

## **ESSAY: Ukrainian Immigrant Theatre 1904-1923**

From the turn of the twentieth century immigrant theatre played a central role in the life of Winnipeg's Ukrainian community. As the historian Robert Harney pointed out many years ago, immigrant theatre, more than any other institution, served to "affirm the existence of ethnic community." By performing in or simply by attending Ukrainian plays staged by Ukrainian drama societies, immigrants acknowledged and celebrated their common cultural inheritance, and asserted their membership in the Ukrainian community. In addition to providing entertainment and quenching the immigrants' nostalgia for the homeland, immigrant theatre was also "an effective vehicle for patriotic, ideological and moral education for those who wished to influence immigrant communities." Even illiterate, uneducated and physically exhausted immigrants could be instructed and influenced through plays with simple and direct plots. In an era before radio, television and motion pictures, the theatre monopolized the immigrant imagination, helped to shape popular opinion, and was utilized by those with cultural, religious and political agendas to advance various causes and reform programs.

### **The First Drama Societies**

The first Ukrainian amateur theatrical performance in Winnipeg, a production of Hryhorii Tsehlynsky's comedy *Argonavty* (The Argonauts), took place on 14 May 1904. Directed by Ivan Antoniuk and featuring Apolinarii Novak, Dmytro Kyrstiuk and Jacob Makohin in the lead roles, it was staged at the Taras Shevchenko Reading Club, which was located in Cyril Genik's home at 109 Euclid Avenue (formerly the Ashdown residence). Produced by young radicals who were challenging the traditional authority of the Ukrainian Catholic clergy, the play satirized the efforts of Ukrainian Catholic theology graduates in Eastern Galicia to find wealthy brides prior to their ordination into the priesthood. During the next six or seven years, several plays were produced annually by a broad spectrum of groups and organizations including the pupils of St Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic School; an ad hoc Ukrainian Working Youth group; the Ukrainian Mutual Benefit Society of St Nicholas; the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society; the Ukrainian Freethinkers' Federation; students of the Ruthenian Training School; the short-lived Marko Kropyvnytsky Dramatic Association, established in December 1908 by members of the local Ukrainian section of the Socialist Party of Canada; the Vidrodzhennia (Rebirth) Society; and the Zaporizka Sich Association. Staged in venues like the first, short-lived *narodnyi dim* (national or people's home) at the corner of Selkirk and McGregor (1905), in the basement of the nearby St Nicholas Church erected by the Basilian Fathers, in the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society hall at 467 Manitoba Avenue (1906-10), and in the parish hall adjacent to Ss Vladimir and Olga Church (1909-11), many of these early spectacles were characterized by very rudimentary production values and performed in front of boisterous audiences that howled, whistled and laughed openly at moments of emotional intensity and high drama.

Perhaps the most successful and best-documented of these early groups was the Taras Shevchenko Educational Society drama circle which flourished in 1906-07. The circle's first play, *Verkhovynsi* (The Highlanders), an adaptation of the Polish playwright Józef Korzeniowski's *Karpaccy-górale*, was staged in November 1906 and played in front of a packed hall. A tragic tale of a young runaway serf who joins a band of brigands in the Carpathian Mountains, it featured nineteen year-olds Jaroslaw Arsenych and (Mrs) Nataliia Ferley as the star-crossed lovers, and also included Apolinarii Novak, Wasyl Holowacky, and Andrii Slipchenko in lead roles. The performance turned out very well, reviewers observed, because the actors were completely involved in their roles. A month later, the circle staged several short theatrical pieces including the Kyiv-born Jewish anarchist David Edelshtadt's *Amerykanskyi robotnyk* (The American Worker), the tragic story of an unemployed and hungry worker, whose

concern for his wife and child drives him to participate in the robbery of a millionaire's mansion and culminates in his execution. Taras Ferley performed the lead roles in these plays. In January 1907 the circle staged Mykola Strutynsky's *Straik* (Strike), about a Ukrainian-led agrarian strike in eastern Galicia, which won favourable reviews and left a positive impression even though several actors forgot their lines and had to ad-lib. Other plays, including Ivan Tohobochny's *Bortsi za mrii* (Fighters For Dreams), a tragedy about the conflict between two brothers, and Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko's early 19th century village comedy *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi* (Matchmaking in Honcharivka), both directed by Taras Ferley, were staged during the spring and summer of 1907, at which point the circle suspended its activities as many members left the city to study, teach or work elsewhere.

### The Big Three

In 1911-12 Ukrainian amateur theatre in Winnipeg acquired a degree of stability with the formation of three new drama societies that would dominate, but not monopolize, local theatrical activity during the next decade. The large influx of young, single men and women into the city after 1905, many of them with some secondary education and practical trade skills, contributed significantly to the formation of these societies, whose members included many tradesmen, craftsmen, small businessmen, teachers, journalists, writers, musicians, white collar workers, university and high school students. As they grew in strength and popularity, and tackled increasingly ambitious stage projects, the new drama societies abandoned the church basements and ramshackle halls on the side streets of the North End and began to perform in real theatres on Main Street and Selkirk Avenue: in the small and inexpensive Royal Theatre at 959 Main Street near Selkirk Avenue; in the large, technically well-equipped and relatively expensive Grand Opera House on Main Street and Jarvis (until it was consumed by fire in March 1918); and most frequently in the medium-sized and inexpensive, Jewish-owned Queen's Theatre at 239 Selkirk Avenue and King Street, which could be rented on most Saturdays for a mere \$30 prior to 1913.



The Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society 1914 (UCEC)

The first society traced its roots to the autumn of 1910, when a group of 15 to 25 year-olds, who sang in the St Nicholas Church choir and belonged to the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita,' which was affiliated with the parish and housed in St Nicholas School, resolved to establish a choral and dramatic society. After staging a few concerts and a one-act play in the church basement in the fall of 1911, the society elected Ivan Trach and Petro Yundak, two



Ivan Trach and Petro Yundak  
(UCEC)

