



2009 > 10 A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

# 2009 > 2010 Learning Link



## Virsky Ukrainian National Dance Company

Monday, September 14, 2009, 9:30am & 11:30am

Recommended Grades: K-12



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*“Its art affirming the ideas of humanism, telling about the history of the Ukrainian nation, its everyday life and traditions by means of dance.”*

*-- Virsky website*

### **Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!**

**History & Geography:** Ukraine, Russia

**Arts:** Ballet & folkdance, music

### **What is it?**

Watching Virsky Ukrainian National Dance Company (let's agree to call them VUNDC!), one is struck by the authenticity of it all. At first blush, there's something strangely familiar about what we see --- the highly colored folk dress, the saber dancing, those hale young men leaping through the air in a show of weightlessness, those festive young ladies, smiles pasted carefully in place, moving in a carefree yet studied coordination. Haven't we seen all of this in Disney shows? In pageants? In old-time Hollywood flicks? But wait! These are the real deal. These are Ukrainians, whose every exuberant kick, butterfly jump, and Cossack squat connects directly to a thousand years of tradition. The longer we look, the more we notice richness of detail and movement vocabulary, as well as an authority, that clue us in: this is no show business extravaganza but an expression of cultural identity.

It will not escape the attentive observer that many of these dances offered by the company from Kiev owe something to military bravura. "Sailors," for example, is comprised of a medley of naval dances. Cutlasses flash and clash. Impossibly long poles thrust into the air, tap percussively on the stage, crisscross with an intricate coordination Busby Berkley would envy. But there are other kinds of dances,

as well. No shortage of one-upmanship is on display when those squatting Cossacks go kicking across the floor, but there is a deft timing, a sense of clowning, a facial mugging, which leavens the proceedings with a good natured comedy. And those moves! One may be excused for desecrating a kinship with breakdancing.

Elsewhere, a spirit of celebration and uplift reign. The dancers pair off, now spirited, now tender. Man lifts man, to facilitate pointed kicks that seem to pierce the very sky. A *pas de deux* features a maiden and her swain whose steps along the path of courtship are no less engaging for being well worn.

Finally, one must concede, however, that as much as this performance owes to Ukrainian folk dance as it has been practiced in countless marketplaces over the years, still there is something more going on here. This is densely layered, intricately conceived dance art. This is choreography of the most sophisticated level. The creators and artists operate at the pinnacle of form and skill. Yes, there is curation of traditional dance in VUNDC's modus operandi, but within the expanded format of high art.



## Who Is Responsible?

Virsky, of course. And by that, we mean Pavlo (formerly Pavel) Virsky. It was his leadership and artistic vision that guided the troupe from its official inception in 1955 to his much-lamented death in 1975. But wait. Let's go back to the early years when Mr. Virsky was a dancer in the ballet. Now, we have probably all heard at one time or another of the extreme rigor of ballet training within the former U.S.S.R. So it

speaks volumes that our Mr. Virsky was not simply a member of the corps but a dancer of leading roles with various companies. The roles were many, and he choreographed works, too. Among these were Don Quichote (French for Quixote) and Swan Lake. That tells us something about his skill and his artistry. But it doesn't tell all, because by 1937 he had moved on to form a troupe whose focus was the native dance of his homeland. He had always been drawn in that direction. To him, these dances spoke of the people's soul.

During the war, Virsky and his dancers performed for the troops at the front. As a result, in 1941, they were officially recognized as Ukraine's Song And Dance Company. Within a few years, they further evolved into the company we are concerned with here. Along the way, there were many awards and accolades. Ultimately, we may assume that, more than any acclaim, it was the work itself which fueled his tireless zeal. The best proof of this may be seen in the events following his death. The work continued and, within five years, a successor had stepped into Mr. Virsky's shoes.

This was Myroslav Vantukh. He came on board in 1980. Like his predecessor, he is dedicated to ethnography and folk traditions. In fact, he is an expert in those areas. Like Mr. Virsky, too, he is an artist. His choreography explores an expanded movement vocabulary, plot development, and expressivity. The ensemble, under his leadership, has toured the world. The dancers themselves, we should mention, are the cream of the crop --- and to be a member of the company is to score a coup. As we in the audience attend to their starting virtuosity, mouths agape, pulses heightened, we wonder: how do they keep it up? Well, they'd like you to know that this is only the beginning. Their sights are trained on future surprises and still higher levels of attainment.

