

LIGHT

MIKKI THE MAGICIAN. FINNISH LIGHTING
DESIGN WIZARD MIKKI KUNTTU WORKS
WONDERS WITH THE LIKES OF TERO SAARINEN,
AKRAM KHAN, SYLVIE GUILLEM AND SIDI LARBI
CHERKAOUI. BY AULI RÄSÄNEN



"SWANLAKER" BY JOHNA USTINOV, THE GÖTEBORGS BALLET

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Lighting artist Mikki Kunttu is renowned for his strong contrasts. His world of illumination appears to spring from the natural environment of Finland: there are the heavy, dark shades of winter, as in his designs for Jorma Uotinen's piece "Jord" ("Earth") at the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen, and there are the dazzlingly bright lights of an awakening summer's morning, as created for Tero Saarinen's choreography "Transfigured Night" at the Opera of Gothenburg. The central elements of Kunttu's design are all featured in Tero Saarinen's "Borrowed Light," one of Kunttu's most powerful works of illumination. In this piece, the dramaturgy of light builds up by means of lighting architecture to construct a spiritual temple. The elevation in the finale with its folk-like cantatas is a tribute to the work and simple way of life of the Shakers, a spiritual cult that flourished in the Boston area of the US in the 1800s. The lighting for "Borrowed Light" reflects Saarinen's vision of a dance group as a similarly disciplined, work-oriented community.

"Lighting design must have an organic connection with the choreography and the music; the light alone doesn't carry the piece very far. Though I think a bad, or not so interesting piece of choreography can be lifted with a good lighting design, but a bad lighting design cannot really save a good choreography. The most traditional approach to lighting illuminates the dancers, brings them on display using strong sidelights. I am interested in illustrating people in a space. I usually concentrate on the person that things happen to and consider how to handle the space around the performer – with or without light. That way the whole three-dimensional space into one of the performers. The performers' relation to the space is one of the central things in every stage production," says Mikki Kunttu.

Tero Saarinen, one of Finland's leading choreographers, is Mikki Kunttu's main collaborator. It all began in 1993 when Saarinen staged the piece "Hurmaa 1" ("Rapture 1") in Tampere (Finland's second largest city) for a small dance group called Dansco. The lighting design for the piece was by the 21-year-old Mikki Kunttu. That was the beginning of a beautiful working friendship, paving the way for future collaborations. When Saarinen's piece "Westward Ho!" was staged in London in 1996, it became the international breakthrough for both Kunttu and Saarinen. For this melancholic "sailor dance," Kunttu created a wonderful, bright, oceanic illustration. On his artistic collaborations, Mikki Kunttu says: "In Tero Saarinen's pieces there is a theme around which the choreography is built. He also chooses good music for his works, which is important to me. Music is the biggest single source of inspiration for me. If the music says nothing to me, I look at the costume design, especially if it is by Finnish designer Erika Turunen; the best in the business in my opinion." The Saarinen-Kunttu-Turunen trio is now a tried-and-tested creative team which has produced critically acclaimed works that are appreciated all over the world.

In his experience, Daries and Swedes take the most professional approach to working, and when it comes to theatres, Kunttu has the highest regard for the Gothenburg Opera: "Gothenburg Opera is a great house for a lighting designer. The stage is the right size, technical things function and the people working there are young and eager to develop their professional skills. Their people in charge seem to have a good vision and they do show that they are willing to stay on board with this rapid development of lighting and visualisation technologies. Also, in Gothenburg the general atmosphere for working has been very positive. Over the years Sweden has always produced some of the highest level professionals for our lighting industry. Gothenburg Opera House is the perfect example of why that keeps on happening." Not only that, but two of the most central designs of his career were created in Gothenburg: Jorma Uotinen's "Svansjön", a contemporary version of Swan Lake's second act, and Tero Saarinen's Arnold Schönberg ballet "Verklärte Nacht." Some praise is also due on the other side of the Atlantic: "The Boston Ballet operates in a rental theatre, but there too they achieve great results in a short period of time. The technical team there is highly professional and time management is effective. After entering that theatre, we put on seven pieces in two weeks!"

Among Finnish theatres, Kunttu's favourite is the main stage at Kuopio Dance festival, the City Theatre of Kuopio – "unbeatable" as a dance stage. The auditorium has 400 seats, and the relation between the stage and the seats is excellent. Tero Saarinen's piece "Overdosed Mood" was premiered in Kuopio in 1997, and Kunttu says he found a lot of confidence for his own style, found his way of expressing with light and dark. The top space for dancers and choreographers in Helsinki is the rearrangeable Almsali, the small stage at The Finnish National Opera. Almsali seats 300-500 people. Many results of Kunttu-Saarinen collaborations have been presented there. The hall has such a good stage and auditorium that other choreographers have asked for the opportunity to perform, preferably during contemporary dance festivals. Meanwhile, Saarinen has not stopped to rest on his laurels.

