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World premiere of Shumka Dancers' Clara's Dream an international event

BY SELENA KITTERINGHAM, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 9, 2013

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The world première of Clara's Dream is Friday, Jan. 11 at the Jubilee Auditorium. It stars members of the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers, Virsky — The Ukrainian State Folk Company and the Kyiv Ballet.

Photograph by: Ian Jackson , Epic Photography

EDMONTON - For Edmontonians of Ukrainian heritage, Christmas comes twice a year. Lucky for all of us, Ukrainian Christmas this January brings a second Nutcracker to our city, with [Edmonton's Ukrainian Shumka Dancers](#) unveiling their world première of Clara's Dream.

And while the dance world is not lacking in Nutcracker concept pieces — from all male casts to the jazzy to Klezmer — it is remarkable to note that despite the iconic composer's Ukrainian lineage, Clara's Dream is the first time The Nutcracker story will be conveyed completely in the Ukrainian folk ballet style.

For Michael Sulyma, Shumka's longtime producer, the idea to create a new Ukrainian Nutcracker represented far more in his mind than a savvy



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business decision allowing his company to vie for a slice of the dance world's seasonal cash-generating cow.

"I've seen how we've evolved in our Edmonton community," says Sulyma, who has been a part of the organization for 43 years, first as a dancer, then as an executive board member and now as a producer.

"As of our 50th anniversary (in 2009), we became a resident dance company of the Northern (Alberta) Jubilee Auditorium and in our opinion that requires some responsibility on our part for our community. It became incumbent on us that we participate in the holiday season of Edmonton."

Another factor was Shumka's successful experience as a participating partner in a classical ballet version of the Kyiv Ballet's Nutcracker since 1997. It was performed here at the Citadel and toured in the eastern United States as well. Shumka was invited to perform excerpts of that show, which Sulyma produced, in 2002 and again in 2005 as part of the touring production A Royal Christmas, alongside Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer and Andrea Bocelli.

"We realized our participation really got people excited. We performed to well over 450,000 people throughout those Royal Christmas shows, so we got a really good chance to understand different aspects of The Nutcracker ballet and what Shumka brought to it. We knew that we really had something here if we did it in a different fashion."

At first blush, programming a new Nutcracker does not seem a particularly risky artistic choice. But Sulyma says delivering on audiences' preconceived expectations of The Nutcracker, built up by powerful sentimentality and nostalgia for whatever version they remember seeing as a child, can be a minefield.

"Financially, is it risky? Very. The community has big expectations any time you want to do a special holiday show," says Sulyma. To exceed audience expectations, Sulyma says a lavish production was in order, and that comes with a high price tag.

"We are in a position to survive the financial strain it is going to take. You can never present these kinds of shows and expect to recoup in a short period of time. It's a long-term investment for all of us and we hope that over the years, we can do Edmonton proud."

Moreover, Shumka's shareholders had the ambitious artistic vision of uniting three of the world's foremost Ukrainian dance companies to pull off the first Ukrainian Nutcracker together.

Shumka is a longtime collaborator with the Kyiv Ballet, the company Tchaikovsky spent many years composing for at the Ukrainian Opera House. But Shumka also had a strong desire to collaborate for the first time with Virsky — the Ukrainian State Folk Dance Company, also based in Kyiv.

There would be no Shumka if not for Virsky, the original group of folk



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dancers brought together by Ukrainian ballet masters Pavlo Virsky and Mykola Bolotov 73 years ago in Kyiv. Dave Ganert, Shumka's current artistic director, cites Virsky as being the primary influence and inspiration for Shumka's founders in Edmonton back in 1959.

"Virsky was the company we aspired to emulate," says Ganert. "Through our artistic history, we've taken on new ways of exploring folkloric Ukrainian culture and contemporary culture today. We've grown into our own cultural identity with using story dance theatre to tell our stories, and convey our emotions. So I think it is now a mutual respect for both companies in the fact that we try to aspire to the technique that Virsky brings to their performances and the fact that they look to Shumka as doing some very exciting and interesting things with Ukrainian dance. I think we've both learned and grown through this process."

Virsky's athletic and colourful compositions have never included a full evening-length ballet. Clara's Dream is also the veteran company's first performance contract with another dance company.

Sulyma explains it took some special bilingual discussions over three years of negotiations to build the trust and relationships necessary to get the project from the seed of an idea to signed memorandums of understanding. It was a long road, even before a single step was choreographed, well before a red boot stepped into the rehearsal hall, let alone onto the stage.

With three established dance companies working as creative partners, there is little doubt that individual artistic egos had to be set aside to make it work.

The production has assembled a top-notch creative team with Viktor Lytvynov, former Kyiv Ballet artistic director and current resident choreographer, acting as choreographic lead, flying back and forth from Kyiv to Edmonton.

The production's sumptuous design was created by award-winning set and costume designer Maria Levitska of the National Opera of Ukraine.

The cast includes 16 of Virsky's best dancers from Ukraine, three dancers from Kyiv Ballet performing the roles of Clara, the Prince and Drosselmeier, and 16 of Shumka's top dancers, among them Jeff Mortensen from So You Think You Can Dance Canada fame, a former Shumka dancer, now based out of Los Angeles. He fills the role of Fritz.

Ganert led rehearsals in Edmonton, acting with former artistic director John Pichlyk as cultural consultants.

Two years ago, an in-development version of Clara's Dream was performed for a private, focus-group audience at the Jubilee to garner feedback. The first time all the dancers were brought together was last Sunday, less than one week before opening night.

"Virsky's been working in Kyiv, we've been working in Edmonton, the (Kyiv) Ballet has been rehearsing — so taking the three companies and blending it all together, I think it is very exciting," says Ganert. "The final rehearsal process is happening very rapidly. The adaptability of everybody is going to be quite exciting."

1-4 of 48

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Ganert says in addition to the Ukrainian dance lexicon, there are many distinctive Ukrainian Christmas traditions woven into the ballet. For instance, the curtain opens with Uncle Drosselmeier entertaining the children with a vertep, a portable, puppet theatre.

"The music itself by Tchaikovsky, a lot of it is based on the time he spent in Ukraine with his family. His grandfather was born in Ukraine, his uncle was a Cossack — most of his music was derived by or influenced by Ukrainian folkloric melodies. It was really a natural for us musically," says Sulyma.

Ukrainian carolling features prominently in this production's score, with a grand orchestral version of Shchedryk (Carol of the Bells) arranged by Ukrainian composer Yuri Shevchenko.

On the eve of Clara's Dream's debut, the big question remains: is there an appetite for two Nutcrackers in Edmonton, with one of them in January, after the main December holiday hustle and bustle? Will Clara's Dream be distinctive enough to carve out its own long-term place in the annual seasonal performance market for decades to come, alongside the Citadel's A Christmas Carol and Alberta Ballet's Nutcracker?

The company hopes to take the show elsewhere, including Kyiv as well as other Canadian and U.S. cities, but there are no firm plans yet as to when that might happen.

Shumka has high hopes for Clara's Dream.

"The lexicon is the lexicon," says Ganert. "But the emotion, the spirit and the passion that you feel from all three companies, that is what is going to make this production truly unique."

Clara's Dream: A Ukrainian Folk Ballet based on Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker

Companies: Ukrainian Shumka Dancers, Virsky — The Ukrainian State Folk Company and The Kyiv Ballet

When: Friday, Jan. 11 and Saturday, Jan. 12 at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Jubilee Auditorium

Tickets: \$25-\$75 plus surcharges through Ticketmaster

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