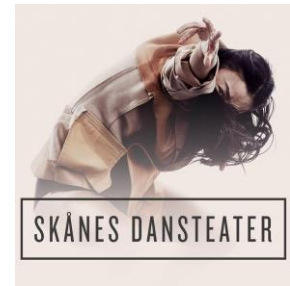


DancePod with Skånes Dansteater

Ep42: Johanna Nuutinen - Sinking into structure
Host: Samuel Denton, dancer Skånes Dansteater
Guest: Johanna Nuutinen, choreographer
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Transcript

Samuel Denton talks to Johanna Nuutinen

5th September 2023

Samuel

First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me today.

Johanna

Thank you. It's an honour.

Samuel

That's very kind. We have a tradition of asking this and it's a question that deals with space and place. And just to give you some background, it comes from a creative process that we did with Tilman O'Donnell. And like all good art it was a question that was inherited from another artist called Eleanor Bauer, and I'm sure we'll talk a little bit more about being inspired and the passing on of knowledge. I think it's quite nice because it's a question that in a very subtle way brings into focus where each of us may be placing our attention and perhaps the different ways of seeing. So the question is: where are you in space and in place? So space, you can think of in physical terms. You can be as literal or poetic as you want, and then place, a little bit more in metaphorical terms. So where are you emotionally? Where's your headspace?

Johanna

I'm in a luxurious recording room and I taste and smell tea. The beautiful lamp also gives warmth and I feel I could be in London, in this magical mysterious place where magic will happen. So this is the room, and then place, I'm in between creation processes. So I'm constantly trying to be super patient with myself, since I don't know all the answers yet. So being comfortable with the uncomfortable is where I'm at. And since I'm also producing my own work, that battle inside my head, the excel versus this intuition and creative space. That's where my mind's divided at this moment.

Samuel

You're spinning several plates all at the same time?

Johanna

Yes, and I know that in November I can sleep!

Samuel

Ok, well why don't I start very simply by just giving you the space to briefly introduce yourself. Who are you? What do you do? And how do you describe what you do?

Johanna

I'm Johanna Nuutinen and I'm a choreographer and I direct work for stage. Work where the motion, the sound and the space have equal value. I think that's what I am in a nutshell, in this particular space.

Samuel

I think that's where I'd like to focus my attention. But maybe for listeners to get a little bit more acclimated to you and to get to know you a little bit better, can you cast your mind back a little bit and talk to me about your meeting with dance itself? How did you begin and what caught your fascination?

Johanna

I lived my childhood on an island and there were three hobbies: scouts, gymnastics and then later came ballet. I was doing gymnastics, but it went in the direction of 'you should compete', and I didn't like that idea. I somehow didn't feel the need to collect points and to do things perfectly. My sister did ballet and the person in charge of the gymnastics asked me what I would like to do if not gymnastics? I checked with my sister, and I said I'm going to start to do ballet, without even knowing what it is, I went to take the class. Everybody else was ok with ordering this pink leotard with a little tutu and kind of being part of the group in that way, I didn't feel it. I had my own black leotard and I somehow got really inspired or attached to the mechanics of the technique and like, how do you do it? And I became obsessed with that. Ballet for my body is not super easy. I'm talented in that movement range and so on, but there are some challenges and I think what took me through those 25 years that I did it, was that I just never gave up on figuring out how I could figure it out! And in some ways that has also become the analytical approach to ballet that has also transferred and found its place in the contemporary dance and more multi-dimensional movement, and this is something that I need to be aware of myself. Because the people that I work with, we can create a beautiful creation space when we share the will to use the analytical side of the mind as well as the intuition. And I thought before that everybody is like this. But it's not the case, and that's the beauty of it. We just need to be aware of it.

Samuel

Yeah, I second that with ballet because I think what I enjoy about it is the fact that it has a certain exactitude and a strong form that requires accuracy. And what you said rings true in my head as well, it's that there's a very specific actualised target with ballet, but yeah, I guess once you have it, what do you do with it? So, I'm curious to learn a little bit more about your performance career because I know that you've had a hugely successful career dancing in the Finnish National Ballet. I'd like to hear a bit more about how you started to embrace and interrogate that foundation of classical ballet and move more into contemporary forms.

