

# JOHANNA NUUTINEN INVESTS IN PHYSICAL IMAGINATION

TEXT Jenny Jägerhorn-Tabermann TRANSLATION Claire Dickenson

After 15 years of job security with the Finnish National Ballet, dancer and choreographer Johanna Nuutinen is now opting for freedom, diving into an uncertain freelance future. Following her breakthrough with the multi-award-winning dance film *Me – Story of a Performance*, she now has her sights set even higher. “I want to focus on building an international career. Success requires respect and awareness of what works in different cultural contexts.”

**SHE IS ABOUT** 12 years old in the photo I have in front of me. The same intense and resolute look in her eyes. We studied together for a while at the Finnish National Ballet School, followed by several years working together at the National Ballet. I remember her as a soldier who never gave up. Even from an early stage, **Johanna Nuutinen** had a highly professional approach to work.

“I got that from my father, a photographer, with whom I worked a lot as a model when I was a child. That nurtured my work ethic. I also learned a lot about production work and entrepreneurship.”

In February she handed in her resignation notice, despite not yet having found

out that she would receive a three-year artist’s grant from the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

“I’ve always followed my intuition and have never walked away from something I felt strongly about doing. I poured my heart and soul into my work for the National Ballet during my 15 years in the company and 10 years in the Ballet School. But everything has its time. Everyday life won’t change much from how it has been for the last two years I’ve spent on a leave, which, alongside dance, have been defined by staying up into the early hours sending festival applications and the like.”

At the National Ballet Nuutinen has

worked with many of the biggest name choreographers in the world of dance: **Ohad Naharin**, **Jiří Kylián**, **William Forsythe** and **Tero Saarinen**, to name just a few.

“I’m grateful to have been given the opportunity to work with so many fantastic choreographers. Some days were extreme – having to switch from Ohad Naharin to Swan Lake in the space of 15 minutes. Your body can cope with it up to a point. I’ve never seen myself as a classical ballerina, I’m more interested in a different kind of image of a woman.”

Nuutinen is well aware that she is leaving behind her the security an institution provides – a monthly salary, paid holidays,

Johanna Nuutinen  
© Tuukka Koski



sick leave, a pension ... all things that many freelancers and artists can only dream of.

“I would have had ten years left until retirement. But a lot can happen in ten years. Of course it’s nerve-wracking to go it alone with nothing to fall back on; it’s a case of survival of the fittest.”

The National Ballet’s choreography workshops and performances were a crucial springboard for Nuutinen, allowing her to create her own choreographies for the company. The first years in a company are often tough, and many younger dancers start off as substitutes. The workshops offered a chance to show a creative side. I remember seeing her in a whole new light.

On stage she is intense and captivating.

“The workshops are an important way to unearth new talent. It was a challenging platform on which to test out ideas, and to learn how the entire production phase works.”

#### A BREAKTHROUGH VIA FILM

Nuutinen’s major breakthrough on the international stage came with the short film *Me – Story of a Performance*, which was created in 2013 in collaboration with **Jopsu** and **Timo Ramu** of Musuta Ltd. The minute-long trailer is visually breathtaking, and in today’s digital world it has spread far and wide via social media and festival

applications. The film has been shown at over 40 film festivals around the world (Festival FIVER in Spain, Miami Short Film Festival, FIFA Montreal, Cinedans Amsterdam, San Francisco Dance Film Festival...).

“I knew that I would be returning to my job at the National Ballet after my job alternation leave, and I wanted to have something I could develop on the side, and it worked. It will still take some time for me to get established. The film was completed in 2013, and three years later I’ve managed to sell a durational performance concept that includes the film to contemporary museums.”

Nuutinen developed the film further



1. JOHANNA NUUTINEN:  
*Me – Story of a performance*  
© Mark Stubbs

2. JOHANNA NUUTINEN: *Iris*  
© Jukka Rajala-Granstubb

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into the piece *Me*, where, alongside the film, she provides a live improvisation, creating a performance in collaboration with the audience. The piece is a site-inspired work for museums and galleries, and serves as an example of the kind of durational works Nuutinen finds captivating.

