

Post-Virsky *Hopak*?

Shumka celebrated its 50th anniversary on March 19-21, 2009. In recent years, the artistic directions of Shumka have been somewhat controversial. To my mind, this was a great show, with great technical qualities and excellent attendance (some 96% sold out over two nights in Edmonton's big Jubilee Auditorium). Congratulations to all the dancers and guest performers, to Artistic Directors Gordon Gordey and Dave Ganert, alumni, producers Sulyma Productions, and everyone involved. The show included the premier of a new *hopak* by co-artistic director Dave Ganert. This review focuses specially on the *hopak*.

We see a lot of new Ukrainian dances in Canada. An estimated 2000 new choreographies are staged every year in this country. This is the land of "disposable" choreography. For dance schools, the vast majority of these dances last for one season. Senior groups experience a great turnover in repertoire too. Shumka and other senior groups used to mount a complete new show every two years. This pace has slowed down some in the last couple of decades, since our big shows are now just too involved and expensive.

Another exception to this very fast turnover is sometimes *hopak*. Shumka has danced much the same *hopak* for 25 years now. There has been pressure to make something new. The "standard" *hopak* for Shumka was choreographed by John Pichlyk around 1982. Pichlyk's *hopak* was and is a great one. It is a proven crowd pleaser and a signature of Shumka, perhaps even more than *hopaks* are for most other groups.

Pichlyk choreographed his jewel a couple of years after his year-long stint in Ukraine, where he studied in the Virsky studio. This period in Canadian Ukrainian dance was a time of great increase in exposure to repertoire from Ukraine. Virsky's *hopak* was becoming familiar to more and more people, and dance groups in Canada were gaining the technical skill and discipline needed to dance in this very spectacular style. Since that time, numerous dance groups have actually mounted Virsky's entire choreography (or as close as they could achieve). Many other groups took elements and the general aesthetics of that piece, and created their own arrangements in that spirit. Pichlyk's *hopak* is one of those (with a bit of his own Canadian *dusha* mixed in, to be sure).

Virsky style *hopaks* feature the traditional Central Ukrainian costume, a complex 5-10 minute composition, starting with a huge colorful swirl around the stage at full speed, frequent formation changes, with a boys' section, a lyrical girls' section, a second half full of exciting solos and a climactic mixed couple section at the end leading to an abrupt final pose. The lexicon of steps are usually quite similar to those used in Virsky's own choreography, featuring diverse girls' turns and combinations as well as split jumps, *povzunets'* and aerial turns by the boys. Another key feature of this style is "monumentalism," with a large number of

dancers performing in perfect unison, designed to be seen clearly from the second balcony. Virsky's *hopak* also highlighted a dense choreographic texture with many complex combinations and almost no repetition. Perhaps most obvious was a very strong ballet influence, with many outright ballet moves and the same aesthetic of elongation, extension, feminine lightness and stretched vertical spines. Virsky's first career, after all, was in classical ballet. In some senses, he never left it.

This style was a huge change from the aesthetics of Avramenko that had been normal until then in Canada. Indeed, Avramenko's shows didn't really end with a *hopak* (and his *Hopak kolom* was not exactly a show-stopper). But Canadian audiences overwhelmingly came to accept the new Virsky style *hopak* as normal and beautiful. Every concert thereafter had to end with a *hopak*. Pichlyk and practically all Ukrainian Canadian choreographers learned to emulate those aesthetics quite faithfully.

One of the reasons Shumka hadn't made a new standard *hopak* since the 1980s was because Pichlyk's *hopak* was hard to improve upon. Pichlyk's was just darned good. He followed the aesthetic and compositional rules of the Virsky style very well, and the piece was dynamite on stage. There was a fear that any new *hopak* would mostly be a re-shuffling of the same elements, and not much more. Meanwhile, in the past fifteen years or so, the parts of Shumka's concerts preceding the *hopak* were changing in very striking ways. Shumka has been forging a niche in the Canadian Ukrainian dance community as an experimenter, toying with modern dance and other styles. However, until now, they continued to end their shows with the standard *hopak*, whose costumes, music and movement style were increasingly and jarringly different from the rest.

Ganert's *hopak* for the 50th anniversary show represents a conscious and active break from the Virsky aesthetic in several respects. Rather than a classical ballet aesthetic, this dance has more of a contemporary ballet, or even a modern dance sense of beauty; more flirtatious, sexy and cheeky. The dancers' spines bend and tilt more. Iurii Shevchenko's music feels different, with more symphonic drama and dynamics than Virsky's. The costumes, designed by Maria Levyts'ka, are dominated by a bright orange, with purposely angled asymmetrical *plakhta*-ish skirts, split *pidtychky* (under-skirts) and large unkempt wreaths on the girls' heads. The boys wore *sharovary* that are yellow at the waist, then evolve through orange into red before they tuck into black boots. Standard they are not. Ganert's *hopak* has less of a monumental feel than Virsky and the "academic" style of Ukrainian staged-folk dance. His dancers break more often into small groups with multiple focus points. The feeling is still joyous and exciting, but more often frenetic and playful rather than classic or elegant. In my opinion, this aesthetic was sustained throughout the dance and matched well with the music and costumes. I think it resonates with many other pieces in Shumka's repertoire, and fits quite well with what general Canadian audiences think is beautiful today. I think it is a post-Virsky *hopak*.

