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Marco da Silva Ferreira in Jeft van Dinther's Mountains, from On Earth I'm Done for Cullbert Ballet. Photo © Urban Joren



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Anna Kozonina journeys through an impressive programme but wonders why we keep caging dance in black boxes and white cubes


The 20th edition of Helsinki's annual Side Step festival of cutting-edge international dance gathered viewers around the topics of ecology, diversity, and contemporary spirituality. Surprisingly, these much-loved themes in Scandinavian performing arts that often stay in the close circle of professionals, seem to have found ways into the hearts of the general audience thanks to careful and insightful curatorial work.

On Earth, I'm Done

In *Mountains*, the first part of the diptych *On Earth I'm Done* by **Jefta van Dinther** for Cullberg Ballet, brilliant guest dancer **Marco da Silva Ferreira** managed to embody a whole range of physical and emotional states available to a person in a contemporary technologised world, permeated at the same time with animal instincts and natural forces.

Van Dinther calls the performance archaic-futuristic, but you can also see it as post-apocalyptic, unfolding after an ecological disaster or in a world where the natural landscape can no longer be separated from artificial powers. This image is emphasised in the scenography: the stage is covered with multiple layers of fabric, which at first resemble sand dunes, icy or rocky relief, but then start to move, slowly rising into the sky, expressing softness, reminiscent of a flowing stream. In this natural-cultural landscape, the human body tries to remember something about animal movements and desires while simultaneously being trapped in technological affects. Da Silva Ferreira moves like a strong, dexterous, flexible beast, but at the same time, abruptly interrupts his movements, depriving them of smoothness and naturalness. The voice morpher brings something robotic to his poetry reciting and singing, making the lyrical genres reminiscent of nightmarish memories.

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web.jpg)  (<http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&title=Side Step Festival Helsinki&url=https://springbackmagazine.com/read/side-step-dance-festival-helsinki-2023/>).



On Earth I'm Done | Mountains | Trailer

jefta van dinther

Marco da Silva Ferreira in Mountains, by Jefta van Dinther for Cullberg Ballet

The composition is based on continuity: it avoids the pauses, scene changes, and collages typical of contemporary dramaturgy. This continuity is manifested through almost all expressive means: the sound series is a monotonous work, only increasing in intensity towards the end; the 'landscape' continuously unfolds in the literal sense of the word: the fabric on the floor is evenly pulled upwards, creating an effect of incessant flow. The dancer always remains on the stage and interacts with the landscape, at one moment wrapping himself in the fabric and hovering in the cradle that arises above the ground. It all looks like a huge unfolding structure that prevents us from defining categories or oppositions, such as nature vs. technology, animal vs. robotic.

At the end, what used to be the surface of the 'earth' floats into the sky, taking the floor covering with it, and turning it into a dark mountain. Will it be a new environment for future inhabitants? And what kind of dance would it feature?

Gracefully grotesque

Graces, the widely recognised piece of Italian **Silvia Gribaudi**, explores beauty, aesthetic standards, and (im)perfection as conventionally represented on stage, with both humour and pleasure. Gribaudi – charismatic, ageing, shortish, with a body far from dance norms –

performs in the company of three charming men, of different ages but each with professional dance training and more 'appropriate' bodies. They are the very three graces (a reference to the famous neoclassical sculpture by Antonio Canova.)

GRACES - Silvia Gribaudi



Silvia Gribaudi, Siro Guglielmi, Matteo Marchesi and Andrea Rampazzo in Graces

The work is an exaggerated demonstration of the dancers' efforts to fit into the expectations of a 'good dance performance.' The brave four embark on a dynamic, repetitive dance, like a fitness sequence aiming for maximum synchronicity, but they quickly fall into clumsiness. Trying to demonstrate physical endurance they lose their breath. They show grace, freezing in spectacular poses with serious or enthusiastic faces, shaking the tension off with ironic comments on the strained intellectualism of contemporary theatre. Running in parallel is an ongoing absurd play with basic theatrical effects, light and music, constant communication with technical staff and, most importantly, the audience, who are supposed to evaluate and approve the performers' efforts and the show's spectacularity.

Graces was supported by Andrea Zanoli's documentary *Overtour*, in which Gribaudi, a former corps de ballet dancer, tells how she came to work with her changing body. When you gain weight, the body ceases to be as disciplined and submissive as it used to be, she explains, but it also acquires new qualities and its own agency. The film also documents her workshops with women over 60 who find in dance the freedom of expression, the beauty, and the opportunity to play and be someone that society does not expect to see

on stage at that age or in such a body. They show little pieces in supermarkets and perform naked, demonstrating the grace and surprising superpowers of bodies overlooked by contemporary visual culture.

