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19th Annual Bloor West Village Toronto Ukrainian Festival: Record Attendance for a Weekend of Show-stopping Culture and Collegiality

(TORONTO, September 25, 2015) – A record number of visitors of widely diverse backgrounds caught the Ukrainian spirit from September 18-20, as the 19th annual Bloor West Village Toronto Ukrainian Festival served up a long weekend of non-stop entertainment, traditional food, stunning cultural displays and activities for all ages. Located on Toronto's Bloor St. West, the outdoor Festival covered six city blocks, making it one of the world's largest Ukrainian street festivals and attracting crowds of 700,000 from North America, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Israel, Paraguay, Poland, Serpent River - First Nations, Taiwan, Ukraine and beyond.

On Friday evening, following a warm welcome from the Festival's founder and chair, Jurij Klufas, visitors enjoyed a lively program of song and dance on the Northland Power Festival Stage, as perennial local favourites Desna Ukrainian Dance Company and DoVira jazz group were joined by Edmonton's Volya Ukrainian Dance Ensemble, Toronto bandurist Yarko Antonevych, and the folk-rock band Svjata Vatra from Estonia with their collection of heritage instruments.

Violin virtuoso Vasyi Popadiuk of Ottawa then took over for an hour-long set, backed by a band of international musicians. The evening's performances were anchored by MC Marta Czurylowicz of KONTAKT and CTV News Winnipeg. Audience members then danced until midnight at the street *zabava* featuring Toronto's Zapovid band, while another 400 attended the popular Festival After-Party at a nearby venue, featuring the Festival's headlining band Ot Vinta from Rivne, Ukraine as well as Toronto's Klooch band and Winnipeg's Zrada band.

Elsewhere on the six city blocks of Festival ground, visitors enjoyed a full program of music and dance performances on the more intimate Community Stage. They shopped at the many vendor kiosks offering Ukrainian crafts, foods, clothing, collectibles and other unique finds, and at the sidewalk sale featuring the offerings of local businesses of the Bloor West Village BIA. They enjoyed the midway rides and games and explored the pavilions of the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, KONTAKT Ukrainian Television Network, the Shevchenko Foundation, and Ukraine Tourism, highlighting tourism to various areas of Ukraine.

The forecast of day-long thunderstorms did not materialize on Saturday, as crowds gathered along Bloor Street West for the popular OMNI Bloor West Village Ukrainian Festival Parade led by 2015 Parade Marshal Alex Ling, Founder of the BWV Business Improvement Area and the Toronto Association of BIAs (TABIA), who rode in a Porsche convertible. The parade featured 74 entries including marching bands, a Veterans' colour guard, floats, historically-garbed re-enactors, and some 3,100 participants from a wide array of associations, businesses, political associations and performing ensembles. It was deemed the Festival's best parade ever by many. The award for Best Non-Commercial Parade Entry was presented to the Yavir School of Ukrainian Dance, while the Ivan Franko Homes earned the Best Commercial Parade Entry award for a beautiful recreation of a village scene.

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Following the parade, politicians from all levels of Canadian government gathered onstage for the Opening Ceremonies with the Rt. Hon. John Turner, former Prime Minister of Canada; Marko Shevchenko, Ukraine's Chargé d'affaires to Canada; and the Hon. Raynell Andreychuk, Senator for Saskatchewan, as well as Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, Toronto Mayor John Tory, Liudmyla Davydovych, Consul of Ukraine to Canada, Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders, major Festival sponsors including James Temerty of Northland Power, leaders of the Ukrainian community, and past Festival Parade Marshals.

The Canadian and Ukrainian national anthems were played by the Vanguard Concert Marching Band under the baton of Roman Yasinsky, after which Festival Chair Jurij Klufas addressed the audience, making a point to focus on the plight of political prisoners Nadiya Savchenko and Oleh Sentsov. Following a welcome and introductions by the Festival's Executive Director, Sonia Holiad, various dignitaries brought greetings and were presented with a #FreeSentsov tee-shirt. Alex Ling was introduced as the 2015 Parade Marshal and was joined by past Marshals – the Rt. Hon. John Turner, the Hon. Raynell Andreychuk, James Temerty of Northland Power, author Victor Malarek of CTV's @-Five, comedienne and actor Luba Goy, MP Chrystia Freeland and Ukrainian Canadian Congress President Paul Grod – to cut the red ribbon, officially opening the 19th annual Festival. Later in the day, the Hon. Jason Kenney, Minister of National Defence and Minister for Multiculturalism, brought greetings on behalf of the Government of Canada.

