

Heartlands – Земля Мого Серця: Celebrating Ukrainian Culture in Sydney

Interview with Linda Gough (Linda Melnychuk)

For many Australians, Ukraine remains an unknown land with a rich yet unfamiliar culture. While leading, publicly funded arts organizations like the Sydney Symphony Orchestra continue to showcase the works of Russian composers, such as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, there is a growing need to bring Ukrainian culture out of the long shadow cast by “Great Russian culture”. Linda Gough is a passionate advocate for Ukrainian artists and is determined to see this change in Sydney.



Linda Gough
Photo Christina Tegza

Linda, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I was born and raised in Edmonton, Canada, in a vibrant, engaged Ukrainian community. My maternal and paternal grandparents come from Ivano-Frankivsk and Chernivtsi. As a member of the Ukrainian-Canadian diaspora my childhood and youth were immersed in Ukrainian language, dance, song and folkloric traditions.

I'm usually a lawyer and governance advisor but I'm dedicating 2024 to volunteering efforts in support of Ukraine. I am also a published novelist, so I am using this break to research my second novel, a historical fiction, and to write a sequel to my first book, *The Scarlet Cross*, which was published in 2022.

Before law, I was a freelance journalist in Toronto and Montreal, and before that, a producer/administrator of theatre, film and dance. My strong desire is to combine my legal skills and my background in arts production, to bring contemporary and classic Ukrainian artistic,

literary and dramatic work to mainstream audiences.

Why “Heartlands”? What is “Земля Мого Серця”?

Heartlands is a celebration of Ukrainian literary culture, expressed through poetry, music, song, and film. It will feature professional musicians performing compositions by M. Skoryk and V. Silvestrov, classically trained vocalists singing original pieces, and professional readers presenting both historical and contemporary poems. The poetry will include lyrical and humorous poems, but importantly, it will also include works by poets who have tragically lost their lives due to the violence of autocratic regimes, recently, due to the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, and under Hitler during WWII. The performances will be delivered in Ukrainian, Yiddish, and Tatar, with English translations provided on screen.

The event highlights Ukrainian voices and talents, and provides a powerful way for non-Ukrainian audiences to understand the significance of poetry, music and song in the formation of Ukraine's national identity and its multiculturalism. Heartlands will also demonstrate that Ukraine is not only a country at war, it's a country that pulsates with creative energy – an energy that has been at the heart of Ukrainian nationhood, and resilience, for centuries. Of course, no Ukrainian event would be complete without food, so the audience can expect a taste of genuine Ukrainian cuisine.

So, Heartlands is a cabaret-style concert and fundraiser. What motivated you to organise this event?

The primary motivation for this event was the tragic death of Victoria Amelina, a poet turned war crimes investigator, who was killed by a Russian Iskander missile in July 2023. Her death followed those of Hlib Babich, a poet killed defending Ukraine in 2022, and Maksim Kryvtsov, who died in January 2024 on the front-line. Heartlands will pay homage to these and other Ukrainian poets who have perished due to their defiance against tyranny, autocracy and totalitarianism. Additionally, there's a need to counter the frustration that Ukrainians often feel about having to clarify misconceptions about their country. Ukraine is not just a country that

emerged in 1991. Its culture is not simply borscht and hopak. It's a vibrant, modern democracy with a deep-rooted history and rich literary and artistic traditions that have endured centuries of cultural and linguistic suppression.

What will the event consist of?

The evening will be organised into three thematic sections: “Love and Nature,” “Nation and Struggle,” and “Hope and Faith,” each separated by two intervals. During these breaks, Ukrainian nibbles will be served, and a silent auction will be held. The intervals will also feature contemporary music, including R&B, jazz, blues, dance hall, reggae, and electronic music by modern Ukrainian artists who continue to create provocative, groovy, original music in a multitude of genres, despite being under constant threat from Russian missile attacks.

We have received literary guidance from the Ukrainian Institute in London and PEN Ukraine. The event is supported by the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, the Ukrainian Council of New South Wales, the Ukrainian Studies Foundation of Australia and other partners.

Why focus on poetry?

Poetry is unique because it can thrive in any political environment. Unlike novels, which require a publishing infrastructure, poetry can be written anywhere – a trench, a bomb shelter, or a prison cell. This resilience is exemplified by iconic Ukrainian poets like Taras Shevchenko in the 19th century and Vasyl Stus in the 20th century. Serhyi Zhadan, another poet whose evocative and cantankerous voice will be featured at Heartlands, has said that Ukrainian history and culture, from one end of the country to the other, is stitched together with poetry.

Many of the featured poems were penned by artists whose language and culture were suppressed under Russian and Soviet rule. Some of the works were written by poets in the trenches, defending Ukraine against recent Russian aggression.

Who will be the performers?

“Heartlands” will feature professional musicians like M. Sywak and V. Stepanenko, playing compositions by Skoryk and Silvestrov. Classically trained vocalists such as L. Kovalchuk and J. Schved will sing original compositions, while professional readers will present a selection of historical and contemporary poems. The lineup includes renowned poets such as Serhyi Zhadan, Myroslav Laiuk, Natalka Bi-

lotserkovitz, Iryna Shuvalova, Vasyl Stus, Taras Shevchenko, Hryhory Skovoroda, Victoria Amelina, Maksim Kryvtsov and Devorah Vogel.

When and where will it take place?

The event will be held at the Cellblock Theatre, National Art School, Darlinghurst, NSW, on 21 November 2024, from 7:00 to 10:00 pm. Doors will open at 6:00pm and everyone is welcome to come for drinks from that time. The performance will begin at 7pm - sharp.

The ticket price is typical for an Australian cultural event but high for a Ukrainian community event. What is the expected audience?

Everyone is invited to Heartlands. We are hoping teachers, writers, reporters, those who make creative programming decisions for publicly funded arts organisations, and members of other ethnic communities will come to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity and quality of Ukrainian artistic and literary work. It offers a comprehensive introduction to Ukrainian culture, compressing its essence into a few hours. Attendees will have the opportunity to experience the sounds of Ukrainian language and music, taste traditional Ukrainian snacks, and gain insights into Ukraine's history, values, and struggles. We shouldn't forget it is a fundraiser as well.

Early bird tickets are priced at \$125, increasing to \$150 after 1 November. This upmarket event will have limited seating, with tickets covering entertainment and servings of Ukrainian treats during the intervals. Each guest will receive a program containing information about the featured poets and composers, along with the poems in their original language and English translations. By the end of the evening, attendees will not only have a taste of Ukrainian culture but also a deeper understanding to take home.

VIP tickets, priced at \$250, offer special drinks and food, priority seating, a unique gift, and the satisfaction of supporting a meaningful cause. Tickets can be purchased through www.trybooking.com/events/landing/1281004

Where are the funds going?

All proceeds from the event will go to the Defend Ukraine Appeal, Australia's largest community-driven fundraising initiative for non-lethal military aid for Ukraine. It is managed by the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO), which represents 22 national community organisations across Australia

Tetiana Koldunenko