

Dance Evolution: The Evolution of Ukrainian Canadian Dance Over the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

Since the arrival of the first Ukrainian immigrants to Canada, Ukrainian folk dance has undergone a series of transformations that led to Ukrainian stage dance becoming one of the most popular visual symbols of cultural identity. Important moments in the evolution of Ukrainian-Canadian folk dance were often closely linked to the political and social situation at home and in Ukraine.



Figure 1

Background

During the first wave of Ukrainian immigration to Canada, Ukrainian territories were split up between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. In the pursuit of better land, many peasants from the western territories of Galicia and Bukovina in the Austro-Hungarian empire made the dangerous journey to the Canadian prairies. After the initial wave of immigration, two other periods between 1919-1939 and 1947-1952, brought Ukrainians from different political, social, and regional backgrounds to Canada. These two immigration periods brought many war impoverished, and politically persecuted intelligentsia to Canada. The introduction of immigrants with a more developed sense of national identity proved to be a potent ingredient for the development of Ukrainian-Canadian stage dance.



Figure 2

Early Folk Dance

When the Ukrainian pioneers first arrived in Canada, they worked long hours to build and maintain their homesteads. Many of the new immigrants had spent what little money they had travelling to Canada and were unable to obtain the tools necessary to ease the burden of labour. As a result of intensive labour that went into developing homesteads, there was little time to engage in activities such as dancing. On the occasions where families and community members were able to gather, folk dancing was only a participatory event. Style and choreography transplanted from the old country were determined by the region families had initially immigrated from. Passing on these steps to younger generations was done primarily by members of the community who had preserved the choreography in their memory.

National Dance and the Interwar Period

By the time Vasyl Avramenko immigrated to Canada in 1925, Ukrainian-Canadians had endured extreme racism, internment as enemy aliens, and government sponsored assimilation programs. Against this background, Avramenko burst onto the scene with a vision to design and standardize a national dance tradition. Avramenko developed a repertoire of dances that were intended to serve as a national symbol for all Ukrainians across the world. His vision stemmed from a desire to create a tool that would aid in the unification and development of self-consciousness among Ukrainian-Canadians. Choreography was selected from what he considered to be the best representation of Ukrainian folk dancing and derived mainly from movements associated with the Poltava region. Although elements of dances from other regions were added to include a degree of diversity, the intention was to create a cohesive image that emphasized a national Ukrainian image.

As a result of the treatment many Ukrainian-Canadians had endured in Canada, Avramenko's vision found fertile ground and his dances dominated the Ukrainian-Canadian dance scene until the 1950s, ultimately becoming a symbol of ethnicity.



Figure 3

Post-War Period

After the end of World War II, immigration from Soviet Ukraine brought an influx of new choreographers and politically engaged intelligentsia. Unlike the pioneer settlers who did not identify with a national identity, many of the post-war immigrants had developed a strong national conscience. New choreographers brought their own understanding of what Ukrainian cultural identity was and added their own artistic flair to the dance ensembles across Canada. Along with the introduction of new artists, a Soviet Ukrainian dance troupe toured Canada at the end of the 1950s, rising new inspiration for members of the diaspora community. Over the 1960s, opportunities to work with Soviet Ukraine started to expand, which led to increased access to cultural resources.



Figure 4

Politics

Ukrainian-Canadians had long been divided in their political views, and with the outbreak of the Russian revolution in 1917, these divisions became more pronounced. By the second half of the century, *The Ukrainian Canadian Committee* (UCC), later named the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, became the representative of smaller organizations on the right, and the *Association For United Ukrainian Canadians*, (AUUC) for the left. Both groups played critical roles in the development of Ukrainian-Canadian dance, viewing dance as a vehicle to create cohesion among Ukrainian-Canadians. Over the 1960s the AUUC built ties with Soviet Ukraine, and by 1971 they had organized annual dance seminars between Kyiv and Canada.



Figure 5

Soviet Influence

Initially there was strong opposition to the inclusion of Soviet choreography by many members in the Ukrainian dance community. Due to the state sponsorship of the Soviet Ukraine dancers, it was argued that they would serve as a tool for the dissemination of Soviet propaganda among the diaspora.

Moreover, there was a genuine fear that by allowing Soviet realism to penetrate Ukrainian-Canadian dance ensembles, choreography would become russified. Ultimately, choreography and costumes from Soviet Ukraine began to be infused into dance ensembles across Canada. One of the greatest impacts was the addition of regional dances that had previously been excluded in the national style repertoire. Soviet style dances also included a character system that included groups traditionally considered as non-Ukrainian. Sailors, the heroic Soviet worker, and gypsies were among the groups introduced into the choreography.



Figure 6

Spectacular Dance

During the second half of the twentieth century, spectacular dance traditions became the dominant form of dance performed on stage. In contrast to the national dance tradition, spectacular dance shifted away from the standardized symbolic representation of a national image and focused on aesthetics and individual creativity. Choreographers and dancers in this tradition incorporated the genre of Ukrainian dance with other forms of technique such as ballet. Spectacular dances often include regional variations that started to be introduced with the adoption of Soviet choreography. Rather than focus on one specific region, diversity became celebrated and embraced. Dance groups across the country, such as the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers, continue to work within the spectacular dance tradition and produce innovative choreography.

Conclusions

From the participatory folk dances in the early years of immigration, to the spectacular stage shows performed today, Ukrainian-Canadian dance has become a vibrant symbol of cultural identity. Vasyl Avramenko embarked on an important journey creating a national image of Ukrainian cultural identity through the medium of dance. With the introduction of new choreographers and access to Ukrainian cultural resources from Soviet Ukraine, the national dance tradition departed the stage, and the tradition of spectacular dance has continued to grow and develop as a symbol of cultural identity. This artistic symbol of cultural identity has become one of the most popular expressions of Ukrainian identity while providing a beautiful source of enjoyment for Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians across Canada.

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Figure 1. Unknown. "Hopak Circle." Digital Image. 1960. Accessed 2 March 2021. This photo was provided by Ukrainian Sumka Dancers Company.

Figure 2. "Vasile Avramenko with dancing school with the great Ukrainian artist Sadowsky." Digital Image. Library and Archives Canada. <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=3677897&lang=eng> Accessed 20 February 2021.

Figure 3. Unknown. "First Wave of Ukrainian Immigration to Canada, 1891-1914." Digital Image. April 1896. National Archives of Canada. https://www.communitystories.ca/v1/pm_v2.php?id=record_detail&fl=0&g=English&ex=464&rd=155629 . Accessed 26 February 2021.

Figure 4. Long, Jack. "Folk Dancing." Digital Image. 1945. Library and Archives Canada. <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=3601931&lang=eng>. Accessed 3 March 2021.

Figure 5. Unknown. "Performance of the State Folk Dance Ensemble of the Ukrainian SSR" Digital image. www.virsky.com, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4199580>. Accessed 13 March 2021.

Figure 6. "Parker, Ryan. Hopak Circle." Digital Image. 2020. Accessed 2 March 2021. This photo was provided by Ukrainian Sumka Dancers Company.

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