Away from the stage, art-lovers were treated to an exhibit by the Ukrainian Association of Visual Artists of Canada, which partnered with the Ukrainian Canadian Art Foundation (KUMF Gallery) to present a pavilion of original artwork with a Ukrainian theme.

On Saturday, film fans crowded into the Runnymede Public Library where they were able to take in a full day of screenings. Films included *Marusia* (a rare 1938 black and white classic from Ukrafilm Corporation of New York); *The Passion of Christ* (1982, based on artist William Kurelek from Philip Earnshaw, Shooting Pictures); *Between Hitler and Stalin* (2003, Producer/Director Slavko Nowytski); *My Baba's Kitchen* (2015, short animation by Writer/Director Stephanie Turenko); *Music of Survival* (2014, Producer/Director Orest Sushko); and *Pride of Ukraine* (2015, Executive Producer/Director Michelle Emson). Directors Emson, Sushko and Turenko were present for question and answer sessions with the audiences.

Back at the Northland Power Festival Stage, named in honour of the longstanding, generous financial support of the Temerty Family and their company Northland Power, some of North America's finest Ukrainian heritage performers were keeping the crowds enthralled, with Festival MC Anya Yablonska of KONTAKT at the helm. Performers included bandurist Yarko Antonevych of Toronto; vocalist Yana Bilyk of Toronto; Colors Duo of Oshawa; the Georgian Soul Dance Ensemble of Toronto, vocalist Rev. Volodymyr Kouchnir of Montreal; bandurist Michael Kostowskyj of California; vocalist Olesya Shevchenko of Ottawa & Ukraine; Andrey Svyrsa of Montreal; the Volya Ukrainian Dance Ensemble of Edmonton, and the Yavir School of Ukrainian Dance of Toronto.

Later in the afternoon, MC Julia Drozdowsky, an improviser/actor/writer, welcomed another set of performers to the Northland Power Stage, including Toronto's Arkan Dance Company; Ukraine's Boyovyy Hopak, whose martial arts moves and daring feats on broken glass and a bed of nails captivated the audience; Toronto's Chervoni Maky vocal/piano trio and Lira Trio of vocalists; Montreal's Rossa Trio; vocalist Yuliya Stupen of Philadelphia; Toronto's Vesnianka Dancers and Yavir School of Ukrainian Dance.

Veteran Festival MC Borys Sirskyj of Ottawa MC'd the Saturday evening show, which featured dazzling performances by Edmonton's Volya Ukrainian Dance Ensemble and the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus of Detroit; bandura stylings of California's Michael Kostowskyj; the high-energy sounds of Winnipeg's Zrada band and the always-popular Zubrivka folk band of Toronto.

After a brief sound check, Ot Vinta, the evening's headlining band from Rivne, Ukraine, got the audience rocking with their highly anticipated set of "Ukrablyly" music. Their performance was made possible through the sponsorship of Ukrainian Credit Union Limited.

Afterwards, the Winnipeg band Zrada played for another street *zabava*, while nearby, 500 Festival-goers attended the Saturday After Party to enjoy Svjata Vatra, OT Vinta and Zrada.

On Sunday, September 20, the Festival opened its third day with the annual Ecumenical Church Service on the Northland Power Stage, featuring the ministers and pastors of churches in the Festival's neighbourhood. The Boyan Choir of Toronto participated by singing hymns. After the service, the performance stages were once again the setting for more fine talent. The youth program featured an array of young performers including Barvinok Ukrainian Dance Ensemble of Hamilton; Barvinok Ukrainian Dance School of Mississauga; Chaika Performing Ensemble of Hamilton; Toronto's Light Up the Floor, local performers Melodia Vocal Youth Group, Natasha Dobriansky & Yarema Hucal, Rezonans Music Studio; Spivohrai Ukrainian Children's Choir of Saskatoon, Studio Echo of Toronto; the Toronto School of Boyovyy Hopak; local groups Ukrainian Academy of Dance, Yavir School of Ukrainian Dance and Zajvir Children's Choir. Alexandra Holyk and Alexander Pidzamecky were the young and polished MCs.

