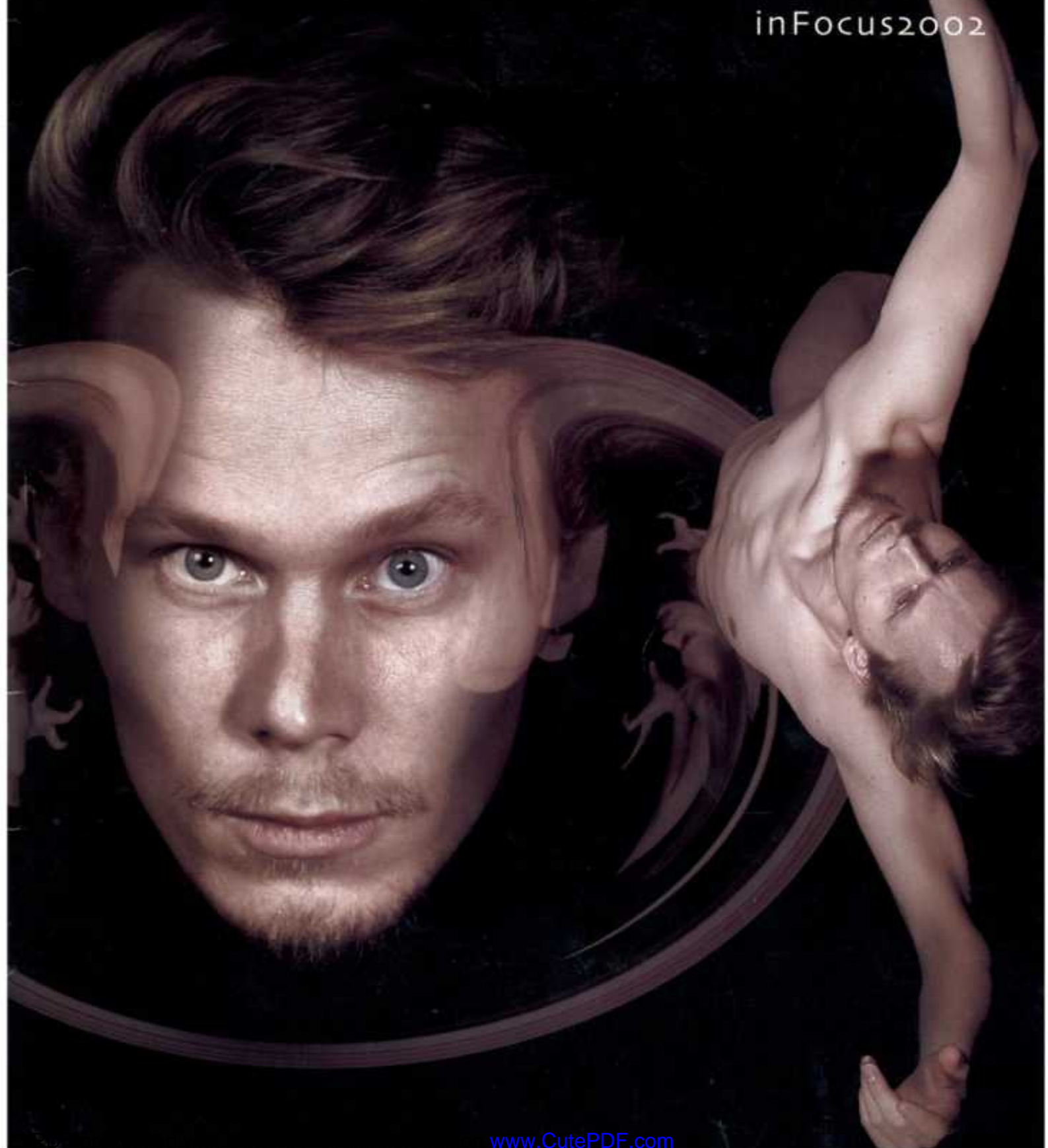


F I N N I S H

Dance

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What Is Tero Saarinen's Dancing Made of?

PIIA AHONEN ■ Photos: SAKARI VIKA, PIERRE MARIEY

After a successful soloist career at the Finnish National Ballet, dancer-choreographer Tero Saarinen decided in 1992 that the time had come for him to get some distance from the world of classical ballet. He travelled to Nepal and Japan en route to a successful career as a freelancer and director of his own group.

Saarinen, 38, is presently one of Finland's internationally best known and most successful dance artists. Saarinen has also been a visiting choreographer in e.g. the Batsheva Dance Company, which is directed by Ohad Naharin, the Ballet de l'Opéra national de Lyon, and the Gothenburg Opera Ballet, where he set his work *Transfigured Night* to Arnold Schönberg's music in March 2002. The originality and versatility of Saarinen's works has brought them attention both in Finland and abroad.

- I'm delighted that people think that I've created works that are all very different. That's exactly what I want to do, says Saarinen.