In *Graces*, what could have been a rather hackneyed 'diversity' theme comes to life in a charming way. The work is very accessible to any audience and connects general issues around our bodies' lives and images with the professional problem of the dancer's changing body. Paradoxically, irony permits seriousness and directness, and the grotesque prevents overacting; *Graces* ends up being full of kindness.

Foolish yet smart

Jenni-Elina von Bagh's *As Time Goes By* deals with a very different dimension of humour: the absurd. The only Finnish performance on the programme, it works with common Helsinki-based art topics through quite widespread artistic devices. The show stems from philosophical research on virtual and incorporeal aspects of bodily expression and its becoming, and plays with 'other-than-human performativity' which here means that bodies, objects, scenography, liquids, words, and the space are taken as active agents in creating the show. Despite the hardcore intellectual background of the performance (it is inspired by feminist philosopher Elisabeth Grosz's *The Incorporeal*), von Bagh's seven performers are looking for fun, non-intellectual and spectacular ways to embody those musings through different encounters on stage, be it putting their bodies in peculiar compositions with objects, playing with nonsense through words, or prancing through the stage in various combinations 'boasting' with their absurdist presence.



Jenni Elina Von Bagh *As Time Goes By*. Photo © Katri Naukkarinen

Bringing contemporary philosophy and art theory together with research on the various bodies and their artistic expression is a trademark of Finnish experimental dance and performance art education, which can be a source of fantastic potential but also sometimes creates narrowness of the aesthetic and choreographic search per se. Sadly, a lot of 'non-human performativity

research', no matter how intriguing it may sound, on stage turns out to be an absurdist manipulation with trash and objects, spiced up by short extracts of pop music and an omnipresent scene in which some kind of a liquid is taking over a human body, sometimes questioning its boundaries, sometimes just being a reference to something 'abject'.

Although *As Time Goes By* has collected almost all of those parts into a sort of performative playbook, it was a success in terms of working with time and dramaturgy. When it's hard to make sense of separate fragments of the show, what really matters is rhythm, intensity play, and the work of 'the invisible.' In this sense, the show reached its goals, smartly walking the fine line between the already slightly hackneyed artistic methods and mastering the local performance art 'genre'.

Reflections on insignificance... really?

Oona Doherty's *Navy Blue* (also reviewed [here](https://springbackmagazine.com/read/oona-doherty-dance-film-interview/) (<https://springbackmagazine.com/read/oona-doherty-dance-film-interview/>)), supported in the festival programme by two video works, the quite well toured *Hope Hunt filmed*, and *Navy Blue Faces*, surprisingly, turned out to be the most conventional performance in terms of aesthetics, dramaturgy, choreography, and probably meaning. The artist's first large-scale production – 12 dancers, to music by Rachmaninov and Jamie xx – looked like a fine combination of all the essential ingredients for a 'proper dance show', which made it almost stuffy. Professional dancers dressed in identical blue overalls – suggesting working class representatives (a recurring image of Doherty's art), labour camp prisoners, or an idea of the dancer as 'universal worker' in a choreographer's hands – sought synchrony at the same time as expressing their individuality within the collective. The permeating sense of anxiety or dread, reinforced by the sounds of gunshots (in the first part of the piece, all the dancers eventually got 'killed' one after another by an external force), was embodied in expressive, almost illustrative and old-fashioned choreography based on conventional compositional structures.



Oona Doherty's Navy Blue. Photo © Sinje Hasheider

However, the performance had strong visual and sound design components, which drew the audience into a dreamy and metaphysical space, appearing in the second part of the show. Turquoise light puddled around lying bodies, suggesting pools of blood that grew to create an impressive abstract visual canvas reminiscent of underwater depths or outer space. Here is when we hear Doherty's well-known voice, reciting the quite poetic speech which she created together with Bush Moukarzel.

Hello.

Thanks for coming.

It's good to see ya

I didn't know you'd be here.

I'm surprised.

You've come a long way.

A really long way.

Four and a half billion years.

That's a long way to come to see a show. But I appreciate it.

[...]

Are we floating? Or are we falling?

Can a thing be falling if it never hits the ground? Unless everything's falling.

Am I falling?

I'm the one in blue.

Next to the one in blue.

Next to the one in blue.

Such a small thing, almost nothing, surrounded by darkness, surrounded by all that space. Surrounded by what's called Everything Else.

A small, insignificant thing on a small, insignificant thing. A pale blue dot on a pale blue dot.

But look again.

There's a whole world in that dancer.

[...]

The speech was to create a swaying and choreographing effect, and in the end, it did so better than the dance itself. Commenting on the actual performance, zooming out into outer space, recounting bitty historical events, the names of entrepreneurs and politicians, it culminated in a citation of the show's budget lines, and asked what seemed to be the artist's main questions: 'And what's the point? Who's it for? What will it do?'

