

**Gordon Gordey, Director and Dancemaker**  
**Ukrainian Canadian Dance Works Created for The Shumka Dancers,**  
**Canada's Professional Ukrainian Dance Company**

***Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque***

Conceived and Directed by Gordon Gordey

Choreographed by Dave Ganert

Additional Choreography by John Pichlyk and Tasha Orysiuk

Original Music Composed and Arranged by Andriy Shoost

Sets and Costumes designed by Maria Levitska

Additional Costumes designed by Oksana Paruta and Robert Shannon

Masks created by Randall Fraser



In January 2007, I created a concept and began writing the dance libretto for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* as a contemporary Ukrainian folk dance dramatic narrative ballet with video projection. Over the decades I had seen numerous Ukrainian dance companies stage performances based upon the rituals of Kupalo and the midsummer solstice. In 30 years with the Shumka Dancers I too performed, from time to time, in dances based upon Kupalo, the first such performance taking place in the early 1970's. The performances I saw and those I performed in seemed to become locked in a very standard formula. I could predict what the choreography was going to be in Kupalo before I even entered the theatre. The dance would typically start with female dancers weaving across the stage in a version of a chain style folk dance (Vesnianka or Chorovod) and move on to a dance where female dancers would begin to weave wreathes, which usually with the assistance of a stage lighting change depicting the passage of time, resulted in the wreathes magically becoming completed. These wreathes would be symbolically placed into a stream which was nothing more than placing the wreathes upon the stage floor. The remainder of the dance moved on to young male and female dancers jumping over a theatrical stage fire of ribbons and red lights. It would then all end in a joyous dance (Kolmeika). Audiences reinforced this repetition of choreography with applause indicating that this stereotypical presentation of Kupalo was somehow an acknowledgement of authentic Ukrainian folk ritual. What it was in fact, was the recreating of a copy- of a copy - of a copy of choreography that only looked different when a particular dance company executed their version of the copy with superior dance technique.

For me, the Kupalo ritual was a completely different experience. It started with my emotional reaction to Kupalo songs which tonally and lyrically convey a profound sense of mystery and wonder. I knew there had to be an aesthetic and theatrical way to capture the mysticism projected in those Kupalo songs and to capture the spirit of those who gave themselves over to the rituals on Kupalo eve in an effort to try and comprehend the midsummer solstice. There also had to be a way to bring Kupalo ritual dance into the stage conventions of the 21st century to re-engage audiences with a fresh insight to the Ukrainian celebration of Kupalo and the Europe-wide observance of the midsummer solstice.



Photo: Burial Mask Caption: Silver Burial Figure  
(Poltava VII cent.) (Ukrainian Chronicle of Clothing, Vol 1.)

It is against this fascinating backdrop of Ukrainian and world folklore that I began to create my libretto for the dancework *Eve of Kupalo – a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque*. I set out to create a dancework that recognized the elements that mark the midsummer solstice ritual throughout time. I wanted to explore pagan and sacred elements of folkloric ritual of Ivana Kupalo that created a fascination for: writers such as Nykolai Gogol (*The Eve of Ivan Kupala*), opera composers such as Anatol Vaknyany (*Kupalo*), filmmakers Yuri Ilienکو (The Eve of Ivan Kupalo) and Emir Kusturica (*Time of the Gypsies*), and New York director, Virlana Tkacz, of the Yara Arts Group a resident company of the famed La Mama Experimental Theatre (*Kupalo Freakout - Midsummer Night Rituals, Songs and Anarchy.*) To me these artists had each in their own medium captured more of the emotional performer-audience communion in Kupalo ritual than I had ever witnessed in staged Ukrainian dance presentations. To add a fresh research perspective I met with Ukrainian cultural folk history expert, Lubow Wolynetz. She is the Curator of Folk Art at the Ukrainian Museum of New York. I discussed Kupalo rituals with Wolynetz via phone and then was fortunate enough to meet with Wolynetz in Edmonton. Wolynetz became a key information source of Kupalo rites in different regions in Ukraine. I also delved into research of Ukrainian rituals and ritual dress of from the 7th Century forward.

My own 20-year theatre studies of ritual show that ritual behavior in societies is passed on through the centuries in an oral tradition of observed practices. The keeper of these practices is typically a village elder, an all-knowing *exegesis*, who is believed to possess mystical powers which lead participants through a transformative experience. This exegesis is the ritual authority on: time of ritual engagement, symbols, secluded place for the ritual, rites of passage for the participants in the ritual, the unification of man, nature, and the unknown, and interpretation of the practices of the ritual- *communication of the sacra*. This exegesis also releases the participants from the moral and religious code of their community. The ritual itself becomes the vehicle through which the participants transcend to an elevated mystical state. I imagined a dance libretto in which the knowledge of all the Kupalo *exegesis* over the centuries is combined into one grand celebration of Kupalo ritual rite across Ukraine. My belief in this accumulation of ritual rite practices became my own well-spring (*dzherlylo*) for the expression of an original Kupalo dancework for the Ukrainian Shumka Dancers.

I met with the dancers of Shumka and shared my concept and images for Kupalo.



