



9th Annual Bishop's Prayer Breakfast Ancestors & Elders Presentation

Darka Tarnawsky on behalf of Ukrainian Shumka Dancers

Thank you, Joan. And thank you Bishop David and your team for asking me to speak at this prestigious event. I am humbled and honoured.

I am a proud member of the Ukrainian Catholic community and have been all my life. My Dido – Father John Cherkawsky - was a Ukrainian Catholic priest who came from Ukraine via German War Camps after World War II, and served in Derwent/Elk Point and Vermillion areas for decades after. I grew up going to Catechism classes in Derwent each summer and have many fond memories of my time there. I also started Ukrainian dancing when I was five years old. Dance and the presence of Ukrainian culture in my family home, built my interest in arts and culture.

I have worked in the arts community for over 30 years in various capacities. Marketing, fundraising, touring, producing, presenting, even teaching. Although a life in the arts isn't for the faint of heart, I have always been pleased with my career choice. Working in the arts presents many challenges – but it also provides many rewards. Like the yin and yang of the world, everything works in balance... I have been blessed with many amazing experiences and lifelong friendships throughout my career. Art explores life and its many facets in creative and unique ways. It makes us more human. And that has always appealed to me.

The most fulfilling project I have ever worked on, is Shumka's latest world premiere production called *Ancestors & Elders*: an exploration of tradition and truth in a collaboration between Ukrainian and Indigenous artists. People have called it "risky" and "bold." It is a work I am extremely proud of. It always felt "right."

When I first heard a story of Aboriginal peoples providing assistance to Ukrainian settlers in Alberta in the early 1900s, I knew it had to be explored. *These berries are safe to eat. This basket of medicinal herbs will heal you. You can stay warm here.* This is a portrayal of the true compassion and humanity we are all capable of. Why would the Indigenous peoples – whose land had been stripped of them by the colonials years earlier – try to help these new settlers who were given this harsh land to till? A land that was rightfully theirs.

Through the process, I also heard stories of Ukrainian immigrants helping their Indigenous neighbours --- providing occasional work and shelter on their farms, and hiding Indigenous children who had run away from the harsh environment of Indian Residential Schools.

There are many more such stories of mutual interactions and often brief encounters. But time is not on our side in salvaging them as time passes by. What we DID continue to learn in the process is the many connections that STILL exist between the two cultures.

Shumka has undertaken the creation of many “story ballets” as we call them. But Ancestors & Elders was by far our most challenging and meaningful.

We always explore universal themes in our work. A good example is our work previous to Ancestors & Elders – called Kobzar. Based on the words of Taras Shevchenko, Kobzar explores the themes of Destiny, Soul, Courage and *Hope in times of oppression*. Universal and ongoing themes, yet these stories often seem to be from ages past. Relevant in their morals and messages, but not in their place in history.

Ancestors & Elders is very here and now. And it is not a look at truth and reconciliation. It is an act of truth and reconciliation.

We knew we could not attempt to tell this story by ourselves. So we set out to gather with fellow artists who brought an Indigenous perspective to the art.

In the end, there were over 100 individuals involved in Ancestors & Elders – a small village in fact! - as creators, production managers, designers, builders, writers, choreographers, visual artists, dancers, actors, prop builders and technicians. We spent months just talking about the work and what we wanted it to say. And we were all thrust out of our comfort zones in various stages along the way. All of this was part of building trust and allegiances; of learning to understand each other’s beliefs and protocols; and of determining how to move forward to develop our related stories.

For each Ukrainian contributor to the project, we brought on someone from the Indigenous community to compliment points of view in the process. Joseph Hoffman, Shumka’s artistic associate took on the role of Co-Director, along with Indigenous theatre artist Barry Bilinsky. We often joked that Barry was the one of the two directors with the Ukrainian last name. (Barry’s Mother is Cree and his Dad, Ukrainian. One of those current connections.)

We brought on a group of musicians to create the soundscape of the piece. Led by Ukrainian musicians/composers/arrangers Carissa Klopoushak and Mike Romaniak, and Stony Nakoda musician and composer Anders Hunter, several session musicians created the music which brought much emotion and life to the piece.

We needed a writer to help with the story and the poetry in the work. Former Edmonton Poet Laurette Anna Marie Sewell was just the person to do this! She is from Polish and Ojibwe roots and could relate to both Eastern European and Indigenous experiences.

We brought together two visual artists: Lana Whiskeyjack of Cree descent and Svitlana Krawchuk who immigrated to Canada from Ukraine at a young age. Through their creative process, Lana and Svitlana sat together, shared stories and painted images that were used in projections on 7 large panels above the stage. Lana’s interesting connection is that she was raised by a Ukrainian foster family whom she loved dearly and who hosted Whiskeyjack travelers on many occasions with traditional Ukrainian hospitality. Svitlana’s husband is of Cree descent and much of her artistic work crosses the boundaries between the two spiritual cultures they share.

Costumes and regalia were assembled by a blend of Indigenous and Ukrainian experts in the field, all brought together by theatrical Costume Designer Megan Koshka – who also designed costumes for the universal elements that played a bridging role in the piece. Representing flora and fauna, day and night,

water and soil, wind and fire, these characters demonstrate the reverence each culture has for the world around them. After all, we are all born under the same stars and on the same land....

