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Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

Breathing new life into contemporary dance What is the source of the vitality in Finnish dance today?

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コンテンポラリーダンスに新風
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Despite its late start compared to other European countries, Finnish contemporary dance has become a source of unique dance with unfathomable appeal. In this interview with the Project Manager of Finnish Dance Information Centre, Ms. Pirjetta Mulari, she talks about the secrets behind Finland's unique dance scene that is typified by impressive collaborations with lighting and media artists and a stylish yet strong-boned and energetic style of body movement.

(Interviewer: Akiko Tachiki)

This summer I had a chance to see the whole programme of the Kuopio Dance Festival in Finland, which focused on contemporary dance in the Nordic countries. I was quite impressed with the energetic rise of Finnish Dance. But, in fact, compared with other countries in this particular region such as Denmark, Finnish dance does not have a long tradition. The speed of the emergence of Finnish dance is remarkable. Is there any special reason you can think of for this change? To my humble knowledge, although ballet was danced in the opera, ballet and modern dance as an art developed in Finland at about the same time in your history, when you were exposed to the various energies of different styles of dance. One thing, we have a very long tradition of female gymnastics in the beginning of 20th Century, and a lot of connections with the Ausdruckstanz in Germany. At that time, of course, we were under the control of Russian power and suffered from the war. Then, a sort of industrialization happened in the 1950s and 60s. All the arts suffered some at this time. On the other hand, we were a people who loved classical music. Dance was a small part of art in our country. Of course, then we had the National Ballet and the modern dance came. Now, we have the proper education of dance at the Theatre Academy, which is important. The Department of Dance at the Academy in Helsinki provides high-level education in dance, in the fields of dance, choreography and dance education. We have had this for around over 20 years. Now, the thinking in dance and choreography have really been developed. You could see, in the beginning of 90s the dance scene became very, very interesting. Strong choreographers, like Kenneth Kvarnström, Virpi Pahkinen, Arja Raatikainen came along at this time. Then, our funding for dance slowly became better. But, I must say, the funding for dance is still under development compared to the size of the field. Finnish people like theatre. Many cities in Finland have their own city theatres that get permanent funding from the city and the state. But, now dance has become popular. There have been lots of dance schools, festivals. I would think that the Dance Department at the Helsinki Theatre Academy was really the major factor for this development of dance—the way our choreographers are more and more educated, and the fact that they have had resources to grow with. The other thing is, in connection with the Dance Department, lighting designers are also educated at the Academy. So, if they want, they can work together. If you think

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of the image of Finnish dance, it is very rich visually. The visual aspect is more developed in our dance. It is because our choreographers often collaborate with lighting and multi mediadesigners.

It is interesting to know that gymnastics exercise, which was popular as a means toward physical and mental health in Germany and Scandinavia at the time, gave a foundation for the development of dance in Finland. This can be considered one of characteristics for a northern region with a harsh climate like Finland, where people need to include physical training as a part of their life routine. I remember

So, I guess a similar development was observed in Finland. You may be interested to know the historical fact that Japanese modern dance greatly influenced by German dance has also developed in the practice and curriculum of physical education.

You also mentioned that the establishment of the Dance Department at the Helsinki Theatre Academy played an important role in giving buoyancy to Finnish dance. What year was the Academy established?

The Academy was founded in 1979, and then the Dance Department was established in 1983.

So, that was the key year for the development of dance? I only observed the change of Finnish dance activities in late 90s, but, without the Academy it might not have happened like that? You value that the rapid development of Finnish dance was brought about under the influence of the Dance Department of the Academy.

In Finland, where official recognition and support of theatre and music has preceded, this department helped give dance a more fitting place in the Finnish arts, while also bringing greater continuity of direction to the dance population, which had been unconnected and functioning independently until then. It also made a significant contribution by providing the opportunity for dancers to improve in the area of technique by having access to formal training. It should also be noted that curriculum of the dance department was a quite practical, performance-oriented one.