Johanna

So, let's go back to when I was nine years old, when I got caught with this technical, detailed work and I became obsessed with ballet. Somehow the exactness, it always gave me a carrot towards which I wanted to go to. To the point where I actually lost myself. I didn't ask questions to myself anymore. Is

it me that is willing to do it or is it just that I want to reach something that is shown to me. And then I think I was fourteen or fifteen years old; I got a chance to work on a solo for a competition. In that process I needed to improvise for the first time in my life and the choreographer gave me this exercise or task that before the next session you should create a sequence, a phrase for arms and hands. And I thought, oh, what is this as a fifteen-year-old? But then my approach is always: I do what is asked of me to do, and I did it at the last minute. And that phrase became the core of the whole solo. And while we worked at it, I found my own unique voice. I realised that dance can be this. I realised that dance can be a place to physicalise emotions, and on stage no one is pushing me in any direction. So, it's my time. It's my space. I control my time and what I share. So that was an awakening and then I started to be fascinated by contemporary dance and the space that it offered. And then I got to create another solo for another competition and that kind of continued the journey for me. And somehow the feedback that I got was that there was some special energy or courage to be seen through. And that gave me a sign that, ok, maybe I have a voice. And then with that voice, I can carry through the professional side of things and eventually my own voice became so strong in my head that I said to myself, if you have so many opinions, you should do it yourself. You should put yourself up for the task and then also see what it's really about when you are responsible for the whole thing. And yeah, that's the path that I am on now.

Samuel

So I'm going to put you on the spot and ask you how significant and vital is dance to you in your life?

Johanna

It has shifted a bit. So now I look at the work as a whole, the sound designer, dramaturg, the light designer, the space designer, costume designer, and the dancers that I work with. There is a strong dialogue with all of them and lately, I have only used composed music for example. So dance is one part of it, and I want to be as detailed with that as with the sound and space and costumes.

Samuel

You've already mentioned that you take on so many different roles. You've worked both as a dancer and choreographer. Does your view on dancing change depending on your role or are they all sort of intertwined. How do you think about that? What are the differences between those two roles, more specifically?

Johanna

Currently I'm aware of what I feel with my body when I watch the other person dance, and then I negotiate with myself, is this how my body would do it? Or how can I step into the other person's timings, rhythms and see, and direct through that. Rather than directing through what I sense. So this is a balancing act. I don't want to force somebody to do it as I would do it, but I do use that knowledge. I trust the history that I have, and I want to also have everybody in the room trust each other and trust themselves with that knowledge that they also have. I can learn something from them. So it's a two-way exchange.

Samuel

I already get a real sense that you're a very curious person, and I think when we put curiosity into practice, we're putting ourselves in uncomfortable positions. And we've already mentioned it, but

from what I've observed from you, you seem quite comfortable from the outside being in the uncomfortable. So how do you work with being afraid of what you don't know?

Johanna

I'm boiling! I'm boiling inside! But it's nobody else's business. My boiling is my business. So that's how I work, to kind of calm down so that I can see the possibilities. That's how you also find the answers. This is something that I also nowadays talk about beforehand, before the creation process, I make sure to check and listen to where everybody is at and how comfortable they are with their uncomfortable, because we are never ready, we are exploring and opening new doors and sometimes it can also be frightening.

Samuel

On one hand, I think oh god it's such a joy to feel completely out of your depth. On the other hand, it's like, no it's not! It feels horrible and terrifying. But I feel like within this art form, I'm speaking more specifically from a dancer's point of view, I'm constantly responding to someone else's vision and I'm getting on board with their creative process. Maybe it's something that we also learn more and more as we go, or?

Johanna

The calmness?

Samuel

Yeah, the calmness. How to deal with those difficult situations.

Johanna

I think for me it has to do with being part of that massive production house that I worked in, where there were eighty of us and the pressure was on because sometimes you have an hour or half an hour to prepare and jump in. I worked a lot from the cover seat or second cast that comes when the first cast is off, and I danced a lot like that. So, it really pushed me to find ways to consider what is essential and how I can find my peace within the stress because it's my responsibility. My stress is my responsibility, so how do I deal with that? And sometimes it's tricky and you...you fail. And then you catch yourself and you do better the next time. And in ballet school, they cut people from the class every single year since I was nine years old. I went through that whole journey. How has it affected me? For sure somehow. But I'm not even probably aware of all of it. There was a time when I said it didn't affect me, but I think it has in ways that I'm not aware of. But I'm also super thankful for that stress that I was put through. And I accepted to go through it, because it was my choice to also stay in that environment. It is nobody else's fault. Nobody forced me to do that. I think that has also created this sensation of calmness and I'm just collecting myself every single day again and again.