He took a chance and rented both spaces, the big and small stage, at great expense – and sold out every performance! Many of Mikki Kunttu's collea-

gues, especially those in other countries, build lighting exhibitions to present their work. So will Kunttu have an exhibition of his own? "Light installations don't interest me right now, but light design for exhibitions I would do with pleasure – as I already have done, for example for the Design Museum in Helsinki." Surprisingly, Mikki Kunttu is more keen on working in light entertainment: "I was working with the Finnish Idols – reality tv-program again. The fun in those things is that one can do experimental lighting design in a commercial context. Experimenting in these productions of course means that it must arrive "right on the money." For me that means that as long as you keep yourself concentrated and open, you are able to deliver more for each production. Pretty much the same goes for any dance production too. Also one gets valuable experience on how to function in a large production and how things are timed. In television it is extremely important to be able to sort out solutions (there are no problems – only solutions) on the spot. At the best a production like Idols can be incredibly creative and inspiring working environment, a bit like a lighting design workshop once a week! Not to mention how fantastic personalities you meet in these productions."

Harking back to his days as a rock musician, Kunttu professes admiration for the British master of imaginative rock lighting, Patrick Woodruff, who has

bathed the Rolling Stones in his showers of light, and Norwegian light designer Jens Setzman, whose work Kunttu comments as aesthetically carefully thought through. So what constitutes good lighting design in his view? "It is the kind that brings another aspect to the performance. A good technical accomplishment is not enough. Computerized pictures are very popular in the world of light design right now such as

those I did for 'Tannhäuser' at the Savonlinna Opera festival." Kunttu's gothic, abstract designs revived the scruffy visual image of the old Wegner production. Kunttu likes to use computer technology in his visualizations, and he feels that the use of video which many theatres favour has passed its peak. Computer technology plays a crucial part in Tero Saarinen's solo piece "Hunt," and this know-how will be needed when Kunttu and Saarinen soon begin constructing their vision of the classic story "Alice in Wonderland."

Mikki Kunttu ist Finnlands bedeutendster

Lichtdesigner, der sich nicht über scheut, einem Ballett die "Strahlkraft" eines Rockkonzerts zu verleihen. Allein 2006 entwarf er das Lichtdesign für Susanna Leinoons «Kaira», Jari Kytänen «Tar and Feathers», Tero Saarinen «Frail Linn», Jorma Elo «Carmen» sowie einen «Russian Evening» und Balanchines «Bermude» - beides Produktionen des Boston Ballet. www.mikkikunttu.com

