

DANCE

From Finland, Wearing Large Tutus

By JACK ANDERSON

FINLAND, though internationally known for its music, architecture and design, has been keeping cultural secrets from America. Contemporary dance, for one. Tero Saarinen has toured Europe extensively with his own company and choreographed for troupes like the Netherlands Dance Theater, the Lyon Opera Ballet in France and the Batseva Dance Company in Israel. When the Tero Saarinen Company presented "Westward Ho!" as part of a showcase of Finnish culture at Gould Hall in 1998, Anna Kisselgoff wrote in The New York Times that the troupe, then new, "should return soon."

But only now is it doing so, coming to the Joyce Theater, with a triple-bill of "Westward Ho!," "Wavelengths" and "Hunt." In July, it will also present "Borrowed Light," with live music by the Boston Camerata, at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts.

Other Finnish choreographers have been arousing interest of late. Productions by Jorma Elo, Virpi Pakkinen and Kenneth Kvarnstrom were part of "Stockholm/59° North," a program of Scandinavian choreography performed by dancers from the Royal Swedish Ballet last summer at Jacob's Pillow. And the New York City Ballet offers a premiere by Mr. Elo on June 16.

But the prominent Finnish choreographer Jorma Uotinen is almost totally unfamiliar to Americans. And few outside Finland are aware that Finnish modern dance goes back as far as 1911, when Maggie Gripenberg, an admirer of Isadora Duncan, created a sensation by dancing barefoot at her Helsinki debut. Her influence remained strong for decades, and interest in contemporary dance continues to grow in Finland.

Mr. Saarinen, 41, has theories why Finnish dance has not caught America's attention.

"We are reluctant to promote ourselves," he said, speaking fluent English in a recent telephone interview from Toronto, where his company was dancing. "Finland's geographical isolation has fostered a sense of emotional isolation. It's also usually easier to tour Europe than to travel to America."

Finland's often austere realm of solid stone, dense forests and cold water may have influenced the Finnish temperament.

"We don't speak much," Mr. Saarinen said. "Although we can be very jolly among foreigners, we are often severe when we are by ourselves. Yet our avoidance of speech may be one reason why we become fine dancers."



Sakari Vika

Mr. Saarinen founded his group in 1998 and called it Company Toothpick. "I thought it would be nice to have a name with a twinkle in its eye," he said. "Then the company grew and the name no longer sounded appropriate." So in 2002 it became the Tero Saarinen Company.

"Westward Ho!" also dating from 1998, is the group's calling card, Mr. Saarinen said. Suggesting that dances should be more than "theatrical fast food," he seemed pleased that audiences still relish this study of three men engaged in a stoic struggle.

Mr. Saarinen originally thought of setting "Wavelengths," a 2000 duet about male-female relationships, to Ravel's "Bolero." Instead, he had Riku Niemi, a Finnish composer, create a new score for him, which, as Mr. Saarinen put it, "follows the emotional arc of 'Bolero.'"

The most unusual presentation at the Joyce

is "Hunt," a 2002 solo, which Mr. Saarinen dances to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." That tumultuous composition could easily overwhelm a soloist. Yet several choreographers have devised solos to it, notably Molissa Fenley, whose "State of Darkness" (1988) transformed Stravinsky's sacrificial maiden into a bold female warrior.

In Mr. Saarinen's solo, he becomes both hunter and hunted. While he dances, Marita Liulia, a multimedia artist, floods his costume with streams of images showing him dancing. The choreography touches upon many themes: among them, a dancer's realization of growing old ("a kind of 'Dying Swan' idea," Mr. Saarinen said), masculine and feminine polarities and the problems of preserving personal identity in a technological age.

"Borrowed Light," the 2004 production he is staging at the Pillow, was inspired in part by the

Shakers, the austere 18th-century religious sect. Shaker songs, performed by the Boston Camerata, serve as accompaniment, and singers and dancers intermingle.

Seen in Helsinki last summer, "Borrowed Light" was impressive for its juxtapositions of light and heavy movements and for the way Mikki Kunttu, the designer, sometimes pierced the stage with light and at other times blurred the space. The title refers to the way Shaker houses, to maximize working time indoors, had windows that let light penetrate far into the rooms.

Light matters to Mr. Saarinen. He praised Mr. Kunttu. "He has lighted his productions since the troupe's founding, for 'using light like an architect.'"

"Light's important in Finland — how we use it, how we react to it. Because of our geographical location, we spend half the year almost entirely under artificial light. Then we have almost

Why aren't that nation's dancers well known here? 'We don't speak much.'

24 hours of real light daily. That must affect our mentality somehow."

Mr. Saarinen, who knows Finland's lights and darks, was born in Pori, a city on the west coast: "the middle of nowhere," he termed it. Asked if he is related to the Saarinen family of distinguished architects, he replied, "Unfortunately not." His mother was a seamstress; his father worked for the local newspaper.

"My father was also a sports freak," Mr. Saarinen said. "He wanted me to try just about every sport there was."

A dance school opened in Pori when Mr. Saarinen was 16, and given the physicality of the art, his parents encouraged him to take jazz- and folk-dance classes: "It was love at first sight," he said.

Impressed by his ability, a visiting teacher from the well-regarded Finnish National Ballet suggested that he attend the company's school in Helsinki. Mr. Saarinen responded eagerly to the training, joined the National Ballet in 1985 and soon became a soloist.

But because his curiosity about dance forms remained insatiable, he left in 1992 for Japan, where he studied the experimental and often grotesque modern style known as Butoh. Among his teachers was Kazuo Ohno, a Butoh master who imbued him with a reverence for tradition. "I am dancing on top of my ancestors," Mr. Saarinen quoted him as saying.

Mr. Saarinen spent a brief time in Nepal studying traditional dance. "That really taught me I have fingers and toes," he said. "Fingers and toes sometimes seem dead in ballet."

Mr. Saarinen lives alone in Helsinki. "My company is my family," he said. And dance remains as strong a passion for him as it was when, back in his student days, he said, "I would stretch out in the snow, stare up at the stars and say to myself over and over, 'I want to dance, I want to dance.'"

Tero Saarinen, artistic director of a Finnish modern dance troupe, performing in "Hunt."

TERO SAARINEN COMPANY

JOYCE THEATER
Tuesday through Sunday at the Joyce, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800.