The faculty has included academic people in the area of dance history and theory like Tiina Suhonen, while the classes for technique and choreography have been taught by representative choreographer like Marjo Kuusela, the professor of choreography since 1998, and other first flight performing dancers and choreographers such as Jorma Uotinen and Tommi Kitti.

If you explain the history of dance in Finland, you first had the influence of German modern dance and after that in the 60s you went through the influence from the American modern dance and the post-modern dance movements?

In the late 1950s, early 1960s, Riitta Vainio went to New York and when she came back she built her own modern dance company. From that company came a new generation of dancers and choreographers. Riitta is still working.

Can you believe that Reijo Kela was trained under Merce Cunningham? He is much like butoh. Talking about the development in 1960s and 70s, we have to mention the Raatikko Dance Theatre, which was established in 1972. When I saw them, I was small then, living in a small town. The Raatikko came to all the local cities.

By the way, Marjo Kuusela came from the female gymnastics tradition. She was dancing and doing gymnastics in a dance school in Turku. This female gymnastic tradition used to be strong and is still so, though less and less now. Now people

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go to aerobics for exercise. Still in the 80s, thousands of female gymnasts used to perform in mass performances in different events. That's how our people connect themselves to dance. Also, there is social dance. There was the strong movement in folk dance.

There have been strong associations with folk dance. We are summer lovers, very much health oriented.

In the beginning of the 90s, Tero Saarinen left the National Ballet to go to Japan.

There are a few people who went abroad like that and came back with new ideas and collaborated with Finnish artists here.

How about the connection with the people's movement for national independence? The theatre movement was involved in the national identity movement for independence in 1917. Was dance also inspired by this?

I think that the female gymnastic movement could be connected with the political movement against the outside, the use of national music, female gymnastic clubs, etc. But, the theatre movement had a stronger impact in that sense. Also, the music movement. The ways our arts were involved is interesting. In the beginning of 20th century, our government had an understanding that our arts could be a means for Finland to have an identity. There was a national will to have our artists show Finland, such as Sibelius. Sibelius was so important. He composed *Finlandia*, as you know. Many people believe that is our national anthem, which is not, actually. Also, the visual arts were very nationalistic, showing the national landscape and creating pictures of the nationalistic legend of *Kalevala*, I think. In connection with dance, dancing needs music and visual arts. Folk dance, on the other hand, was influenced by Russia and Sweden.

How about the relationship between dance and religion, say Christianity, in your history? Because I remember that in Europe there were times when the dance expression was forbidden under the stoicism of religious teachings of Christianity.

I understand that there were movements to ban dance, allow no dance. Some events happened, just as with alcohol when it was banned at some time in our history. There was an underground movement to free themselves for this.

What new ideas were introduced to promote dance as an art?

When the Raatikko Dance Theatre opened in the beginning of the 70s they made some outrageous works. Raatikko started the dance theatre tradition in the 70s. Also, I have to mention Jorma Uotinen in the 80s and 90s. He made spectacle solo works. Jorma Uotinen started "open dance" that involved collaboration with the visual arts. Thus, if you think of the movement in 90s, the 10 years up to 2005, more and more choreographers came out in the contemporary dance scene.

Probably, that was the impression I received from Finnish dance. My first visit to Finland was made in 1998. I have been watching the development of dance, and I guess I arrived there at the right time for that.

And the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company is important. Marjo Kuusela, Jorma Uotinen, Kenneth Kvarnström, all these people worked there. ...And Tommi Kitti was the dancer for Raatikko.

These lines connect to the Academy? The Academy educated the new choreographers?

Jorma Uotinen also still teaches at the Academy. He is doing work almost annually. Kuusela has been the professor for choreography since 1995. Their idea

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is that dancers should be independent and thinking artists. They should be strong individuals for choreographers to work with.

As for the curriculum of the Academy, they have a 3-year course for a B.A. in the Dance Department. After that, an M.A. can be earned in the fields of dance, choreography, or dance education, which ensure that the education lives. Kuusela built the base for “dance as an art” with confidence in the value of dance. Susanna Leinonen and Jenni Kivelä were both trained at the Academy under Kuusela. That is the educational center in Helsinki. The Academy also has courses in film, film technology, stage art and lighting design and they work closely together.