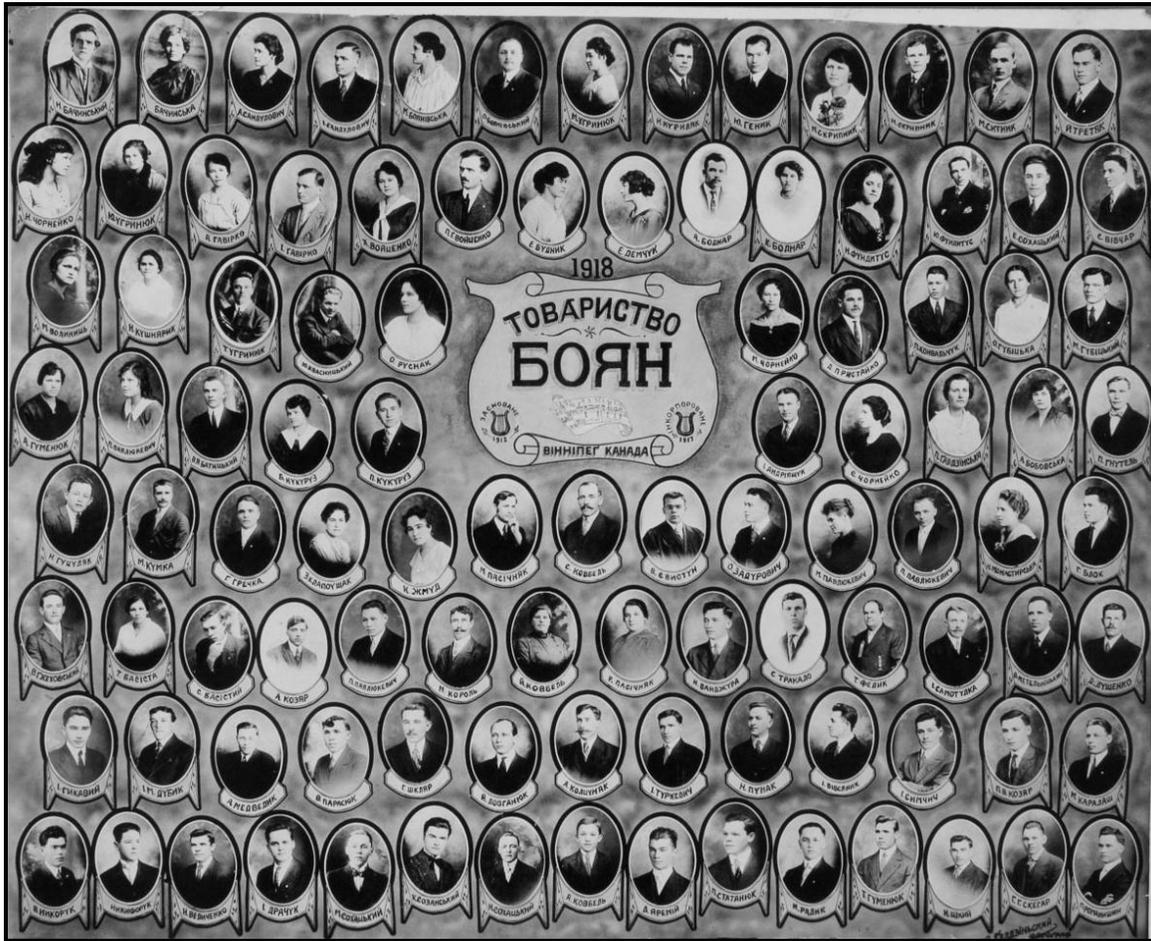
immigrants in their early twenties, stage and musical director respectively. Then, after resolving to produce three plays and a concert commemorating the poet Taras Shevchenko, society members threw themselves into evening rehearsals at St Nicholas School. However, after two of the plays and the concert had been staged as planned, and proceeds from repeat performances donated to St Nicholas School, conflict suddenly erupted in the spring of 1912 between the budding young thespians and Father Atanzii Fylypiv, pastor of St Nicholas. Father Fylypiv, a very stern and pious Basilian missionary, reprimanded the youthful members of the choral and dramatic society for spending too much time on theatrical activity, asked if they intended to established a theatre company in his parish, and ruled that they could not rehearse in St Nicholas School: "The school is for school, the church

is for church, and the theatre is for theatre; the school is not the place for theatre." In particular, Father Fylypiw was alarmed because on the stage, "there are scenes of love-making, people kiss, sometimes they sing indecent songs, and they dance." This was all highly inappropriate in a Catholic school that was also the residence of the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate. Consequently, he ordered members of the society to confine meetings and rehearsals to Sunday afternoons, between 3 pm and 6 pm, when he could be present.

Outraged by the imposition of these restrictions, members of the choral and dramatic society refused to sing in the church choir on Sundays, withdrew from the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita,' stopped meeting and rehearsing in St Nicholas School altogether, briefly rented meeting and rehearsal rooms at Jastremsky's Hall on the corner of McGregor and Stella, and finally settled into the private home of a generous member at 752 Manitoba Avenue. Having cut their ties with the parish and its reading association they also adopted a new name, the **Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society** in honour of the celebrated contemporary singer and actor who dominated the Ukrainian stage for 40 years between 1882 and 1922. That fall the Maria Zankovetska Society performed Antonii Nahoriansky's light three-act comic operetta *Okh ne liuby dvokh* (Oh, Do Not Love Two) at the Polish Roman Catholic Holy Ghost School hall on Selkirk Avenue, and the much more ambitious five-act operetta *Natalka Poltavka*, written by Ivan Kotliarevsky and scored by Mykola Lysenko, at the Royal Theatre on Main Street near Selkirk Avenue. Both were performed before full houses that included Poles, Jews and Anglo-Canadians, although the production of *Natalka Poltavka* was not an artistic success because the society still lacked the voices to put on a full scale operetta. In the future, operettas would only be attempted in collaboration with other companies. During the next few years, as it established itself as the oldest and most resilient Ukrainian amateur theatrical society in the city, its dramatic and comedic repertoire grew to well over 30 plays. Between January 1911 and May 1916 the Maria Zankovetska Society staged 34 plays and a number of concerts, and it accumulated a costume collection worth \$827 and a library of 350 volumes. In 1917 it had 115 members, including 77 men and 38 women, although annual turnover was high as many members left the city in search of work or returned to rural homesteads, while new members joined.

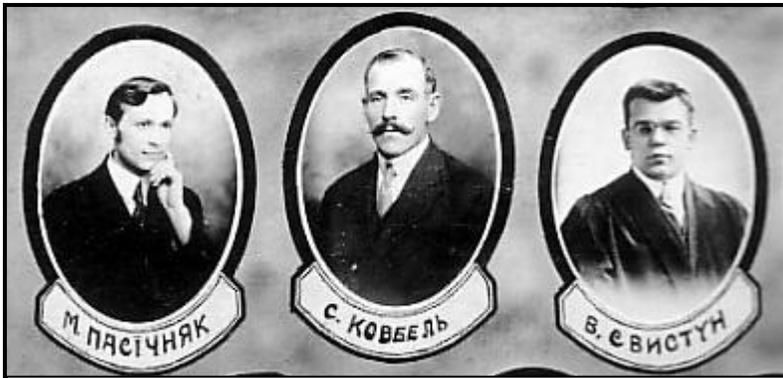


Cossacks), Mykhailo Starytsky's *Oi ne khody Hrytsiu, tai na vechornytsi* (Don't Go to Parties, Hryts), Petro Nishchynsky's *Vechornytsi* (Evening Pastimes) and Semen Hulak-Artemovs'ky's *Zaporozhets' za Dunaiem* (Cossacks in Exile).



