

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

Pathways to Hopak (Stezhky do Hopaka)

Conceived and Directed by Gordon Gordey

Libretto and Choreography: Viktor Lytvynov

Additional choreography by: Dave Ganert

Music composed and arranged by Yuri Shevchenko

Sets and Costumes designed by Maria Levitska



In 2002 I developed the concept for the dancework *Pathways to Hopak*. The motivation to develop this work arose from conversations with my long-time friend and Canadian contemporary dance director, Brian Webb. He and I studied ballet together in our youth with the celebrated Alberta ballet teacher, Ruth Carse, who founded the Alberta Ballet Company in 1966. Brian Webb and I maintained our close friendship studying theatre together at the University of Alberta. He went on to study modern dance with Eric Hawkins in New York City and in 1979 he founded the Brian Webb Dance Company with a mandate in contemporary dance.

His life-long belief is:

Dance celebrates our aliveness in the moment. Dance is always about the dancing; the dancing that is taking place right before the audience. The dancing body feels its senses totally engaged and communicates this aliveness to the viewing public. The dance is not complete until it is received by the audience. This exchange between the dancer and the viewer is what makes contemporary dance alive in the here and now. (Brian Webb, 2012)

As colleagues in dance we would meet over coffee and discuss our creative thoughts and philosophies. Through 30 years, Brian Webb often collaborated and choreographed for the Shumka Dancers bringing his dramatic sensibilities and style to contemporary dance works Shumka created. It was during one of our coffee discussions that Brian Webb asked me a question that had been puzzling him for some time. He asked me: “Why is it that no matter where the Shumka Dancers perform, the audience leaps to its feet at the end of the dancework “Hopak” as if Shumka’s Hopak was a dance that they felt was a part of them?” Brian and I discussed: that maybe it was because Shumka’s Hopak is a great piece of music that it lifts everyone’s emotions; maybe Shumka’s *Hopak* dancers with their swirling colours and patterns seem to mesmerize the viewer; and that maybe Shumka’s *Hopak* dance movement seems to be a perfect combination of grace and virtuosity that leaves an audience taking on the same space as the dancers. Audience reactions to Shumka’s *Hopak* in Canada were different from reactions to Pavlo Virsky’s Ukraine *Hopak*, choreographed in 1960, which embraced what Andriy Nahachewsky in his book *Ukrainian Dance, A Cross-Cultural Approach* calls the “spirit of a nation”. Audiences in Ukraine experienced a level of nationalism reacting to Virsky’s Ukraine *Hopak* which could not be duplicated elsewhere.

Brian Webb and I did not resolve the question but both of us continued to think long after about this phenomenon of the “Hopak” and how over decades it continued to engage all cultures who experienced it live on stage. At this time Brian Webb was also the Artistic Director of the Canada Dance Festival, a prestigious national organization that presents live dance performances that reflect the diverse cultural and regional landscape of Canada in partnership with the National Arts Centre in Canada’s capital city, Ottawa. Little did I know that this question on the “magic of Shumka Hopak” was not going to be left in limbo. I was contacted by the Canada Dance Festival conveying they were extending a \$10,000 dance commission to the Shumka Dancers to answer the “Shumka Hopak” phenomenon with a new dancework.

The challenge for me was to puzzle out a concept and metaphor that would lead an audience to a greater understanding and engagement with the “Shumka Hopak”. If the “Shumka Hopak” culminates a celebration of a life worth living, I then conceived that the dancework that expressed this would reflect the cycle of life from birth to death and then renew the cycle in celebration.

For the next 16 months I began the task of developing a concept that followed the cycle of life theme and undertook the task of raising the funds required to create this original dancework. In addition to the \$10,000 commission in hand from the Canada Dance Festival, I used my track-record as Shumka’s Artistic Director to secure additional grants of \$18,000 from the Canada Council Dance Production Project Program, and \$57,000 from the Government of Alberta’s funds for cultural programming. Significant among these grants was the grant from the Canada Council for the Arts because this was the first acknowledgement by our premiere national funding body that the quality of Shumka’s submission for *Pathways to Hopak* was recognized as a professional dance project. This acknowledgement was also significant for Ukrainian dance in Canada because the Shumka Dancers became the first and only Ukrainian dance company in Canada to be nationally accredited as a professional company. Now in 2016, the Shumka Dancers are still the only recognized professional Ukrainian dance company in Canada. With this \$85,000 in hand I could now proceed to work with Shumka to engage the required creative team to develop *Pathways to Hopak* into performance.