In other cities, there is the college education. It is the secondary level education that ends at the Bachelor level. Or the Conservatory...those students often come to Helsinki for further studies in dance. The cities involved at this level are Kuopio, Oulu, Turku and Tampere. Mainly they educate dance teachers in the ballroom dance, folk dance and jazz dance fields.

So, would you say that the arts are nicely mixed in Finland? The fusion in styles and techniques gives a good energy to Finnish dance? The close relationships that develop between artists in different genre have also had a positive effect.

If you think about our mentality... we have to be open. We only have five million people [in Finland]. From the beginning we have to manage everything in such a small world. We have a long tradition of collaboration. For example, Tero and Mikki Kunttu, plus a sort of strong director in the theatre... and choreographers are open. They are working together in one production—total theatre—more than anything else. I am very happy to see how that fusion is the energy for our dance. Jorma Uotinen really made it clear in his works that ballet is also contemporary choreography too. I guess we are open-minded people.

The National Ballet is now going back to the old classics under Dinna Björn from the Danish Royal Ballet. It is interesting that the National Ballet has been influenced by Russian ballet, but it seems that you have had no Russian ballet director so far.

We always had a tricky relationship with Russia. People have been very clear about having a Finnish leader. Nowadays, it is becoming less so, and we are getting closer with Russia. That is our history.

By the way, it seems to me that lighting in Finland is very dramatic. Do you think that the fact that you have many wonderful lighting designers has something to do with the natural environment in Finland? The climate you have up in the north, where you have the white summer light [midnight sun] and the long darkness in winter...

I do not know the reason. First, there is education for lighting design. I think it comes from the environment too. We have a dark, dark winter. We have to really think of the lighting in our life. Light is very important for us. As you said, we have different shade and different light. Also, we are a very technological country. So, lighting has become a part of technology and has become an art in itself. Lighting artists make such specific work. For instance, our city itself might be considered a work of art.

I actually had a talk with Kimmo Karjunen, who is one of the main lighting designers who worked a lot with Jyrki Karttunen and used to work with Ari Tenhula and Alpo Aaltokoski. Tero always works with Mikki Kunttu. Kimmo actually teaches at the Academy. He has had a strong influence. Dancers and lighting designers are educated in the same place. From the beginning they work together. Choreographers understand the meaning of the lighting design in their works from

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an early stage. Lighting designers understand what art form it is. I don't know why, but lighting works so well in Finnish dance. You know, it is really the collaboration in art. Choreographers and lighting designers are main collaborators in the work. Of course, the costume designers have input, but I would say that a lot of contemporary dance work could be sort of concluded between the choreographer and the lighting designer. Miki also uses this kind of huge show of light, like in rock concerts. The light in *Borrowed Light* was cleverly done.

You also have nice film and multimedia artists as shown in Tero's piece, *Hunt*.

That is Marita Liulia. The government subsidizes this area nicely. If you think about Nokia, we really think as a nation we provide things mostly in the fields of knowledge and technology. So, media art is an established art form having its own research and centers. An artist like Marita is appreciated. They have established the art. They actually create. So, the technology is endless as a tool for art. For us, just video projection with choreography is not interesting enough anymore. How you use the technology as a part of the art, as one element, is the most interesting. The collaboration between Jyrki and Kimmo Karjunen, or the collaboration between Tero Saarinen and Marita Liulia are much more than just putting in the video.

Yes, it is more than just showing video. The live movement and video images have an interactive effect that enriches the space.

But it would not work if the choreographer does not know how to work the technology into the art. The choreographers need to have ideas and aims for the technology in order for it to be a part of his art. Also, vision is necessary.

I was really impressed with some videos I saw in the Information Center. I remember Alpo's beautiful dance work with dynamic images of nature in the Sahara and Raatikainen's *Opal-D*.

It was images by Kimmo Koskela in Arja's work.