*Rife with the symbolism and pageantry of summer solstice folklore, *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* is a bouquet for the senses, filled with beguiling movement, mesmerizing stagecraft, and bewitching film art, delving into the mystery of summer solstice rituals that have endured for centuries in Ukraine and across European cultures.*

*The rhythmic unison of the magical, echo-like invocations of the songs and incantations of the summer solstice blanket the night....a burning fireball blazes down a hillside in the darkness to plunge into a lake...wreaths of herbs, grasses and flowers float upon that lake, determining lovers' destinies... the ritual bathing cleanses, renews and beautifies... young men tempted by the tsvit paparot (magic fern flower that only blooms for one night) with the promise of untold wealth and prosperity await their fate... and young lovers leap over bonfires, hands clasped to foretell their futures...*

*It is a flirtation with the magic and mysticism of those creatures and spirits that can tempt and influence fate, only on the enchanted mid-summer's night of Ivan Kupalo, determining who will be lovers, who will be prosperous, and whose futures will be beset by misfortune. This is a mystical Kupalo for the ages for it occurs in the rarity of a full moon –the extraordinary magic of the honey moon. The Veed'ma (Witch) and her entourage of the spring goddess (Lada), the toad, the raven, and the snake look on to guide the mystery of the Eve of Kupalo... (Gordon Gordey)*

Alyssa Eugenio and Laryssa Sulyma in the wreath scene in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* in Edmonton, Canada 2009.

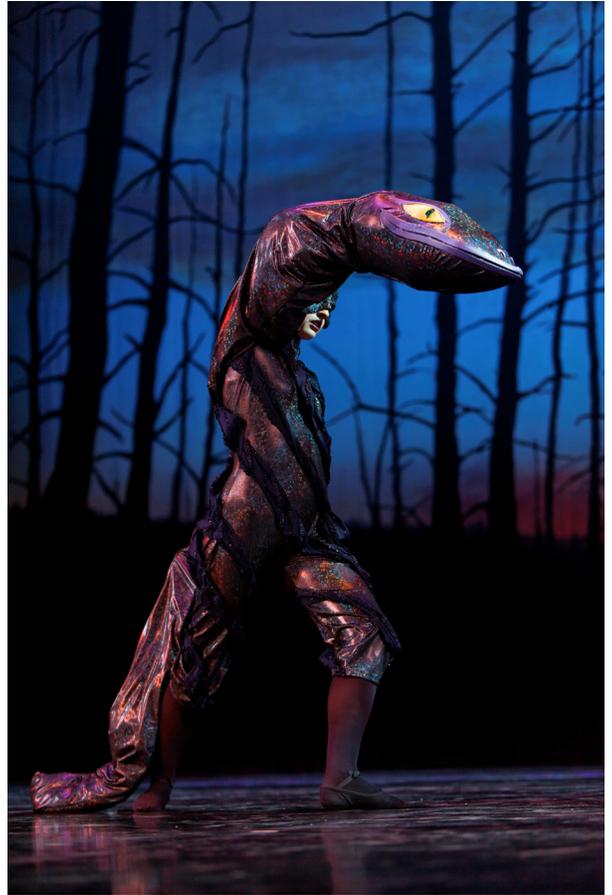
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

With the resources of the Shumka Dancers, I began to assemble the creative team to take *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* from concept libretto, to the rehearsal creation process, and ultimately to the theatre for audiences to experience. As in my past creative undertakings I worked with theatrical producer, Michael Sulyma, to bring together the creative artistic team for this project. We would once again, as with *Shumka's Cinderella* and *Pathways to Hopak* work with recognized artists from Ukraine and recognized artists from Canada. Maria Levytska, Director of Scenography at The National Opera of Ukraine in Kyiv, designed the scenic drop (*zavisa*) and the costumes for the Kupalo night rituals. Oksana Paruta, from Lviv, designed the costumes for the *kolomeika* finale celebrating the arrival of the day after Kupalo Eve.

Robert Shannon, costume designer and professor of design at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada created the fantastical forest creatures: *Veed'ma* (witch), the Raven, the Toad, and the Snake.



Robert Shannon's design for the Snake character in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* 2011.  
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Robert Shannon's Snake character built by mask-maker Randall Fraser in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* 2011.  
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Robert Shannon's design for the Toad character. Mask designed and built by Randall Fraser. *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* 2011.  
(Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Robert Shannon's design for the Raven character. Mask designed and built by Randall Fraser.  
*Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* 2011.  
(Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Stephanie Lilley as the *Veed'ma* (Witch) with her creature entourage in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* 2011. Costumes designed by Robert Shannon.  
(Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

A major scenographic element in my concept for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* was the use of masks throughout the dance.



