

Tero Saarinen and "Toothpick"

Interview by Patricia Boccadoro

PARIS, 7 December 1998 - When an early phone-call changed an afternoon appointment with Tero Saarinen to one later that morning, I had to rush, but he had to rush even more ; somebody had misunderstood the message because he'd suggested meeting on the eleventh of the month, not eleven o'clock that day

This tiny touch of farce as we both arrived breathless at the ornate, mock Viennese café Zimmer in Paris might give the impression we are disorganised people. Quite the contrary. Saarinen knows exactly what he is doing and precisely where he wants to go, despite the fact he seems to be doing " ten thousand things " at the same time.



A classically trained dancer whose whole body conveys emotion on stage, Saarinen was a pupil of the Ballet School of the Finnish National Opera for three years before he joined the company in 1985.

With his astonishing talent and blue-eyed Nordic good looks, he was rapidly promoted soloist, dancing all the main roles in the then mainly classical repertory, and in 1988, he won the gold medal in the [Paris International Dance Competition](#), contemporary section, with a solo created for him by Jorma Uotinen, now director of the Finnish National troupe. (This solo was the base of Uotinen's most well-known work, *Ballet Pathétique*, premiered in Helsinki the following year).

" My career really took off then ", Saarinen told me. " It slowly dawned on me that there were other goals in life besides trying to be like Baryshnikov. Dance became a whole new world and suddenly lots of possibilities opened up and I started to find my own way. "

"I was brought up in a small village where dance was unknown, and I didn't start learning until I was seventeen which was maybe too late for me to become a prince. I felt limited because fifteen years ago, there were close links with Russia , and everything was a little old-fashioned ", he said.

" Then we started doing short modern pieces which awoke my interest in contemporary ballet, and I saw the work of Uotinen and other Finnish modernists which made me realise there were other things I wanted to say, and other ways of expressing them ".

Saarinen explained how he began creating solos for himself quite naturally, " I made no sudden decision to become a choreographer, but I wanted to dance ballets based on my own experience. I created honest pieces reflecting my life, and it felt right ", he said.

The great change in his career came in 1992 when he left the National Ballet and moved to Japan for a year, where he studied martial arts, Butoh dance, and Kabuki. He learnt Nepalese dance at the Kalamandapa Institute, Katmandu, where there was a totally different approach and way of thinking.



" Most of my time after this seemed to be spent on tour ", Saarinen told me. " I danced with an American group, worked in Germany, went to Italy with Daniel Erzalow, and took part in Johann Kresnik's theatre production *Francis Bacon*. But I wanted to use all the experience I'd accumulated and do something more permanent with people who wanted to work with me ", the choreographer said, " so when I got funding from the Finnish government three years ago, I created my own company, " Toothpick ".

There are two Israelis, a Norwegian, and three Finns, all with a classical background in the troupe, interpreting a growing repertoire of works by Carolyn Carlson, Jorma Uotinen and Tero Saarinen himself..

Westward Ho was the first piece Saarinen wrote for his new company. " I was brought up next to the sea which I love, so it's about sailors and friendship ", he said. " It begins at dawn, then it's midday, finally evening. It could be a day in one's life, or a whole lifetime, depending upon how the audience perceives, or receives it. I almost

became a painter before I discovered dance, so now I try to mix the two, and I design both costumes and set very often. When there's light in Finland, it's very strong for twenty-four hours, then there is darkness for many days, so lighting is very important for me, again a reflection of my upbringing. "

In *Westward Ho*, the stage is totally white. The costumes are pure white, and there is a strong blue light. It's very Nordic, and very beautiful. " Nordic gloom " , he added. But the smile that illumined his face belied his words.

All Tero Saarinen's spare time is spent in the Fnac(the largest music and book store in France) " I'm always listening to music ", he told me, " and I use many different kinds in my work. Sometimes there's a long period of classical. At the moment I'm planning to use *Gaspard de la Nuit* by Ravel for my next creation in Lyons ; it's a lovely piece of music, meditative ; and I'm already working on this ballet for four dancers in my head.

" Next summer I want to create a new version of *Pulcinella* because Stravinsky's score fascinates me, and I've choreographed a short piece for the Theatre de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines , programmed for May. "

Lionel Hoche, with his company, "Mémé Banjo", based in St. Etienne is billed to appear with Saarinen at the suburban theatre, currently presenting Claude Brumachon, director of the Centre Nationale de Nantes.

France actually has six or seven national theatres, and twenty-eight flourishing choreographic groups, or *Centres Nationales*, smaller companies directed by young French choreographers firmly implanted in cities outside the capital.

Saarinen, whose base is Helsinki added, "I'd love to establish my company here. France is in the middle of Europe, and has a dance audience lacking in Finland, with its population of barely five million scattered over such a wide area. Outside Helsinki you can count yourself lucky to get eighty people to see your performance !"

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