

Dragon Dance Theatre

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Relishing our success

The Capture of the Fire Fish, *Tuli Kala*, Kalevala, Ruino 48
performed October 5, 2007-- Kemijärvi Finland

a review written by art director Sam Kerson, edited by Katah

The symposium was billed as, the closing event of the Artist Residence above the Arctic Circle in Kemijärvi, Finland.

For the last month, the office, on the second floor across the hall from our apartment, was open at eight in the morning and Leena, the friendly part of the good-cop/bad-cop scene they have going over there, was on the phone till she left at eight or nine at night. Aila who turned the key to the office in the morning and revved up the computers concentrated on video and cyber materials, there was a plan to show a movie at the symposium and it had to be made. There was a new carpenter, Oli and his assistant Pekka, working in the well equipped shop. A Japanese artist is in residence Kazuko, she will make a water borne, lantern like, installation for the symposium. Plus there is a light artist from Helsinki, Timu and Esa, his assistant; they arrived with a truck full of equipment a few days before the symposium.

There are three of us Dragons, Katah, Sam and Kerstin, plus our musical ally George Apostolakis, who lives here in town and who we met at one of our Persephone performances and who works at the music school where we often go to rehearse.

At one in the afternoon we appear at the symposium, on the stage at the culture center, the three of us, to dance two pieces that we have created here in Kemijärvi, the first by Kerstin regarding the condition of womankind in this modern world, a solo piece, wearing a black costume in a red and white lighting scheme and accompanied by, a CD of, the accordionist, Tatu Kantomaa, playing a composition by, Veikko Ahvenainen.

The second piece is a complex collaboration by the three of us based on Katah's poem, *A Nations Palms Reach up to Allah*, which she performs. The poem is dramatized by Sam's choreography, danced by Sam and Kerstin, in the *mise-en-scène*, created by projecting the graphics from the linocut series, *Imperial Armies in the Garden*, on the back wall of the stage and dancing in the image. The music is Sibelius', *Swan of Tuonela*, complimented or spiced up by Katah's very live sax.



Dance Poem "Palms Reach up to Allah, pastel by Sam Kerson, 2007

A good little crowd, including a number of prominent citizens and a number of big wigs, a delightfully engaged woman from the Finnish Ministry of Education and the flamboyant head of ResArtis, Europe, and a group of fifty artists and art lovers and Lapland culture people. First we warmed up in the music building, then, we danced this strong and intense dance, for this intimate audience, a good performance and a good start for our day. Afterwards, we hardly spoke to anyone, but dodged out the stage door to our waiting bicycles and rode across town, through the field, and along the lake shore to the site of our evening performance.

We have built a stage along the lake shore, ninety meters across and thirty meters deep, with five straw houses along the back of the stage, and three large fish, each three meters long and one and a half meters high, along a diagonal line, stage right; stage left is defined by a low hill where the musician is set up, so he has a bit of elevation and can see everything. The space is a sculpture park, and the five large sculptures that are visible are each on a low hill of its own. These knobs create a sort of deep amphitheatre, behind a large flat area where the main part of the audience can stand along the edge of our set. The back drop is a large pond with birch trees along the shore and in the distance a silhouette of the town, Kemijärvi.



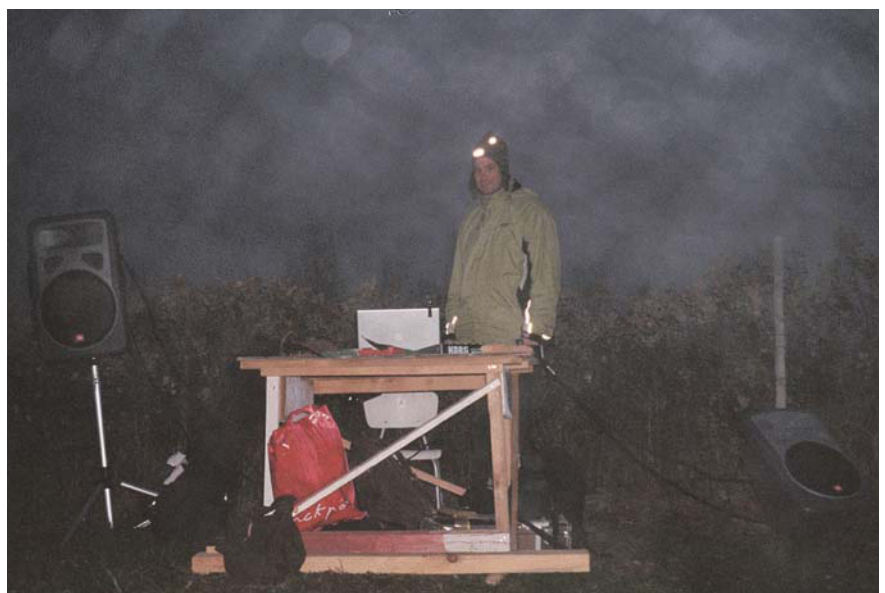
As we come cruising in on our bikes we see that Yuppi has been here in our absence and installed a string, dividing the audience from the performance area. The carpenter Oli is stretching a home made, Yuppi invented, fusing device from one stage element to the next. We join him and stuff the fish with hay and fill the walls of the houses with hay as well. The light men, Timu and Esa from Helsinki, have placed a dozen large red fixtures along the front of the set and three at each end, plus they have run electric wire for the music table, in fact they installed the table.

