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The Audience of Contemporary Dance in Finland

*A study on the audience of the contemporary
dance festival Dance Arena 2000*

English Summary

Dance Arena 2000

This report studies contemporary dance audiences in Finland based on the festival Dance Arena 2000, organised in February 2000. The Dance Arena festival presented key Finnish choreographers, performers and groups as part of the European City of Culture programme in the year 2000, when Helsinki celebrated this special nomination along with eight other European cities. The aim of the Dance Arena was to highlight the current state of contemporary dance in Finland, enhance its image, market it abroad and widen the audience base of dance performances overall.

The research material

In all, the festival featured 30 performances, with an audience totalling close to 5,000. The venues used represented typical dance venues in Helsinki, ranging from the Finnish National Opera, the Helsinki City Theatre, and Kiasma – Museum of Contemporary Art, to the smaller venues of Stoa in the eastern part of the city and Zodiak – the Center for New Dance, located at the Cable Factory in the southwestern part of Helsinki. The festival budget was some 250,000 euros, part of which was used for an extraordinarily visible marketing campaign in Helsinki.

This research is based on an audience survey conducted in eight events representing a variety of the festival programming. In all, 805 question-

naires were filled in. The audience was very motivated as 91 per cent of the respondents returned the questionnaires, a high but not uncommon figure in similar kinds of audience studies in Finland.

Highly educated, relatively young visitors

Broadly speaking, similar demographic trends can be traced in contemporary dance audiences as in other art events and performances, such as in classical music or the theatre in Finland. The participants are well-educated, either students or working in middle-class occupations, female dominated, city-dwellers.

A high level of education is perhaps the most significant demographic feature of Finnish arts audiences. In this survey 44 per cent had an academic background, which is more than double the average rate in the Helsinki region. As a significant proportion of the visitors were still students studying at various universities, the academic orientation becomes even more highlighted. Most of the visitors were either senior or junior white-collar employees or students. On the other hand, those with lower socio-economic position, especially the working class occupations were underrepresented. In addition, pensioners made up a relatively small share of the visitors.

Contemporary dance seems to attract relatively young visitors as almost two thirds (61 %) were under 40 years of age. This figure makes the Dance Arena audience significantly younger than audiences of classical music, the theatre or even some other dance performances such as the Kuopio Dance Festival. On average, Dance Arena's visitors were some ten years younger than in Kuopio. Women comprise a majority of arts audiences in Finland, and this holds true for dance as well, as some 70 per cent of the participants were women.

Mainly from the Helsinki region

The majority of the Dance Arena audience live in the Helsinki region: almost two thirds (61 %) in Helsinki proper, 14 per cent in the neighbouring city of Espoo and 5 per cent in Vantaa. One tenth travelled from outside the Helsinki region. Foreign visitors were only a handful. One of the key findings was that the majority of the audience live within a geographically small area, i.e., the centre of Helsinki. A radius of some five kilometres from the city centre covers most visitors' place of residence. Perhaps a special urban way of life characterises many of the participants.

Friends were key sources in providing information on the dance performances as they also tended to have an impact on the choosing which performance to see and where to go. Also, newspaper articles and leaflets provided by the festival organisers and venues had a great impact on the decisions made. Many of the professionals within the field of dance cannot necessarily name their sources; they receive information and follow events

in the area so closely that they are constantly updated on forthcoming events.

There seem to be various kinds of contemporary dance audiences. Some prefer more established venues and groups such as the Finnish National Ballet or the Helsinki City Theatre Dance Company; others follow well-known individual choreographers, groups or artists, while the more innovative attend more challenging productions in less established venues by less established artists. Naturally there is some overlap between these audiences, but the attitudes shown towards different venues suggest that a certain “venue loyalty” has been established and different stages have different images.

Close relationship to dance

Not surprisingly, many of the respondents have experienced dance as a hobby, or are currently professionals in the field. A bit less than half (45 %) of the audience have never danced as a hobby whereas some 55 per cent have a close link to dance. One tenth are either professional dancers or dance teachers, four per cent study dance full time and five per cent work in other dance-related jobs (such as producers). A quarter (24 %) of the visitors currently have dance as a hobby and 12 per cent have danced as a hobby earlier.

A quarter (23 %) of the audience can be characterised as heavy users of dance performances as they had seen at least six dance performances in the past twelve months. Twelve per cent had seen more than ten productions. Half (53 %) had seen 1–5 performances. Quite a few are newcomers as one quarter (24 %) had not been to any dance performances in the past year. Dance Arena 2000 managed therefore to attract new audiences as it had originally set out to do.

There were differences in audience composition depending on the events. In particular, *Evankeliumi*, a choreography by Jorma Uotinen, performed by the Finnish National Ballet and the heavy metal group Waltari, attracted very different visitors. *Evankeliumi*'s cross-over nature attracted much younger, less dance-oriented, more rock-oriented visitors than the other performances. Also, a significant proportion, 41 per cent, came from outside the Helsinki Region. In this way the Finnish National Ballet managed to widen its audience base considerably. However, it cannot be assessed whether this was just a one-off visit for the new audience or whether they will find their way to other contemporary performances after this first experience.

All in all, this study confirms most of the earlier assumptions concerning dance audiences when it comes to demographic features such as age, gender and educational level. Moreover, it gives background information for the dance field when assessing the means of widening the audience of contemporary dance.