

An Overview 解説

Finnish Dance Today

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フィンランドのダンスの現在
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If one were to describe European dance since the 1990s in geopolitical terms, it would be a disintegration of the center and dispersion toward new cells. While on the one hand we see a continuing diversification of expression, we are also seeing the start of trend toward similarity in the creative approach and ideas due to the development of information networks and media. The creators are questioning the fundamental elements of “creativity” as the source of creation. Within this context, there was widespread critical acclaim when the Lyon Dance Biennial 2004 chose a program consisting primarily of artists from what had until recently had been considered the peripheral regions of Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean countries rather than the “mainstream” countries of France and Germany. This move was considered an apt reflection of present conditions. In fact, there is increasing attention coming to focus today on the refreshing new expressions coming out of these areas of Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the Mediterranean countries, which are indeed possessed of new, untapped appeal.

Among these up and coming dance nations, Finland has shown especially vital growth in recent years. It is dance that is energetic and strong-boned or, you would not call it stylish or adroit, but it stands out among the dance styles of Europe with a unique vibrancy that draws from an accentuated presence of the body.

For example, among the performances I saw during the 2005 season, the one that perhaps left the strongest impression was *Borrowed Light* by one of Finland's representative choreographers, Tero Saarinen. This is a work that takes as its subject the Shakers, an especially strict religious group that was one of the Puritan sects that left Britain for the New World in the 18th century. The intricately thought-out stage is full of artistic tension that gives apt expression to the spiritual elevation born denial of the baser human desires. Set to unaccompanied chorus by Boston Camerata that combines exquisitely with the minimalist choreography of uneven movements and odd-shaped forms. Add to this the natural lighting of Mikki Kunttu and it produces a convincing expression of religious ecstasy building with the energy harbored in the constrained movements of the dancers.

The History of Finnish Dance

When looking at the history of Finnish dance, it can be noted that, unlike the other Scandinavian countries of Denmark, with its Danish Royal Ballet boasting a proud tradition since the romantic ballet of Aguste Burnoville, or Sweden, known for its Swedish Royal Ballet and Cullberg Ballet, the history itself is not a long one. Dance as an art, including ballet, has only taken root in Finland since entering the 20th century. It can be said, however, that the very lack of a long tradition of dance has created an environment that has encouraged a free development of unique dance styles. The absence of a strong aristocratic dance culture supported by the nobility eventually allowed new dance to bud without the constraints of such a tradition.

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[Ballet]

There are some similarities between the history of Finnish dance and that of Japan. Both ballet and modern dance were introduced at roughly the same time in the 1920s. Isadora Duncan first toured Finland in 1908. In that same year, Anna Pavlova and the dancers of the Mariinsky Theatre came to Finland from St. Petersburg to perform. As full-fledged ballet began to establish itself in Finland after that, there was an influx of Russian ballet dancers emigrating to Finland in the wake of the Russian Revolution in 1917. In 1921 a ballet company was established as a part of the Finland Opera Theatre, and in 1956 its name was changed to the Finland National Ballet Company.

In ballet, Finland has learned much from neighboring Russia, but there also seems to be an ambivalence deriving from the political distance that has existed between the two countries. In the first 40 years during which the foundations of the Finland National Ballet Company were established, the company developed under the influence of Russian ballet, led by two ballet masters who had studied in Russia, George Ge and Alexander Saxelin.

[Modern Dance and Contemporary Dance]

In the genre of modern dance, the expressionist “Neuer Tanz” of nearby Germany had a great influence on Finnish dance from the 1920s. In 1926, Mary Wigman and in 1937 Kurt Joos came to Helsinki with their companies to perform. During the 1920s and 30s Finnish dancers of what was then called the “Free Dance” movement went almost exclusively to Germany and central Europe to study. Entering the 1960s we see the birth of a new dance culture stressing more abstract movement developing out of the popularity of figures like Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Alvin Ailey in the modern, post-modern and jazz dance genres.