How about the education in filmmaking?

We have university level education for the visual arts including filmmaking. The University of Art and Design Helsinki has different departments for film and TV production, visual arts, multimedia, design and art education. Marimekko, Iittala and other design companies based in Helsinki collaborate with the art university. They are really advanced in their thinking. Technology has been an element of art for a long time. There is a lot of collaboration going on.

Do these enterprises sometime put up money for artistic creation? I mean support artists in their creative activities?

Basically, Basically, no, if they are not sponsoring an artist's work. Because our state provides funding. Can you believe our university education is free for everyone? But you have to apply. That is really free education. It is great. But our taxes are quite high. Depending on your income, it may be 30%. Of course, you have tax deductions if you have a loan or something. But, thanks to that, we have fantastic education and social security. To become a dancer is basically possible to any one in Finland having that kind of talent to pass the entrance exams. Therefore, everyone has the equal starting point to get into the dance world. The artistic status is well supported. Our ministry of education and our arts council support artists. We have an artist salary, which you have to apply for. There are maybe 20 dance artists receiving it at the moment. It amounts to 1,000 euro a month. Of course, you have to show the Arts Council your working plan. For

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instance, Katri Soini is in a 5-year program with this salary. With that money you do not have to worry about the basics of life. Above that you can also earn money from your work.

We have to learn how to support the artists from your system. Now, let me ask you a question in different direction: **butoh**. Finnish people like **butoh** very much. **Anzu Furukawa** had an influence on many dancers in Finland. Why?

It is because it is a strong form of expression. It is very different from our expression. And it involves this point too; we are a very melancholic people. Not only us, but the Swedish, too. With its deep understanding of nature **butoh** is somehow easy for us to connect to. Because it is so deep. It involves natural feelings, although it is strict and severe. But, we find something we can connect to. I understood that **Anzu Furukawa** was quite well accepted, with a real impact on Finnish dancers. **Ari Tenhula** worked with **Anzu** and **Kim Itoh**. **Tero** went to **Kazuo Ohno**. He just thought that he did not want to be just an ordinary dancer. He wanted to get the strict education [like that of **butoh**]. He had a vision of some sort of deep understanding of movement and body. When he started to create dance works, he felt that ballet was not enough.

How do you evaluate his recent development as a choreographer, which is interesting? Of course, it is not simple.

I think that he learned something from that experience, I am sure. I remember what he said at the National Ballet: "Dance has to express something more." It was just a feeling, but maybe from **butoh**, the total extreme, somehow on a basic level."

His inner research on the body. It is interesting to hear your evaluation. Also, I, as a Japanese, find a certain similarity in the Finns' attitude toward nature.

I think so too. We are living in places that are so far from each other, but we have so many similarities. I do not know why our societies are similar in so many ways. High education, but very different history, and the industrialization process. And the mentality is somehow similar. We too are very shy. Not very talkative...

And even your attitude about nudity. In other European countries, it is symbolic of a challenge against "taboos" in connection with Christianity, etc. In Finland, it is more naturally accepted. In a way, it is considered very sound and healthy, a part of everyday life. So, there is not a hesitation about nudity in dance expression. Although the connotation may be different.

You have the public bath, "Ofuro". We have our sauna. We have always been naked. Although there are different customs, there is a certain similarity. Europe is too close, but somehow a few people are really connected with our idea or our way. They have to be connected with nature in thinking and all of that.

Now for some more practical questions. I would like to know about the festivals you have in Finland. The **Kuopio Dance Festival**, which has a long history in Scandinavia first held in 1970, is now in its 36th holding. Held in the summer season of the midnight sun in the town of **Kuopio** in the beautiful lake region of central Finland, this festival has played an important role in the development of not only Finnish but all Scandinavian contemporary dance. In addition to the producers, it appoints an Artistic Director, whose vision and policies has given the interesting characteristics to the respective holdings. At times, the Artistic Director's vision has been reflected in the planning of presentations of traditional arts from countries like Japan, China and Thailand. Recently, to introduce the young work from Japan

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Leni-Basso was invited to show their work *FINKS*.