Despite a diverse array of themes and musical selections, there is always something recognisable in Saarinen's works: the movement and the shape of the body. Jazz dance, classical ballet, contemporary dance and butoh have been filtered through Saarinen's body and influenced the resulting original style. Saarinen explains that people abroad tend to think that there is something very Finnish in his movement language, but actually it differs clearly from e.g. the movement created by choreography graduates of the Theatre Academy of Finland.

- I'm into imbalance, instability, where one nearly falls over. I find that an interesting place. Also related to the same thing is a foot that takes a step, the way it is rooted to the ground, and how much room there is for playing around with it.

- On the other hand, I'm often told that twisted or arched bodies recur in my works. I'm also interested in big continuous movement, which can at times be rather boring for the spectator, Saarinen smiles.

Saarinen's interests are clearly visible e.g. in his choreography *KAZE*, which had its first premiere at the Venice Biennial in 2001. In *KAZE*, whose starting point was to study how rhythm activates movement, the dancers' bodies are repeatedly seeking extreme positions. Their arms stick out behind them while their heads are bent forwards; their

torsos turn in the opposite direction and the entire body line is twisted. This bird-like, grotesque impression is strengthened by their bodies oscillating rapidly backwards and forwards, accompanied by rhythmical steps and quivering hands on the end of flaccid wrists. Or, as Donald Hutera put it, "Imagine butoh with wings" (*Dance Now*, 3/2001).

The Experiencing Body Leads the Process

According to Saarinen, the dancers have a strong influence on his choreographies. This actually seems a bit odd, if one thinks how recognisable his movement language is. But the dancers' influence shows more in the choreographies' structure than it does in their movements. Saarinen says, however, that he is no master of improvisation as a working method.

- I'm not able to work by giving the dancers some tasks, watching over them, and then picking up on the well-functioning themes.

This is also hard to believe, as improvisation actually seems to be a method well suited to Saarinen. He does however improvise as if he is one of the dancers, moving with the rest of the group.

- When I'm visiting a new company, the dancers are initially a bit surprised as I jump in with them. For me, however, it is vital to first feel and sense the logic of the movement with the dancers.

- It is as if I'm knitting a huge human net with the dancers which produces masses of movement material. From this I will then refine the final piece. First the experiencing body leads the process; the observing eye joins in only at a later stage.

A Small Person in the Stormy World

As well as distinctive movement, a melancholic, absurd atmosphere with quiet humour also characterises Saarinen's works. Their recognisable universe is created by movement that ranges between lightness and deformity and Saarinen's understanding of human nature.

Saarinen's recurring themes are linked to these characteristics as well as the potential Finnishness of his dance.

- In my own view I always set out to do something very mundane.

My choreographies tell about the fate of a small person in the stormy world because I think we are all directed by greater powers, explains Saarinen.

- I work continuously on the same themes: human relationships, encounters, the absurdity of human behaviour, and loneliness.

In Saarinen's choreographies the dancers seem, every now and again, to be at the mercy of a strong wind that tosses them about en masse.

Saarinen's characters are concretely trying to find salvation in one another, but the situations change endlessly and nothing remains stable. One reason that Saarinen chose to work on such a well-worn subject as *Petrushka* a couple of years ago was partly because *Petrushka's* character is perfect for dealing with the aforementioned themes.

- As a character, *Petrushka* has always fascinated me: he is an eternal clown and a pushover. I see him as a kind of archetype which all kinds of people can identify with, including myself.

Music Gives the Impulse

Petrushka (2001) is not the first instance of Saarinen choosing a topic or piece of music that has previously been made into a dance work. In 1999 he choreographed *Pulcinella* for the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company. This year, apart from the aforementioned *Transfigured Night*, he has used **Stravinsky's** *The Rite of Spring* for the solo piece *Hunt*.

The starting point of Saarinen's choreography is not very common in Finland, although literary works are widely used as a framework for dance pieces.

- Starting with something that already exists and creating something completely new are two very different ways of making a choreography. Although many of my works are born of purely personal needs, it is sometimes fascinating to choose topics and music that have already been dealt with. Saarinen explains that he is presently going through a kind of a "classical phase", although he says that this is not a conscious choice.

- These compositions simply feed my imagination – and who knows what else – so much so that I just have to give it a go. I believe that music that has been used a lot has somehow struck a chord in the collective unconscious, since so many people choose to work on them, Saarinen thinks aloud.

- What appealed to me in *Petrushka*, apart from the character's universal features, was the music's many layers and its dramatic sweep. The same thing applies to *The Rite of Spring*. Most contemporary music seems to lack these features.

Saarinen admits that it is unavoidable that his *Petrushka* owes some of its ideas to earlier versions of the piece. However, these works did not serve as his point of departure; that impulse was born of the music that touched him irresistibly.

