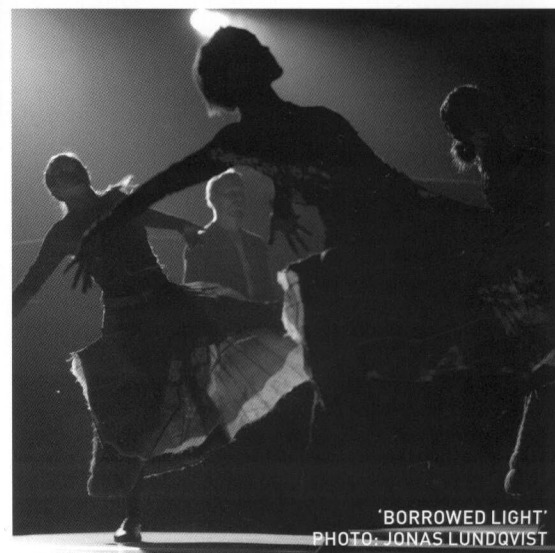
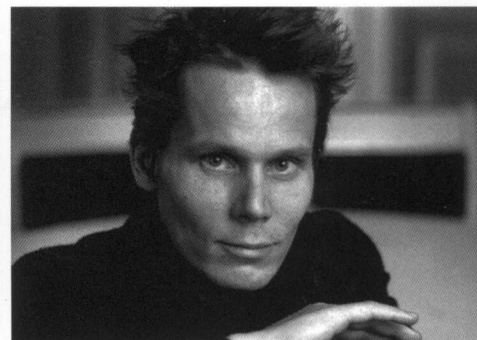


'BORROWED LIGH'T PHOTO: LAURENT PHILIPPE

TERO SAARINEN, PHOTO: IRMELI JUNG

'BORROWED LIGHT'
PHOTO: JONAS LUNDQVIST

Finnish Choreographer Tero Saarinen

TRAVELLING BETWEEN THE POLES

By Francesca Horsley

Though a world away, New Zealand and Finland have much in common in the dance world, visiting choreographer Tero Saarinen observed after spending time in Wellington in March. Artistic director, choreographer and dancer, his company presented the work *Borrowed Light* at the New Zealand International Arts Festival – proving to be a highlight.

Tero says that Finland, like New Zealand, is a small nation, a very young dance country comparatively and although with considerably less distance to travel to the centre of Europe than here – three hours – is still an isolated country. This, he says, gives Fins a special advantage – their isolation provides them with insulation from many current trends, a chance to develop their own idiom and individuality – something many NZ choreographers can identify with.

"Dance in Finland has had two powerful influences: classical ballet and contemporary dance. The Finnish ballet background is the Russian Vaganova Ballet training", Tero says. "Both choreographer Jorma Elo and I had this strict Russian education in classical ballet." Elo's work 'Plan to A' impressed NZ audiences in the Royal New Zealand Ballet's 'Red' season this March.

Tero says the contemporary dance movement was a kind of 'crazy Fin' expression, influenced by German Ausdrückstanz. While this movement had been quiet, it nevertheless paid off because they were the pioneers of their contemporary dance and a lot of people who had trained in classical ballet started to do their own thing.

"At present in Finland there is a 'big hype' about dance – and the audience is increasing all the time. There are very interesting choreographers who are not following European trends in dance, going their own way. Nowadays I think the government is starting to realise this and slowly more money and investment is coming towards the arts and towards dance also."

"We are a small nation and people do not talk so much, we are not a verbal people, but there are individual artists and strong artists and through these personalities contemporary and experimental dance has been getting stronger and stronger."

Tero said he left his classical ballet career in 1992. "I was doing nice roles in the Finnish National Ballet but then I had this hunger to go and study more. I went first to open my eyes in Nepal and I did some Nepalese dance, then I went to Japan and I lived there nearly one year, studying Butoh dance, Kabuki and other traditional Japanese dance." He found these very informative. "Their traditions are so old and I think they provide other ways to express yourself as a male dancer. In classical ballet in the 1980s, for me, it was a little bit limited with what the man could express."

For him ballet and Butoh are the extremes of dance. "Butoh dance really comes from the subconscious or exactly what you are, it allows you to show your emotions and create ugly forms. Then on the other hand the strong classical background goes for beauty, elevation and aesthetic values – so in that way I think they are really opposite, at far ends from each other. I think that is very interesting, they are fertilising my language in that way, I think I am all the time carrying these two poles and sometimes I am nearer one and sometimes nearer the other. I like forms and lines but on the other hand I think this earthiness and heaviness is interesting; these two tastes are always present in my choreography."