Samuel

That's nicely put. Yeah, I like that image. I do get a real sense that you're a very experiential person. You obviously create from a deep sense of inquiry, and you have a big curiosity in questioning and actively experiencing. Would you agree with that? Where does that come from and why is it important for you to work in that way?

Johanna

So that the dancers really find the seed or the essence. I think I'm aware of it, thanks for your question. I don't think about that myself. I'm really thankful to hear you describing it. I'm like, wow, is it like that? But experiential - I do think that I want to put a lot of focus on what the dancer carries to the stage and is it something that they are aware of? Is it part of the work? And if it's not part of the work, it will affect the work. And also doing things for longer durations, I have done some durational shows where the longest take was nine hours and at the four-hour mark, something happens. A shift of energy, that your energy starts to go higher up again, and you get more of it and you feel like you could continue forever, this is maybe how it is for marathon runners and so on. But through that experience I realised that there is so much extra that we carry with us. So I'm really happy if the performer wants to go through that journey of letting go and then finding the essence and finding pleasure in exhaustion or tiredness. And that comes from the fact that I have worked on a massive stage throughout my career, and you very easily get exhausted, but you just need to survive. Not only to survive, but to enjoy it!

Samuel

So if we talk a little bit about how you work with dancers. I mean how do you get the best from the dancers that you're working with?

Johanna

The whole process starts way before we start in the studio. Nowadays, I prefer to audition dancers so that the dancer can also see and feel if I'm the right fit for them. It's a two-way choice and path that we go on. And then in addition to that, I will interview the person. My priority is that everyone in the room are able to self-reflect, negotiate and be responsible for vocalising their needs and finding solutions. So when we have this, we can build trust. Once we have the trust, we can go beyond our dreams and expectations. And then how do I get the best out of them and how do they get the best out of me? It is constantly building the situation together, not only me giving directions. I feel a bit lost when the situation goes that way. So I'm very happy if the dancers also figure out their own journey so that we can then talk about the journey and explore the journey together. And I do try to create a situation where they go slightly beyond their aerobic condition, or the state where they feel that ok now I've given it all, because that's when it starts to actually fire up. Because you cannot carry the extra weight of things and the occupied mind with you anymore. And then also what is really important I have realised, is that nowadays when the creation starts, if I have the opportunity for it, such as I had here as Skånes Dansteater, we will use four days just to get to know each other. So I get to know an individual's strengths and we can then start to work from that point. I also took this with me to the creation process that I started in Helsinki this autumn, so everybody has a chance. I don't need to make decisions during those four days. It is just listening, observing, directing, exploring and finding out that if there is something that the dancer or performer is not strong at yet. Then I can calculate, do we have time for strengthening certain movement qualities and how much would it need for us to get where I would feel that we need to get to, and then having that negotiation with myself. Sometimes we can also just have a dialogue about it, like how comfortable the dancer is with this? Do you want to go for expanding the scale of your movement qualities, tempos etc, and then I start the actual decision making from there. But I used to go straight in and like, now we bang the material together and that's it. I also do very extensive warmups because I want to create safety and strength.

And this is something that might take, I say it's one hour and 15 minutes, but it usually goes on for two hours. So it has strength tasks built into it and then the improvisation material.

Samuel

It feels like a very beautiful sort of transparent process. I think I would feel very safe in that environment and you're very aware of what's happening in the room. You're really watching the individuals closely. Each person in the room is being seen. I could imagine that you feel very empowered being in a group where you have that safety and I guess working from that strong base, that strong foundation, then you can go really far because there is trust established like you said.

Johanna

Yes, yes. And yeah, sometimes you can create that space better, and sometimes it still has holes. But I feel that it's up to all of us in the room to create that two-way street and what I have realised is that it's important to just keep vocalising. Don't 'expect'. I have 'expected' a lot. I have expected a lot that since I think this way, the others will also think this way. No! If you feel something, kindly vocalise it so we are all on board with what is going on. We don't hold it in and then go to the bit when it explodes. Instead, when you recognise something, vocalise it. I do trust physical work, but the needs are something we need to talk about, we cannot read everybody's minds.

Samuel

Listening to you talking about that, that's something that I think with age and experience I'm personally becoming more accepting of. I feel that I am able to do that, and I feel confident enough to do that. But ten years ago, perhaps not. I have this inherent thing in my brain from my training that it has to be this way. This is right, this is wrong, but you have to go through a process of sort of dismantling that right?

