimes helped explain the women's heavily accented English.

The two women playfully joked and tugged at each other often, bringing laughs from the audience. They discussed how their lives changed after their Moscow church arrests when the masked group, formed in 2011, sang their punk prayer called, "Mother of God, Rid us of Putin."

Can anybody be part of the Pussy Riot movement? asked Berkovitch.

"I think you should ask that person," said Tolokonnikova, pointing to a woman in the front row who was masked in tribute to the group.

Speaking of the masks the group wore, Tolokonnikova said, "It was really difficult to cover our identities because the Russian political police knew us very well."

Since their release from the Russian penal colony, where the twosome worked 16 hours a day sewing prisoners' uniforms, they have become involved in prisoner rights worldwide. In the meeting with reporters, Alekhina was asked about what societal problems she has seen in the United States.

"We think, and not only us because we probably don't have the whole right to speak about situation of American prisoners because we are not citizens of this country, but we are friends of many artists who are talking about the problems of the United States and the problem of Chelsea Manning for example. And we think is important," Alekhina said.

Manning, a former Marine, was convicted and is in prison for releasing military documents and video to WikiLeaks.

"And we support artists who go against the limitations of free speech," she said

Thursday night's event is part of the university's Artists for Positive Social Change series and also kicks off SITE Santa Fe's 20th anniversary series of events, lectures and performances. Tickets, ranging in price from \$35 to as much as \$600 for a dinner with the two Russian activists, benefited SITE Santa Fe's future programming.

The two women now sit on the board of the international whistle-blower organization the Courage Foundation after getting an invitation from WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, according to the United Kingdom's Guardian newspaper.

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