This *hopak* doesn't break with the Virsky style completely, of course. It solidifies, rather than challenges the role of the *hopak* as the show-ending finale. Some classical ballet influence is still very clear. The overall composition remains long and complex. Ganert probably uses even more formation changes than Virsky, shifting from boys to girls to small groups to solos to clusters to large blocks and so-on in a never-repeating and always-bustling kaleidoscope. Several of the formations, combinations and the abrupt ending are familiar. It remains very recognizable as a *hopak*. Much of the power of the performance comes with the strong technical abilities and disciplined polish of Shumka's dancers – a feature that has also made Virsky's ensemble famous ever since the 1950s.

This *hopak* is probably not the first post-Virsky *hopak* ever, as there have been successful experiments in Ukraine and Canada before. Many of them came as a result of necessity, because the sheer size and quality in Virsky's state-funded choreography became impossible for other groups to maintain in the post-Soviet era. Several other *hopaks* have involved a different fusion with ballet, cabaret, jazz or other dance traditions. A few have aimed to be intimate rather than monumental. In my experience, until now, none have been a viable substitute for a "standard" *hopak* at the end of a dance concert on a large stage.

We will see if this *hopak* has legs. There were many beautiful passages and original moments. I think Dave Ganert is developing well as an artist, though he is not as mature now as Virsky was when he created his masterpiece in the early 1960s. After all, Virsky was nearly 60 years old then, with a lot under his belt. I think Ganert will explore pacing more in future stagings of this dance. Mountain peaks are more spectacular if you look up at them from the valley, but this *hopak* seemed to present peak after peak after peak of excitement with no break in between. I wished for a more differentiated composition that built to a clearer climax. I longed for more opportunities to rest my eyes on one point at a time, rather than trying to see three things at once. It was too busy for me.

One of the challenges of Ganert's move is related to the fact that the Virsky style is still beloved. Many people in Ukraine, Canada, and throughout the world see Virsky and the monumental "academic" style as the pinnacle of Ukrainian dance art. No choreographer has been able to dislodge Virsky's repertoire from that ensemble's concerts since Virsky himself died in 1975. Many artists believe there remains great potential for creativity and beauty *within* the style, and they will never tire of it. The Virsky style is now *traditional*. Shumka is betting on gaining broader audiences in Canada and internationally with their stylistic shifts. They will inevitably lose certain traditional supporters as well. I think that Shumka's typically strong technical level will help them make that transition. They may well succeed, indeed flourish, in their ambition to be an adventurous artistic company. I hope they do.

I think the greatest risk is actually for the rest of the Ukrainian dance community, rather than for Shumka itself. Ukrainian dance is necessarily an ethnic activity, attractive to most because it connects us powerfully with Ukrainian roots and identity. This is why almost all of the 250 Ukrainian dance groups across Canada were formed (including Shumka itself, 50 years ago). An essential tension exists between tradition and innovation in every ethnic dance community, and ours is no exception. Too much tradition and it weakens relevance in the new cultural environment. Too much creativity and it weakens the link with our heritage. I'm glad Shumka has the vision and courage to venture onto the creative edge. I hope most of the community has the vision and courage not to follow them there.

As one of our community's best groups, Shumka has long been a role model for the many smaller and younger groups in our midst. For decades, the content of Shumka's concerts has often been copied and watered-down on 20 smaller stages the following year. Imitation is the highest form of flattery.

The problem is that Shumka can't occupy the centre of the tradition and the edge of the tradition at the same time. I sincerely hope that parents and instructors of most other groups see the difference. If they start imagining Shumka's contemporary and jazzy numbers as "normal" for Ukrainian dance, fit for every children's class, they risk abandoning the core that keeps our community rooted. An ethnic community that undervalues its heritage is probably in its last generation. (The dancing itself won't be better in the meanwhile, because these groups won't have the skills or support or artistic vision to bring it together like Shumka does.

Perhaps ironically, by expanding its creative licence, Shumka is partially abdicating its position as a community anchor. That role will and should be filled by others. A post-Virsky style can be a double-edged sword.

Shumka has made a move and is deeply engaged with one of the areas that are important for a thriving Ukrainian dance scene. There are other territories, and each group should carefully choose their own space. Overlap is fine, but we should NOT all be the same. Here's wishing for the best of many worlds in our community.

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