

Inspiring Change through Collaboration: An Exchange Between Dance Programs in Outokumpu and Petrozavodsk

Ulla Mäkinen

ABSTRACT

Since 2007, North Karelia College Outokumpu in Finland, and Cultural College of Petrozavodsk in Russia have collaborated in various educational and artistic exchanges. In 2012, a project called Dancing Whirlpool was launched. In addition to a teacher's exchange, a joint full-length piece was created together with four choreographer-teachers and nearly thirty students from Outokumpu and Petrozavodsk. The piece toured in Russian and Finnish Karelia. This article reflects on the role of collaboration in multicultural projects, through the lens of the experiences of Dancing Whirlpool. Why is collaboration important for dance students? Can multicultural collaboration invoke real change in our cultures?

TIIVISTELMÄ

Pohjois-Karjalan ammattiopisto Outokummun sekä Petroskoin Kulttuuriopiston tanssin koulutukset ovat tehneet erilaisia yhteistyöprojekteja vuodesta 2007 lähtien. Vuonna 2012 koulutusohjelmat aloittivat viidentoista kuukauden mittaisen Dancing Whirlpool -projektin, jonka tarkoituksena oli opettajavaihdon lisäksi luoda yhteinen tanssiteos. Lähes kolmenkymmenen tanssijan ja neljän koreografi-opettajan yhteistyössä rakentamaa teosta esitettiin Pohjois-Karjalassa sekä Venäjän Karjalassa. Tämä artikkeli reflektoi kansainvälisen yhteistyön merkitystä Dancing Whirlpoolin kokemusten kautta. Miksi yhteistyö tanssinopinnoissa on tärkeää? Voiko monikulttuurinen yhteistyö saada aikaan aitoa muutosta kulttuureissamme?

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Introduction

I found the collaboration in Russia to be a broadening experience. In my dance studies, I find it truly most important to work with different cultures. The intensive time spent together with the Russian students gave me a personal experience of their way of dancing, and we also got to taste a bit of Slavic folk dancing... (...) One particular experience for me was a duet with a male dancer, who with his own, strong way of dancing affected my dancing, making it clearer and stronger. I also think that this particular project took place at just the right time for the whole group, at minimum spurring a certain blossoming of our skills. (Hannakaisa Hautamäki, second year student from Outokumpu, about the project Dancing Whirlpool)

In *Choreographer's Handbook*, Jonathan Burrows reflects on collaboration, quoting writer Joe Kelleher:

Collaborating is like two people banging their heads against each other, and the collaboration is the bruises that are left behind. (Burrows 2010, 59)

Geographically the two towns, Outokumpu and Petrozavodsk, are located rather close to each other, only a five-hour drive between them. Outokumpu is a small, culturally vibrant town in North Karelia, the Eastern part of Finland. While

once famous for its mining business, it has now transformed the former mine school into an internationally recognized cultural education center. As far as the physical distance is concerned, Outokumpu is not far from Petrozavodsk, the capital city of the Republic of Karelia in Russia – a culturally and historically significant city stretching along the shore of the lake Onega. Culturally belonging to the same Karelian region for more than 1200 years, the course of 20th century history split the area between the two different countries and forced the Outokumpu and Petrozavodsk area and people to grow in their own directions as well. This has caused the two districts to be located simultaneously near and far from each other.

Both of these culturally active towns have their own very different and distinct dance programs. The dance department of North Karelian College Outokumpu is known for its improvisation and somatic work, teachers stemming from the international lineage of new dance. Nowadays it offers students a wide base in contemporary dance and supports their individual artistic approach. The dance department at the Karelian College of Culture and Arts in Petrozavodsk relies on the traditional lineage of ballet and folk dance that is familiar to Russia, and just in recent years has added contemporary dance into its curriculum.

I became the director of the North Karelia College Outokumpu dance department in September 2012, and one of my first projects



*Photo 1: Rehearsal for Dancing Whirlpool at Theater Kaisu, Outokumpu in October 2013.
Photography by Egon Tiik.*

was to begin a new collaboration called Dancing Whirlpool, a co-production with the dance department of the Karelian College of Culture and Arts, funded by the Karelia European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, cross border cooperation (ENPI CBC). This project was a continuation of several collaborations since 2007 between the dance programs of Petrozavodsk and Outokumpu. During the past seven years various events have taken place: teacher exchanges, performance visits and even a dance festival organized together. This time, though, the task was more ambitious than before. In addition to a teachers' exchange, it included constructing a full-length performance together with the teachers and students from both colleges. The piece was performed in Karelia of both Russia and Finland.

Being new to my position, but having a history of traveling and teaching in different cultures, I was excited to begin the project.