*“The main purpose ... is collecting, investigation and maintaining the national traditions, customs and rituals of Ukrainian folk dance.”*

*--- Virsky website*

## **At the Root of It All**

We've given some thought already to the history of this company. What else interests us? Should we explore the history of Ukraine just a bit? After all, the dances on display here emerged from that particular context. One is linked to the other.

You'd have to go back in time quite a ways — to at least 4500 B.C. — to catch up with the first human inhabitants of this particular region. Zoom forward in time, though, to the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, and we discover the country Kyivska (Kievsky) Rus. Absolutely the biggest and most powerful country in Europe from that point through the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, this antecedent of Ukraine weathered various assaults from without. Finally, it fell before the savage might of the Mongols. Sacked and pillaged.

Zoom forward again. It's the Great Northern War.

From Wikipedia:

**The Great Northern War (1700-1721) was a war in which the so-called Northern Alliance composed of Russia, Denmark-Norway, Poland-Lithuania and Saxony engaged Sweden for the supremacy in the Baltic Sea. The war ended with a defeat for Sweden in 1721, leaving Russia as the new major power in the Baltic Sea and a new important player in European politics. The war began as a coordinated attack on Sweden by the coalition in 1700 and ended in 1721 with the Treaty of Nystad and the Stockholm treaties.**

During this period, most of the area occupied by Ukraine today was subsumed into the Russian behemoth. What remained passed over to Austria-Hungary.

One more zoom. It's 1922. Ukraine, as it is now called, is one of the founding republics of the just-formed U.S.S.R. It retains this status until 1991 when, you may recall, it achieved independence.

That's Ukraine's development in a nutshell. Here, in another nutshell, is the development of its folk dance tradition. Before Christianity came knocking, rituals in this area were a mixture of song and dance. These rituals were so firmly ingrained that missionaries, finding a reluctance among the populace to give up the old ways, revised those rituals, giving them a distinctly Christian bent. Dance, then, was used to "spread the word!"

In those early days, dance had a social function, too. Social dances included Hopak and Kozachok. Later on, social dances from other cultures began showing up. The Quadrille and the Polka are examples of these. Still later, a type of native dance arose called the story dance. These involved fairly extended visual narratives, chiefly centered on the various sorts of work people did.

In times closer to our own, as these dances became less a staple of daily life, they began to show up as performance art in theatrical presentations. Vasyl Verkhovynets, born in 1880, was an actor, choir conductor, and amateur musicologist. He was the first great exponent of Ukraine folk dance in its theatrical incarnation.

**To get ready for the performance, students could research these:**

- Ukraine
- Folk dance
- Story dance
- Pavlo Virsky

## Here's a 60 minute lesson you could teach to help prepare students for this work

**Line of Inquiry:** *How does VUNDC synthesize traditional folk dance, classical training, and visual narrative to create dance art that conveys culture?\**

(\*A line of inquiry is a question that generates a lesson.)

Begin by showing a map of Ukraine and its neighbors. Have students discover which countries those neighbors are. A student with access to the Internet might volunteer to learn about the relationship between Ukraine and its largest neighbor overnight and share that the following day.

Ask: What's a folk dance?

*(One possible definition, adapted from Wikipedia: The term "folk dance" is applied to certain dances of historical importance in a country's culture and history; typically originated before 20th century.)*

Next, play a Ukraine folk music selection. Students write down descriptions of the music as they listen. These descriptions are shared after the hearing.

Using your particular method of showing images in the classroom, share with students some photographs of Ukrainian folk dress. Ask them to describe the details aloud. Then, each student selects one of these images and attempts to copy it, paying close attention to colors and shapes. Everyone in the room gets to see these. Treated as the works of art they are, one or two of these pictures could be described by the whole class in an act of group noticing.