It was in the 1970s that modern dance began to emerge as a full-fledged artistic genre in Finland. Two companies that contributed to the development of dance in Finland, the Dance Theatre Raatikko in 1972 and Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company in 1973, were founded one after the other respectively. Being a country where both Finnish and Swedish are recognized as national languages, the emergence of theater in Finnish was related to the movement to establish a national identity and independence. In the case of dance, which developed later, the search for a Finnish identity in dance was first observed in the 1970s. Based in those two companies, Finnish contemporary dance emerged in the 1980s.

◁Dance Theatre Raatikko and its founder Marjo Kuusela▷

Raatikko was founded by two dance artists: Marjo Kuusela and Maria Wolska. Marjo worked as a choreographers-dancer and Maria as a dancer. They were the two power ladies of Raatikko.

The co-founder of the Raatikko company, Marjo Kuusela, chose works from Finnish literature for the company’s dance drama and also included familiar social and political viewpoints in the creation of works possessed of a unique strength. For example, one of Kuusela’s representative works, *Seven Brothers*, (1980) is based on a novel by one of Finland’s nationally renowned author’s, Aleksis Kivi, and is a story of the coming to maturity of the young protagonists. Kuusela continues to be active today as a choreographer, and since 1995 she has been pouring her energies into dance education as a professor for choreography in the dance department of the Theatre Academy in Helsinki. Her company has produced a number of prominent dancers like Tommi Kitti, who now leads the Tommi Kitti Company.

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〈Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company and choreographer Jorma Uotinen〉
Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company has continued to bring fresh new inspirations into Finnish dance with its ongoing creative activities. A review of its accomplishments over the years indeed provides a tour of the history of Finnish contemporary dance. In particular, it is safe to say that the character of this company became established during the nine years beginning in 1982 when one of Finland's representative choreographers Jorma Uotinen served as the company's artistic director.

After performing under Carolyn Carlson in Paris, Jorma Uotinen became artistic director of the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company. During that tenure Uotinen produced nine works, including

his representative works *Kalevala* and Ballet *Pathétique*. Although some of Carlson's influence can be seen in Uotinen's work, there is also a uniquely rich visual aspect to his work and deeper emotional nuance than Carlson's work. For example, his representative work Ballet *Pathétique*, which takes the name of the Tchaikovsky piece uses about 20 male dancers wearing tutus melt into the music as they dance dynamically in subdued stage lighting. A portion where all the dancers jump together with half turns is truly uplifting, and you can even sense in it an extension of Matthew Borne's *Swan Lake*. With works like this, Uotinen went on to serve as artistic director for the Finland National Ballet until 2001 and gave it a unique repertoire of its own.

The successive artistic directors since Uotinen have included some of the leading choreographers in Finnish dance, namely Carolyn Carlson, Marjo Kuusela, Kenneth Kvarnström and Ari Tenhula. The mother of French contemporary dance, Carlson is originally an American of Finnish descent. She spent a year as artistic director of the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company after Uotinen and has had a great influence on the young generation of Finnish dancers. The current artistic director of the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company (now Helsinki Dance Company) is Ville Sormunen, formerly a dancer at the company since 1991. Kvarnström became the director of Sweden's Dansens Hus by 2003, a fact which has deepened the exchange between the two countries' dance worlds (and the two companies as well).

Since Finland is a country where ballet and modern dance developed at the same time, there was little opportunity for boundaries to be laid down between the genres of ballet, modern dance and contemporary dance, and the subsequent influx of musicals and jazz dance only contributed to further lowering of the barriers between the genres. The choreographers and dancers in Finland thus tend to learn a variety of techniques without concern for genre and seek opportunities freely in different areas of performance. The National Ballet Company also lacks the type of concern for tradition that exists in countries like Denmark and is able to introduce contemporary dance into their performances. And, there have been numerous cases of ballet dancers studying butoh as well. This flexibility, abundance of varied technique and openness regarding style have given Finnish dance its unique character typified by freedom of development.