The Boyan Society 1918 (UCEC)

Two factors help to explain Boyan's success with Ukrainian operettas. First, the society had a surfeit of musical talent in its ranks. Maksym Pasichniak, the society's musical director, graduated from a teachers' college, conducted a military band while serving in the Austrian army, and ran a musical supply store in Winnipeg; Kowbel, the stage director, was a fine singer who played several stringed instruments; Wasyl Swystun, the society's choir conductor, was a 20 year-old gymnasium graduate with a fine singing voice. Other society members included Nicholas Hutsuliak, a gifted violinist, Wasyl Parasiuk the leader of a mandolin orchestra, and many of the finest Ukrainian amateur singers in the city. Second, and no less significant, was the society's windfall acquisition of costumes *and* complete twelve-part musical scores for eight of the most popular Ukrainian operettas. These were purchased from a disillusioned DL Makarenko, the leader of a well-travelled Jewish-Ukrainian drama troupe, who had been unable to persuade any local Ukrainian singers to help his relatively small touring company stage several full-length Ukrainian operettas at the Queen's Theatre, where the company had a lengthy booking in early 1913. Spurned by Ukrainian performers who resented being denied access to the Queen's Theatre during his stay, Makarenko and his company confined themselves to their Yiddish repertoire, several Ukrainian dramas and abbreviated versions of *Natalka Poltavka* and *Zaporozhets za*



**Maksym Pasichniak, Semen Kowbel and Wasyl Swystun (UCEC)**

*Dunaiem* (in which Makarenko was brilliant according to Kowbel). When the booking was over, Makarenko decided to drop Ukrainian operettas from his repertoire and sold his Ukrainian costumes and scores to the Boyan Society for a mere \$100. Thereafter, Boyan would include at least one operetta in its repertoire each year, and it also made a practice of

leasing its newly acquired costumes to Ukrainian drama circles in towns and cities all across Canada. In May 1917, and then again in March 1918, Boyan staged complete unabridged renditions of *Zaporozhets za Dunaiem* at the Queen's Theatre, the first time the operetta had been performed in its entirety in Canada. The second time it was performed, in March 1918, Matthew Popovich and his wife Liza (who were also very prominent founding members of the socialist Volodymyr Vynnychenko drama circle) had lead roles in the production. At the time, the Boyan Society had 207 members (including many, like the Popoviches, who also belonged to other dramatic and choral societies), a costume collection valued at \$764, and a 1035 volume library.

The third major drama group to emerge in 1911-12 was the **Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society** named after the poet and playwright usually credited with being the 'father' of modern Ukrainian literature. It was established in November 1911 by youthful members of Ss Vladimir and Olga Ukrainian Catholic parish. Wasyl Kazanivsky, a 21 year-old who had immigrated to Winnipeg in March was elected the society's first head and its stage director. Since moving to Winnipeg, Kazanivsky had been struck by the large number of Ukrainian youths who spent most of their time fighting at Ukrainian weddings or drinking and shooting pool in Main Street hotels, and he thought that the camaraderie and entertainment provided by a drama club could provide a positive alternative. Father Emylian Krasicky, the elderly secular priest who served as pastor at Ss Vladimir and Olga was very supportive, although his efforts to recruit a deacon/musician to help the drama circle came to naught when an agreement could not be reached with the parish trustees. The Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society's first play, Yeronim Lutsyk's *Na starosty lit* (In Old Age), was staged in late 1912 in the hall beside Ss Vladimir & Olga church where members of the society held meetings and rehearsed. By early 1913, when it staged Korzeniowski's *Verkhovyntsi* and Kvitka-Osnovianenko's *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi* in the Queen's Theatre, the society was beginning to attract a following, although the absence of a qualified musical director obliged it to focus on drama and comedy; operettas and musical theatre were never part of its repertoire. About 50 young people had joined and a family atmosphere in which one was able to have a good time without drinking began to develop. A friendly rivalry was also emerging among the three existing drama circles as they vied for members, tried to put on the best plays and choral recitals, and competed to attract the largest audiences possible to their performances. As their productions became more frequent and varied - by 1913 the three drama societies were jointly sponsoring weekly soirées (vechirky) of humour, music and song at the Ukrainian-owned Leland Theatre on Selkirk Avenue and Grand Opera House on Main Street - the number of fights at hotels and weddings began to diminish. Unfortunately, success of this kind made little impression on parish trustees at Ss Vladimir and Olga. When Father Krasicky was transferred to Sydney, Nova Scotia, and replaced by Fr Joseph Bala, the parish executive insisted that the Kotliarevsky Society's earnings must be channelled into parish coffers and controlled by the parish executive because the

Society used the parish hall free of charge for rehearsals. Apparently, the fact that Society members paid parish dues, sang in the church choir every Sunday, and donated a portion of their profits to the parish did not enter into the trustees' calculations. Unable to resolve their differences with the new pastor and trustees, the members of the Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society moved their headquarters to Jastremsky's Hall across the street and remained in that facility until the fall of 1916 when the National Home Building was opened. By then the Society had a 250 volume library and property valued at over \$1,100.

Drama circles like the Boyan Society, the Maria Zankovetska Educational and Dramatic Society, and the Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society did more than entertain and educate Ukrainian immigrants on stage. Even when they were not performing, these groups mobilized Ukrainian immigrants, promoted Ukrainian national awareness, and played a leading role in local community building. While the Zankovetska Society made donations to Ukrainian private schools (*ridni shkoly*) in the old country on several occasions between 1912 and 1914, the Boyan Society raised funds to help the ageing Radical writer Mykhailo Pavlyk in Lviv, and sent money to Kyiv for the construction of a Taras Shevchenko statue on the one hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth. All three societies participated in fund raising and contributed generously toward the purchase of Winnipeg's Ukrainian National Home in 1916. On several occasions in 1913-15 the Zankovetska and Boyan choirs also sang at People's Forum meetings in the St John's High School auditorium; the meetings had been initiated by James S Woodsworth of the All People's Mission to help English-speaking Canadians acquire a broader understanding of European immigrants and their cultures. The Boyan Society also offered a number of services to the community: free weekly lectures on reading musical notation were launched in the fall of 1913; a public library with a reading room full of books and Ukrainian newspapers from Canada, the United States, and Europe was opened in the spring of 1914; and music and voice classes were held during the 1916-17 fall and winter season. Dramatic and choral societies were also responsible for organizing and staging many of the numerous concerts that commemorated the anniversaries of prominent Ukrainian national and cultural figures during these years. Meetings and concerts commemorating Shevchenko had been an annual spring event since 1905. The first concerts had been staged by Ruthenian Training School students, but by 1908 drama circles and university students had assumed the task. In 1909 the 140th anniversary of Ivan Kotliarevsky's birth had been celebrated with a performance of *Natalka Poltavka*, lectures on the poet and playwright's significance, and a concert of Ukrainian folk songs. Two years later, the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Father Markiiian Shashkevych, the poet who led the Ukrainian literary revival in Galicia, was observed and in 1913 a concert was staged in honour of Ivan Franko, perhaps the most gifted and certainly the most intellectually wide-ranging Ukrainian writer of the era.

