

**Gordon Gordey, Director and Dancemaker:
Creating Original Ukrainian Dance in Canada – An Autobiographical Reflection of a
40-Year Creative Journey with The Ukrainian Shumka Dancers of Canada**

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The wonderment of telling stories through dance in an engaging 21st century style is how I choose to celebrate our Canada. I believe Canada’s plurality of cultures and communities creates a fascination of our present linked to our past, and an intrigue to influence our future through a diversity of cultural expression. For 40 years, I chose to share my goals with the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers of Canada and commit to making art expressed through the gift of Ukrainian dance. I am honored to share my personal experiences of the ecology of my heritage through the process of creating original Ukrainian dance in Canada today. (Gordon Gordey, September 2013)

My 40-Year Journey of Creating Original Ukrainian Dance in Canada

We all come from somewhere and we humbly accept our life’s journey. My journey is driven by being able to express my truth. As a Canadian dancemaker of Ukrainian heritage, I thought about this deeply in the fall of 2011 when the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers set foot in China to begin our *Shumka at 50* tour - 22 performances in 14 cities in 44 days. This was my fourth tour to China, but this one was a major first-tier tour to some of the most remarkable new theatres in the world.

China is committed to advancing its present cultural growth on a world scale. China has over 500 cities with populations of over 1 million with a growing new wealth of independent businessmen, private-sector lawyers, artists and employees of joint-venture companies. The leading cities in this population group have theatres with 1,800 plus seats and the highest standards of Chinese -European influenced architecture, backstage logistics, and audience comfort with restaurants, bars, and art-filled lobbies.

Can you imagine the shivers I and the rest of the Shumka dance company felt when we heard the cinematic soundscape for *Eve of Kupalo*, with its voice over in Mandarin, bring audiences to life in each of the 14 cities of this China tour? Canadian created Ukrainian dance was showcasing itself as an engaging art form that connected with an audience more half way around the world from its origins. Shumka had brought together a ‘world community of man’ into the ritual communion that is live theatre. I felt the same satisfaction when these audiences responded to *Pathways to Hopak*. To have these two dance works as part of the *Shumka at 50* tour in China was a personal highlight in celebrating the mystery of the imagination through rich humanizing experiences – a mission of my artistic work.

As this written account of ‘a 40-year creative expedition’ is autobiographical, the words “I” and “my” are used throughout; however dance is a collaborative art form and we never make it alone or experience it alone. Foremost in the contribution to the canvass upon which I conceived my artistic work is Canada’s Ukrainian Shumka Dancers. Their financial resources, their choreographers, their community supporters, and the talented contributions of hundreds of dancers over 40 years were the foundation upon which I was able to build my creative inspirations and collaborative discoveries.

Within the foundation of this 40-year journey, I must recognize influential individual mentors and creative partners. I didn't start studying dance until I was 15 years old, when I left my small rural village of Innisfree to attend the summer cultural program, *Osvita*, at St. John's Institute in Edmonton, Alberta. At *Osvita* I was introduced to Ukrainian dance by Shumka dancer, Gerald Metrunc. Pride, discipline, and perfection of Ukrainian dance technique were instilled in me. Although dance was a new experience, its athletic demands flowed naturally out of my leadership experiences as a high school athlete. My music experiences from folk singing with the elders in my small village were refined for dance with operatic singing lessons from Domety Bereznetz and ensemble chorus singing under conductor, Roman Soltykevich - both classically trained in Ukraine. Chester Kuc, Shumka's Artistic Director in 1966, introduced me to the 40 year North American Ukrainian dance legacy and repertoire of Vasile Avramenko. Ruth Carse, founder of the Alberta Ballet, was my first ballet teacher instilling the fundamentals of classical dance technique. University of Alberta Department of Drama professors: Jim Defelice, Frank Buekert, Margaret Faulkes, and Tom Peacocke, shaped my pedagogy of dramatic sensibility and the art of directing for the stage. Alice Major, poet and writer of the Shumka, *Tradition in Motion* book, focused me on understanding the evolution of Shumka and its place in the evolution of Canadian culture. John Pichlyk, Orest Semchuk, and Gene Zwozdesky were the first Shumka co-creators of my first small dance works. From the 1990's forward my mentors and colleagues, who became the right combination for artistic success, were: John Pichlyk and Dave Ganert (Shumka Artistic Directors and Choreographers), Michael Sulyma (Arts Producer and Film-maker), Darka Tarnawsky (Publicist and Executive Board Member), Tommy Banks, Gene Zwozdesky, Brian Cherwick, Yuri Shevchenko and Andriy Shoost (Composers/Arrangers), and Colin MacLean (Arts Critic), Viktor Lytvynov and Brian Webb (Choreographers), Slavko Halatyn (Music Producer and Sound Engineer), Stephen Romanow and Andrew Scholotiuk (Videographers), Robert Shannon, Randall Fraser, and Oksana Paruta (Costume and Props Designers) and Maria Levitska (Director of Scenography with the National Opera of Ukraine). Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* writes that in order to become good at something, an expert, you need to have invested at least 10,000 hours in solid training and relevant experience. He also writes: *No one –not rock stars, not even professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses – ever make it alone.* I owe a gratitude to this combination of teachers, mentors, and artists whose contributions brought truth to the phrase that no one "ever make it alone".