Johanna

Yes. And if you have gone through the classical training in the 90s, yes, for sure you feel that do I have a voice? But I trust and I want to believe that dance education is shifting. I think I like a strong physical dance education so that the person is strong when they come into the field. Yeah, almost stronger than they would need to be. I think that would be the ideal in terms of optimal health and physicality. But then the vocalising, giving space for the young dancers to talk no matter what is so important, I hope it's changing because it all comes back to that. And us who are learning it on the way, I think we leaders also need to be aware that if there is any trauma in the room, how to deal with that? Where are our boundaries? What traumas do we makers carry? And how far can we go with helping each other and when it's the time to say 'I'm not the right person anymore, I don't have the tools to help or solve this'.

Samuel

Speaking of tools, I'm thinking a bit about how you access the individuals in front of you. Do you have particular strategies that you've built up or is it different each time depending on who you're meeting?

Johanna

It depends if it's three people in the room or eighteen. If I have one to six people, I can still meet them with time individually. When there are eleven or eighteen it becomes trickier. So, I just had this

audition on Sunday in Helsinki, where people came from multiple backgrounds, like globally. And there I realised that if I want to find out how analytical and how fast the person is ready to make decisions, I need to use some tools that I don't necessarily use in my creation process. Just to test where the person's mind is at, and then when there is the intuitive side, that is then giving tasks and layering it together across the floor and so on. But I think since I always set the material in the end, if the person is fully intuitive and a beautiful mover, but there is not the ability to catch what they just did even though we film everything, then our communication might be trickier. So to have the intuitive side and then being able to talk about it after, finding landmarks and so on. So that's why I feel we need both sides of the brain working, the intuitive and the analytical.

Samuel

So what makes a remarkable performer in your eyes? What particular qualities are you looking for? What attracts you to a performer?

Johanna

Movement-wise, how the movement traces itself through the body, through the torso. We are not only limb orientated which classical ballet often is. So, if the movement is able to trace itself, to travel, to resonate through the torso. And then from classical training, I do have this yearning for direction and counter direction. I think it comes from the fact that I had a bit of lower back pain. I fractured my spine. And in order to continue, I needed to find the space within my body to lengthen, to find space so that it's not all collapsed, and I did this for years and years and years, because that working culture that I was in didn't always have opportunity for recovery. So you need to find strategies to survive with a tight, tired body and my way of surviving was expanding, lengthening and that also then activated the torso area. So yes, that's from the movement side. Then of course there is the capacity for self-reflection, negotiation, and vocalising needs which are part of things and then I mean, what does the person carry with them and how ok are they with that?

Samuel

Interesting.

Johanna

Dancing on stage is not performing for me. I don't like performing. I don't like to see anybody performing. I like that they are sharing, and that they are very aware of what their relation is with the public and with the space and with themselves. I think we can all be fractured, and we all have our own challenges about how aware we are about those wounds, but we carry them, and how we are with them is interesting to me. I do respect everyone who keeps working on themselves. Because that is also part of the creation process and what the work becomes. And then being aware of what you carry and whether it is the right thing to carry to the stage for the work.

Samuel

Yeah, it sounds like you've been on that process yourself, that kind of self-learning and keeping that going for yourself. That's been something that you have noticed that you've needed after working in such an environment that you've described.

Johanna

Yeah, yeah. Yes, and how to find the essence of the work? I don't like to name drop, but just to give the difference that you change in fifteen minutes from a Sleeping Beauty fairy solo, which is super-fast material en pointe. You have fifteen minutes to shift into Ohad Naharin's material. How do you figure out your thing in fifteen minutes? So, to find the essence of the work and then being aware of how I do it while respecting the needs of the work and choreographer. This is what I did, a lot. Not to think how I would like to do it. But first, how it's directed and how I find myself within that world.

Samuel

So if we go a little bit into Johanna making her own work and taking decisions with regards to your own vision. How do you make those creative decisions? Is it something that you find easy?

Johanna

It depends on the process. Sometimes I can make the excel spreadsheet of the scenes before we start the work. And some productions require that depending on the working culture of that particular institution or place. Some of the decisions are intuitive and I only find the reason for them after the work is done. Some of them I can explain and open up what decisions need to be made so that new decisions can be made. I don't like the state of floating for too long in the clouds. So in order to advance we need to pilot things, we need to make decisions so we have something that we can switch to, that we can work on. Sometimes I do make fast decisions. Sometimes I say I'm in trouble and I speak with a dramaturg or light designer or sound designer. And sometimes we just let it be and we look at the whole arc and that arc will inform the decision that we need to make, in another part of the work and so on.

