Dancer-choreographer Tero Saarinen gracefully and swiftly changes position before the camera. His hands slice the air with force and millimetre accuracy, but also with delicacy. The artist's deep-set eyes convey an intense, even hypnotic gaze that his sculptural features and coiffed hair accentuate.

When Saarinen dances, the presence is so powerful that it can be felt all the way back in the last tier of the auditorium.

When, in 2009, the then-44-year-old Saarinen demonstrated his masterful skills at the Finnish premiere of Blue Lady [Revisited] under the legendary choreography of Carolyn Carlson, one of the top international names of contemporary dance, shivers ran down the spines of audience members. Those following the 70-minute solo scarcely remembered to breathe. Saarinen threw himself into the female role once performed by Carlson herself with such intensity that when the performance came to an end, the audience cheered and gave a standing ovation – and the critics were besotted.

The man himself lost eight kilos while preparing for the role.

The same intensity seems to be ever-present in the gaze and presence of Saarinen, one of Finland's most successful choreographers. He binds his listeners and viewers strongly to a particular situation, a shared experience, in which the mind and the gaze are never allowed to wander. It feels as though in the presence of Saarinen, time is never aimless or empty.

From Pori to Paris
Empty time was not a feature of Saarinen's childhood, either. Growing up in a sports-mad family in Pori, on Finland's west coast, he was always involved in one hobby or activity or another. At different times he played ice hockey and football, practised artistic gymnastics and skied. If some hobby came to an end, it was replaced with another. And if there was nothing else to do, his father might build the family a ping pong table, for example.
»Life was one unending stretch of sports,« Saarinen recalls. »I'm grateful for that. Otherwise I wouldn't be in this shape at the age of 46.«

And Saarinen really is in fine shape. His own solo Hunt still plays a major role in Tero Saarinen Company's repertoire. The artist also continues to dance under the choreography of others – in recent years primarily Carlson's.

Saarinen is a well-known opponent of age-based discrimination.

»Kazuo Ohno (the butoh artist) was 95 when he performed for the final time. You can't dance classical ballet after a certain point if you don't want to do parody. But if the body still works and the desire's there, a place can be found on stage for everyone,« Saarinen says.

But let's put old age aside and return to childhood.

Saarinen began dancing at the comparatively late age of 16. It was his father who took the young Tero to his first dance class. In the Saarinen family, dance was one physical activity among others, and was treated as such. Thirty years ago, not all boys interested in dance trod such a smooth path.

»There weren't strict categories in my family. The home team has always been there to cheer me on,« Saarinen says.

After more than a year of dancing, Saarinen was encouraged by his dance teacher Liisa Nojonen to enter the entrance exam for the Finnish National Opera Ballet School. Saarinen passed the exam, moved to Helsinki at the age of 18 and began to practice.

»The others were 12 or younger; I had to learn quickly in order to catch up. I was still at the beginner level, it was a difficult place. All I remember of that time are the endless days. I was given extra time, one year at a time,« Saarinen recalls.

Fortunately he had a sturdy athlete's body that withstood punishing practice. And in 1985, three years after passing the entrance exam, he was dancing in the Finnish National Ballet.

In 1988 Saarinen travelled to Paris to take part in an international dance competition, and immediately won first prize in the contemporary dance category. Other dancers were accompanied by masseurs and other support teams, but Saarinen arrived in Paris alone, determined to show them all.

»It was like a fairytale. I won 30,000 francs. It was absurd. But I never lost my nerve. There's always been a small risk-taker deep down inside me,« Saarinen says.

He took his next risk a couple of years later when he resigned from the National Ballet. Setting up as a freelancer was a bold move in a situation where he had a steady job, a guaranteed pay cheque and the other advantages of an employee.

But the rise from novice to promising young international star over a period of ten years had taken its toll. Saarinen admits that work in the ballet and visiting performances with the Helsinki Dance Company were burning him out.

But he believed that something better lay in store.