Knowing I still lacked experience with this particular kind of collaboration, I asked Jyrki Haapala, initiator of the exchange and the former director of the Outokumpu dance department, to join the project as choreographer. Since neither of us speaks more than a handful of words in Russian, we would not have managed without an interpreter: Jura Spiridonov, a graduate from Petrozavodsk and later from Outokumpu and currently a ballet teacher in Outokumpu, joined in to make communication possible. On the Russian side, teacher, choreographer and director Laryssa Vodynnina had the main responsibility for practical work with the dancers.

Over fifteen months, Finnish teachers in different combinations travelled to Petrozavodsk three times to give master classes and to work on the project. Russian teachers travelled with their students to Outokumpu, twice to work on

the choreography and later to perform. Finnish students along with their teachers travelled to Russia to rehearse and perform in Petrozavodsk, as well as to tour in Russian Karelia. During these fifteen months, dozens of visa applications were written, hundreds of emails were translated between Russian, Finnish and English, dozens of meetings held – but more significantly, stories emerged: stories of encounters, of dance, of learning.

Dancing Whirlpool

The name Dancing Whirlpool was chosen for the project to describe the swirl of encounters related to mixing students from two different cultures together. It derives from the notion that both colleges' faculties are aware of the different contexts in which the students study. Mixing these two indeed creates a whirlpool, where ideas and aesthetics can get messed up, turned around and thought anew, both in the context of performance as well as in the student's experience.

Dance studies at North Karelia College Outokumpu are based on a concept of creating self-reflective, independent dance-makers. Somatic approaches, release-based contemporary dance, improvisation practices and plenty of

personal creative work and collaborations guide the students, who do not all necessarily have extensive experience in dance training. Their peers in the Karelian College of Culture and Arts endure very long days of training in ballet, Russian folk dance and choreography, and have been taught dance since their early childhood. In Petrozavodsk, many aspects of contemporary dance are still new and their views on dance are strongly based on the lineage of ballet. Thus these two student groups not only embody very different physical approaches to dance, but also have different historical knowledge, aesthetics and values shaping their individual interpretations of art and the practice of dance.

One of the main aspects of the collaborations between the schools has been to share knowledge from the field of contemporary dance with the Karelian College of Culture and Arts. This has included teaching release-based contemporary dance classes, floor work, Authentic Movement and somatic practices, which were all new to the Russian students. Reciprocally, the Russian

Photo 2: Warming up with yoga. Class with the dance students of Karelian College of Culture and Arts by the visiting teachers from Outokumpu, Vera Lapiitskaya (front left) and Ulla Mäkinen (front center) in March 2013. Photography by Yuri Spiridonov.





Photo 3: Jyrki Haapala (front) warming up the Russian and Finnish dancers for the rehearsals in theater Kiisu, October 2013. Photography by Egon Tiik.

teachers brought their knowledge of folk dance with its specific lineage to the Finnish students. These exchanges have been eye-opening on both sides, ultimately benefiting the students in their quests for their own vocabulary and art-making.

Why Collaboration?

In our contemporary world of speed and efficiency, taking time for slow processes is not easy, and there is the risk of creating collaboration just to put forth a trendy image. In her text *Prognosis on Collaboration*, Bojana Kunst states that we should rethink the notion of collaboration and free it from the world of deadlines, speed and constant actualization. Collaboration has become a catch-phrase, “an honorific that must signal more than it performs” (Kunst 2010, np). There is the potential for change, but are we merely building an image of collaboration, unable to actually initiate change? It is necessary to relate critically to the importance

of collaboration and ask what are the goals of the process. “What is true collaboration?” is a very difficult question, but asking for “genuine exchange”, according to Kunst (2010, np), could serve as “a reminder, a trigger which can help us talk about the potential of collaboration as an agent of change.”

I believe multicultural collaboration in dance can be a reminder to look more carefully at our practices of dancing and teaching. There is a constant danger that the structure becomes more important than the content – that the idea of an international project becomes more important than the actual exchange. In my opinion, the collaboration has to primarily serve the students and must intend to enable change – however small or big – in the collaborating cultures. It is not easy to have enough time for going into deep processes. It is too easy to have

a class by an international teacher who will propose something new that by the end of the day is forgotten, or buried, underneath one's main influences. But maybe the popular images of collaboration and international exchange can also support us to dive beyond the surface and really take enough time to understand the potential of what we actually could share.

Dance as a Universal Language?

