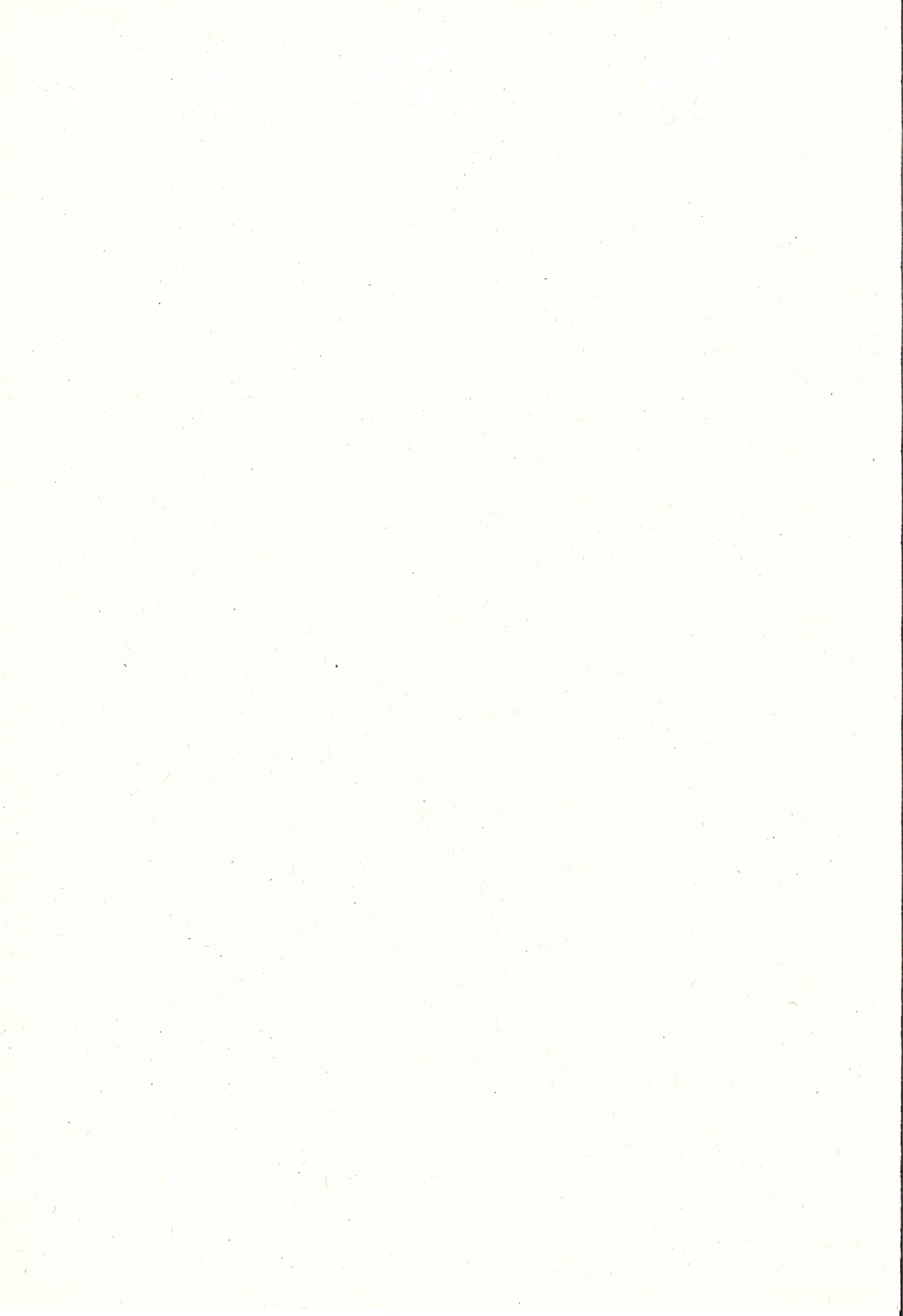


There is only one thing to dance about: the meaning of one's personal experience must be taken in its literal sense as action, and not as intellectual conception.