»The National Ballet had given me a lot, but I saw its limitations. I wanted to make my own decisions,« Saarinen explains.

Learning from a butoh master

Saarinen walks into the dance hall of the Alexander Theatre in Helsinki. This is where Tero Saarinen Company has been housed since 2000.

Saarinen himself has an even longer relationship with the space. This is where everything began in 1982. Back then the National Opera was still based in the building, and it was in this same space that Saarinen got his first impression of the National Ballet.

»It felt like coming home,« Saarinen says of the moment when he and his company moved into the theatre.
Some feel that an artist who agrees to market himself has sold his soul.

The hall once looked massive; now it feels as though I'm constantly running up against walls.

Saarinen founded his own company in 1996. Prior to that he spent time abroad, including in Japan, where he practised the Japanese contemporary dance form butoh under the tutelage of Kazuo Ohno, a master in the art. In the early 1990s, butoh had just arrived in Finland, but it was not yet possible to receive training in the art. Saarinen wanted access to the very source, so he travelled to Japan to find Ohno, the artist who established it.

At that time Ohno was a wizened, 80-year-old man, but full of strength and with a shaman's bag of tricks.

»He taught us in a small garage in his apartment building wearing a pair of old underpants, and instructed us to think back to what it felt like to be in our mother's womb,» Saarinen grins.

»Sometimes it felt like the experience was too powerful. When someone's bouncing around and strikes his head against the wall, but you're hardly able to move yourself, it's baffling. I thought, why can't I enter that state?«

In the company of Ohno, the students slew their ego and practised humility. It came as a relief.

»In the West we have a habit of puffing up egos. There are the unsuccessful and the successful. Clean and unclean moves. In butoh there is freedom of movement and feeling, randomness. It calmed and deepened me and my understanding of the possibilities of dance.«

Dance as palette

Kazuo Ohno offered Saarinen work, but the dancer decided to return to Finland. His time in Japan had affected him deeply, however. Saarinen's studies in butoh and traditional kabuki theatre remain clearly visible in his technique.

Life in Japan was expensive, and the ever-present feeling of being an outsider bothered him. Upon returning to Europe, Saarinen worked as a choreographer for the Finnish National Ballet, the Lyon Opéra Ballet, and Israel's Batsheva Dance Company.

His own company was born of an urge to work with like-minded people, seek new winds and push boundaries.

Boldness has brought its reward. Over the last 15 years, Tero Saarinen Company has grown into Finland's leading company, and Saarinen has achieved worldwide renown. During that time, branding and marketing - typically looked upon with suspicion by artists - have left their mark on the art world. Tero Saarinen Company has approached marketing openly and professionally, since, when properly realised, it serves to guard what matters most - humane values and art.

»Some feel that an artist who agrees to market himself has sold his soul, and that art remains pure when the artist does not let his gaze wander in any direction. But art is not cut off from the rest of the world,« Saarinen points out.

Nor should the artist himself be cut off. Saarinen is surrounded by a team whose members support and nurture each other. Other trusted figures are also often involved in productions - Mikki Kunttu in lighting and Erika Turunen in costumes.

Saarinen's productions are all-encompassing experiences, in which the visual plays a key role. For example in Saarinen's solo Hunt, his interpretation of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring that premiered in 2002, psychedelic images created by media artist Marita Liulia and featuring Saarinen himself are reflected against the dancer's body.

Saarinen calls himself a dyed-in-the-wool aesthete. As a child he enjoyed not only sports but also crafts, especially painting. Painting fell by the wayside as dance took over, even if every five years Saarinen does buy a palette set and plans to take up painting anew. Now the stage is a canvas on which Saarinen creates his artworks.

Saarinen's choreography Borrowed Light, a large-scale production performed by Tero Saarinen Company and renowned early music ensemble The Boston Camerata, returns to Europe in May. The highly acclaimed production can be seen in Turku and Helsinki from 6 to 14 May 2011. The tour continues to the Netherlands, France and Germany. For more information, see uiuno.terossaarinen.com