

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

Girl in the Red Dress TANGO

Conceived and Directed by: Gordon Gordey

Choreography by Dave Ganert, Leo Sato

Original Music Composed and Arranged by Andriy Shoost



Since my teenage years in the 1960's, I was fascinated with the well-known Ukrainian tango piece *Hutsulka Ksenia* by Yaroslav Barnych. It always struck me that this piece of music inspired people at wedding celebrations to move onto the dance floor and enjoy its emotional tango rhythm even though many who did dance to it did not know how to do the tango. In January 2006 I began research to develop a dance libretto for *Hutsulka Ksenia*. Through my research, I found that jazz and urban tango were popular in the cafés in Lviv, in Western Ukraine, during the 1930's to 1940's. I also discovered that Eastern Canada enjoyed the tango music of musician Bohdan Veselovsky who after WWII immigrated to Canada from Ukraine for political reasons. This research broadened my scope of tango in Ukrainian popular music and inspired me to think beyond the melody of *Hutsulka Ksenia*.

I wanted to create a dance where despite Soviet political repression of so-called decadent music from the Western world, there was a courageous girl who would go to her secret place in the Carpathian mountains and dare to dance the forbidden tango. For me this girl represents the courage for free expression exhibited by strong women throughout the world.

One year later, in January 2007, with this concept in hand I travelled to Kyiv and met with composer, Andriy Shoost. He and I worked together in Kyiv for one week mapping out my libretto and the structure of the music sections for an original music composition for *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO*. Andriy Shoost composed an original score using a diverse synthesized soundscape of symphonic orchestration with live Japanese Taiko drums, ARS NOVA percussion array created by composer, Yuri Chernenko, 18th century folk instruments, Argentine acoustic guitar styles, violin, clarinet and accordion.

Although it had a narrative character framework, *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* was not a dance with a traditional 'girl-meets-boy' instructional guide storyline. In the mapping of the dance, the girl in the red dress in 'daring to dance the tango' metaphorically frees every other female to dance the tango. This progression of a spreading freedom of expression with the other females she encounters became the mapped dance shape of *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO*. It was March 2007 and I now had a libretto and a musical composition underway. I also knew that to get the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers support for this tango project I needed to receive validation from an outside dance authority. This validation came from the national funding body, The Canada Council for the Arts, who through a juried process by dance professionals awarded a production project grant of \$17,000 for developing *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO*. This now became only the second Ukrainian dance work to receive recognition and funding as a professional dance undertaking.

The final element I didn't have on our creative team was a principal choreographer versed in the lexicon of the tango. Dave Ganert, Shumka's Resident Choreographer, at the time was able to support the choreography with Ukrainian dance lexicon but not with tango lexicon. Three different tango choreographers, two from Edmonton and one from New York City, came into the Shumka Dancer studios to work on *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO*. While each knew the tango lexicon and taught it to the dancers, none could create choreography that advanced the narrative of the 'girl who dared to dance the tango'. It was then by chance that I learned about Leo Sato, a tango dancer and choreographer living in Calgary, Alberta. He had studied tango in Buenos Aires with such greats as former ballet dancer and tango choreographer, Angel Coria and renowned tango teacher and dancer, Angela Tonanez. Leo Sato came to our dance studio and after the first rehearsal it was clear that Dave Ganert and I had found the creative choreographer for *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO*. The learning curve of tango lexicon was difficult for the Shumka Dancers cast within the time frame of our premiere scheduled for November 2007. However the excitement of undertaking a new genre of dance linked to our Ukrainian urban heritage brought a great commitment from the dancers in rehearsals.



Shumka Corps performs *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* in Edmonton, Canada 2008.
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

It became clear that Leo Sato himself needed to also dance in *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* playing the character in the narrative that the "girl in the red dress" dreams about when she goes to her secret place in the Carpathians to dance the tango. The lead female dancer in *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* was Jayleen Gordey, who perfected her tango technique by training and dancing with Leo Sato in Calgary in addition to rehearsing with him in the Shumka Dancers Edmonton studios. Leo Sato partnered with Jayleen Gordey at tango clubs in Calgary to reach the professional standard required for the mystique of the tango.



Jayleen Gordey and Leo Sato dance the forbidden tango in *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* 2009.
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Girl in the Red Dress TANGO premiered at Edmonton's 2,700 seat Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium on November 10, 2007. *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* achieved its goal that it would absolutely not be about 'Ukrainian dancers doing a tango' but it would be a dance that stood as a work with strong passionate characters, original choreography, and one inspired by a rich European Ukrainian urban café culture. The editor of *The Ukrainian News* Marko Levitsky, Edmonton's bi-weekly ethnic press, wrote "The premieres were the highlight of the evening [...] The *Girl in the Red Dress TANGO* is a virtual whirlwind of swirling motion and color." (November, 2007) As the audience applauded for *Red Dress TANGO* I imagined satisfied smiles on the faces of political exiles Yaroslav Barnych and Bohdan Veselovsky, and all the women in their red dresses who dared to dance the tango in the cafés of Lviv in the 1930's.



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(Video freeze frame by Stephen Romanow. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)