A Passion for Duets

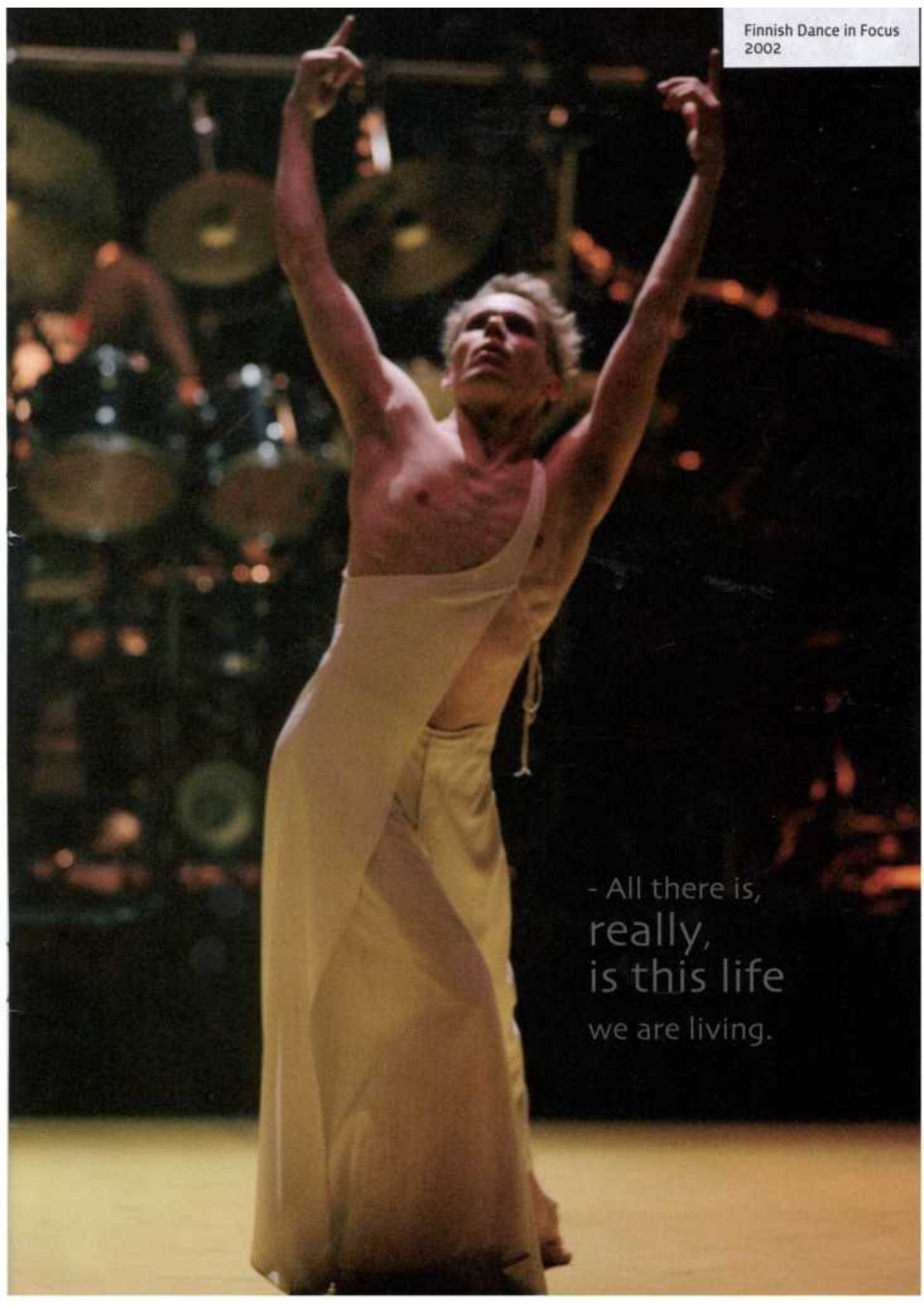
Saarinen's latest solo work *Hunt* received its first premiere in Venice on 2.6.2002. It is ten years since he last made a solo choreography, but the long interval has been well justified.

- I have a passion for duets. I'm always very eager to work on the next one, Saarinen laughs.

- Duets can show all the electricity and nuances that belong to an encounter of two people. It crystallises something essential about being human.

The fact that Saarinen values duets highly is manifested in his choreographies. Duets are emotional eyes of the hurricane, moments of thematic concentration in which time seems to stop. Their movement and structure are truly original. Saarinen's duets seem to crystallise his entire view of dance art, his movement language and his understanding of human beings. People in his works become entangled in one another in the most peculiar ways. The lifts are always somehow distorted or touchingly clumsy. The dancers, a man and a woman, are two equal individuals longing for intimacy, but, typically for Finns, they are unable to express their emotions. Even though a caress may turn into some kind of dragging, Saarinen's duets are not violent. On the contrary, in their portrayal of people's shy and desperate longing for tenderness, they are deeply touching, and they do not lack comical tones.

What is Tero Saarinen's dancing made of, then? He is the first to point out that it is a waste of time to try to find fine philosophical constructions in his works: "All there is, really, is this life we are living".

A male dancer is captured in a dynamic pose on a stage. He is wearing a long, white, form-fitting dress that is open at the chest and has a high slit on the side. His arms are raised high, with his index fingers pointing upwards. The background is dark with out-of-focus lights, suggesting a stage setting. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the dancer's physique and the texture of the dress.

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