When I joined the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers in 1966 I entered an organizational culture that had evolved over the seven years from its inception. Shumka presented their first concert on November 29, 1959 at the Ukrainian National Federation Hall in Edmonton. In Shumka's fifth anniversary program in 1964 Myron Tarnawsky, a dancer, wrote: *"We can now say with pride and humility that we are known throughout all the provincial capitals of Canada"*, and dancer Lois Sulyma wrote: *"the Shumka Dancers are making a marked contribution to the enrichment of the Canadian cultural mosaic ... as we know it, value it, and expect it to be perpetuated by the generations to come."* In this fifth anniversary program audiences enjoyed folk dances from Ukraine originally researched and choreographed by Vasile Avramenko and staged by Chester Kuc, original dances influenced by Avramenko and choreographed by Shumka dancers, and two Ukrainian folk ballets *Ukrainian Suite* and *Under the Cherry Tree* choreographed by Shumka's, Natalka Dobrolige. By 1966 the majority of dances presented were original works choreographed by Shumka including the development of a new music arrangement for *Arkan* by Shumka dancer, Gene Zwozdesky. Within the ecology of Ukrainian dance of the day in Canada, Shumka primarily performed for our own Edmonton community much like our counterparts – "Yevshan Ukrainian Folk Ballet" in Saskatoon, "Rusalka Ukrainian Dance Ensemble" in Winnipeg, and the "Chaika Performing Arts Ensemble" in Hamilton.

I lived the first 30 years of my Shumka era as a dancer, a choreographer, and a stage director who helped shape the dramatic structure of our stage works. During this period Shumka was committed, under Artistic Director, Orest Semchuk, to the goal of broadening the reach of our Ukrainian Canadian dance form to the widest possible audiences. In 1977, '78, and '79 Shumka was the only Ukrainian dance group invited to perform in July 1 Canada Day Celebrations on Parliament Hill in Canada's capital city, Ottawa. With over 50,000 Canadians in attendance and 100's of thousands watching television broadcasts Shumka believed we were reaching our goal of being regarded as a legitimate Canadian dance form. We were dancers engaged in showcasing the culture of Canada and not simply regarded as 'that nice ethnic Ukrainian oddity of men in baggy pants and women with brightly swirling ribbons'. Cross-Canada tours in 1979 and 1982, guest artist appearances with the Edmonton Symphony, and Gala performances for Queen Elizabeth II's visits to Canada combined to put Shumka into the company of Canada's successful mainstream performing arts groups. Shumka's artistic growth continued under Artistic Director, John Pichlyk and Music Director, Gene Zwozdesky, with the refinement of creation of works with a Ukrainian folk ballet narrative – a storyline through dance that engaged audience emotions in caring for characters triumphing over difficult situations. Audiences were now engaged beyond appreciation of physical dance virtuosity, lively music, and colorful costuming. This was Shumka's Canadian success but what if Shumka could test the evolution of Ukrainian dance in Canada by showcasing our work in Ukraine? Could this reconstruction of the traditional into a modern day Canadian Ukrainian folk dance experience resonate with an audience in Ukraine? In 1990 Shumka answered this question and through the determination of Producer Michael Sulyma, we toured our work to Kyiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Moscow. Ukrainian and Russian audiences and dance companies were astounded by our innovation and moved by our commitment to the preservation and advancement of Ukrainian dance in Canada. We were repeatedly told we were an inspiration for the development of Ukrainian dance in Ukraine which had stagnated creatively under the strict officially sanctioned codification of Socialist Realism.

