

Gordon Gordey, Director and Dancemaker
Ukrainian Canadian Dance Works Created for The Shumka Dancers,
Canada's Professional Ukrainian Dance Company

Vechornytsi (Life is a Cabaret)

Conceived and Directed by Gordon Gordey
Principal Choreographer: Dave Ganert



During the period that I was creating major dance works in 2007, I became intrigued with the new freshness of music in Ukraine, both popular and classical. I was intrigued that Ukrainian folk pop artists like Mandry, Oleh Skrypka, Pikkardijska Tertsia, and Vasya Club were finding their own voice in new arrangements of folk songs and original works. I couldn't wait to hear the next new CD release from these artists. Canadian Ukrainian folk and pop artists like Edmonton's Brian Cherwick, Toronto's Vasyl Popodiuk, and Winnipeg's Alexis Kochan were also finding their own voices and connecting with the North American folk roots music world with innovative and personal expressions of their musical heritage. The works of living Ukrainian classical composers like Miroslav Skorik were released in new interpretations by young Ukraine based virtuosos.

I became engaged by this contemporary direction in Ukrainian music and knew Shumka had to become a part of this cultural folk music renaissance by creating original dances in the same vibrant spirit. I listened to over 1,000 of these new songs from hundreds of artists and ensembles to get inside of the artistic voice of those creating them. I searched to find what I call a "resonance" I felt would connect with our choreographers and dancers. What would also "resonate" with our audience and with newly arrived Ukrainians in Alberta? Which songs and music would have something to say through inventive 21st century multi-media staging with video projections, live music, and live dance? We couldn't have dance as mere accompaniment to these new ventures in expression. What style of dance would emerge that was organic with the music and would give our dancers a new dance skills benchmark to which to aspire? How could we create dance that would make us hear the music better? Out of those 1,000 songs, 15 emerged over four years to transition into original dance works, the majority of which were choreographed by Canada's most prolific Ukrainian Canadian dance new works choreographer, Dave Ganert.

The first series of new dance librettos I wrote, starting in January 2007, was based upon Ukrainian folk songs that I felt were given inventive new interpretations for a new century. The dances were two to four minutes in length and conveyed the pure joy of the folk song. I worked with Dave Ganert and other Shumka choreographers to find the spiritual core of each song and give it an original staging. I wanted the public to engage in these dances because the dances are pure fun, the movement is innovative, and the spiritual core leaves one feeling a joy of living. One thing we did not want to do in our staging and choreography was to simply act out the lyrics of the song through dance. The result of this kind of choreography is usually an emotionally empty mimicry of the lyrics. Musically we re-scored many of these folk songs and in dance performances they were played and sung live – often by Shumka alumni who after their dance careers moved on to join choirs and form singing groups. Later these folk songs were recorded by Ukrainian Canadian performers under the direction of Brian Cherwick.

From 2007 to 2012, I had successfully developed the concepts and librettos for a total of 15 new works under the title of *Vechornytsi (Life is a Cabaret)*. The new dance works were: *Tezhe Mene, Chaban, Halia*, and *Kin Stojit* inspired by Oleh Skrypka; *Kapelyoux* and *Sumna Ya Bula* inspired by Pikkardijska Tertsia; and *Kalyna* inspired by Mandry. Inspiration came from Vasya Club for new dance works to *Chorne More* and *Hey Joe*.



Maria Konowalec and Marco Gauk perform *Chorne More* 2008.
Sung in performance by John Zinchuk.
(Photo by Ed Ellis. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Andrea Yaremchuk and Marco Eugenio in the role of the jealous husband in *Hey Joe* 2008. Original song written by Billy Roberts, popularized by the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and sung in Ukrainian by Vasyia Club.
Sung in performance by John Eshenko.
Costumes by Trinity Chopyk. (Photo by Ed Ellis. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Nicolya Lirette in *Kin Stojit*,
Music Inspired by Oleh Skrypka 2009.
(Photo by Ed Ellis. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

In *Hey Joe* I extended the dance libretto to include projected video with exterior scenes shot in the countryside depicting the lead character, Joe's, inner torment of jealousy and the sorrow of taking his murdered wife to the graveyard draped across the back of a horse. *Hey Joe* was choreographed by dancer and choreographer, Sasha Kondrateyva, from Kyiv. She also choreographed a pas de deux from my libretto to Mykola Skoryk's *Melodia*. This work was danced live to a classical quintet with accompanying projected video of the dancers filmed in romantic settings in Kyiv, such as the fountain area around the Kyiv State Puppet Theatre.



Jayleen Gordey and Lukian Opyr in *Melodia*,
Music Composition: Mykola Skoryk 2009.
(Photo by Ed Ellis. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Jayleen Gordey and Lukian Opyr in *Melodia*,
Music Composition: Mykola Skoryk 2009.
(Performance video projection freeze frames from Kyiv,
Ukraine, by Stephen Romanow.
Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



In 2009 I wrote the libretto for *Summertime Dreams: Lullaby for a Lifetime* to the music of Canadian singer Alexis Kochan interpreting the Ukrainian folk lullaby *Oi Khodyt' son kolo vikon* and American composer George Gershwin's *Summertime*. The dancework was choreographed by Viktor Lytvynov and sung live in performance by Junetta Jamerson of the Alberta Black Pioneer Heritage Singers. The haunting similarities between the music and lyrics of this very old Ukrainian lullaby, and those of George Gershwin's *Summertime*, speak to the universal responsibility to protect the children of the world from the moment that the first lullaby is sung to them. The closing moments of the dance, during which we hear the actual recorded battle sounds of an ambush in Afghanistan, reflect upon the fact that every day the loss of someone's child is a reality in areas of conflict around the globe.



Larissa Sulyma and Jarrett Syddall comfort their child with a lullaby, while Jayleen Gordey as the metaphor for all mothers reacts to the battleground sounds of Afghanistan 2009. (Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers).

Summertime Dreams reminds us that our children are not ours alone; they are children of the world - a world in which a lullaby is our communal prayer for their safe return. Two other *Vechornytsi (Life is a Cabaret)* dance works, *Spring's Dawning* and *Hutsulka Ksenia* were created to the music of violinist Vasyl Popadiuk. *The Devil Went Down to Vegreville*, based upon the American pop song *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* by the Charlie Daniels Band, was re-worked by Canadian composer Brian Cherwick. To promote emerging Alberta artists of non-Ukrainian Canadian heritage, *Vechornytsi (Life is a Cabaret)* expanded its vision to include *Take My Hand* by Alberta singer-songwriter Ann Vriend and choreographed by JoJo Lucila, former dancer with Ballet Philippines. For me as a creator of innovative dance concepts and librettos, *Vechornytsi (Life is a Cabaret)*, allowed me to express that you live a life in the “here and now” and you have a responsibility as an artist to bring this immediate world to the stage with a plurality of international choreographers through the gift that is our Ukrainian Canadian cultural heritage.