Doris Humphrey, 1932





TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE FINNISH FOLK DANCE AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE*

Pipsa Niemen

In my presentation I'll talk about folk dance and contemporary dance. Though these two dance forms seem to be quite different there are some influences between them. The history of dance shows that the dances of the rural population, the upper classes and professional artists have been continuously interacting so that fashionable dances first became popular in the higher social strata and then were adopted later among the lower social classes. This interaction is noticeable also in Finland today between Finnish folk-dances and contemporary dance such that folk dancers want to make their expression wider and richer by using the "rules" and ideas of contemporary dance when choreographing dances for the stage.

The heritage of the Finnish folk dance

Although Finland belongs to a periphery in several respects its cultural connection with both East and West Europe has been firm, with contacts at several levels. Dances of the Finnish and Swedish speaking population are part of the pan-European tradition, while the Lapps' way of moving by hops, and their way of singing, the Joiku, connects Finland with the northern Eurasian arctic dance and song traditions.

The actual collection of Finnish folk-dances began only 150 years ago in the 1840's. Knowledge of the Finnish folkdance is based on material mainly from the end of the last century. There are only few notions of dance from earlier dates and these are mostly negative saying that the Finns did not know dance at all. In the end of the 18th century there was not even a word for dance in the Finnish language. The people near the coast used the words *tantzi* and *tantzan* which were words they had learned from the west.

The different areas of Finnish folk dance

Based on the differences in folk dance culture, Finland can be divided into four areas. This division is based on population areas of 1938 which include Finland, Ingria, eastern Karelia and the Swedish speaking parts of western Finland. At that time Finland's border was further east.

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The different areas based on the folk dance culture are:

1. The Swedish speaking areas on the west coast of Finland
2. Karelia's orthodox church area (a part of the eastern Karelia tradition)
3. "The rest" of Finland
4. The Lapps' area of Finnish Lapland

Folk dance tradition in the east and west of Finland

In the first part of my presentation I will focus mainly on the folk dance tradition of two areas: the western coast of Finland where the Swedish influence was strongest, and the eastern, that is Karelian folk dance tradition where the Russian influence was obviously seen. "The rest of Finland" is less interesting and I'll skip it.

Somehow it's amazing that the old dance culture has been preserved better in the borderlands of both the east and west of Finland. The reason for this could be that the strong revivalist movements that came to Finland had a negative attitude towards dancing and the "rest of Finland" (the main part of Finland) was under the influence of these religious movements. Thus the history of folk dance shows how strong the power of religion can be when dividing people. Often it was stronger than the linguistic barriers.

Despite what I just said about the linguistic barriers and religion, the folk dances of East and West differ from each other very much. Typical of the dances in the orthodox church area (in the east) was certain degree of freedom and improvisation. In these dances the dancers could make certain parts of the dance longer and the musician followed the dancers by endlessly repeating the short melody. Though the eastern Karelian dances show a clear Russian influence western features are still more dominant. It seems like the western influence went to the East through St. Petersburg that has been quite an important city of cultural influence. Also the SkoltLapps who had their own dance tradition and who were living the area of "the left arm of the Finnish Maiden" (which now belongs to Russia) were influenced from Karelia and Russia because the culture barriers were lower on the eastern side. In addition most of the government, religion and trade were being administered from the east. The first "eastern" instruments of the musicians were harmonica and accordion while in the west, the violin was the main instrument.

The song-dances

Simple dances accompanied with songs represent the earliest known phase of Finnish dances. The basic steps were walking, running and stamping and

basic figures were lines, chains, spirals or circles. (Actually the same basic elements as those of the oldest dances of Europe).

The Country Dances

Much later, in the eighteenth century several variations of the Country Dances, became common in Finland. The kontra-dances, composed of simple steps became common in the greater part of Finland and the largest part of Finnish folk-dance material belongs to the Country dances.

In France, Country Dances started to be danced in the form of a square and the dance got a new name, quadrille. This name became so common that it was used to refer to any "country" dance despite its form. In Finland the square form became so popular that it is the most usual form we have. Country-dances were extremely popular in Finland until the turn of the present century. Typical parts of quadrilles are facings, walking through, changing places, circles, shaking hands, and so on. Quadrilles were known throughout the country and the most formal ones came from the southwest of Finland. The more east in Finland we go, the longer, more variable and more vivid the quadrilles become. The vividness is due to the fact that the quadrilles from Karelia have parts of Slavic origin, such as improvised solos, which are not known in the west. The Finnish quadrille reflects cultural contrasts with Western Europe as well as Eastern.