In 1999, I was asked by Ukrainian Shumka Dancer organization to undertake the role of Artistic Director. In my 30 years of involvement in the performing arts I brought the experience of "10,000 hours", written about by Malcom Gladwell, to my new role in Shumka. The organization determined they wanted an Artistic Director who would continue Shumka's vision to grow as a Canadian dance company and someone who could shape the artistic path in the 'here and now' of the coming century. The Shumka organization understood that in me it was getting an Artistic Director who did not fit into the typical model or paradigm expected by those in the Ukrainian dance field.

In most dance companies, and in particular, Ukrainian dance companies, there is a model of how dance is made. In this typical model, a Ukrainian dance company has an Artistic Director who functions as the sole choreographer and authority of expert correctness in the work the company produces. The Artistic Director's authority or knowledge accreditation comes from completion of folklore and choreographic training in an academic arts school setting in Ukraine, from experience as a dancer with one of Ukraine's national folk dance companies, or from experience as a dancer in one of Canada's folk dance companies. This artistic director personally trains and rehearses the company's dancers in the studio. This Artistic Director then stages performances that are a combination of "authentic" original folk-dances and re-staged dance-works from 1970's and 1980's-era dances choreographed in Ukraine based on the same paradigm. The artistic director functions as the expert demonstrator of a fixed historical lexicon of steps and figures, a choreographer of movement patterns attributed to traditional folk dance style, and an authority on appropriate music and costuming for the dances. Dr. Andriy Nahachewsky, historian of Ukrainian dance, in his book, *Ukrainian Dance, A Cross-Cultural Approach*, writes about a principle of staging where choreographers: "allow themselves substantial licence [but] continue to try support the illusion of authenticity. [...] Whenever convenient the melodies, the instrumental flavour, the costume, the dance motifs, the dance program all make reference to the original (the authentic)". At its best Nahachewsky refers to this approach to staging as an attractive strategy that offers a balance between the goal of pursuit of the authentic and the creation of interesting theatrical presentations.

Clearly I did not wholly fit the typical artistic director model described. I did bring my own broad artistic background to add to my 30 plus years of being a dancer and choreographer with Shumka. But in addition I brought the academic experience of a Masters of Arts degree in Theatre History and Criticism, and a Masters of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Directing. I studied Ukrainian art, both pre-revolution and post-revolution. I studied pre-revolution advances in Ukrainian theatre and translated exiled playwright Mykola Kulish's avant-garde expressionist drama *The People's Malakhi* into English. Combined with this, I had directed numerous theatre productions in Canada from Edmonton to Halifax. I taught acting and directing for the stage at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Dalhousie University in Halifax, and Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton. I also worked full time for 25 years as the Drama Consultant, a Sound Recording Industry Consultant, and Film Consultant for the Department of Culture in the Province of Alberta. I came from the theatre tradition of working with creative teams who collectively pool their talent to produce engaging art. I also looked at my role as Shumka's Artistic Director as someone who mentored choreographers to work with dancers to teach them how to express their discoveries through movement as opposed to working with dancers to teach them how to mimic someone else's 'authentic' choreography.

My creative work in Shumka is credited with: "Conceived and Directed by Gordon Gordey." What does this mean? It means that the idea and creative form of the work – the story that needs to be told through dance was first thought of, researched, written out, and directed by me. It means I believe I have something to share through dance. In all of the arts we call this "finding your voice". It means not accepting boundaries that others want to impose on you. Often in heritage-based dance this imposition becomes a form of 'nostalgic bullying'. My work always springs from original creative inspiration. It is not just a cut-and-paste of Ukrainian dance vocabulary from Ukrainian dance videos, other Ukrainian dances I have seen, or the re-staging of the master works of Ukrainian choreographers. The works of Virsky National Dance Company of Ukraine are the remarkable creations and choreography of Pavlo Virsky and Myrosalv Vantukh. I respect their achievement, I am inspired by their life-long contributions, and I deeply believe their work should be fully credited to them and not copied by others. Their work is already the best version of what they wish to express so why would I want to present another variation of it? My artistic voice is driven by "created in Canada" and not "copied in Canada".