In February 1914, a Shevchenko Jubilee Committee that was led by Semen Kowbel and Maksym Pasichniak of the Boyan Society, and also included representatives of the Zankovetska Society, the Ukrainian Student Circle, the Ukrainian National Home, several Orthodox and Presbyterian congregations, and most local Ukrainian-Canadian newspapers, resolved to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth in grand style with a gala concert and a massive street procession. By April, the committee had published a collection of articles on Shevchenko, ordered 30,000 small window posters, issued a commemorative badge bearing Shevchenko's likeness, and lithographed lyrics and notes to ensure that the anniversary became "a national celebration for all Ukrainians in Canada." A rather quixotic campaign to erect a Shevchenko statue in Winnipeg and rename Burrows Avenue as "Shevchenko Avenue," in order "to document our existence in the capital of Manitoba," was also launched but abandoned when war broke out later that summer. The gala concert, held at the Queen's Theatre on Saturday 16 May 1914, was, according to the *Manitoba Free Press*, "the most elaborate and eventful affair of its kind given by

the Ukrainians of Winnipeg." "The stage was decorated with many plants and a hand-painted portrait of Shevchenko. The background scenery represented a village in the Carpathian mountains, with which so many Ukrainian followers are connected. The sky blue Ukrainian flags and bunting, the Ukrainian national colours, were very much in evidence throughout the hall. The general atmosphere among the audience and on the stage pointed to some great event being celebrated ...." Recitations of Shevchenko's poetry, renditions of songs by male and female soloists and by male and mixed choirs, a mandolin duet, and a violin soloist performing selections by Dvorak, Correlli and Kreisler with piano accompaniment, filled out the program. Taras Ferley's closing remarks paraphrased Shevchenko and urged those in attendance to "Rise, shake off the chains, [and] help their brothers in the home land to free themselves from tyrannical despotism." The next day, Sunday 17 May 1914, more than 7,000 Ukrainians, including a few hundred farmers who had come from as far away as Ethelbert, gathered at the corner of McGregor and Burrows. Then, led by three men on horseback dressed as Ukrainian Cossacks (who, as the *Free Press* dutifully pointed out, "have nothing in common with the Russian regiments of Cossacks"), followed by standard bearers carrying the Union Jack and the Ukrainian flag, a marching band, members of the Boyan and Zankovetska drama circles in national costumes, and uniformed members of a Transcona organization, they marched, four-abreast, east along Burrows to Main Street, south along Main to Broadway, and then back north along Main to Selkirk Avenue and west along Selkirk to the corner of Sinclair, where, after a few brief speeches at the entrance to the Old Exhibition Grounds, the crowd dispersed. Marching down Main Street, the procession had stretched for more than a mile. While Ukrainian Catholic leaders, who refused to participate in celebrations that included Ukrainian Presbyterians, and some socialists, who maintained that standard bearers with the Union Jack dishonoured the anti-imperialist Shevchenko, had not participated, the event was a great success. Never had Winnipeg's Ukrainians been seen in such numbers, and the organizers believed they had demonstrated to all concerned that Ukrainian Canadians had a culture that was worth cultivating and defending.

### **New Drama Societies**

The Boyan, Zankovetska and Kotliarevsky societies may have dominated amateur theatre between 1911 and 1922 but they certainly did not monopolize the Ukrainian stage in Winnipeg. The public's thirst for popular entertainment and on-going efforts to finance the city's numerous Ukrainian organizations and institutions, meant that increasingly plays were staged and drama circles formed to generate revenue by attracting paying customers. In 1913, for example, the Ukrainian Reading Association 'Prosvita,' which had been abandoned by the Zankovetska society, established a new drama circle; starting in June 1914, the small Taras Shevchenko Reading Club in the Brooklands consistently produced at least three plays annually for the next two decades; ad hoc drama circles associated with the Holy Trinity Russo-Orthodox parish at 643 Manitoba Avenue staged several Ukrainian plays in 1915; the Ukrainian section of the Russian Enlightenment Society produced at least four Ukrainian plays in 1917-18, rare instances of cultural contact between Ukrainian migrant labourers from Russia and immigrants from Austria; and small, relatively isolated reading clubs and socialist circles in Transcona and East Kildonan began mounting the occasional play in 1914 and 1921 respectively.

Two amateur dramatic societies established during the war years stood apart from the others. In March 1914, members of the Ukrainian section of the Social Democratic Party of Canada (or the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party of Canada, as it was popularly called) established the **Volodymyr Vynnychenko Dramatic and Educational Society**, named after the prominent novelist, playwright and leading member of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Worker's Party in Kyiv. The third drama circle established by the city's Ukrainian socialists, it succeeded the short-lived Marko Kropyvnytsky drama circle (1908-09) and the Ivan Tobilevych drama circle

that had flourished briefly in 1911-12 only to flounder and disappear when Matthew Popovich, its founder and director, temporarily moved to New York City. Initially headed by the veteran party organizer Tymofei Koreichuk, the Vynnychenko Society made its debut at the Queen's Theatre in late April 1914 with a production of Tobilevych's *Sto tysiach* (One Hundred Thousand), a satiric comedy about the socially corrosive power of money. Rehearsing every evening except Saturday in rented rooms, the society staged three dramas, one comedy and one farce (and held four dances to raise funds) during its first year. Unlike its predecessors, the Vynnychenko Society thrived, making a name for itself with productions of Trembitsky's *Ilko Pashchak*, a social drama about the life of Hutzul highlanders, and Tobilevych's *Beztalanna*, a psychological drama about love and desire in a culturally backward village, directed by Matthew Popovich and featuring Popovich and his Jewish-Ukrainian wife Liza Sladkaya, in the lead roles. In 1915, society members also participated in a local production of Jacob Gordin's *Di shvue* (*The Oath*) mounted by a Jewish progressive group. In all, between 1914 and 1920, the Vynnychenko Society staged about 50 theatrical performances, donating hundreds of dollars to sustain the local socialist weekly *Robochyi narod* (The Working People) and very briefly, in the spring and summer of 1917, raising funds for the social-democratic *Robitnycha hazeta* (Workers' Gazette) in Kyiv. By August 1918, the society had 60 full-time members, a library of over 500 volumes, and costumes worth in excess of \$450. From the fall of 1916, the Vynnychenko Society offered elementary courses on music theory, as well as singing, mandolin and violin lessons. It also organized more dances - usually at Steiman's Hall on Selkirk Avenue and Minuk's Hall on Dufferin Avenue - than any other Ukrainian society, a phenomenon explained by the society's involvement in the fund-raising campaign to build a Ukrainian Labour Temple in the North End.