In January 2004, in studio development began on *Pathways to Hopak* with an incredibly talented creative team: choreographers Viktor Lytvynov (Kyiv) and Dave Ganert (Edmonton), composer Yuri Shevchenko (Kyiv), designers Maria Levitska (Kyiv) and Robert Shannon (Edmonton) and producer Michael Sulyma (Edmonton). We set out to create that “pathway” of the universal life cycle that brought us to the finale celebration in Shumka’s *Hopak* choreographed by John Pichlyk and with music composed and arranged by Gene Zwozdesky. Additional dramaturgical input was sought from producer Michael Sulyma (Edmonton) and stage director, Ray Roderick (New York). My task, as stage director for *Pathways to Hopak* was to bring this project to performance in six months for its June premiere at the prestigious National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada as part of the Canada Dance Festival on June 12, 2004.



Shumka Dancers Corp performs “Requiem” scene from *Pathways to Hopak*. 2004.
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Viktor Lytvynov and I worked very closely in shaping *Pathways to Hopak* to follow our determined life cycle. We were guided in our studio creative work by the artistic vision statement of my concept.

The resonance of the world we wake up to everyday is a great human adventure. We laugh, we cry, we love and we dream. We celebrate. A child is born into a field of dreams, takes its first awkward steps and swiftly transforms into the carefree abandon of youth. A world awash with color and music, that seems propelled by boundless energy, brings a sheer joy to being alive. But what is 'joy' if you don't share it with someone special in a suspended moment of love of another being. Love is balanced by humankind's unexplainable recurring descent into the darkness of conflict. The conflict is faceless and its end through century after century is profound loss. As humankind we acknowledge this loss and mourn for it with deepest expressions of the requiems of generation after generation. Left in a state of vulnerability and with a human instinct for survival we wait for the rivers world to wash our battlefields clean. Children will continue to be born and will continue to take their first steps. There is a life worth living. Celebrate this cycle of life through the gift of Pathways to Hopak." (Gordon Gordey, 2004)

This artistic vision statement realized itself over 35 minutes in the six scenes of Viktor Lytvynov's libretto for the cycle of life that made up *Pathways to Hopak*. The scenes are: Lullaby (Koloskova), Fields of Plenty (Rodooche Pole), Dance of Youthful Abandonment Kolmeika), Love Adagio (Kohannia), The Battlefield (Borot'ba), Requiem (Chorne Pole), Life-giving Rivers (Povernenia), and Hopak.



Jarrett Syddall and Stephanie Bahniuk celebrate Kolomeika in *Pathways to Hopak* 2011. Costumes and Set Design by Maria Levitska. (Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Following its national premiere at the Canada Dance Festival the Shumka Dancers have performed *Pathways to Hopak* in Canada's major theatres and in 14 major theatres in China. *Pathways to Hopak* is in the permanent repertoire of the Shumka Dancers and is often referred to as Canada's Ukrainian contemporary folk dance benchmark. With *Pathways to Hopak* original Ukrainian Canadian dance achieved national recognition as a bona fide modern day expression of cultural life in Canada.



Dancers Jayleen Gordey, Lukian Opyr, Andrea Yaremchuk and Dave Ganert celebrate in the Hopak finale of *Pathways to Hopak*. 2009. (Photo by Ed Ellis. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Recognition of our heritage dance form had what folklorist Robert Klymasz, writing in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, calls: “transgressed the limits and patterns sanctioned by the surrounding dominant mainstream culture.” The hierarchy of taste that disregarded heritage based art was crumbling. The belief in an expressive Canadian life where a plurality of cultures and free expression operate simultaneously realized itself in an artistic vision I would continue to pursue.