In 'Borrowed Light' Tero used the American Shaker community of the 18th and 19th Centuries as a starting point to explore elements of ritual, sacrifice of self, devotion and the contradictions they raised. "I didn't want to create an illustration of how the Shakers were but more to create, in a way, my own community and talk about these things. What was challenging was to find the movement vocabulary that would be heavy and earth bound, like they are carrying some kind of burden but at the same time trying to get elevated and enlightened; so there is this contradiction in the dancer's bodies all the time."

This contrast is also carried through in his lighting, always an important ingredient in his work. This was never more so than in 'Borrowed Light', which drew from both the Scandinavian view of light, and the Shakers' innovative way of drawing light into interior rooms to extend the working hours.

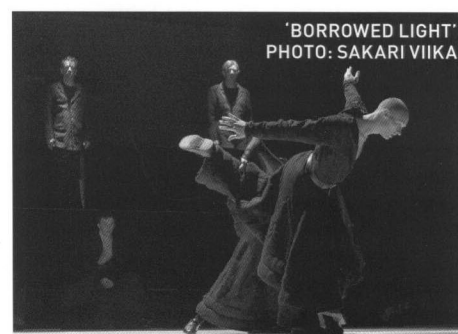
"The work bears the marks from Finland, some kind of Nordic gloom for sure. Also how we treat light and conceive light – and what we think about light and what light does to us. In winter we live most of our time under artificial lights, and then in the summer we have suddenly these white nights and there is no night actually. It is a very dramatic state of living. The lighting designer, Mikki Kunttu, is from Finland and so is Erika Turunen, the costume designer; we have been working closely for years, so the work looks like us."

"When I presented this idea inspired by the Shakers, we all studied their philosophy, 'the form for function', their ways of thinking of light and building and we had a dualistic starting point – light would be sometimes piercing and over-exposing and sometimes kind of hiding and mystic. It was the same for the costumes – sometimes they really looked heavy, like a burden, and on the other hand they can look very light and transparent."

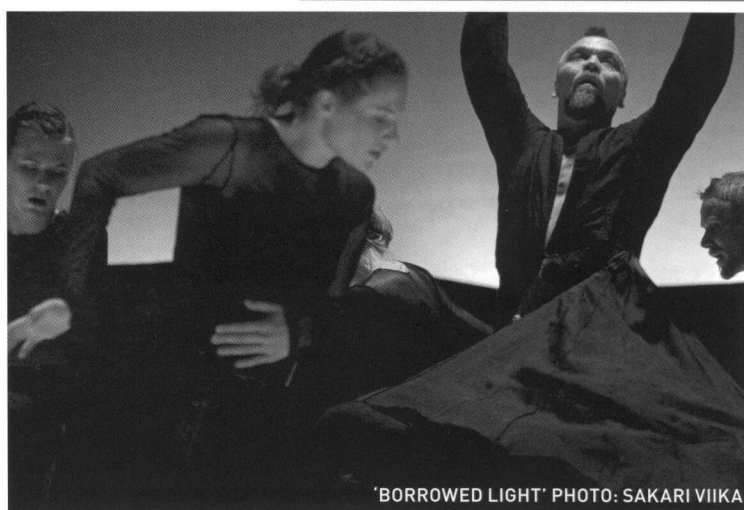
Live music is also an important component for Tero. "When I was working with the National Ballet of Finland, we always had a live orchestra so that was always the best part of being on the stage, every day is different and it is very stimulating. Since I have created my own company, I have tried to always cherish this connection and even though there is a problem of funding sometimes because it's expensive, most of my pieces I have always found a way to have live music. It is very exciting, it makes a different feeling for the performers and I think it is also different for the audience when there are live musicians or singers on the stage."

For 'Borrowed Light' I wanted to integrate the musicians and singers. This set the tone for the work. I couldn't have elaborate movements because I wanted the audience not to see who the dancer is and who the singer is. That is why some simple movements came in."

The musicians enjoyed learning the dances saying 'we want to do this one and could we do more' and they were even trying to convince us to sing – but we were like – oh no there's a limit now, because then the audience will go out if we sing!"



'BORROWED LIGHT'
PHOTO: SAKARI VIIKA



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