Dances on the west coast of Finland

While the dances of the Finnish Swedes of the coast area have many features from Sweden they are still more strongly connected to the Finnish folkdance tradition than to that of Sweden. In the west of Finland the dances are defined in every detail and the dancers follow the musician.

The mid-seventeenth century brought changes and the older ballad-dance had to give way to the "new dances"; the minuet and polska. The Minuet, a sophisticated court dance developed from a French folkdance, came from France to Scandinavia and from Sweden to Finland also, where it bloomed at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The Minuet with its complicated steps was only danced along the coast area in the western and southern parts of Finland among the Swedish-speaking population. The Minuet became known as a celebration dance, particularly at weddings until the present century. Minuets were danced by opposing lines of men and women and minuets were accompanied by instrumental music, mainly by violin.

A dance that is about the same age and of the same period is Polska that originally comes from Poland. In Sweden the Polska is almost a national folkdance and in the eighteenth century, the Polska was also a prominent dance in Finland to such an extent that in some areas any dance was called a Polska. Polska has many faces. It has been danced with a partner, by two couples together and in a

big single circle. First there was the 3/4-meter Polska and later 2/4-meter Polskas were developed.

In the Couple-Polska dancers go around with different steps in pairs holding each other hands or shoulders. The dancers do not move around the dance floor, they stay in one place during the whole dance. For some reason Polska and Minuet began to be danced one after the other and so they formed a new dual-dance combination. This minuet-polska combination was the most popular dance in the western and southwestern parts of Finland in the 18th century

Stylistic features of Finnish traditional folk dance and new folk dance choreographies

Folk dances are mainly a part of social life and therefore the dancers are usually a girl and a boy. In the dances the girls and boys flirt and tease each other very often. Most dances are for 4-8 couples and they include many polite manners such as nods. Women and men are equal. For example, girls might dance first a certain turn and boys repeat the same, maybe in another direction. Repetitions are very typical for Finnish folkdance (girls/boys, clockwise/counterclockwise, main couples/ side couples).

Finnish folk dances are usually not narrative and no additional equipment is used. We don't have war or gun dances. The music of the dances is mainly divided into equal intervals (2/4 and 4/4 meters). Only 10% of our dances are of triple time (Waltz, Mazurka, Polska, Minuet). Though the rhythmic of our dances are not very rich, we have many different steps. If you are an unaccustomed viewer of folkdance you may not notice the change of steps because the steps are low and unnoticeable on purpose. We do not have any "high feet or high steps" in our folk dances.

Folk-dance, after becoming more and more a performing art, was detached from the life of its original community by its norms as well as the contrast between everyday life and celebrations. This in turn changed the nature and function of folk-dances. Due to the Finnish social life, folk-dances were considered an entertainment and a joy as well as a part of the people's own personal celebrations, such as weddings & birthdays. There they were pursued ritually in a correct manner. But on the stage, when the folk-dance was evaluated by the same criteria as any performing art. It had to be interpreted as aesthetically enjoyable but at the same time it should reflect the nature and traditions of the original community.

In many new folk dance choreographies you can't find some of traditional features any more. Quite often a choreographer breaks the formation, tells a story, uses equipment, lets girls and boys dance separately, etc. We have new folk dance choreographies which are very much like the traditional ones, but then we have those which are not easy to categorize into folk dance choreographies any more.

Folk dance today; folk-dance as a performing art

During the last ten or more years there have been many discussions about folk dance on the stage. When we have "competition" between new folkdance choreographies there are different opinions among the jury, audience and performers about what is allowed or what should be forbidden in folkdance. That means that we are trying to determine the rules or limits of how far we are allowed to go from the old "pure and perfect" tradition. The concept of this "old tradition" quite often means the dances as they were written down at the end of the last century. But tradition is alive and that means that it is also changeable, reflecting the culture and societies' values. It has been discussed also whether it should be allowed to have any "new" influence from other countries. But just as I have said earlier, outside influence has always come to Finland both from the east and west (also from the south but through the east or west) so it's unnatural to think that after these dances have been written down, tradition should stay the same and we should stop the natural development of folk dance.