Might *Navy Blue* indicate discomfort with her new professional status (Doherty has recently gained much recognition and received the Venice Biennale Silver Lion award), and reveal conflicts between professional expectations and critical distance to her own work? Are the 'outer space' theme and the impressive last solo of a topless female dancer – who seemed to be furiously shaking off her own body to escape the spotlight, the stage, and her physical being – signs of attempting to escape this inner conflict? For me, this aesthetically pleasing, coherent and virtuoso performance left an impression of lack of faith and creative potential, as if creativity had become hostage to big form and the expectations of the theatrical world.



Choy Ka Fai, *Yishun is Burning*. Photo © Diajana Lothert

Burning Hot

Probably the most exciting and well-crafted show of the programme, **Choy Ka Fai's** *Yishun is Burning* brought together Asian shamanism and dancing, Singaporean spiritual rituals, fascinating documentary video work, live music, vogue ball culture, and western contemporary dance. Performed by Norwegian-Thai dancer Sun Phitthaya Phaefuang (stage name **Aurora Sun**), supported by Singaporean Malay band NADA and Chinese drummer Cheryl Ong and the moving image of a virtual 3D deity, the show brought

together seemingly distant styles and traditions that nonetheless strive to transcend the limitations of the physical body and identities and open up altered states of human consciousness.

Referring to *Paris is Burning*, the famous documentary on vogue culture, and inspired by the extraordinary spiritual rituals of Singapore's suburban town of Yishun, the show creates a multimedia canvas made of interviews with shamans, a traditional-contemporary music performance, and virtuoso solo dance in which it is almost impossible to say which tradition – western or Asian – becomes the basis for the choreography to unfold. Trained in the first instance as a contemporary dancer with ballet classes in the background, Aurora Sun masterfully intertwines positions and steps quite familiar for a westerner with traditional Asian dancing patterns, and movements based on local myths (one, he told me, he called 'chopping demons' heads'). Unlike productions that try to justify Asian traditional dancing through exoticisation, Yishun sets it within wider technological, political, economic and ecological worlds.

Being part of Choy Ka Fai's ongoing project CosmicWander Series – in which he explores fascinating spiritual rituals as well as other folklore and shamanic traditions of Siberia, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia and presents them in various artistic formats, from documentaries to installations and stage performances – *Yishun is Burning* also welcomed a more direct encounter with the audience, typical of traditional dance formats that have never been caged by the western theatre box. At the end of the show, Sun's dance was accompanied by catwalk passage and posing by four vogue dancers from the iconic local House of Ninja. Supported by unexpected cheers from the audience, it developed into a form of vogue ball or celebration in which the dance became a vehicle not for representation, but for joy.

Weird–Place–Stage

As with many festivals, Side Step presented discussions in more conventional artist talk formats as well as three rounds of something that can be called a 'post-talk-show.' That's how American choreographer and researcher **Eleanor Bauer** defined the series of events she hosted with experimental musician **Chris Peck**. Crafted as an improvisation performance in the format of an artist talk on the verge of a stand-up comedy show, merging with live music background or sound interventions from Peck, jazzed up with sporadic dance moments or appearance of Doctor Dance (Bauer), a fictional character that would listen to your complaints and prescribe a dance as a remedy, *Bauer Hour and Peck a Sec* created a nice formal, sensual and intellectual shift in a programme otherwise designed for traditional theatre stages.

During the talk I attended, Bauer had a conversation with **Harald Beharie**, a Norwegian-Jamaican performer and choreographer who had just presented his solo *Batty Bwoy*, and the sound designer for the same piece, Jassem Hindi (though in no way participatory, it was probably the most 'socially engaging' show of the week, with Beharie, fully naked, furiously, gracefully, seductively and dangerously moving between audience members). Toward the end of the talk, Bauer encouraged Beharie to ask the most important question for the night. He asked, how can we bring dance as an art form out of stuffy theatrical spaces that hold the production budgets and limit the possibilities for audience engagement?

'Weird Place Stage,' wrote Bauer on a flipchart, as if she were playing Wordle (<https://www.nytimes.com/games/wordle/index.html>). How did we get stuck in a theatre, that weird place, the most recent box for dance to exist, the least natural, most indisposed to bodily sensitivity and participation, suppressing kinaesthetic empathy and bodily intelligence of the audience? It seemed that the most vibrant shows of the programme came from non-theatrical dance experiences and situations, be it social dancing in *Overtour* or spiritual dancing and vogue culture in *Yishun is Burning*. ●



Helsinki, Finland

www.zodiak.fi/en/sidestep (<https://www.zodiak.fi/en/sidestep>).

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REVIEW