Choreography was done by Shumka's artistic team and that of our new friends of Edmonton's Running Thunder Dancers. Our rehearsal formats and dance styles are so very different. Shumka's form focuses on the precision of stage dance and Running Thunders' - about ceremony. Yet after many challenging rehearsals, a common goal came to be.

Led by Indigenous partners, we injected the artistic and rigorous rehearsal process with ceremony. A pipe ceremony in the Edmonton river valley to ask our ancestors and elders to bless us on this journey – to give us the strength, courage and foresight to make the right decisions along the path of creation. Before we set foot on the Jubilee Auditorium stage as performers in April, we came together in a circle of unity, marking the performance aspect of the journey with a ceremonial smudge. We shared thoughts, dreams, prayers and hugs throughout.

Our first dress rehearsal was chaotic to say the least. So many parts of the interwoven puzzle between dance, sound, music, lighting, projections and costuming were being brought together for the very first time. We adjusted, we believed... and we prayed a bit more.

Less than 48 hours later at the world premiere of Ancestors & Elders, God smiled upon us. Everything came together beautifully and intrinsically. Was it the months of preparation and rehearsal - or was it divine intervention? I felt it was a bit of both.

Thousands of people attended the two performances, and audiences were moved by the experience. The show was truly visceral – bringing people of various backgrounds to tears - as hardships and the love of mankind for one another were brought to life on the stage. At the end of the production was the usual celebratory Ukrainian dance known as HOPAK – this time featuring hoop dancers, chicken dancers, jingle dress dancers and fancy dancers in beautiful moments together with Shumka. Immediately after, drummers joined the dancers on stage and a large round dance began. It wound itself into the seating area of the Jubilee Auditorium and audience members joined in without hesitation. Old, young, Indigenous, Ukrainian, and everything in between.

And the circle grew. It moved up into the first balcony then a round dance began in the second. Technical staff of the theatre couldn't believe their eyes. They had never seen the building so alive.

An opening night audience member sent me a message following the performance. "We wept and cheered and clapped and tapped our feet to the beat of the drums. Our hearts nearly burst. Ancestors & Elders is far and away the best Truth & Reconciliation inspired project on stage this year," she said.

Social media posts were all very positive. Inspiring. Beautiful. Poignant. Touching. Brave. Historic. ...were words used to describe the production.

We couldn't have been happier.

When we embarked on this process almost two years ago, I knew the journey would be just as important as the final destination. Looking back, both were equally integral. A building of trust, an embracing of our similarities and differences, a love of what we created together. All in celebration through poetry, song, and dance.

I've always been interested in the similarities between the Indigenous and Ukrainian cultures. *Reverence for the land. The beauty of beading, braiding and embroidery. The significance of circles, rhythms and percussion in our dances.* And as I got to know our many artistic collaborators and moved through this process, I realized we were more similar than I ever suspected. Such love of tradition, of family, of prayers and blessings. Such respect for our ancestors and elders.

Given our current point of history in Canada, it is even more important to explore this connection. The weight of Truth and Reconciliation is difficult for most of us. *What can we do? How can we possibly help?* Telling this story of mutual respect and support, one that acknowledges the truth and celebrates our cultures collectively and collaboratively, is but one step in this healing process.

Said Co Director Barry Bilinsky, "We must get beyond blame - we must get beyond guilt. Only then can we admire the beautiful reflection of one another we see in our dances, traditional practices, and communities. I hope that our piece reflects the journey we have undertaken to understand each other more deeply and begin a path to true ally ship and conciliation."

And from Joe Hoffman, Co-Director from Shumka: "Through our journey we have endeavored to create something that is more than a dance piece, a political discourse, or a history lesson. We aim to truly and genuinely engage each other with humble and open hearts as we share our most personal stories - the ones that have seen us become who we are today - in hopes that this sharing will help us grow further in love and courage tomorrow and every day thereafter..."

Ancestors & Elders will have a long life beyond these performances. There are too many giving it life for it to lie down for long. Its message must continue to be told. *We are all human. We have the same wants and needs. We want to be loved and supported. We want to create and celebrate. We can do this together.*

I have so much respect and love for our new partners and friends whom we have come to know in this process. The last several months has been a journey of true learning, mutual respect of our differences, and recognition of our many similarities.

This thought has been an inspiration throughout the journey: "We must strive to become good ancestors." When we look at the legacy of the ancestors and elders who came before us, we realize this is an enormous expectation. But with each gesture of acceptance, openness, and the simple joining of hands, it seems more and more possible...

Maybe the most significant feeling I personally took away from the experience of Ancestors & Elders was a feeling of Canadian identity. My father and grandfather who came from Ukraine after WW2 – were who I most identified with as I was growing up. My mother's parents came from Ukraine and were among the early settlers we depicted in this story. But I always felt most connected to being a first generation Ukrainian. After Ancestors & Elders, I finally felt what it meant to be Canadian. This is but one of the many blessings it gave me.

This amazing pioneering journey is just a start. Its magic is that it celebrates tradition and truth in reality – not just on stage. Each of us who made it happen – who was part of telling the story of their ancestors and elders - has befriended each other and will continue to play a role in each other's lives.

One of those people whom I'd like to call upon today to close this presentation about Ancestors & Elders is poet – and my friend - Anna Marie Sewell with spoken word excerpts from the production to share with us all.

Link to video: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Kf49JtW6t1hBiZpQt9L75yWy7xyfDr6X/view>