In Finland there are many active innovative folk dance choreographers who want to see folk-dance not only as a transition of tradition but also as an art form. They have choreographed whole evening long narrative stories. Some choreographies have such a new and different movement vocabulary and expression that it's no longer easy to categorize them into folk dance tradition. Maybe it's not even important. If you as a choreographer or as a dancer can express your ideas to the audience and touch their feelings, isn't that enough. But we are so used to categorizing things that we start to feel unsure or uncomfortable with something that we cannot put into its own place or which doesn't fit into the concept we have about it. But folkdance is also a form of art that is full of challenges. There is always a possibility to ask questions about the old tradition, to try new things, to fail, to try again and create something new.

Contemporary Dance

The history of art dance in Finland is considerably shorter than the history of Finnish folk dance or the history of art dance in the Middle European countries. We could say that art dance did not come to our country until this century. In the beginning of the 20th century there were only a few dance schools in Finland; therefore many Finns went abroad to study and perform.

Ballet got its influence from the east and the famous Imperial Marias Theatre Ballet School in St. Petersburg became the most important place of study for Finnish ballet dancers and it formed the style as well as the technical and methodological base of Finnish ballet.

The earliest influences of free dance came to Finland from the west when the American Isadora Duncan visited us in 1908. The most important stylistic in-

fluences seem to have come from the German-speaking culture area, especially from the Dalcroze Institute of Rhythmics. Finnish students also went to the schools of Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Joos. Many of the earliest representatives of free dance were teachers of physical education who also brought their ideas into Finnish women's gymnastics.

The 20s and 30s were a time of development for free dance in Finland. The famous names of Ausdruckstanz, Mary Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg, Kurt Joos and Trudi Schoop visited Finland. In Finland the most significant person in free dance was Maggie Gripenberg who won the International Choreographer Competition in Brussels in 1939.

Anyhow free dance did not manage to consolidate its position as a professional dance form. Compared to ballet dancers who had their own school at the Opera, free dancers were regarded as amateurs. The representatives of both free dance and classical ballet argued in the press which of the dance arts was better. After WW II the situation changed for Finnish free dance. The connections with Germany were cut and Finnish culture turned towards the Anglo-Saxon countries. The lack of influences from the outside, economical problems and the lack of professionals depressed the activity of free dance and its time was over in the 50's. In the 60's new trends came from the USA to Finland in the form of modern dance.

Riitta Vainio became the leading lady of modern dance when she returned to Finland from the USA in the 60s. Modern dance was a cultural shock. Pure white ballet had a new and strange competition. Dance critics expressed loathing and scorn towards modern dance in their newspaper reviews. As late as in the 60's the critics accustomed to classical ballet criticized these "gym teachers" who danced with bare and dirty feet. Vainio had influence in many areas. Because she was a many-sided person she reached the elite art community and through the new medium of TV she gained a wide audience. Vainio was shocking to the art, visual and aesthetic community. On her own she created a new concept of woman as independent and strong.

Cultural policy changed in the early 70's and left-wing theatre groups were founded. Their social way of thinking and working evoked a response among many dance artists. Riitta Vainio's abstract modernism was replaced with social realism.

Choreographer Marjo Kuusela and dancer Maria Wolska founded Raatikko Dance Company in 1972. Raatikko was the first professional dance company to get state support for its work. In the beginning of the 70's Raatikko was the most innovative dance company in Finland. The choreographer of the group, Marjo Kuusela, based her artistic policy on the realistic and social dance drama. Raatikko's works had a message and they were politically oriented towards the left-wing. Many of her works are based on famous written works and one didn't need any fine art studies to understand her narrative works. The company took the dance to new places. They went to the smallest places in the countryside and performed

for people who had never before had any possibility to see dance. (Raatikko's picture of woman was based on the workers' culture and values as well).

In the 70s there were also quite different styles of contemporary dance which were not based on narrative stories but on time, space, form and the flow of the movement. Carolyn Carlson's flow, lyric movement expression was one of them. Then during the 80's we had a new "strange" male dancer Jorma Uotinen.