Besides Kuopio, what kinds of festivals do you have?

We have the Full Moon Dance Festival. It has existed since 1992. They will celebrate their 15th Anniversary next summer. It was also started by Marjo Kuusela and Tommi Kitti. They used to have a summer place, very close to Pyhäjärvi, which is the small town of 6,000 inhabitants located in the middle of Finland. It just happened that there were very active dance people there. It started as a very local festival. Then, in a few years time, under the new artistic director, who was Alpo Aaltokoski, a native of the area, he started to build this festival more like the Finnish Dance Platform. Now, it has become an international festival of dance. It lasts for six days, always at the end of July. The stage was built in a sporting house, but I assure you that the stage is one of the best in our country. They built it beautifully. Huge, on an ice hall. They built a beautiful theatre just for the duration of the festival. The feeling is very special. You see five or six shows a day. All contemporary dance with just 500 or 600 people coming there to see the festival. During the daytime there are seminars and workshops. In the evening are the performances. Kuopio is the major dance festival, but the Full Moon Festival is a lot more intimate. It has just one street. It is important for young people to appear. The Artistic Director commissions works from young choreographers. Usually there are premieres of major choreographers, but also premieres from young choreographers. They also collaborate. Young choreographers are supported to create new pieces. The Zodiak (The Center for New Dance in Helsinki) and Jojo - Oulu Dance Centre production centers in Helsinki and Oulu, are often co-producing the young choreographers' works commissioned by the festival. At least two works from young ones, with six to seven new works altogether. It is meant to show the most interesting Finnish dance at that time.

You invite foreign companies, too? Any dancers and choreographers?

Yes, I remember that for instance Akram Khan and Kitt Johnson were invited. It does not need to be young people. There are also more established international companies and young companies. Most of the audience are local farmers, who enjoy seeing dance. They ask a lot of questions. Also producers and audience come from Helsinki.

Festivals provide people with chances to know and learn new aspects of dance and other cultures. Do you have other festivals? How do you support the activities of dancers and choreographers, especially financially? You respect the basic concept that the arts play an important role in building a country's culture. According to Takako Matsuda, who is a Japanese dancer currently active in Helsinki, foreign artists can also apply for support in projects where they are working with Finnish artists.

Yes, there is the Asia in Helsinki Festival at the Alexander Theatre, showing works from Asia. It always has an annual theme. Jukka O. Miettinen introduced a lot of ethnic things to Kuopio. Jorma made the Kuopio a contemporary dance festival. There is the Moving in November Festival, which has been around for 20 years, since the 80s. This festival is meant to introduce new international dance to the Helsinki audience. The Helsinki Festival is a festival for the performing arts with guest artists like Pina Bausch for 2005. Can you believe that it was her very first performance in Finland? Pina Bausch is not a big influence, although German dance had a big influence on our dance. Very hard to get her, it is true, after great expectations.

Yes, support for dance comes from that basic concept you have just pointed out.

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Even if the support may not be as complete as it should be, it is being pursued under a system that aims to make it possible for artists to make a living from their art. I am pleased to tell you that support for dance is on the increase.

In the support system for artists in dance, the Finnish Dance Information Center where you work undertakes the essential function to help and promote the dance culture in your country. Could you introduce the activities of the dance information center?

The Finnish Dance Information Centre was founded in 1980. Our center collects and publishes information on Finnish dance and promotes international cooperation. The Centre publishes a quarterly magazine named *Tanssi* (Dance) in Finnish. We also publish an annual publication in English titled *Finnish Dance in Focus* to provide foreign readers with the latest information on Finnish dance scene. Besides providing information, the Center collates and analyzes performances and audience statistics, and organizes seminars. I must tell you that the website of the Centre is a comprehensive online source of information on Finnish dance.

My work as Project Manager, International Affairs, is to create an economical and functional basis for establishing an international office at the Finnish Dance Information Centre, which would organize and co-ordinate international projects in dance both in Finland and abroad.