“The longest I’ve gone in terms of improvisation is nine hours. I eat and go to the toilet in the moments when no one is watching. I want to use the work to break down personal boundaries and explore how audience members react to touch.”

The solo piece *Hatched* was born when a festival director in Hong Kong saw the trailer of *Me* in Singapore, and asked Nuutinen to create a new piece for the 2014 i-Dance festival. *Hatched* takes use of power, anonymity and identity as its starting points.

*Social eMotions* is based on the results of a two-year scientific and artistic study carried out in collaboration with a research team led by **Tommy Himberg**, PhD from Aalto University’s Department of Neuroscience and Biomedical Engineering, and Nuutinen’s partner, performer and

“First, I build a world of sound, the visual and other moods. I then physically step into that universe.”

producer **Jarkko Lehmus**. The project studied emotions in a social context from the viewpoints of neuroscience, dance, music and visual art. One of the biggest challenges the team faced was first finding a neutral movement which they could start from.

“People in the same space have an emotional effect on each other. Trying to hold an emotionally neutral movement while the other person was dancing full-out romantic love or loathing was very challenging. It was a very interesting and educational experiment, and one that I have been able to draw upon in my working process. Personally, I often start with feelings, but it

is useful to be able to return to the zero point if I need to.”

In the resulting performance, the audience can use a mobile application to influence the performers’ emotional content.

#### A PERSONAL UNIVERSE

As a child, Nuutinen could often be found drawing. She liked creating three-dimensional architectural spaces. Still today she often jots down her works on paper when starting work on something new.

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Recurring themes in Nuutinen’s works are identity, metamorphosis, and how the body and mind are influenced by fatigue and the duration of the performance. What happens if you see a fifth or sixth version, and how does the piece take shape in different spaces? She has travelled the world studying different movement practices, including Ohad Naharin’s *Gaga* and *Butoh* with **Yoshito Ohno** in Japan.

In addition to the dance, the visual

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elements and video are also important parts of Nuutinen’s multidisciplinary works. “A video image constitutes an expansion of reality, another dimension.”

#### FOCUS ON ASIA

Besides creating a stronger contact network in Finland, Nuutinen also has her sights on establishing an international career. At the moment her attention is focused on Asia.

“In a new culture you develop further and can challenge your own perspectives. How success is achieved internationally is dependent on the artists themselves – you have to become your own business card and be aware of the kind of environments in which your pieces are presented in. It can take a number of years to establish yourself. Success requires respect and awareness of what works in different cultures.”

Nuutinen has not ruled out establishing her own company in the future, but is keen to emphasise that this would require finding a suitable person to take care of the management side of things.

Her three-year plan includes activities such as organising a variety of workshops

for dance, circus and theatre artists lead by international master teachers of different movement methods

“It is important to me that I share the knowledge I find interesting and work with the group to test ourselves through improvisation. It won’t be focused solely on dance but rather on movement – physical imagination.” ■

#### PROFILE: Johanna Nuutinen

Lives in: Helsinki

Age: 34

Career: The Finnish National Ballet 2002–2017 (freelance 2015–2017)

If I weren’t a dancer I would: be a photographer and have my own espresso bar.

#### UPCOMING WORKS 2017–2018:

*ME – durational performance*

In November 2017

Centre Pompidou Málaga

#### IRIS

Premiere in September 2017 in Helsinki  
Collaboration with the Irish residency centre Shawbrook

#### ROOM

Premiere in November 2017 in Pori  
Collaboration with Pori Dance Company and the Centre of Choreographic Creation Trois C-L (residency in Luxembourg)

#### LUCID DREAM

Premiere in spring 2018 in Helsinki  
Collaboration with Seoul Dance Centre (residency in South Korea)

Writer is freelance dance critic and former dancer at the Finnish National Ballet