The unique character and appeal of Finnish dance

[collaboration with lighting creators]

It is the presence of cross-over type activities that transcend conventional category boundaries, like the works of Uotinen that give Finnish dance its contemporary

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strength. There is also active collaboration with artists from other genre, especially collaborations with media artists and lighting creators. This writer has personally feels that there is a lot of beautifully created light work in Finnish dance, and it seems as if the sensitivity of the lighting art is not unrelated to a dramatic element that originates in the Finnish natural environment with the shining brightness of the midnight sun in summer, the darkness that dominates the winter and the fact that its polar proximity makes the Aurora borealis a common sight.

〈Mikki Kunttu, Finland's representative lighting designer〉

In the work of Saarinen mentioned at the beginning, the natural light effect designed by Mikki Kunttu helped to bring an abstract expression of the religious spirituality achieved through a life of denial of human desires that is the theme of the work.

〈Marita Liulia, the multi-media artist〉

The solo *Hunt* that takes Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* as its motif is an impressive solo that brings the theme to life within the burning energy of the dance. Beginning from silence and having the body spring to life with the music, the piece proceeds to the closing stage to build as images of Marita Liulia projected on the body in a way that created a visual expression of the human body in the information age.

〈Kimmo Koskela, the multi-media artist〉

Also, there is the representative work of the edgy choreographer Arja Raatikainen, *Opal-D*, in which her simple choreography stands in exquisite contrast to the beautiful, lively images of Tokyo by Kimmo Koskela.

[Strong interest in Butoh]

Another notable fact is that there also a strong interest in butoh in the Finnish dance world and there are many choreographers and dancers who have studied butoh or been influenced by it. This can be imagined to be a result of an expansive approach to the natural world and the physical implications of the fact that the distant roots of the Finnish people who make up most of the population lie in Asia. For example, the approach to nudity that has resulted from Finland's sauna culture that is an integral part of Finnish life is completely different from that of other European countries and even its neighbor Sweden. For the Finnish, nudity is neither implicative of the taboos of sexuality or the diametrically opposed concepts of utopia but simply a natural state that is part of daily life. This fact further deepens the interest in butoh as a form of dance that examines the truths of the body and the darker sides of life and seeks to encompass expressions of ailment and death as a part of dance.

The artistic director of the previously mentioned Kuopio Dance Festival from 1993 to 98, the Asian arts researcher Jukka O. Miettinen, was one of the first to take an interest in butoh and play an active role in introducing butoh artists Carlotta Ikeda and Ko Murobushi, Kazuo Ohno, Sankaijuku and Anzu Furukawa and the festival helped establish an audience for butoh in Finland.

Among the front-line dancers and choreographers in Finland are a number who have journeyed to Japan to study butoh. For example, in the case of Tero Saarinen, who performed as a dancer for the Finland National Ballet Company before forming his own Tero Saarinen & Company, he studied butoh for a year in Tokyo at

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the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio. And, Arja Raatikainen and Ari Tenhula have also studied under Ohno and Anzu Furukawa.

Other butoh artists who have visited and worked in Finland include Masaki Iwana, but the influence of the late Anzu Furukawa who visited numerous times and gave many workshops was especially strong. After performing with Dairakudakan, Furukawa formed Dance Love Machine with Tetsuro Tamura. Later she moved to Germany and continued her activities based in Europe, forming a multinational dance group called Dance Butter Tokio. The reason for her popularity was probably the wild dance theater type composition of her works that made use of unexpected or comic twists and the exaggerated deformé type body movement that connected in some ways to German expressionist dance.