The afternoon show was MC'd by special guest Andrea Slobodian, late news anchor at CTV in Winnipeg. Featured performers included local favourites Barvinok Ukrainian Dance School; Ukraine's Boyovyy Hopak; Toronto's DoVira Jazz Group and Dunai Band; Kalyna Dance Ensemble of Hamilton; Yuliya Stupen of Philadelphia; Volya Ukrainian Dance Ensemble of Edmonton; Toronto's Zapovid Band and Zubrivka folk band.

Throughout the weekend, many performers entertained on the Community Stage at the east end of the Festival, including Barvinok Ukrainian Dance Ensemble of Hamilton; Boyovyy Hopak; local performers Natasha Dobriansky & Yarema Hucal, Dunai Band, The Gypsy Rebels, Light Up the Floor, Lira Trio, Melodia Singers, Marta Mironovych, Mykola & Mihailo Panczenko, Theodore Pucak, Rezonans Music Studio, St. Demetrius Bandura Ensemble, Natalia Terek, Ukrainian Academy of Dance and Zubrivka Folk Band; Michael Kostowskyj of California; Rev. Volodymyr Kouchnir of Montréal; Maksim Shcherbatyuk of Pittsburgh; Olesia Shevchenko of Ottawa; Spivohrai Ukrainian Children's Choir of Saskatoon, Svjata Vatra of Estonia, and Andrey Svyrsa of Ukraine. As well, the audience enjoyed regular "Teach Me to Dance" lessons by members of the Desna Ukrainian Dance Company, and a fashion show by Chichka Designs of Lviv, featuring an array of women's clothing that mixes traditional Ukrainian embroidery with modern influences of colour and clothing style. The stage was MC'd throughout the weekend by Odessa Kelebay, Oksana Rohatyn-Wasylyk and Anya Yablonska. On the street, Festival-goers enjoyed concerts by our buskers, including The Imbayakunas, counter-tenor Ian Sabourin, Zirka band and Zubrivka folk band. Performers from the GTA on both stages were supported by the Building Communities Through Arts and Heritage Program, Department of Canadian Heritage.

Festival Chair Jurij Klufas closed the event on Sunday with thanks to all involved. He was followed by the traditional Festival finalé – the double-tier Hopak performed by the Barvinok Ukrainian School of Dance, who took to the stage and the ground level below in a flurry of colour.

The BWV Toronto Ukrainian Festival allowed those who are active members of their Ukrainian communities to reaffirm their pride in their heritage and to solidify old friendships. It allowed visitors with only a passing connection to their Ukrainian roots to discover their heritage and connect to a larger community. And most importantly, it gave visitors of other cultural backgrounds the important opportunity to learn more about the country that has been at the forefront of media coverage around the world – the opportunity to be moved by traditional songs and dances, to hear the language, to learn the history, and to interact with fiercely proud Ukrainians from around the world.

The Festival is truly grateful to its invaluable 2015 sponsors: KONTAKT Ukrainian TV Network; Northland Power; Government of Ontario; Government of Canada; OMNI; AV-Canada; Shevchenko Foundation; Ukrainian Credit Union Limited Cardinal Funeral Homes; Horodynsky Farms; Caravan Group of Companies; Scotiabank; Toronto Star; Pizza Pizza; CIBC; Supreme Pierogies; The Daniels Corporation; Petro Jacyk Educational Foundation; Ukraine International Airlines; G. Huculak, Friend of Ot Vinta; Rodan Energy Solutions; Dock Edge; Classical 96.3 FM; Turner & Porter Funeral Directors; Cholkan + Stepczuk LLP, Chartered Accountants; Quality Suites; Ukrainian National Federation Toronto & West Toronto Branches; Topper Linen and Uniform Service; Bohdan L. Pahuta, Chartered Professional Accountant; Hrycyna Hunter Hamiwka Barristers and Solicitors; The New Pathway Ukrainian Weekly; and TABIA, and extends special thanks to the Bloor West Village BIA.

The 19th annual Bloor West Village Toronto Ukrainian Festival attracted what many estimated to be the largest crowd in its history, and left everyone looking forward to gathering again next year.

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