The Volodymyr Vynnychenko Dramatic and Educational Society 1917-18 (UCEC)

The second important theatrical group, established at Sts Vladimir and Olga Ukrainian Catholic parish in the spring of 1916, was the **Bandurist Choral and Dramatic Society**, named after wandering minstrels who played the bandura, a traditional Ukrainian plucked string instrument. Led by two young pastors, Fathers Mykola Olenchuk and Petro Oleksiv, who were determined to steal at least some of the thunder from the four established secular, nondenominational and often anti-clerical dramatic societies, the Bandurist Society had a band and tended to favour musical productions. These included Starytsky's *Tsyhanka Aza* (The Gipsy Aza), the tragic story of a love triangle involving a Ukrainian girl, her domesticated Gipsy husband, and his former lover, the tempestuous and bewitching Aza; Starytsky's *Marusia Bohuslavka*, about a Ukrainian harem girl who rescues a band of Cossacks from Turkish captivity; and Kvitka-Osnovianenko's *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi* (Matchmaking at Honcharivka). All three were staged during the 1917-18 season. At the end of that season, the Bandurist Society, which also offered lessons on how to play wind instruments, reported that it had 350 dues-paying members, a library of 325 volumes and costumes valued at over \$360. By the fall of 1916, Fathers Olenchuk and Oleksiv, and their parishioners, were also making plans to build the Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita,' an institution that would unite and house the city's Ukrainian Catholic cultural organizations under one roof.



The Bandurist Choral and Dramatic Society on stage with Fr Petro Oleksiv (UCEC)

### Frequency of Performance

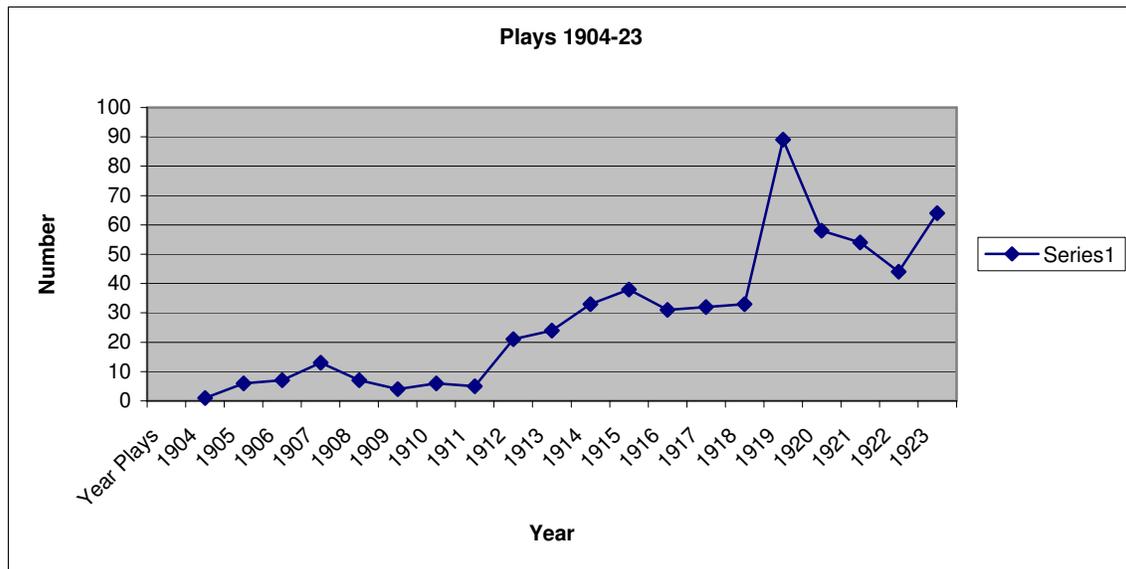
With five large drama societies producing at least five or six plays annually, and up to a dozen smaller drama circles and ad hoc groups mounting productions of their own, Ukrainian theatrical activity grew exponentially during the war years (Table 1 and Figure 1).

**Table 1. Number of Plays, 1904-1923**

Year	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913
Plays	1	6	7	13	7	4	6	5	21	24

Year	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923
Plays	33	38	31	32	33	89	58	54	44	64

In total, at least 570 theatrical performances of some 250-260 works (dramas, comedies, operettas, vaudevilles) by almost 100 identifiable playwrights were staged by Ukrainian amateurs in Winnipeg between 1904 and 1923. Whereas fewer than a dozen plays were produced annually prior to 1912, the number of productions grew to just over twenty annually on the eve of the war, plateaued at over 30 during the war years, peaked at about 90 in 1919, and declined marginally thereafter (although serious gaps in the data after June 1920 makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions). The formation of the Zankovetska, Boyan and Kotliarevsky societies in 1911 explains the growing number of stage productions by 1912, while the emergence of the Vynnychenko and Bandurist societies, and the very active Brooklands Shevchenko drama circle, accounts for additional growth during the war years. The almost three-fold increase in the number of theatrical performances recorded in 1919 was a direct consequence of the opening, in March 1919, of the Ukrainian Labour Temple with its magnificent (by immigrant standards) theatre. Not only did it allow the Vynnychenko Society to stage many more plays, it also encouraged Labour Temple officials, who were eager to pay off their construction debts, to rent their facility to Ukrainian competitors. The latter, tired of competing for bookings in the few adequate venues available to them, leapt at the opportunity even though it meant performing in a theatre owned by ideological adversaries who had adopted a pro-Bolshevik and pro-Soviet stance in 1918 insofar as homeland politics were concerned. As a result, in 1919-20, every Ukrainian drama society and circle in the city - not only the Boyan, Zankovetska and Kotliarevsky dramatic societies but also staunchly Catholic groups like the Bandurist Society, the Ukrainian Mutual Benefit Society of St Nicholas, and the Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky Student Residence drama circle - performed in the Ukrainian Labour Temple.



The honeymoon ended, and the feverish pace of theatrical activity that had characterized the previous two years began to subside in January 1921, when the Ukrainian Labour Temple executive banned the staging of *Mizh dvokh syl* (Between Two Powers), a joint production of the Boyan, Zankovetska and Kotliarevsky drama societies. Ironically, *Mizh dvokh syl*, which was set

during the bloody Bolshevick occupation of Kyiv in early 1918 and demonstrated that Russian Bolshevism was incompatible with the Ukrainian national cause, had been written by the lifelong socialist (and advocate of a sovereign communist Ukraine) Volodymyr Vynnychenko, whose name had adorned the Labour Temple's premier dramatic society as recently as March 1920. After Vynnychenko's controversial play was performed at the Queen's Theatre several weeks later, the Labour Temple executive refused to allow any of the actors who had participated in the production to appear on its stage, thereby effectively banning all three societies from its theatre. They returned to the Queen's Theatre for the remainder of the season and then amalgamated into a single **Ukrainian National Home Choral and Dramatic Society**. From the fall of 1922 most of the newly amalgamated society's spectacles were staged at the recently opened Canadian Ukrainian Institute 'Prosvita' at the corner of Pritchard Avenue and Arlington Street. Before long the other Ukrainian drama circles also left the Labour Temple which now became the exclusive home base of the **Ukrainian Labour Temple Dramatic and Choral Circle**. With the arrival of Myroslav Irchan in 1923, the latter would begin a brief period of intense and remarkably popular activity featuring a new and more contemporary repertoire.