It is the fifth of October and we are 66 degrees north of the equator, the weather is stunning, sunny but in a, late in the day way with the sun close to the horizon, warm, on the side of your body that faces the sun, but noticeably cooler on the other side, that is warm on the south side, cool on the north side. There is a slight breeze and a good drying factor, which is drying the rather damp hay we are working with. Swans in formation fly overhead, calling out to one another, as they begin their southern migrations. When we feel the set is ready we ride back to our apartment for a snack. As we sit at the table we watch a low cloud sweep in from the west, if we look up we can see blue sky, but the ground is covered with fog and visibility is about 200 feet. This is the weather the light artists were hoping for and we see its charm too, everything emerges from the fog and everything is shrouded in fog.

Just before six, our actors begin to arrive at the residence, we have the large masks and the fish lanterns outside ready to go. Twenty of us start the walk to the site with the puppets, sticks and masks over our shoulders. We go right to work, reviewing the dances, checking the sound levels, discussing the entrances and exits. We have not had very many rehearsals and none of the volunteers have ever worked on a show quite like this before. Some times they play out of doors, and at night, but this stage is vast, the style might be called, slow moving spectacle. The piece is a mytho-drama based on the texts from the Kalevala. There are about twenty performers. George's electronic music emanates from the hill, stage left, while Katah's saxophone, is on the scene, front and center, together they set the pace for the five large masks and a number of group dances. At least, all the texts, are in Finnish and the story line is quite clear, there are ten simple scenes.

By seven it is dark, Yuppi has built hundreds of fires for a mile or more along the lake shore, and in the harbour just over the small hills and in the greater area between our set and the sculptures, smoke and flames can be seen in every direction and there are more and more people moving through the night from fire to fire. The fog moves over the lake and across the land threading

itself between the trees along the shore and entering our stage through the doors of the houses. The mist is hugging everything, lines are shortened and edges are softened, sounds are a bit flat, voices indicate people close at hand but they are not visible. The mist diffuses the light, as it does the eerie sounds, generated by George's computer. When the lights come up, the stage is bathed in red. George picks his guitar over the synthesized base. Hardly visible on the hill side, we hear him improvising, riffing, with his instruments.



George Apostolakis, Capture of the Fire Fish, photo by Sam Kerson

By quarter of eight everyone is waiting, hundreds of people have lined up along the very long front edge of the set, ninety meters, and they are three or four deep, all the way. The performers are feeling a bit of pressure to begin; at one point the audience even starts a rhythmic clapping but they must have realized that we too were waiting for Yuppi's boat load of guests who have sailed out on the lake to see the fires.

By ten after eight, the actors have been in their places for twenty five minutes, waiting quietly to step out on the stage. Leena comes running and calling out, "The ship has come, we are here". I give the signal to begin the performance. By now the audience lines the stage five or six deep and people stand on all the hills, dark silhouettes against the sky. There are seven or eight hundred people in the audience!!!



Spectators, Capture of the Fire Fish performance, photo by Lauri Akola

The first movement includes everyone, a dance to the four directions; all the dancers are singing Kerstin's, Kalevala song. The twenty dancers move, forward and back, using a gesture that suggests weaving a net and then one that reminds us of throwing the net out into the water.

This first motif is followed by the entrance of the story telling ensemble, two large masks one of Vainamoinen and one of Ilmarinen the black-smith, accompanied by Katah with her sax and the narrator Lasse, dressed in a white suit. Lasse pronounces the text of the Runo 48 the Fire Fish, Runo in his clear voice articulating each of the many Finnish syllables. In the first stanzas Vainamoinen says, "Since all the houses are dark we must go fishing, for the fire fish, a great fish, that has swallowed the fire". All the people of the village enter, half of them represent the fishermen and half of them represent the fish, it is a line dance in which the audience sees that the people do go fishing but they only catch each other, the dancers exit in a *fishing frolic*, arms around each other laughing and chatting.