Seated again with their own pictures, students hear the folk music selection again.

Ask: What would folk dances to this piece of music by people wearing these outfits look like? How would they move? "Using your imaginations, and not worrying about whether you guess correctly, try to imagine what these dances would look like, and write down a paragraph of description."

Students share, in pairs, their writing with one other student. Each of the partners gets to ask questions about what has been written, and why.

Ask: What will we be looking for in the performance, based on what we've done today?

**Here's a quick follow-up you could teach after students have experienced the performance:**

Have students review their paragraphs from the earlier lesson.

Ask: What in the performance was like what you had written, and what was different? What surprises were there for you in the performance? Would anyone like to share a move they saw the dancers perform?

Have them create a class poem in this way:

They think silently for a few moments about the various movements they saw in the performance. One after the other, they come up with descriptive words or phrases --- or actions like leaping, kicking, lifting --- which, scribed by you (or a student volunteer) onto a poster sheet of paper, become a poem.

Ask: In what ways do you think performances like this one are valuable?

**After coming to the performance, students could research these:**

- U.S.S.R
- Military dance
- Ballet
- Myroslav Vantukh

*“The young men in the Virsky Ukrainian National Dance Company are still soaring high in the air in splits, careering around the stage in gravity-defying butterfly jumps and spinning like tops in the 18th-century equivalent of break dancing.”*

*--- New York Times*

## What do YOU think?

How would you answer these questions --- and how could these questions be adapted for student use?

- What levels of energy did we notice?
- What telltale signs did we observe that told us a choreographer had guided the creation of this work?
- How does the concept of community connect with this work?
- Where have you seen folkdances before, and what sort were they?
- What emotions were expressed by the dancers? How?
- What are some of the stories these dances tell?
- What specific evidence did you see that told you the dancers had been classically trained?
- Which image most stands out in your memory --- and why?
- Which skills are called upon in performing these dances?
- How do you know that the performers are paying attention to each other?
- How would you describe the music? Is there more than one mood expressed? More than one tempo?
- If fun is one characteristic in evidence in this work of art, what are some others?
- What roles does partnership play in this work?
- What did you notice about the sequencing of the dances?
- What does costuming bring to this performance?
- In which ways was this like break dancing? Which other sorts of dance are similar to something you saw here?

## Internet

Try cutting & pasting these links in your browser.

### On Mr. Virsky himself:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavlo\\_Virsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavlo_Virsky)

### On the company:

[www.cami.com/?webid=615](http://www.cami.com/?webid=615)

[www.virsky.com](http://www.virsky.com)

[en.wikipedia.org/.../P.\\_Virsky\\_Ukrainian\\_National\\_Folk\\_Dance\\_Ensemble](http://en.wikipedia.org/.../P._Virsky_Ukrainian_National_Folk_Dance_Ensemble)

### Footage of the company: (the 1<sup>st</sup> one is especially comprehensive)

[video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7582982227573479660](http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7582982227573479660)

[www.dailymotion.com/video/x5nr3r\\_virsky-hopak-ballet-ukrainien\\_music](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5nr3r_virsky-hopak-ballet-ukrainien_music)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxwuzFTd6uA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxwuzFTd6uA)

## Books

### **Welcome to Ukraine** (Welcome to My Country) (Library Binding)

by Katharine Elizabeth Brown

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Gareth Stevens Publishing (August 2003)

ISBN-10: 0836825551

### **I Come from Ukraine** (This Is My Story) (Paperback)

by Valerie J. Weber

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Weekly Reader Early Learning Library (August 30, 2006)

ISBN-10: 0836872452

### **Ukraine In Pictures** (Visual Geography. Second Series) (Library Binding)

by Jeffrey Zuehlke

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Lerner Publishing Group (June 30, 2005)

ISBN-10: 0822523981

## CDs

### **Ukrainian Folk Music** (Import)

By: Various Artists

Release Date: April 2, 2002

Label: Air Mail Music

UPC: 723724402027

WAPI (Towerrecords ID): 106571920

List Price: \$10.98

# *"Astonishing"*

*---Anna Kisselgoff, The New York Times*