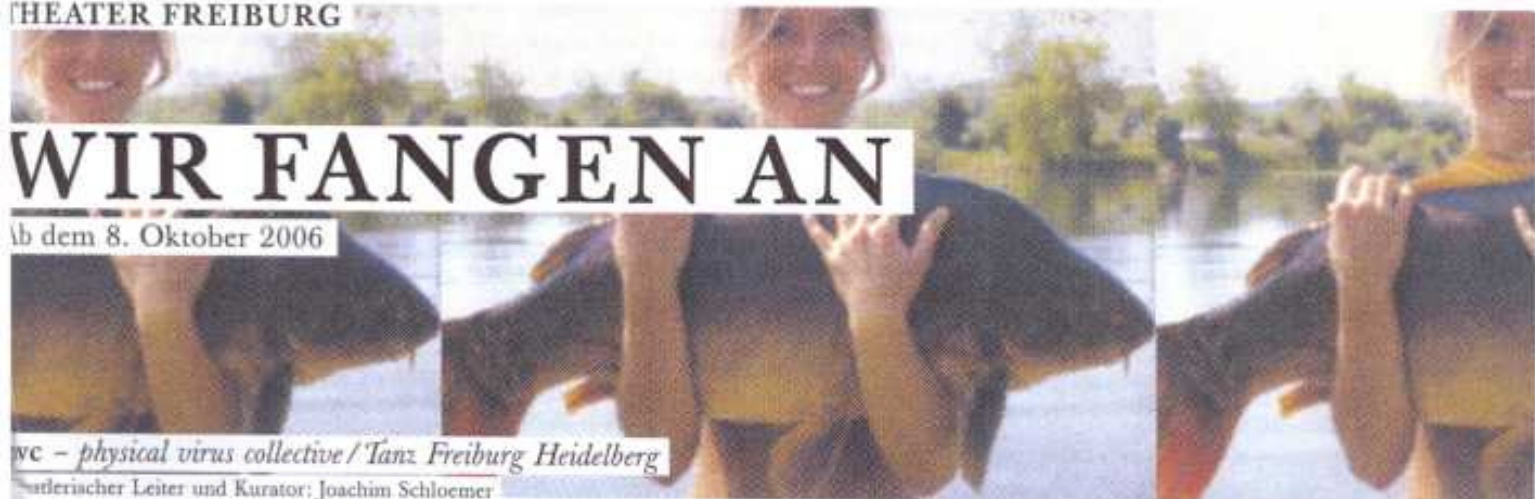
THEATER FREIBURG

WIR FANGEN AN

ab dem 8. Oktober 2006

vc – physical virus collective / Tanz Freiburg Heidelberg

Artistic Leiter und Kurator: Joachim Schloemer



LIGHTING DESIGN MUST HAVE AN ORGANIC CONNECTION WITH THE CHOREOGRAPHY AND THE MUSIC; THE LIGHT ALONE DOESN'T CARRY THE PIECE VERY FAR



Work on the lighting design begins with a dialogue between Saarinen and Kunttu, taking, for example, the visual style of the piece – bright, maybe, or mystical – as its theme. The world of cinema frequently has an influence on lighting design, although for Kunttu, music is a more decisive element. The visual motifs of a choreography affect the lighting design, too. One example is seen in the piece of upcoming choreographer Susanna Leinonen, "Kaira" ("Anger"), in which the basic movement is spiral, and is reflected in Kunttu's spirals of light.

Jorma Uotinen is another of Kunttu's regular collaborators. The former director of the Finnish National Ballet is currently director of the international Kuopio Dance Festival and also works as a freelance choreographer. "Uotinen is inspired by the music of Kimmo Pohjonen, like myself, and that is a good starting point for working together," says Kunttu. Pohjonen's evocative music is influenced by all kinds of folklore, from Finnish to Central Asian. Kunttu has worked with Kimmo Pohjonen in his various projects (like with The Kronos Quartet in the UK and in Finland). Kunttu enjoys designing lights for concerts, too. In his opinion, symphony orchestras do not need any lighting design, but rock concerts would not survive without. He is one of those people for whom a coincidence turns into a successful career. Kunttu was an 18 year-old guitarist with a rock group called Thunder Bay when he was asked to work as a light-and-sound man in the City Theatre of Kotka, a small town on the southern coast of Finland, east of Helsinki. After working untrained for some time, he finally embarked on a course of study at Tampere Polytechnic. On graduation he was hired by the largest concert house in Finland, the Tampere Concert Hall. It was here that Kunttu met Tero Saarinen, and the rest is history. As his work began to travel with Saarinen and gain recognition, more great artists approached him with offers of collaboration.

In the spring of 2006, Kunttu worked at the Boston Ballet, where he created the lighting design for the Russian Seasons bill, put together by Mikko Nissinen, as well as for a new ballet by Boston's Finnish resident choreographer Jorma Elo: "Carmen." A collaboration with Sylvie Guillem and Akram Khan, who are creating a duet together, is scheduled for early autumn 2006. In October, Kunttu will illustrate the ballets of two Finnish choreographers, Jorma Uotinen and young talent Jouka Valkama. The next stop after that is Oslo, where he will work on new pieces by Jorma Elo and Norwegian choreographer Jo Strömngren. In spring 2007, Kunttu will design lights for Jorma Uotinen's new piece at The Royal Danish Ballet and for one of the most in-demand young dance-makers of the moment, Moroccan-Belgian artist Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. It is not the first time the two have worked together, as Kunttu worked on Cherkaoui's duet with Akram Khan a few years ago, having previously provided the lighting for Khan's "MA" production.

Kunttu's list of clients has grown long over the past years, and he simply doesn't have the time to do everything he is offered. He is pleased with his latest works, and choreographers are welcome-working partners for him. Kunttu is also happy to work in Nordic theatres, because the technicians are professionals and the equipment is state of the art. But, "there are theatres and festivals that do not care about the lighting. The worst case was staging Tero Saarinen's 'Kaze' at the Venice Biennale in 2001. Replacing a broken light bulb took two days there!" Though a year or two later when working there with Carolyn Carlson, everything was business as usual with no mentionable problems. These things usually put a stamp on that specific production and one should not state that this and this festival sucks. For sure there are differences in working methods and manners and ethics and all that, but isn't that really the kicker when it comes to touring? What would be the point of touring if everywhere would be just like home? Our differences are the richness".