It is an idealistic thought that dance can be a universal language reaching beyond our cultural differences. Shapiro (2008) talks about the belief that dance provides a common language, creating a positive partnership between cultures, which is assumed to transcend and obliterate all other differences. While everyone who has worked with multicultural groups has seen the beauty of the mutual, non-verbal experience of dance breaking the ice and bonding people from very different backgrounds, it is still too romantic to consider dance itself removing all obstacles. This would also be undervaluing the meaning of art. By collaboration we should aim for more, and consider the potential for real change in our cultures.

In the practice of Dancing Whirlpool, it was obvious that there was no time for translating each word. Classes often started with an interpreter. Yet, because the movement and touch were faster tools to transfer information than the slow verbal process which had to go through at least two, sometimes even three languages, the rehearsal processes as well as classes often ended up not being translated. They were just danced and moved through sometimes with a verbal translation dragging behind like an echo or a broken record. The teacher or choreographer, continuing to talk in a language incomprehensible to the majority of students,

could through the intonation of her or his words together with the movement deliver enough information for the students to have something to work with. The verbal information coming after the movement could sometimes clarify what was done, sometimes not.

For the choreographic piece itself, rehearsing began both in Petrozavodsk and Outokumpu separately. There were components of small pieces from both the Russian and the Finnish students, but the overall concept was held together by the choreographers from both schools. Much of the movement material came from Jyrki Haapala. His first task for the students was to study a partnering choreography, which we learned separately in the two schools by watching the material on YouTube.

Pedagogically some of the most interesting moments took place during the days when the YouTube-learned material was polished together, with all the students now in the same physical location. While all had studied the same videos online without further instructions from the choreographer Jyrki Haapala (only amongst themselves and with some assistance from teachers such as myself and Laryssa Vodynina), the material from these two colleges looked undoubtedly different. While the Russian students had focused on the excellence of shapes, executing each step precisely, and the intensity necessary for performance on a grand stage, the Finnish students had searched for the weight and flow to bring them from one movement to the next with the help of breath in order to make the whole picture look harmonious, alive and dynamic.

With nearly thirty students with very different backgrounds working with partnering material, different interpretations were natural and inevitable; polishing the material, making decisions, compromises and aesthetic choices could not have happened if we had relied more on

verbal communication than we did. Repetition – watching and doing – did not require words. In the partnering material it was also through touch that the duets and trios with both Finnish and Russian dancers could understand what the other person wanted to define. Most of the Russians, not understanding English, and the Finns, not understanding Russian, often had to rely on physical, bodily understanding instead of linguistic understanding. Thus I had several experiences of the romanticized thought of dance as a universal language actually telling more to us and revealing more about us than verbal language could, or would do. Without words, the students developed heightened embodied awareness to read each other's emotions, physicality, and intentions very carefully. The physical body revealed information intentionally as well as unintentionally. Words were not there to hide behind.

While bodily movement and dance can be seen as a transcultural language, the interpretation of it is still bound to our subjective viewpoints, experiences and values. Thus I do not see them as a language that is always able to transfer the intention and expression wished for. In fact, even translated words fall short at times and fail to communicate the intended information because of the different body cultures, histories and aesthetics between the teacher and students. It was not rare that misunderstandings had to be solved with the interpreter, even for several times. The misunderstandings were not so much related to clarify actual movements themselves, but to confusions about the physical and social intentions around them.

These challenges would emerge from different thinking and aesthetical values (regarding choices in choreography, movement,

Photo 4: Performing Dancing Whirlpool, October 2013, at Theater Kiisu, Outokumpu. Photography by Egon Tiik.



and sound/light/costume design), gender issues (having a same-sex couple dancing together/ tolerating only male-female partnering), or the notion of abstract versus narrative dance, triggering the question of what is the meaning of a movement, or furthermore, what is the meaning of dance. And moreover, what is the meaning of what we were doing. It was not always easy to find an agreement, resolution or even compromise in the process, but more important than the end result were the collisions themselves. Forcing us to confront our core values regarding the work, they served as a space for the actual exchange, for the real meeting of the cultures, where we could question our own values and thinking processes. If the universal language of dance is the common love that binds and inspires us in collaboration, instead of collaboration being an end in itself, its function could be seen as a to guide us to unknown territory, confronting and reflecting on our cultures and values from deeper within.

Process and the Outcome

A multicultural approach goes against what some regard as our natural human tendency to reject people and cultures that are different from our own. We like to believe that our way of doing things is the right way. Our discomfort with those who are different from us provides a challenge to dance within the complexity of achieving diversity within unity. The task is in finding ways that accept the particular and at the same time transcend the differences. (Shapiro 2008, 256)

According to Shapiro, one of the challenges of multicultural collaboration is the tendency to think that our own culture and ways of working are superior to those of others. This can also be seen in the ways we value certain forms of dance, such as ballet, as being superior to other forms.

