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The Ukrainian Shumka Dancers join forces with Virsky - The Ukrainian State Folk Company and the Kyiv Ballet for the world première of Clara's Dream Friday at the Jubilee Auditorium.

Ukrainian Nutcracker takes flight

PREVIEW

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 and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Jubilee Auditorium Tickets: \$25-\$75 plus surcharges through Ticketmaster

SALENA KITTERINGHAM Edmonton Journal

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

"Tve 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



For the first time, Clara's Dream conveys the Nutcracker story completely in the Ukrainian folk ballet style.

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 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.

See CLARA'S DREAM page C2