**The Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky Student Residence drama circle staged Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at the Ukrainian Labour Temple on 13 May 1919 (UCEC)**

## **The Repertoire**

The repertoire that predominated in Winnipeg between 1904 and 1923 was almost indistinguishable from the repertoire of most itinerant and small town Ukrainian theatre companies in the old country at the turn of the century. A list of the playwrights whose works were most frequently performed (Table 2) reveals that most major playwrights from western (Austrian) and central and eastern (Russian) Ukraine were represented, with the latter, more prolific group, significantly outnumbering the former.

**Table 2. Most Frequently Performed Playwrights**

Ivan Tobilevych	45 performances	13 plays
Mykhailo Starytsky	36 performances	12 plays
Marko Kropyvnytsky	31 performances	10 plays
Ivan Tohobochny	28 performances	5 plays
Yeronim Lutsyk (Roman Surmach)	16 performances	9 plays
Hryhorii Tsehlynsky	13 performances	7 plays
Trokhym Kolesnychenko	12 performances	3 plays
Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko	11 performances	2 plays
Ivan Franko	11 performances	4 plays
Oleksandr Sukhodolsky	11 performances	5 plays
Myroslav Irchan	9 performances	4 plays
Borys Hrinchenko	8 performances	3 plays
Lev Lopatynsky	8 performances	2 plays
Taras Shevchenko	7 performances	1 play
Ivan (John) Bodrug	7 performances	1 play
Ivan Kotliarevsky	6 performances	1 play
Semen Hulak-Artemovsky	6 performances	1 play
Petro Nishchynsky	6 performances	1 play
Volodymyr Vynnychenko	6 performances	4 plays
Liubov Yanovska	6 performances	4 plays
Stephan Kazanivsky	6 performances	3 plays
Mykola Yanchuk	5 performances	1 play
Antin Nahoriansky	5 performances	1 play

Works by Ivan Kotliarevsky (*Natalka Poltavka*) and Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko (*Svatannia na Honcharivtsi*) who wrote the first modern Ukrainian plays and transformed the Ukrainian vernacular into a literary language during the early nineteenth century, enjoyed iconic status and were frequently performed. Sentimental comedies with songs, set in idyllic Ukrainian villages, these plays expressed sympathy for the socially oppressed peasantry but refrained from criticizing the status quo in the Russian Empire. Hulak-Artemovsky's work (*Zaporozhets za Dunaiem*), written at mid-century, fell into the same mould. Taras Shevchenko's lone foray into the theatre (*Nazar Stodolia*) was historic rather than comedic, more romantic than sentimental, and not as politically radical as his poetry; it was usually staged in tandem with the composer Petro



**Ivan Tobilevych 1845-1907**

Nishchynsky's dramatic scene (*Vechornytsi*), which set an excerpt from Shevchenko's play to music. The most popular playwrights - Marko Kropyvnytsky, Mykhailo Starytsky and Ivan Tobilevych - represented a style known as 'ethnographic realism,' which predominated on the Ukrainian stage between 1880 and 1910, and reflected the constraints within which Ukrainian theatre had to develop in the Russian Empire. Since tsarist censors only approved Ukrainian plays that depicted peasant life and folk culture, prior to 1905 Ukrainian theatre was restricted to comedies, village melodramas and historical plays that drew on folk rituals and usually featured songs and dances. Starytsky's social dramas (*Oi ne khody Hrytsiu tai na vechornytsi, Tsyhanka Aza*) tended to be most melodramatic, his historical plays (*Taras Bulba, Yurko Dovbush*) quite bombastic. While much of Kropyvnytsky's work was also melodramatic, saturated with folkloric detail, and inclined to romanticize peasant life, some of his plays (*Hlytai abozh pavuk/The Profiteer or the Spider*) were

perceptive studies of rural social differentiation and power relations. Tobilevych's work

(*Burlaka/The Vagabond*, *Sto tysiach/One Hundred Thousand*, *Suieta/Vanity*, *Martyn Borulia*), more sophisticated and realistic than that of his contemporaries, relied much less on ethnography and melodrama, highlighted conflict and social relations in the Ukrainian village, and focused on psychology and character development. Lesser exponents of 'ethnographic realism' included the critically acclaimed Liubov Yanovska, who tried to follow in Tobilevych's footsteps and was one of the first playwrights to write about the Ukrainian proletariat; and several journeymen actors, including the prolific and very popular Ivan Tohobochny, whose social dramas tended to be overly melodramatic and lacking in artistry, Oleksii Sukhodolsky, and Trokym Kolesnychenko. Younger playwrights like Borys Hrinchenko and Volodymyr Vynnychenko rejected 'ethnographic realism'. Hrinchenko, a short story writer and a Ukrainian cultural nationalist, wrote plays dealing with history and contemporary cultural politics that were lacking in psychology but packed with dialogue on social and national issues. Vynnychenko, who wrote short stories and novels, and dabbled in journalism, was a modernist and one of the most prominent Ukrainian social democrats of his time. His work often dealt with the lives of workers, criminals, intellectuals and revolutionaries, and was primarily concerned with psychological and moral issues, especially the morality of the new revolutionary generation.

Comparatively few western Ukrainian playwrights produced work that was staged regularly in Winnipeg. Only the work of the remarkably versatile Ivan Franko was both popular and critically



**Ivan Franko 1856-1916**

acclaimed. A founder of the Ukrainian Radical movement and the most prominent western Ukrainian public intellectual of his generation, Franko was a novelist, poet and literary critic whose plays (*Ukradene shchastia/Stolen Happiness*; *Uchytel/The Teacher*) tried to provide social and psychological insight into the actions of his protagonists. The popular works of Hryhorii Tsehlynsky, a teacher, journalist and parliamentarian, tended to be superficial and devoid of psychological insight and character development, but Tsehlynsky did produce some of the earliest satires (*Argonavty/The Argonauts*, *Sokolyky/The Darlings*, *Shliakhta khodachkova/Nobility in Clogs*, *Tato na zaruchynakh/Father at the Engagement Party*) of contemporary western Ukrainian society. Lev Lopatynsky (*Svekrukha/The Mother-in-law*), an actor and conservative journalist; Mykola Yanchuk (*Vykhovanets/The Foster Son*), an ethnographer born in the Chelm region, who wrote plays to preserve the local dialect; and the long-forgotten Antin Nahoriansky (*Okh ne liuby dvokh/Oh, Do Not Love Two*), produced slight didactic plays written expressly for peasant audiences.