Female dancer in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* is drawn into the ritual of the mask 2011.  
(Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)



Female dancer in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* is drawn into the ritual of the mask by Lada (Nicolya Lirette), goddess of spring 2011.  
(Photo by Gordon Gordey. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

I saw the use of masks as a central image to the organic pagan ritual practices I wanted explored in dance movement and as a core metaphor of ‘choosing in the unknown and the unexplainable’. I believe that in the age-old rituals of the solstice, and in Kupalo, our ancestors felt that if they could mingle in harmony with nature and the spirits they could ensure the return of the sun after its descent on the longest midsummer’s day. I wanted to show in dance that in order to ‘mingle in harmony with nature and the spirits’ participants in Kupalo needed to lose their self in a two-fold state of being. Participants had to be what they were, that is living mortals, and at the same time that which they were not, spirits of the eve of Kupalo. Wearing masks transformed participants in the dance to enter this two-fold state. The transition to the hand-held spirit mask was carried out under the guidance of the *Veed'ma* (witch) and her forest creature entourage who danced with two large one and one-half meter spirit masks. This concept allowed for a style of movement that embraced the mysticism and wonderment of the eve of Kupalo. This concept was not based in linear time but in the here and now of nature’s mysteries.



Shumka male Corps in Kupalo ritual masks awaiting the arrival of masked females 2009.  
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers).



Our masks for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque* were designed and built by Canadian master mask maker, Randall Fraser from Edmonton. The scenography was completed with projected film images captured by Canadian videographers Andrew Scholotiuk and Stephen Romanow. Using projected video images onto the scenic drops (*zavisy*) advanced my concept of creating a mystical “living spirit world”. The eve of Kupalo element of fire was captured by projecting a video image of a rolling ball of fire onto a scenic drop of a mysterious forest. The element of water was integrated with projected video images of young maidens actually floating wreathes in a stream and images of young maidens walking into the water and submerging themselves completely to the will of chance discovery by the young men of their dreams. Water was integrated in the finale of *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque* with projected a projected image of the ritual bathing of a young maiden having water poured over her head as she stands in a river. This image of baptism linked the pagan Kupalo ritual with the Christian baptismal rite attributed to John the Baptist and the naming of the *Sviato Ivana Kupala* or Feast Day of John the Baptist.

Nicolya Lirette as Lada baptizes Tanya Yacyshyn, Kupalo ritual participant in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque* 2009.  
(Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers).

The use of projected video was instrumental in depicting the illusive and magical fern-flower (*tsvit paparot*) of Kupalo myth. Under the guidance of the *Veed'ma* (witch) the fern-flower (*tsvit paparot*) was able to magically float from the stage and onto the scenic drops (*zavisy*), always just out of reach of the young men seeking to possess the golden treasures of the eve of Kupalo.



Director, Gordon Gordey in rehearsal with Andrew Scholotiuk (Videographer, Projectionist) for *Eve of Kupalo – a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque* in Edmonton, Canada.  
Dave Ganert, Choreographer, (Upper left) guides dancers through the baptism scene. 2009  
(Video freeze frame by Stephen Romanow, Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Audiences were spellbound by this seamless integration of live stage action and projected video - the magic of Kupalo created through 21st century stage technology.



Performance scene from *Eve of Kupalo – a Midsummer’s Night Mystery Masque* 2012.  
(Video freeze frame by Stephen Romanow. Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

The original music score was composed, orchestrated, and arranged by Kyiv composer, Andrij Shoost. Additional music acknowledgment goes to Kyiv artists Yuri Chernenko and Daxa Brakha. Andrij Shoost's wide experience as a composer of scores to theatrical productions, documentary films, songs and musicals for children's ensembles, and dance was a fertile field for the diverse musical needs of *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque*. The score for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* was scored for orchestral symphonic recording with added Ukrainian folk instruments using 45 players under the baton of maestro, Alexei Baklan. He is a conductor with the National Opera of Ukraine and the Chief Conductor of the Kiev Municipal Opera and Ballet Theatre for Children and Youth.

My libretto and stage direction were completed with the imaginative and fresh choreography of Shumka's Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer, Dave Ganert. His original choreography for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* was inspired by the spiritual seed of the removal of boundaries of previous Kupalo dance works. This was our team's original creation firmly rooted in solstice rituals and age-old Ukrainian myths. The movement lexicon embraced Ukrainian folk dance, ballet, and stylized modern movement influenced by the expressiveness of ritual masks.

Additional contribution to the movement style for the female dances was created by Edmonton choreographer, Tasha Orysiuk.



Allysa Eugenio (centre) in Tasha Orysiuk's choreography for the ritual inspired "sleeves reaching to bring back the sun" in *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque*. Costume design: Oksana Paruta, Lviv 2009. (Courtesy Ukrainian Shumka Dancers)

Additional theatrical dramaturgical contributions were provided by Edmonton choreographer, John Pichlyk. Dave Ganert's choreography for *Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* achieved a multi-media synthesis of dance, theatricality, and video. This 25 minute dance theatre work brought a heightened theatre experience for our audiences through the ritual and myths of our ancestors in a 21st century artistic sensibility.

*Eve of Kupalo - a Midsummer's Night Mystery Masque* premiered at the 2,700 seat Northern Alberta Jubilee Auditorium in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada on March 19, 2009. Since then it has toured across Canada and has toured to China, receiving 22 performances in major theatres in 14 cities carrying the Kupalo metaphor of the spirituality of renewal and love.