Samuel

You just mentioned a dramaturg there and I'm curious to know a little bit about that relationship and what does having a dramaturg offer in the space with you during a process?

Johanna

Every dramaturg works in a slightly different way, and I think in dance it's a slightly different role than in theatre where the dramaturg has a lot of effect on which part of the book is used in the work, how the work is structured and so on. But I think it offers an important window, there's somebody that sets questions, hard questions sometimes that I cannot even answer immediately, and I also like the fact that the dramaturg also addresses the performers and the sound and the space makers. So it's not only me who is having the dialogue with her, him or them. And also, I just want to sometimes get out of my own head sometimes!

Samuel

Yeah, I can imagine.

Johanna

And that's why I started to direct, choreograph and teach. I got so tired of myself, my instrument, my pain, it just came to a point where I wanted to work with others. I want to see things through others, and this is why I also often in every process during the past few years now, I've interviewed people based on the themes of the work who are not related to dance.

Samuel

Oh, fantastic.

Johanna

And I will also do that with all of the dancers and with the designer team if they want to. I find this a good way to access the work so that the dancer is not excluded from the preparation part, but they need to sit down for an hour and spend a bit of time with that. With Zero-zero for example, all the scenes and all the material were created based on the dialogue and interviews that I had with the dancers.

Samuel

Michael, one of the dancers from Zero-zero mentioned that you had a very acute attention to detail. And he also commented on the fact that you work on the same thing for long durations in the studio. So perhaps improvisations or repeating the same patterns of movement, really drawing them out so they go as far as they can go. Is that a deliberate working method? Are you aware of that?

Johanna

I am now! Thank you. No but this is really good, I mean I just do what I feel needs to be done. I think since I worked a lot on the sides, if you are a cover or second cast. I've done big roles working on my own on the sides, getting just one chance to have a run through with the choreographer before the general rehearsal, before you go in front of 1200 people. So this has required independent work, on the sides and I don't know if I get bored easily, but I have just kept myself occupied. Also, in ballet class you repeat the same thing over and over again every morning six days a week for 25 years. So if I include the studies, I think I have just kept my mind occupied because I don't accept myself doing the thing just for the sake of doing it, it has to have a reason every single time. I need to find the reason every single time and this detailed work and finding little new points of views, like where does the movement start? Where do I have room to make a difference? Although it needs to look the same as everybody else, this has probably affected the fact that I think the essence is in the detail and in timings and rhythms. To me, the body is just not a mass in space, even if it's a group scene, I think we can be detailed with our reason to move, detailed with the directions, detailed with our relations, because all these will then transfer to the person who is experiencing the work, the audience.

Samuel

So let's talk about that, that invisible thread between the dancer on stage and the audience member watching. So the dancer is hopefully conveying some kind of kinetic experience. What is that? What is that relationship for you?

Johanna

I call it the umbilical cord. So the dancer needs to establish the umbilical cord between the audience member or the energy of the audience, and this I can give an image of. First you need to be able to welcome them. Then you need to be able to shake their hands so they feel safe, and once they feel safe, you can take them on a journey. But mentally you are kind of constantly holding their hand throughout the piece and we are not pushing them away unless that's the reason for the scene to exist.

Samuel

The act of dancing on stage or the act of performance. This is a big topic that interests me greatly, about dancers holding presence on stage, about breaking that fourth wall. How to not feel that I have to perform something. How do you make sure that the dancers that you're working with stay authentic to the tasks and the essence of the work? Because for me, when you're taken outside of the comfort and the safety of the studio, it can be a really scary thing and you're suddenly on stage and you're being watched, and you can become very self-aware. So how do you break that self-awareness? How do you facilitate and guide individuals in that?

Johanna

If that's the case, if I notice that self-awareness is creeping in and that umbilical cord disappearing because the self-awareness is in the way, then I might give tools such as concentrate on these two things and always come back to your body. Always come back to the body to feel the trace of movement within yourself. Always come back to the body, drawing the space. I used to be super nervous before shows, like super nervous, and these were my ways of dealing with it. Feeling the floor, drawing the space, creating these massively big imaginative worlds around me, even though that world didn't physically exist. So always coming back to the body, the direction of the gaze, which body part is leading and that way calming the nervous system so that we come back to the sharing and not pushing the motion and the being to happen. Because you can also sink into your structure and I think the invitation that we need to create for the audience, I think you deal with energy there. And how do you explain energy? So some people are curious about investigating it. Some are not necessarily ready for it, or it's not in their interest, but this is what I talk about, and I want to question it.