Vainamoinen and Ilmarinen say, "If we are going to catch the fire fish we must go fishing ourselves". Six green and yellow, fish lanterns on long poles enter, stage left, and cross slowly to the center. In cold eyed, fishy confidence, the lanterns make figure eights around the giant masks and then make, large school of fish movements, three this way and three that way, till they exit again.

Now the narrator tells how these little fish, "mere fish fry", were not what the heroes wanted. The two decide to make their nets bigger and cast them out again, with one foot on an island and an eye to the heavens, they cast their great net and this time they catch the large fish, the fish, which has swallowed the fire. At this point the three large fish sculptures, stuffed with hay, along the stage left, diagonal, come into play.

Right about now the fog starts to lift, or blow over, though there is no wind, to speak of, a friend suggested that the fires and the smoke, there were hundreds of fires besides ours, which were quite large, might have lifted the fog. By the end of the show the sky is clear.



Capture of the Fire Fish, photo by Lauri Akola

Vainamoinen hesitates for a moment and says, he doesn't feel sure about cutting into the fish. Katah cues with her sax, George, switches to the remixed, Anssi Tikanmäki's piece *Aamu Lakeuksilla* (Morning in the Flats) and The Son of the Morning appears. This character is danced by Kerstin in a white costume. The narrator tells us that, Son of the Morning says, "If I had my father's knife I would cut open the great fish". As he calls for his father's knife, the knife appears. Son of the Morning lifts the knife and stabs it into the great fish, which is one of three, each three meters long and stuffed with hay.

On cue, the carpenter Oli, lights the first fish which is fused to the other two and then to the five houses. The fusing fails immediately and Oli and Pekka begin a long process of drenching each house with some theatrical chemical and then lighting it with their lighters. The dancers run out from the wings, shouting, "Our houses are on fire", or, "My house is burning, help, help!!" Kerstin is managing this little riot on stage which gets extended as a result of the combustion problem. Katah is playing her sax in front of the various conflagrations. Lasse is telling the story in oratorical Finnish, with a big voice and big gestures; George is playing the Hang Drum Fire music.



Capture of the Fire Fish, photo by Lauri Akola

As the fourth house burns we see the mask of Ilmarinen burning, inside this house-on-fire. Still running and shouting the actors from the burning houses leave the scene. Incidentally, Kemijärvi was burned to the ground by the retreating German army in 1945. People say, all of Lapland, all the town and villages were burned at that time, at the end of the war.

Throughout the performance Katah has been cueing each movement and shift with ornamental figures played on her sax. Lasse the narrator continues to speak the Kalevala which says, Ilmarinen suffered agony from his burns. Ilmarinen climbed on top of a magic stone where he calls to Pohjola, old woman of the north; “Bring on the wind and the snow and the sleet and the ice, the rhime ice and the grainy snow, the cold icy wind, the freezing, chilling, clear nights and the deep, deep snow, to ease my pain, to cure my wounds.”

From both sides of the stage the Pohjola masks enter, large white and blue masks with long white fabrics trailing, they cross in front of the, other Ilmarinen mask, there were two, and the three masks dance together, a healing dance, which the narrator informs us, heals Ilmarinen the smith and makes him the man he used to be.

The Pohjolas exit, while the narrator goes and puts a bit of the fire into his lantern, he then explains that Vainamoinen persued the fire and contained it in his tinder box and that ever after the houses had fire when they wanted it.



Pojola--Capture of the Fire Fish performance, photo by Jouni Kuvaia, 2007

The rest of the performers come back on stage, to join the two large masks, Vainamoinen and Ilmarinen, the narrator and the sax player, in a long line, in front of the fires, and they take their bows. We hear the hundreds of gloved hands clapping, the actors bow again. Yuppi, shouting from somewhere in the crowd, insists that the director appear. I have been kneeling on the wet ground in front of the audience at center stage taking photos; I unstiffen myself, stumble forward and join the performers for a last bow. The narrator invites the public to follow him back to the Artist Residence for a cup of warm refreshment.

Something has happened here, we drew a bigger crowd than the hockey game. Is it because of the Kalevala? Is it because of the night, maybe the last beautiful night of the luxurious fall? Is it a result of Leena's advertising campaign? We have more than ten percent of the local population at the show!

Our hosts, especially Yuppi and Leena, are delighted, our company gratified, and we are high, cruising on adrenalin and good will and a shower of accolades. Could an Astrology show; draw this crowd? Were they moved by the procession of the Zodiac? Surely this piece, this fishing tale, was an introduction to the age of Pisces, are these Aquarians nostalgic for times gone by? As it is above, so it will be below?



Dance of the Son of Day, pastel by Sam Kerson, 2007

from the scene of the Fire Fish,
from the polar circle, from Lapland.

Sam, Katah and Kerstin
Kemijarvi, Finland; October 7, 2007