I challenged myself to create original work that is an outward expression of life through dance by engaging a creative team's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves. I wanted to contribute original work to the canon of Ukrainian dance - original work that is spiritually connected to generations of continuous cultural practice. I wanted dance stories that I conceived to embed themselves in viewer's minds and become cultural touchstones worth sharing. Robert Klymasz, Ukrainian folklorist, in the *Journal of the Folklore Institute* calls this: "*the phenomenon of innovational folklore where there is a reconstruction of the traditional to produce a modern-day version of the folklore legacy[...]*an amazingly rich, limitless source of entertainment, instruction, wonder, and pride."

Despite this artistic vision dedicated to the advancement of an art form I faced a critical fork in the road in starting my role as the Artistic Director of Shumka. One fork was to continue our mandate of creation as an amateur organization with the inherent expectations of producing dance works with limited budgets and small government Arts grants supplemented by the contributions of deeply committed volunteers. Success in this model would continue to be defined as Shumka being the best of amateur and recreational Ukrainian folk dance in Canada.

The second fork involved taking the leap to meet the benchmark of being recognized as a professional dance company by audiences, and being welcome as peers into the Canadian professional dance world. It involved adhering to new high standards of artistic achievement, management, and governance required to access Arts grants for professional organizations from all levels of government. I proposed to the Executive Board of the Shumka Dancers that if we were to survive as Canada's leading Ukrainian dance company and be recognized as an integral expression of Canadian arts, it was imperative we undertake the organizational governance change to become a professional dance company. In Canada's conditions for Arts funding from government Arts bodies in the early 2000's this also meant that dancers would now be paid for performances where there was sufficient revenue to do so.

This reconfiguration to professional status was not an easy philosophical transition for many of the company dancers. A large number of Shumka alumni were also not willing to accept change to the core belief of amateur status no matter what the financial and artistic future held for Shumka. They felt that as the Artistic Director I was giving up on a sacred pillar of our organization's history. After numerous meetings with the Shumka dance company of the day and with Shumka's Alumni Association, the Shumka Dancers society voted to become a professional dance company. *The Shumka Dancers, Canada's Professional Ukrainian Dance Company* received its first grant as a professional Arts organization in 2004. This grant from the Canada Council was the first ever grant award to a dance company outside of mainstream genres. Shumka's continued contribution to expressing our Canadian Ukrainian cultural heritage under my Artistic Directorship was built upon: advancing a vision of Canadian Ukrainian dance built upon commitment to making art, fiscal prudence, integrity to the foundation of our Ukrainian heritage, and the predictable increased support from government Arts agencies that came from committing to the principles of being a professional Arts organization.

In five years my track record as Shumka's Artistic Director and my respect from the theatre community in Alberta led to my appointment to manage performing arts celebrations for Alberta's Centennial in 2004. It was an incredibly proud moment being introduced to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II of England, as Gordon Gordey, Artistic Director of Canada's Ukrainian Shumka Dancers.



Gordon Gordey, Artistic Director, Ukrainian Shumka Dancers, introduced to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of England during Alberta's Centennial 2005 (Courtesy Government of Alberta, Centennial Archives)

Our forefathers would never in their wildest dreams imagined that 100 years after being one of the founding peoples of Canada, our Ukrainian dance heritage and the Shumka Dancers would be recognized as a living component of Canada's cultural life.

Creative Renewal for Original Ukrainian Dance in Canada for the Next 40 Years

It is from these experiences of my 40 year expedition of creating original Ukrainian dance in Canada that I pose the questions that every generation of Ukrainian dance artists must ask: "What is the future of our art form of Canadian Ukrainian dance?", or as I prefer to ask them, "How do we actively shape the future of our art form in a 21st Century mentality to meaningfully engage audiences?" "How do we increase the bandwidth of Ukrainian dance in Canada?" "What can I do so the next generation of dance leaders in Canada will be wildly more successful than I ever was?"