Samuel

Can I push you a little bit further? Can you somehow articulate for yourself what that energy is?

Johanna

When I'm interested in something, I do believe others can become interested in it too. So if I'm occupied and interested in how the motion feels, what do I see? I do believe that is also part of the invitation. I have something so special here that will grow the eye on me and serve as an invitation. I also talk about inviting with your skin, even though there is no touch. So that we are 360 degrees aware of our being in space. But I think that energy can be established with the dancer being curious and interested in the very, very small things which can then become an exclamation mark. But I think the show also needs to be approached through curiosity, and there is a saying that, 'treat every rehearsal as a performance and a performance as a rehearsal'. This I like.

Samuel

For me, I just have an image of a body in space on stage let's say, and they could be in big impressive physical motions, but they could also just be standing very still and there's a lot of motion going on there and it's transmitting.

Johanna

Yes! It's a tricky thing because I think experience can bring you there and some people have it naturally but it's hard, it's a tricky thing to vocalise. But I do believe it can be vocalised.

Samuel

Well, you just did, beautifully.

Johanna

Yes, yes. That's why I like when the training background is multidimensional, and you have exposed your body to many things. One training method cannot offer all the directions for movement and mind. So that you have exposed yourself to multiple things in life as much as possible, movement-wise. And then those layers are within you, they are present and then it's almost like the onion. I talk about an onion where you peel each layer, you let go of little by little and then you just have the core and when you have the core of the onion with multidimensional experience in space, bam! You can just stand there and resonate through the walls.

Samuel

I'm going to channel that tomorrow, the onion image. I'm going to take that with me on stage.

Johanna

Do it! You have it!

Samuel

I think I already know the answer to this question but is a piece of work ever finished in your eyes and what are your hopes for the performers that will hopefully be giving life and growth to the work as it's being performed and shared with audiences over and over again?

Johanna

Respect the essence of each scene, so this has to be clear for everyone before I leave. Keep being creative and understand where there is the space for that creativity, because there are boundaries. So thinking throughout the creation process and throughout the shows, where is my space to expand? What were the borders that were given and are the borders something that I am encouraged to push further? Or are the borders there and you figure out your thing within that? And then I do hope that each performer will find their own journey and not leave any points with a question mark. So being responsible for making decisions within the work, and this is where I stand, and this is what I suggest, and this is what I want to explore. And stand with those so that nobody's thinking that I don't know. I don't know what I should do here. I do of course aim for a timelessness so that the work that I create could be performed in ten years and it would still be fresh, but it's a dream. But what can I do? That's my goal.

Samuel

I'm thinking about creative environments. So what's a creative environment for you? How would it look, and feel, and operate? So that you can feel that you are at your most creative?

Johanna

Preparation, preparation, preparation!

Samuel

Ok!

Johanna

This is what I like to do, and I become stressed if I don't have time for it, and 'don't have time for it' means that I have taken on a lot of work and there's too layers on top of each other. So preparation is one, and then the space to fail. I did write this document for all the collaborators three years ago during the pandemic where I really listed my wishes to be transparent with that. But I have realised those need to be shared vocally, so I'm very clear with the fact that I'm not expecting all my ideas to be diamonds. Sometimes we need to go through three failed ones to find the core and essence of it. So I hope I can have that space and trust, and I want to offer that trust also. I can offer that trust when I feel that the person is going towards something and accepting that it's a very vulnerable place to be. I have now realised that for all of us, not only for me, but also for dancers. So being sensitive to that, I think I'm also not expecting that I find all the best solutions, so I open the mic for everyone and sometimes the suggestion comes from the dancer or sound department or light and space and dramaturg, or then we are talking and through the talking I find the solution. But this trust has become a massive thing for me and how I can be part of building it from the very beginning and what questions do I need to ask from everyone joining the process so that this trust can be established.

Samuel

There are some makers that can keep producing works quite frequently. I get the feeling that you are a maker that fully immerses themselves in a theme that could perhaps go in multi directions and become let's say five different pieces of work, all surrounding the same theme. Do you have this, "I can only create one piece of work within one or two years"? What's your capacity in that sense?

