

Edmonton's Ukrainian Shumka Dancers combine traditional dance with good business sense

Shumka's success is mirrored by other dance-based productions like Riverdance and Cirque du Soleil

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Apr 11, 2012

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In 1990, in the waning days of the Soviet Union, Edmonton's Shumka dancers were touring the region presenting their unique fusion of ethnic Ukrainian, Western balletic and modern narrative dance on main stages in Moscow and Kyiv. Perhaps because they were performing for a Ukrainian audience that already sensed something momentous in the air, the dancers danced their feet off, especially with their trademark Hopak, the exhibitionistic piece for the male dancers that features Cossack-inspired routines of jaw-dropping gymnastics and mid-air splits. And all this was done, of course, in sharyvary, the voluminous baggy pants that would have a place of pride in your average Cossack's wardrobe.

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They brought the house down in Kyiv. Then a camera goes behind the curtains and zooms in on the last dancer backstage, the one who had been thrown in a mighty hurl across the ranks of his fellows, his own leap a sizzling streak through the air, with a Canadian flag unfurling behind him as he holds his arm aloft. Now, behind the curtains, he's sitting cross-legged on the floor, panting and clutching that flag to his heart, and he tells the interviewer, "This is what it's all about."

Well, what exactly is "it"?

The Ukrainian Shumka Dancers celebrated their 50th anniversary last year. Do the math: these are fourth- and fifth-generation Ukrainians whose ancestral village dances are lost in history's fog. Besides, look at the artists' names on the Shumka website: they aren't even necessarily Ukrainian-Canadians anymore. These are young people exuberant with the joy of dancing and the sheer theatricality of choreographed full-length productions. The effect doesn't come cheap: a Shumka performance combines sumptuous costumes, dramatic decor, wild music and the artistry of dancers who are rigorously trained in several dance genres to produce dance theatre

with a Slavic soul. Or, as the Globe and Mail's dance critic, Deirdre Kelly, put it: "Riverdance meets Ukraine." This is not your baba's circle dance on the village green.

And behind the show is a canny fusion of art and commercial, one that's absolutely essential when budgets soar past what arts foundations and individual donors can provide. Creating new works and touring them costs millions of dollars, while the costumes, props and equipment needed to carry them out fill the equivalent of a 10-metre tractor-trailer.

I belong to the generation that was sent to Saturday school in the church basement, and there we had Ukrainian language, geography and history classes and, as a real treat, some traditional singing and dancing. I remember a petite ballerina with a ponytail, a displaced person, patiently teaching us our one-two-three baby steps of what we called folk dance. But Chester Kuc, Edmonton-born and himself a dancer, had big plans for "folk" dance. In 1959, he brought together as a troupe the best Ukrainian dancers in the city and, a year later, had them on the stage of the Alberta Jubilee Auditorium. Fifty years later, Shumka tours North America, Australia, Japan, China and Canada. The company holds the fifth-highest box office figures for a nationally touring dance production in Canada.

How does the company do it? Sprinkled around its website are words like customers, clients, business partners, opportunities and creative partnerships. Yes, it's a charitable, non-profit company. But, as the group's marketing director, Darka Tarnowsky, put it, "We have to be efficient in our operations and continuously cognizant of our audience and resource development. We have to keep our art vital and interesting to our audiences – whether they be the 'bums in seats,' the students we teach, our donors or our funders."

Artistic and creative passion and fiscal prudence: for Shumka, they are not an either/or but instead a both/and. "The stakes are higher," Tarnowsky says, "and the challenge is ongoing. But it's an exciting one. We will always be community-rooted, but the boundaries around what we can do feel much wider."