A handful of playwrights who lived and wrote at least some of their works in Canada also had plays staged in Winnipeg before 1924. The most popular and prolific was Yeronim Lutsyk (who also wrote under the pen name Roman Surmach). Prior to emigrating to North America in 1908, Lutsyk had abandoned the Ukrainian Greek Catholic church and the Basilian Order, joined the Russophile camp, and published a translation of *The Lives of the Saints*. In North America, he continued to write moralistic and didactic plays which exposed immigrant vices (*V nevoli temnoty/Enslaved by Ignorance*) even after being ordained into the priesthood of the Russian Orthodox Church. Much less prolific was Ivan Bodrug, a founder of *Kanadyiskyi farmer* (Canadian Farmer), the first Ukrainian weekly in Canada, and a leader of the quasi-Protestant Independent Greek Church, whose first play (*Ubiinyky/The Murderers*), an artless pastiche of older plays about the western Ukrainian village, was nevertheless popular all across Canada. Stephan Kazanivsky, the stage director of Winnipeg's Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society managed to have his stage adaptations of two popular Ukrainian novels performed several times before 1920. Dmytro Hunkevych, another member of the Kotliarevsky Society, and Semen Kowbel, the

director of the Boyan Society, also had plays staged and would gain recognition all across Canada and in the old country during the interwar years. Other immigrants whose plays were staged at least two or three times included Jacob Majdanyk, a painter and cartoonist, whose *Manigrula* satirized life in a raucous boarding house; Michael Kumka, a Ukrainian evening school teacher, who wrote several children's plays; and VV Babienko, who wrote about the Russian Revolution of 1905 (*Mizh burlyvymy fyliamy/Among Turbulent Waves*) based on personal experience. Plays by Myroslav Irchan, the young convert to communism, who wrote with compassion and insight about the oppressed and downtrodden, were first staged in 1922 but only began to attract large and enthusiastic audiences between 1923 and 1929 when he worked as an editor and writer-in-residence at the Ukrainian Labour Temple.



**Ivan Bodrug, Jacob Majdanyk, Semen Kowbel, Dmytro Hunkevych, Michael Kumka (UCEC)**

**Table 3. Most Frequently Performed Plays, 1904-23**

Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko		
	<i>Svatannia na Honcharivtsi</i> (Matchmaking at Honcharivka)	10 performances
Ivan Tohobochny		
	<i>Zhydivka Vykhrystka</i> (The Baptized Jewess)	10 performances
Trokhym Kolesnychenko		
	<i>Za Pravdu i Voliu Naroda</i> (For Truth and the Liberty of the People)	8 performances
Mykhailo Starytsky		
	<i>Oi ne khody Hrytsiu ta i na Vechornytsi</i> (Don't Go to Parties, Hryts)	8 performances
Marko Kropyvnytsky		
	<i>Perekhytryly abo Poshyls v durni</i> (They Made Fools of Themselves)	8 performances
Ivan Tohobochny		
	<i>Maty Naimychka</i> (Mother, the Hired Woman)	7 performances
Taras Shevchenko		
	<i>Nazar Stodolia</i> (Nazar Stodolia)	7 performances
Lev Lopatynsky		
	<i>Svekrukha</i> (The Mother-in-law)	7 performances
Ivan (John) Bodrug		
	<i>Ubiinyky</i> (The Murderers)	7 performances
Petro Nischynsky		
	<i>Vechornytsi</i> (Evening Pastimes)	6 performances
Semen Hulak-Artemovsky		
	<i>Zaporozhets za Dunaiem</i> (Cossacks in Exile/Beyond the Danube)	6 performances
Ivan Tobilevych		
	<i>Beztalanna</i> (The Fortuneless Maiden)	6 performances
Ivan Tohobochny		
	<i>Bortsi za mrii</i> (Fighters for Dreams)	6 performances

Ivan Tohobochny	<i>Dushohuby</i> (The Murderers)	5 performances
Mykola Yanchuk	<i>Vykhovanets</i> (The Foster Son)	5 performances
Fedir Kostenko	<i>Batraky</i> (The Farm Labourers)	5 performances
Ivan Tobilevych	<i>Burlaka</i> (The Vagabond)	5 performances
Marko Kropyvnytsky	<i>Doky sontse ziide, rosa ochi vyist</i> (By the Time the Sun Rises, the Dew Will Devour the Eyes)	5 performances
Oleksii Sukhodolsky	<i>Khmara</i> (The Cloud)	5 performances
Ivan Tobilevych	<i>Martyn Borulia</i> (Martyn Borulia)	5 performances
Ivan Tobilevych	<i>Naimychka</i> (The Hired Woman)	5 performances
Petro Stetsenko	<i>Na vidpust do Kyieva</i> (Going on pilgrimage to Kyiv)	5 performances
Ivan Kotliarevsky	<i>Natalla Poltavka</i> (The Girl from Poltava)	5 performances
Mykhailo Starytsky	<i>Nich pid Ivana Kupala</i> (On the Eve of St John the Baptist's Feast)	5 performances
Antin Nahoriansky	<i>Okh, ne liuby dvokh</i> (Oh, Don't Love Two)	5 performances
Vasyl Hohol	<i>Prostak</i> (The Simpleton)	5 performances

The repertoire to which Winnipeg's Ukrainian theatre-goers were exposed before 1924 was quite narrow and parochial. Unlike Jewish and Finnish immigrants, whose theatre familiarized them with the European classics, introduced them to mainstream North American culture, and examined contemporary topics such as the status of women and class relations in modern industrial societies, most plays performed by Ukrainian drama circles were fixated on the nineteenth century Ukrainian village. Although a substantial number of European classics were available in Ukrainian translation, only a few performances of Moliere's *Le Mariage Forcé*, Gogol's *Inspector General*, and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* were staged. Nor did modern Ukrainian drama fare much better. Even Vynnychenko's work was staged a mere six times and, ironically, never by the socialist society that carried his name.



**Kvitka-Osnovianenko**  
1778-1843

Sentimental comedies and works of populist 'ethnographic realism' were popular in Winnipeg and throughout Canada because they were written with unsophisticated rural and lower-class urban audiences in mind. The most popular plays almost invariably depicted the tribulations of star-crossed lovers. In comedies like Kotliarevsky's *Natalka Poltavka*, Kvitka-Osnovianenko's *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi*, Tobilevych's *Martyn Borulia*, and Kropyvnytsky's *Poshylysia v durni* (Deceived), rich, old, unattractive bachelors (or the fathers of young simpletons) pursue beautiful and virtuous girls. They conspire with greedy and socially ambitious parents to separate the young heroines from their handsome, noble and youthful admirers. A similar story line runs through Starytsky's *Oi ne khody Hrytsiu tai na vechornytsi*, a tragedy with singing and dancing, in which the hero dies after drinking a vial of poison provided by a wealthy old bachelor who