Johanna

Last year we created three works and one that was postponed due to the pandemic, so we had four premieres and that was quite a lot. I think that the time that I have with the audience is super valuable and their time is expensive. I want to be really sure about the decisions that I make, and I think for me it's to find the core point, why should I dance this? This needs to be clear. So of course there's an income issue, the more you produce, the more money you will get, but I try to be very honest with the fact that I do want the preparation time to be there. We might have four different productions going on through three years and then it's possible to do many because there is enough preparation time, but I haven't felt an interest that I just need to keep producing because of producing work. Also, funding is precious, and my time has become extremely precious, and the time that I spend and ask from everybody else. So there also needs to be time and energy, that the moments that we share are as important as what we are aiming for, so that the energy keeps looping. If we just keep producing for the sake of it, the energy doesn't come back to you. And then you are draining yourself and exhausting yourself. So I'm balancing this now. What is enough? And I think, if I can stand with the work, if it's not rushed, I can be present during the process and I can remember the people in the process and I can feel what we shared. This is valuable.

Samuel

You have just used the word responsible, and you've used the words precious funding. I second that. I'm thinking a little bit about our responsibility as artists, having those precious sources of money, taxpayers' money, and how we're thinking outwardly towards the audiences that we're sharing the work with and how it relates to the bigger picture. How people perhaps see themselves being

represented on stage, how maybe they can relate to something that they're living in. We're living in very uncertain times and at the moment, you, we, we're making art in quite an unstable world. What does that do to your mindset, and does it make it difficult to sort of articulate the value of dance when there are such big things happening in the world?

Johanna

I think it has, because I can sense the confusion of our times, also in people and within myself. For sure I cannot put myself aside and just talk about others. I come back to what I just shared; the processes need to be well structured. There need to be enough places for communication and this then becomes part of my responsibility as a maker, an employer, a producer, and all the hats that I'm wearing. So this has become important. And then as I said, since everybody's time is so precious and the resources that we have are so precious, I cannot rush through things. I need to maybe do less and be more present and this is something that I go for at the moment. I'm not saying that there wouldn't be a year where I would not do five works, but usually if that happens, there has been four years going towards that, and then we have a shabang year, and then we breathe a bit and we start another preparation for the next shabang!

Samuel

Something that's in my life at the moment, is the fact that my partner is a freelance dancer, and he has been studying alongside his dance career, half time, long distance, online. He's been doing that for the last nine years and he finally got his masters. It's been a big journey, and it makes me think a little bit about that moment of transition and transferable skills we have as dance artists, because he's looking outward to do something else. He's sort of departing away from his known dance career. So yeah, I'm curious to know what's in your DNA as a dance artist that you think is useful for existing in the world? And talking about those transferable skills, I think that we all sort of harbour this deep sense of embodied knowledge in our bodies, we carry that with us. So what can we do with that? What does that offer to others in the world? It's a big question!

Johanna

Yeah. What can we share? I think not to name particular professions, but what I feel based on my training background is that we need to be organised, that kind of organised mind yet intuitive. And the working environment that I lived in and spent a lot of time in created this sense of responsibility and that you need to be efficient with time and so on. And the role that I have now as a director of the work, as an employer, as a maker. So of course that brings you to not being afraid of responsibility. You are not afraid of standing with your thing, on your own ground and having the ground firm underneath your feet. This is what I feel strongly about, and this profession has a lot of wind built into it. So how to stay calm within that wind that is around you. So this is from the mental side and then of course there is the bodily knowledge that sometimes we are not even aware of, how we could share that, from which angle and what to study. What to study because you can build your own future, you can build your own dream. But then what are the studies that you need to support the background that you have so that you can share something that doesn't exist yet or doesn't exist that much, but people still find an interest in it or need for it. This is a question for me. There is the mental endurance side that has helped me a lot. It has also helped me to a point where you can become quite exhausted because you just don't have those boundaries and this is what I'm learning currently, to put those boundaries for myself. I'm learning because life has been that you just go beyond and beyond and

beyond, and you still go beyond. Even though you feel you can't move anymore, you still find another source of energy and so it's a bit of a dangerous field to be in. But it does have its strengths and I'm super, super happy about the journey that I've been on. I'm grateful for what strengths I have gathered, and I've also become aware of the weaknesses with which to work with.

Samuel

We've been talking a lot about the 1% in this building a lot lately and I think the fact that you're even aware that you need to build boundaries, it's cooking in your head, it's in process and it will seep further and further in, you just need to give it time I think. There's a rumour flying around that you took a trip to China, and it made me very curious to learn a little bit about what you did there. Can you talk a little bit about that.

