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Dance review: High-flying Clara's Dream hits its mark

Shumka and Ukrainian partners create powerful Nutcracker

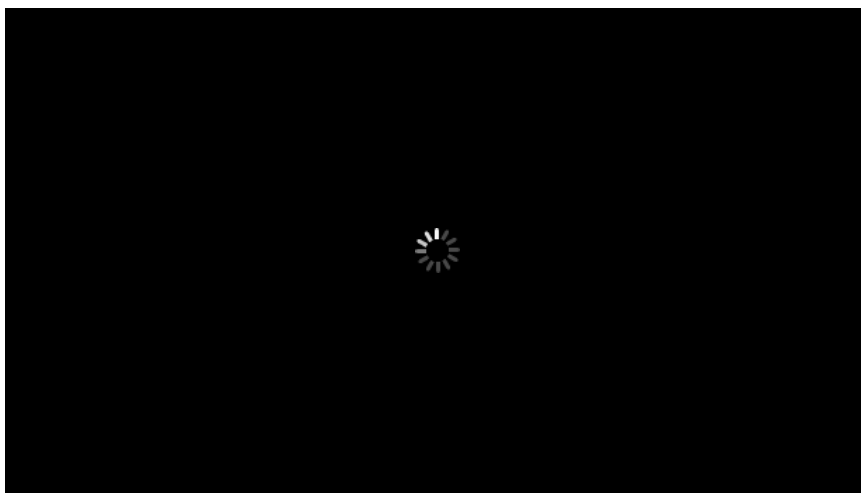
BY SALENA KITTERINGHAM, EDMONTON JOURNAL JANUARY 12, 2013



STORY

PHOTOS (2)

VIDEO (1)



Canada's Ukrainian Shumka Dancers: Virsky - The Ukrainian State Folk Dance Company and The Kyiv Ballet join forces for the world premier of Clara's Dream: A Ukrainian Folk Ballet. In celebration of Ukrainian Christmas, Clara's Dream brings this Canadian-Ukrainian artistic collaboration to the Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium which takes place on Friday Jan. 11 and Saturday Jan. 12, 2013.

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

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

When: Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.



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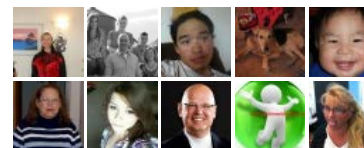
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Where: Jubilee Auditorium

From their first slipping and sliding steps in the playful opening skating scene, to the warm and bubbly, jewel-toned party, and the high flying athletics of the Cossack dance, it was clear Canada's Ukrainian Skumka dancers and Virsky – Ukraine's State Folk Dance Company were a great match to dance The Nutcracker.

Virsky is the original Ukrainian folkloric dance company from the homeland, the initial raison d'être for Shumka's formation in Edmonton more than 50 years ago. Friday night was a historic dance moment, the first time the world's foremost Ukrainian dance companies performed together.

United they were. Witnessing the infamous Cossack dance performed by the world's foremost Ukrainian dancers is a powerful and beautiful thing to behold. For a dance history buff, it was enough to bring a tear to my eye and I'm not even Ukrainian! I can only imagine the sense of pride so many in attendance must have felt on opening night.

So remarkably well did the dynamic Ukrainian folkloric dance style pair with Tchaikovsky's iconic ballet score, it was, in fact, the ballet that looked out of place on opening night.

While Kyiv Ballet principal Natalia Lazebnikova delivered a fine Clara, her fellow Kyiv ballet company dancers, Dmytro Kliavin and Oleksandr Shapoval, in the roles of Uncle Drosselmeier and the Prince, were nowhere near as capable of dancing with the same technical prowess as the men of Shumka and Virsky. Although Kliavin and Shapoval were expressive, leg lines were weak and lacked solid turnout, both in the partnering work and allegro solos.

If Kliavin and Shapoval represent the best of Kyiv Ballet dancers, perhaps stronger ballet leads should be found from ranks closer to home, such as Edmonton's newest resident ballet company, Citie Ballet.

The Kyiv Ballet's contribution of Viktor Lytynov as choreographic lead should not, however, be overlooked. Once again, like his Cinderella for Shumka in 2000, Lytynov has propelled the Ukrainian dance art form forward. And the production is suitably sumptuous, designed by Maria Levitska, Ukraine's state artist of the National Opera of Ukraine.

Guest artist Jeff Mortensen, former Shumka dancer and So You Think You Can Dance Canada finalist now based in Los Angeles, performed a rambunctious Fritz. For group numbers, Mortensen fit right back into the Shumka fold, a testament to the sheer number of high-calibre dancers within the company. It might have been any one of those dancers who auditioned successfully for the hit reality dance show.

There's no doubt, on a very basic level, the long-term success of Clara's Dream is contingent on how well it compares in the minds, hearts and memories to other Nutcrackers that audiences have experienced.

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For the most part, in my mind, Clara's Dream stacks up very well. It is different enough from Alberta Ballet's production that I believe Alberta dance patrons, if they have the means to attend both, may not feel compelled to pick one over the other but thoroughly enjoy the diversity. With some adjustments to the ballet casting and a live carolling voices performed by the many outstanding, local Ukrainian choirs, you can just imagine the goosebumps.

The Ukrainian snowflake dancers did an admirable job and the use of evergreen boughs was growing on me but I have to admit, I was yearning for some snow in the final scene before the curtain on Act 1. It is such a dear and magical moment in my personal Nutcracker mind's eye when the corps snowflake dancers and the Snow Queen make the snow fly as Clara and the Prince are whisked off to a fairy tale land.

Having the Nutcracker represented by a large rag doll rather than a wooden soldier was a little jarring for me as well. He seemed to flop about like a creepy, lifeless corpse when Fritz and Clara played and danced with him. It didn't help that the poor guy's hat kept falling off Friday night.

One of the greatest strengths that makes Clara's Dream stand apart is how her second act unfolds at such a fast pace.

In the typical classical ballet versions, the second act's colourful parade of international dances-for-dance-sake tends to tire out the young ones, and lose the attention of those adults taking in a live dance performance for the first time.

But the Ukrainian dancers tackled the flamenco with a true smouldering fire and the Chinese dance with such sprightly, acrobatic spunk, I'm willing to bet Clara's Dream will prove to be a perfect first Nutcracker for many Edmonton generations, entertaining for all, no matter the heritage.

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Dazzer Sutherland · ★ Top Commenter · Anaheim University

Really enjoyed the video and the review, am intrigued by the whole production. Chinese and Flamenco? In a Nutcracker production? As a Ukrainian dance variation? Wow, cool. Wish they would film it and play it on CBC...seems logical to me.

[Reply](#) · January 12 at 10:37pm

Mary Hanycz · Works at Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease LLP

A glowing review of "Clara's Dream" performed yesterday evening in Edmonton. Perhaps they'll take this to cities out east



and even into the U.S. Sure wish I could have seen this in person!

Reply · January 12 at 4:29pm



Donna Stephenson · Works at Retired

I took my mother to see Carla's dream last night. Spectacular!

Reply · January 12 at 11:20am

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