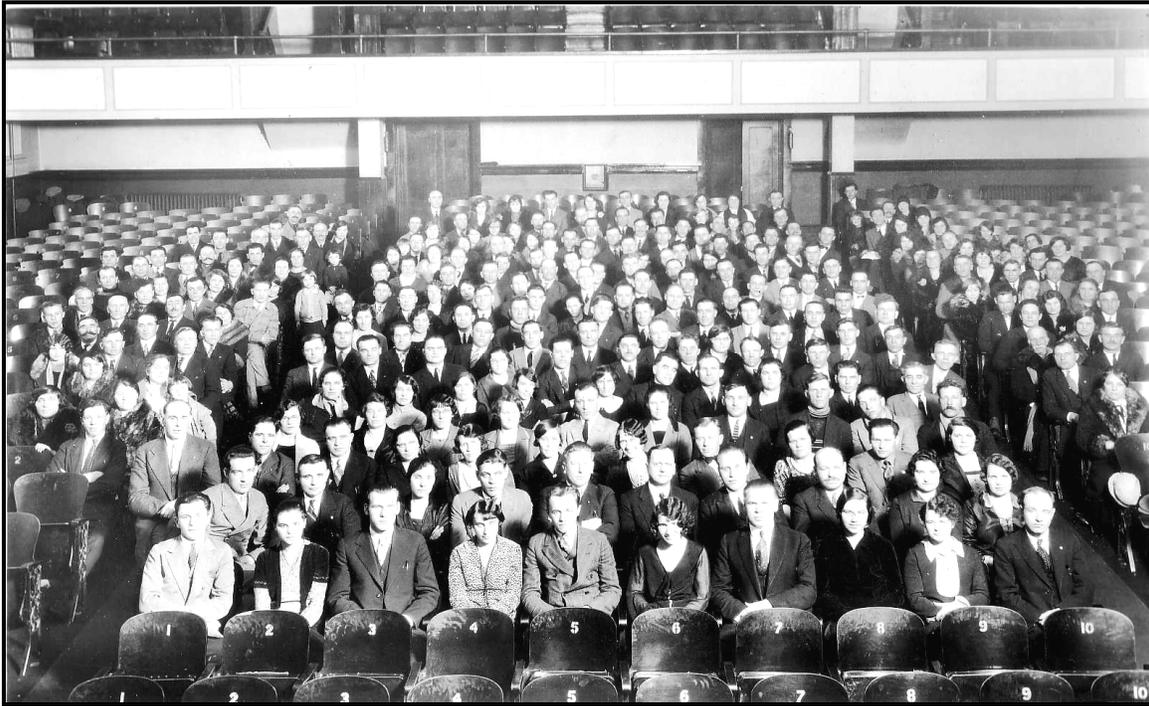
is pursuing his girl friend. More conventional works like Tobilevych's *Beztalanna* (The Fortuneless Maiden) and Tohobochny's *Zhydivka vykhrestka* (The Baptized Jewess), both of which dispensed with the peculiar mixture of tragedy, songs and dances so characteristic of nineteenth-century Ukrainian theatre, focused on the tragic fate of women who were beaten, abandoned, murdered or driven to suicide by unfaithful husbands. Tohobochny's very popular play, managed to transcend the limitations of ethnographic melodrama depicting Jews very sympathetically while exposing the prejudice and ignorance that sometimes coloured the attitude of Ukrainian peasants. (The Russian playwright Yevgeni Chirikov's *Yevrei* (The Jews), which condemned anti-Semitism, was also presented in Ukrainian translation on two or three occasions in 1916-17 by the Ivan Kotliarevsky Drama Society.)

Many of these plays were performed repeatedly because they had a moralizing or didactic edge that appealed to immigrant leaders intent on 'uplifting' and 'enlightening' newcomers who neglected their families and spent much of their time loitering in Main Street hotels and fighting at weddings. Tragedies like *Beztalanna* and *Zhydivka vykhrestka* implicitly condemned wife-beating and evoked sympathy for victimized heroines. In comedies, excessive drinking was invariably depicted as a vice that had terrible consequences. Had not their alcoholic fathers frittered away the family fortune, the heroines of *Natalka Poltavka* and *Svatannia na Honcharivtsi* would not have been pursued by repulsive elderly bachelors. In Tobilevych's plays the aristocratic airs and social climbing of wealthy old buffoons like Martyn Borulia, and the condescension in *Suieta* (Vanity) of the educated Barylchenkos, who speak Russian rather than their native Ukrainian and feel ashamed of their peasant parents, were satirized mercilessly. Some of the plays by minor western Ukrainian dramatists were even more didactic, moralistic and occasionally blatantly propagandistic. In plays like Nahoriansky's *Okh ne liuby dvokh* (Oh, Don't Love Two), Lopatynsky's *Svekrukha* (The Mother-in-law) and Bodrug's *Ubiinyky* (Murderers), the heroes, represented by abstemious and literate Ukrainian peasant youths, university students, teachers and lawyers, established reading clubs and co-operative stores, and tried to reform their opponents -- rich but illiterate and ignorant old peasants, pretentious small-town clerks who used Polish and German phrases to put on aristocratic airs, and legions of demoralized and spineless alcoholics.

The didactic and moralizing nature of several plays written in North America, particularly Majdanyk's *Manigrula* and Lutsyk's *V nevoli temnoty* (Enslaved by Ignorance), resembled the western Ukrainian repertoire. Set in boarding houses, both plays contained a gallery of negative immigrant types: landlords who drink with their boarders and neglect their school-aged children; philanderers who seduce women of all ages, promise marriage, and abscond with the victim's life savings; dance hall thugs who gamble by day and brawl by night; shallow working girls who spend all their money on clothes and express contempt for hard-working, literate Ukrainian youths; unemployed drifters who drown their sorrows in alcohol; and older immigrants who condemn reading clubs because their literate adult children no longer defer to them. Earnest, hard-working young men and women who promote sobriety, cherish books and learning, and organize reading clubs serve as foils for the negative characters and inform the latter that 'it is because of people like you that the Ruthenians have become a laughingstock [in North America].' Dmytro Hunkevych's *Zhertvy temnoty* (Victims of Ignorance), written shortly after the war and staged by the Kotliarevsky Society in 1921, reiterated many of these themes and warned newcomers about the frightening consequences of alcoholism and bigamy among Ukrainians in Canada.

In the mid 1920s this traditional repertoire would begin to change. Events in Polish-occupied western Ukraine and in the Soviet Union, the Great Depression in Canada, and in particular the

arrival of a new wave of politicized interwar immigrants - some communists, others nationalists - would create the demand for a different theatre with a new or at least renewed repertoire.



**Auditorium of Ukrainian Labour Temple (upper gallery not visible) (UCEC)**

-- Orest T. Martynowych

### **Books and articles**

Robert F. Harney, "Immigrant theatre" in *Polyphony: Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 5 (2) (Fall/Winter, 1983), 1-14.

Semen Kovbel and Dmytro Doroshenko, *Propamiatna knyha Ukrainskoho narodnoho domu u Vynypegu* (Winnipeg: Ukrainskyi narodnyi dim u Vynypegu, 1949).

Orest T. Martynowych, *Ukrainians in Canada: The Formative Years, 1891-1924* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, University of Alberta, 1991).

### **Unpublished bibliography and data**

"An Annotated Bibliography of the Ukrainian Canadian Stage" and "Chronicle of the Ukrainian Canadian Stage: Play Productions in the Pioneer Era," both received from Jars Balan, CIUC, Edmonton.

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