As a visiting instructor at a Finnish university, Anzu Furukawa concentrated on collaborative productions at the Helsinki City Theatre and staged works like the *Rite of Spring* in 1994 and the butoh works *Bo (Keppi)* and *Shiroi mizu (Villi Vesi)* in 1995 using mostly Finnish dancers. I saw the former in Helsinki and remember it as an appealing work that combined a complex type of eroticism and energetic and dynamic movement unlike that of other Japanese butoh artists. One of Finland's leading dancers, Ari Tenhula, danced an important role in Furukawa's *Rite of Spring*, and Arja Raatikainen and Ari Tenhula danced in her production of *Chugoku no Tantei* (Detective from China) performed at Tokyo's Parco Theatre.

Another thing that characterizes Finnish dancers is their extremely long performing careers. In Western Europe, most people believe that a dancer should stop performing at the top level sometime in their 40s. Due perhaps to the attitude of placing importance on the realities of the body mentioned earlier in regard to the interest in butoh, or perhaps the influence of butoh itself, many Finnish dancers continue to perform into their 50s.

Faces of the artists, dance companies, venues

As we mentioned earlier, Finnish dancers tend to have long careers which means there is a large dance population ranging from veterans to young newcomers. There are many artists besides people like Jorma Uotinen and Tero Saarinen mentioned above.

〈Reijo Kela〉

Among the more mature choreographers and dancers are ones who went to America to study under Merce Cunningham and then returned to Finland. Like Reijo Kela, who did experimental or outdoor works that shared elements of method with the performance art of the U.S. in the 60s while showing social/political viewpoints through a unique style of expression.

〈Tommi Kitti〉

There is also Tommi Kitti, who was originally trained in jazz dance but whose works feature strong choreography that draws energetic movement from other genre like ballet and show dance.

〈Alpo Aaltokoski〉

Another leading artist, and one who didn't come to dance until later in life, is Alpo Aaltokoski, concentrating mostly on solo works and known for stylish pieces that combine sharp, well-trained movement with film and lighting.

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〈Susanna Leinonen〉

Among the younger artists is Susanna Leinonen, who performed at the 2004 Aoyama Dance Biennale.

〈Jenni Kivela〉

She won the Grand Prize at the Saitama International Creative Dance Contest.

〈Jyrki Karttunen〉

He turned to free-lance performance after a stint as one of the lading dancers at the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company.

〈Virpi Pahkinen〉

She does attractive solo performances that use technique borrowed from yoga and other Eastern methods.

[The systems supporting dance]

The size of Finnish dance companies is relatively small, with the exception of the National Ballet Company. For example, the pamphlet for the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company boasts that it is one of Finland's largest companies, but in fact there are only about ten full-time member dancers in the company. And, the Tero Saarinen company continues to perform internationally with a basic core of only a handful of full member dancers. They employ the other dancers they may need to fill the roles for each of the specific works they perform. Regardless of whether they are regular members of a production company, however, many excellent dancers are working independently. And, the large number of dancers giving solo performances is another characteristic of the Finnish dance scene.

〈NOMADI〉

One of the most active production groups is Nomadi Productions, and it is the group to which Arja Raatikainen, Katri Soini, Alpo Aaltokoski and Jyrki Karttunen belong.

In terms of the theaters, halls and studios that serve as venues for contemporary dance performances, there are few large facilities with the exception of the National Opera House in Helsinki. Among the best-known venues where dance is performed regularly are the Art Space Kiasma, a comprehensive arts space in Helsinki, and a space known as the Cable Factory, which was created in a former factory complex. Stoa the Cultural Centre of Eastern Helsinki shows a lot of contemporary dance, too.

〈Kiasma〉

It is located in the center of Helsinki near the Helsinki Central Station and it also contains a modern art gallery space. It is a facility with a unique program concept that focuses on cutting edge multimedia visual arts including design, film and media art. It seems that modern art exhibitions have also been held with accompanying dance programs. There is an active schedule of dance workshops and performances going on here.

〈The Cable Factory〉

The Cable Factory consists of several connected buildings in a huge space where workshops, recitals and performances are held, and it also focuses efforts on nurturing young artists.