

**Orest T. Martynowych.** *The Showman and the Ukrainian Cause: Folk Dance, Film, and the Life of Vasile Avramenko.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014. 219 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$27.95, paper.

**V**isitors to the Canadian Prairie provinces might notice that most dance schools and studios there offer classes in Ukrainian dance alongside traditional ballet and jazz. This may be the only place in the world that the status of Ukrainian dance has been elevated to that of a major dance mode, practiced by amateur and professional dancers alike, regardless of their ethnic background. Semiprofessional and amateur Ukrainian dance ensembles abound in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, and many other prairie towns, and attract both Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians. The best-known groups, such as Shumka, perform across Canada and tour the world with shows that draw mainstream audiences. One may wonder: Why has Ukrainian folk dance become, and remained, such an integral part of Ukrainian life in Canada over generations, and how has it transcended its social and ritual functions by developing into an elaborate stage craft?

Research into the phenomenon of Ukrainian dance in Canada leads even the casual observer to Vasile Avramenko (1895-1981), a Ukrainian immigrant who lived in Canada for only a few years, but whose influence on Ukrainian popular culture in North America cannot be overestimated. In fewer than three years—between his arrival in Canada in December 1925 and his departure for the United States in 1928—Avramenko accomplished what very few Ukrainians have done since the first Ukrainian pioneers arrived in Canada in 1891: he put Ukrainians on the cultural map of Canada. He transformed the so-called “bohunks” and “men in sheepskin coats” into a Canadian cultural group, at least in the eyes of fellow Canadians.

The book under review is the first book-length study devoted to Avramenko and, as such, is long overdue. It is almost entirely based on original archival research undertaken at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, the University of Manitoba Archives in Winnipeg, and the Oseredok in Winnipeg. Martynowych adopts a simple chronological structure for Avramenko’s biography. Two-thirds of the narrative covers the years 1926-40, coinciding with Avramenko’s greatest accomplishments as a dance master and motion picture producer. The balance of the book sketches out Avramenko’s formative years—prior to his arrival in Canada—and his unsuccessful attempts to revive his career after the Second World War.

Avramenko’s career as a film producer was yet another attempt to bring respect to the Ukrainian diaspora. With little knowledge of the film industry or the film-making process, he spearheaded the production of two feature films—*Natalka Poltavka* (1936) and *Zaporozhets’ za Dunaïem*

(*Cossacks in Exile*, 1938). These films still stand out as the highest achievements of the Ukrainian diaspora in feature (non-documentary) film production. Although today they may seem dated, they need to be regarded from the perspective of audiences of the 1930s, as the film quality was on a par with most Hollywood productions of that time. Martynowych situates Ukrainian-language film productions of the 1930s within the tradition of race films (78-80) in North America, yet it would be more apt to treat them as part of a different trend. The more significant impetus behind the emergence of Ukrainian-, Yiddish-, and Italian-language films in North America was the introduction, in 1927, of sound in cinema and the subsequent desire of various ethnic groups to showcase their music, songs, and language on the silver screen. The fact that European film industries adopted sound technology at a much slower pace also offered these films the possibility of distribution beyond North America.

Martynowych's research goes beyond Ukrainian communities in North America. He provides brief, but informative, overviews of American and Canadian popular cultures, against which he situates Avramenko's achievements. He also demonstrates how Ukrainian popular culture won over non-Ukrainians and helped change the not-always-positive stereotypes about Ukrainian immigrants. For example, in the context of the Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties, Avramenko and his dancers received unexpected, favourable recognition from the guardians of moral virtue in Canadian society. The puritan Anglo-Saxons, who generally perceived nothing but evil in the ways that Ukrainians entertained themselves and disrespected liquor laws, warmed up to Ukrainian stage dancing. Unlike "immoral" dances, such as the Charleston and the Shimmy, which were taking North America by storm and were seen as corrupting Canadian youth, Ukrainian folk dancing was viewed as "pure" and "virtuous" (49-50).

As Avramenko's biographer, Martynowych is challenged with maintaining a balance between the ballet master's often troubled personal life and his charismatic persona and indisputable artistic successes. The difficulty of this task is amplified by Avramenko's habit of preserving all letters and documents from his creditors, enemies, harsh critics, wronged collaborators, and those who had an axe to grind with him. As anyone who has perused Avramenko's archive can attest, these types of documents greatly outnumber the records pertaining to his creative abilities or detailing his successes. Thus, if there is a single improvement that, in the opinion of this reviewer, could be made to the book, it would be to adjust its overall tone. Martynowych too often dwells on Avramenko's financial incompetence, personal failings, and obstinacy, at the expense of the showman's better qualities. Furthermore, the book comes up short in demonstrating how a man with little formal education was able to mobilize

the Ukrainian community and inspire it to dream big. What extraordinary qualities and talents did he possess to entice Canadian-born Ukrainian youth to sign up for dance classes and travel thousands of kilometers to perform on stages and act as extras in his films?

This book stands apart from other studies of Ukrainians in Canada and the US by reaching beyond the politics, organizations, and churches of the Ukrainian community. Through his biography of Vasile Avramenko, Martynowych explores the passions of common folk, who were trying to fit into the North American cultural landscape. At the time, very few Ukrainians understood show business as well as Avramenko did. In order to become a star, Avramenko resorted to well-known tricks of the trade, such as shameless self-promotion, publicity and celebrity seeking, and occasional extravagant behaviour. His aim was to entertain people by means of popular culture, both unmediated and mediated—such as dance and film, respectively. He wanted to reach large audiences with his stage performances and even larger ones with his films. Therefore, his achievements should not be viewed through the eyes of the community leaders who looked down on popular culture, but rather as Martynowych does, from the perspective of the countless, often illiterate, immigrants for whom Avramenko was larger than life—the Ukrainian embodiment of the American Dream. In him they also saw a promoter of national causes and a defender of Ukrainian culture, which was under Bolshevik threat in Soviet Ukraine.

Martynowych's book is a great contribution to the history of Ukrainians in Canada, and North America in general, and to the history of popular culture. It should engage not only dance and film historians, but also diaspora historians, popular culture specialists, and anyone interested in the formation of Canadian cultural identity during the interwar period. The University of Manitoba Press should be commended for publishing such a notable and elegant volume in its *Studies in Immigration and Culture* series.

Bohdan Y. Nebesio  
*Brock University*