We tend to think our values in dance are superior, more intelligent and advanced than those of others. These hierarchical value systems are not necessarily bound to the country we come from, but to the history and education we have been exposed to.

In a group of thirty dancers, there are thirty individual thinkers and movers with their own values, aesthetics, interests and needs. The question is, do we let something become superior to another, and for what reason? As we make choreographic decisions, can there be space for reflecting on different choices, different interpretations of the movement? As we structure the days, what do we prioritize and give most time to? As we teach, how do we share our intentions with the students – are they more like demands or suggestions? When we confront resistance, rejection or discomfort, how do we react?

It is trendy to say that learning happens outside of our comfort zone. In the globalizing world we live in, it seems to be a trendy expression for a reason. It is necessary to step out from a place of safety to be able to see further, not only to learn from others, but to learn from ourselves as well. And as Burrows suggests in the quotation at the beginning of this article, it is not without bruises that we come out of collaboration. But it is the stories behind the bruises that are much more valuable than the bruises themselves. From my own, new-dance-based contemporary dance background influenced by Eastern philosophies, I am tempted to state that the process is more valuable than the outcome. I am aware of this not always being the case in all traditions of dance, and surely not the only way we worked during Dancing Whirlpool. I do not underestimate the importance of the performances we created, especially of the magnificent premiere at the Finnish Theater of Petrozavodsk. As the outcome is what reaches



*Photo 5: Duet with Alexander Romanchenko and Laura Tujula, Theater Kaisu, Outokumpu, October 2013.
Photography by Egon Tüik.*

the larger audience, it is also of much value, and represents the whole process itself. There is actually no need to compare the value of the process and the outcome, as the two are so profoundly intertwined.

The contemplation of process and outcome can be seen as one way of giving space for different ways of thinking and being in collaboration. In *Dancing Whirlpool*, the collaboration definitely turned out to be about the mix of all the different viewpoints we have in dance and ways of practicing dance. Collaborating with a choreographic outcome meant that there were many different styles in one piece of art; it included some sections where we searched for a more common expression and others that underlined our individualities. It is only with generosity and curiosity that this is possible. Choreographers, teachers and students must remain generous with sharing their knowledge and become curious about other ways of dancing. Our mutual love for dance can take us beyond what bruises us, and make us continue the dance with more knowledge and more possibilities to change.

There was a language barrier during the whole production between us and the Russian students, but we understood each other's gestures and movement language. I was a bit nervous to work with dancers from such a different dancing background, but laughter and the positive energy in the group took away the nervousness. From the beginning we became friends with many of the Russian dancers and at the end of the tour in Russia we found comfort in knowing that we would meet again in the fall in Finland.

I appreciate that our schools can give us opportunities like this to work with dance teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds. Dancing Whirlpool is definitely one of the highlights in my dance studies! (Laura Tujula, second year dance student from Outokumpu)

Conclusion

In my opinion, multicultural collaboration such as Dancing Whirlpool can be a remarkable experience serving the individual dance student's practice and developing his/her understanding of dance. In this way the outcome of the project is upon the individual and the depth of his/her experience. The curiosity and generosity of the student are keys to open up a dialogic process that can inspire change, both personal and communal. Collaboration in educational settings should be done for the sake of the student, not the image of the produced work itself. It should also not settle for being in a comfort zone – collaborators should be ready to confront the diversity of values, styles and ways of working involved in the fields of dance and the arts. There are still plenty of ways for our colleges to continue developing our means of collaborating and creating dialogue between our educational approaches, as well as to foster multicultural collaboration in general.

While looking forward and contemplating the possibilities of future collaborations, it is necessary also to consider our common past and where we have come to. Looking back at our common cultural history in the Karelian

region we cannot ignore the hostilities between Finland and the Soviet Union, which led to the Continuation war during the Second World War (1941–1944). The grandparents of these very students were at war with each other, on the very grounds of where we would now, seventy years later, dance together. From this point of view we have come a very long way.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ulla Mäkinen is a Finnish dance artist and teacher, and currently the head of dance education at North Karelia College Outokumpu, Finland. She received her MA in Contemporary Dance Pedagogy from the University of Music and Performing Arts, Frankfurt am Main. Her work is based on improvisation, somatic practices, and release-based contemporary dance techniques. As a teacher she emphasizes collaboration,

open-mindedness and curiosity. Ulla has worked internationally as a dancer as well as a teacher in nearly twenty countries in Europe, America and Asia. She is also one of the initiators and first co-directors of Barcelona International Dance Exchange (BIDE), an international platform for exchange for contemporary dance artists.