Jorma Uotinen

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In the 70s more and more dancers went to schools in the international centres of dance -London, Amsterdam and New York. Jorma Uotinen, the present director of our National Ballet, developed his internationally recognized skills in dance and choreography during the time of the trends mentioned above. Jorma Uotinen was mostly influenced by Carolyn Carlson when he danced in the experimental group of the Paris Opera in 1976-80. He is strongly connected with the theatre way of working but also often makes visual works which resemble the methods used in modern movies and videos.

Audiences got to know Jorma Uotinen and his choreography during the 80's. His choreography, free from social themes, had a visual and dreamlike quality which attracted his audience. Princes in tights were thrown in the trash. Uotinen's male dancers often represented sexless, androgynous humans. He also had dances with homosexual visions.

Our national ballet is and should be the "Flagship" of dance in Finland. In 1993 Uotinen accepted the directorship of our new National Opera and already after one year the National Ballet has been ranked high in the media. When the Finnish National Ballet got a new opera house and a new leader who represented modern dance, people were expecting or fearing radical changes. After one year we can see that there has been no revolution. Uotinen has not made radical changes, but has rather tried to integrate new things with the traditional. He has taken a middle ground between tradition and innovation. In classical ballet he has introduced more French influences to balance the Russian Vaganova method. Last season's "Stravinski Evening" with Nijinski's "Rites of Spring" revival was the season's overwhelming success.

Modern dance repertoire in the National Opera has had a low profile with no radical pieces. Even Uotinen's own new choreography "Glass sonata" is maybe his most classical composition. Also his visiting choreographers have been low risk choices like John Neumeier and Ohad Naharin.

The National Ballet has fulfilled people's expectations and one reason for their success might be the Opera's failure. In its first season in the new opera house all the choices have been poor ones. For that reason the National Ballet has lifted the name of the new opera house and has won a new and large audience for ballet. Only the extreme post-modern and the most radically traditional ballet fans have been disappointed and critical.

Reijo Kela

The best known avant-garde dancer and choreographer in Finland is certainly Reijo Kela. His production criticizes the urban way of life. Kela's own roots are in the countryside and in his works you can find linkages with the ecologists' philosophy.

Reijo Kela studied Cunningham-technique in New York. For many years he has already abandoned big stages. He is interested in finding new points of contact between dance and the surrounding world and surprised people by taking dance into museums, galleries, marketplaces, fields, streets and so on. He makes improvised works with live music. Kela calls his way of working "near-dance".

In his choreography "Ilmari's Field" Kela combines modern Finnish reality and his home village's history as a war battlefield for an expressive drama, with images from Finnish mythology. He dances on the roof of a barn and drove the audience like cattle with a whip. The local audience received the performance well. Someone who had never before seen a dance performance said: "Hell, it's all about us".

Kela was the last of the "lucky ones" who got an artist's grant for 15 years from the state. In Finland the state has become the main supporter of dance and also other art forms. Maybe in this respect we are the "leading" western country. The support given by the state to dance is aimed at performance activities, training, artist pensions, artist grants and to support the dance organisations. The state support to dance is less than to other performing arts and after this year the longest grants are "only" for five years.

New trends

Even if some dancers had found new softer techniques like contact-improvisation the concept (image) of a dancer changed in the 80s. The dancer had to be both strong and sensitive at the same time. Even female dancers were allowed to have strong muscles. Embodiment was the main concept in art and science. Postmodern dance favours complete disclosure of formerly private areas, individuality and courage. Choreographers felt free to combine theatre, visual art and different styles and techniques. Female identity was complex. Woman should be sexy, intelligent, motherlike, male-like and female-like. Femininity and its stereotypes (cliches) were dealt with many different ways. Irony and grotesque humour were used to deal with these themes.

Now in the 90's the physicality by itself is no longer so important. Dancers are allowed to be different. Certain styles are no longer important. The themes of the choreographies are very personal dealing with deep inside feelings and the relationship of the choreographer's own embodiment and environment. Choreographers want to express in their own way what it means to be a woman, to be a man, to be a human being, to be homosexual or to be lesbian.

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