I believe the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers can continue to lead in being the beacon of creative renewal for our art form. Shumka's distinct style of Canadian Ukrainian dance is a recognized part of the world ecology of dance. I champion the words given in a speech by Alan Davey, Chief Executive of the Arts Council of England. He says: *I want our dance companies, practitioners and choreographers to be the best they can be. I want to enable them to make amazing, difficult, baffling or joyous art. I want people to be able to do dance, to understand it, to encourage and revere our dancers and dance companies as they should, and to will them to do more. I want what we do in dance to reflect the diversity of the country we are – and to use all the talents we have. More than anything, dance should reflect who we are and who we want to be. And we should say it on a world stage as well as a domestic one.*

What an incredible renewed creative Canadian Ukrainian dance community we would be if we were to embrace Alan Davey's vision for dance. I believe we are at a point where creative renewal and adaptive capacity are vital to the long-term health of our Ukrainian dance community. If we think the public will continue to come to see anything we do because it's important to us, and because we're brilliant at marketing, we are doomed. If we believe we can continue to ask audiences to participate in an act of boredom in the theatre for reasons of romantic cultural nostalgia we are doomed. The commercial culture sector with its transnational touring shows and deep pocket advertising dollars has already marginalized us. The status quo of Ukrainian dance cannot compete with Cirque du Soleil and Paul McCartney, whether it's in Canada or in Ukraine.

As part of our creative renewal we must invest in artistic leaders who ignite the collective creativity of our community with originality, curiosity, and fresh ways of presenting our art. It's happening in Alberta in art forms other than Ukrainian dance. Visual artist, Larissa Cheladyn, achieved local and international recognition for her work inspired by her Ukrainian heritage. Her art touches a chord with all of us because it allows us to see the here and now around us as it is inspired by our Ukrainian Canadian roots. Cheladyn doesn't paint Ukrainian themed red poppies over and over and over. She paints the "Flowers of the Bible". Red poppies as part of our Ukrainian art heritage are inherent symbols of hope and I too have a painting of them – just not in every room. Cheladyn paints scenes from our churches that explore the simple wonderment of a candle-flame. Artists Iryna Karpenko, Valery Semenko and Oksana Zhelisko, as new Ukrainian Canadians living in Edmonton, Alberta, give us an amazing fresh lens as visual artists to see the world around us. The Ukrainian Male Chorus of Edmonton and the Dnipro Ensemble do not sing the same 20 folk songs over and over. They commission new work from Alberta composers like Andriy Talpash and Willie Zwozdesky.

It sometimes seems that Ukrainian dance is the only art form mired in the same old village themes where melodramatic characters are either very good or very bad and the kozaks ride to the rescue so justice can prevail in the end. This is not our Canadian Ukrainian experience nor do these themes resonate with a 21st Century audience. Why do we keep doing this? Why do we put such effort into creating a romantic nostalgia of Ukrainian life that only exists for a vocal limited and shrinking audience of self-proclaimed cultural custodians outside of Ukraine? I challenge Artistic Directors and choreographers not to keep re-enforcing this stereotype. I challenge all Canadian audience members not to keep asking to see these stereotypical themes.

I admire the courage in our Ukrainian dance community to pursue fresh themes and do what Shumka choreographer, Dave Ganert and Quebec choreographer, Jean-Marc Genereaux did together in *Through a Dreamer's Eyes*. They used contemporary dance with elements of Ukrainian dance lexicon to explore the reality of MS (Multiple Sclerosis) and the dream of those affected to be able to again freely walk and dance in the world around them. *It is a piece speaks to the human heart - human emotion, human struggle and human hope* choreographer Dave Ganert said in conversation with me in 2012. Dealing with themes of great emotional depth is difficult. Yes it is going to be a challenge to create a dance work that finds the humanity and personal triumph out of a horrific genocide in Ukraine like the Holodomor. But I challenge choreographers take it on with a vision beyond showing starving people on a stage, arms reaching to the sky. Go for a high-stakes vision that engages audiences to connect the Holodomor with today's oppression by various governments in the world at large. Find the inspirational flower of humanity that grows in the wasteland of the Holodomor. Embrace Canadian choreographer Brian Webb's vision of "*dance that takes the space and moves the audience to an ecstatic state where everyone shares ownership*".

As a Canadian dancemaker of Ukrainian heritage I listen with fascination to the world around me. I have stories that I'm dreaming about and working on that I believe need to be told. My inspirations change from year to year because I change from year to year. I believe in Canadian author, Rudy Weibe, who said: *Storytelling is a human gift that allows us to put visions in each other's heads*. I believe I am entrusted by an ancestral calling to spare no effort to make the dance that only I can do. I thank audiences in Canada, Ukraine, and in China for the respect, for coming to see my work, and thank Canada's Ukrainian Shumka Dancers for being the leading edge for my vision.

Gordon Gordey

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