Johanna

So I exposed myself to a Qigong class. I think I was still working at the opera at the time. It was on the schedule, so, I went and to take the class. I was in a creation process of my own at that moment and after the Qigong class I could see so much more because my central nervous system was calmer and the way it opened up my vision and my energy and my ability to sense what is in the room was mind expanding and really made me stop and think about what just happened. So I continued with Qigong training in Finland, and then I saw that there is a course in China, in Xiamen that had multiple different martial arts...what is it, types?

Samuel

Disciplines?

Johanna

Disciplines! Yes, in that course curriculum there was Tai chi improvisation, and I was like, I'm going to travel there. So I went there, and I went through all the classes. And then the Tai Chi Improvisation came, and the master teacher didn't go into it, he did something else. By the end of the class, I needed to say, "Hi I just came from Finland for this. So what is this all about?" And then he said, "Oh, ok. So lift your forearms in front of your body and then release the energy, and then see where that energy is taking you. And there you have it". I was a bit shocked, but it was such a nice feeling. The sense of floating and the energy leading me, that I realised that if I want to continue in this profession for a long time, I cannot work with muscles. I cannot work with the push all the time and then I closed my eyes, and I thought like, this is a task that everybody does. And I was there in that state for half an hour and I was expanding my head to the sky. And when I started to lower myself into grand plie, changing my way of approaching ballet class. And for half an hour, I was in that floating state, directing my energy and experimenting with the directions in the room, and I opened up my gaze and there was nobody with me. I had been there floating on my own. But then I kept going with Qigong. I still do that occasionally, as part of the creation processes and classes because you hear your noise, and some people are more ok with that. But also, in that moment you can see and sense in which state all of us are in without judging, but just becoming aware of it in its simplicity. It also creates space where you can just do what you feel is right. So concentrate on the breath. Concentrate on the pathway of the movement and then you can let go of it and you can just let the energy that possibly has awakened within you, to move you from within. And I worry, I worry, I worry so much. And these exercises also make me realise and remind me about the thing, that the only thing that I need to do is what I feel is

right, no matter if it's hard. But I just do what I feel is right, no matter how uncomfortable I feel and then I can let go. I don't need to carry the thing with me anymore. The rest will follow, and I cannot do the work of anybody else. I can just do my part. So this is a set reminder, and what I use the Qigong for is that I got tired of the constant warming up of the body being, four times a day. So you do the morning class, then you wait. You warm up before your session comes or your role comes. You have a break. You warm up for the show. There is an interval. You warm up after the interval and I was like, I cannot do it anymore. I don't even get warm in that short time. So then, in addition to the class, I started to warm up with Qigong. This was just before I took leave of absence, and I started the journey of un-attaching myself from the company, or transitioning from the company, let's say.

Samuel

Ok.

Johanna

And there was, I think it was Nutcracker or some show where I needed to do pointe work and be warm for it. And I did. I did a couple of Qigong exercises and before I went on stage, I became less self-aware and my upper body was expanding and carrying me in a way that no exercise before could do, it created this sense of suspension and that helped me technically. I felt both mentally and physically good. It lifted my skeleton and made things just dozens of times easier. So I took it to my own practice to support the tricky technique that classical ballet needs and requires, and then also to call my own mind and create the space where others can kind of let go of the noise. Yeah, little by little.

Samuel

Yeah, I just want to point out to anybody listening out there that. While you were talking. I actually felt like a transition of state in your body, but also in the room around me and the way that you sort of just allowed your gaze to gently close. I saw it. It was very beautiful.

Johanna

I need to go through that state to explain what it is.

Samuel

Yeah, yes, but you obviously share and take that with you in your creative processes. And yeah, I'm wondering how that maybe feeds into how you do direct the movement of the performers. I did hear that, for instance, there's a particular part within Zero-zero that you're working on with Kat at the moment and you're talking very much about holding the sensitivity of your hands as if you're holding a bird or a sword.

Johanna

Yeah, it's just to find different images, like finding what is, what is the connection point with that individual and what makes the energy flow through so that the state of the whole body is alive, and we are not sinking into the structure. So what are the ways of keeping it alive? And then what do you need to let go of so that we can feel and be exposed to the essential?

Samuel

I feel like we're talking a lot about fuelling curiosity as well, like you've just explained something very concretely, that you were interested in. That's really expanded your knowledge. And so is there something that you would like to do, or you can't do?

Johanna

Developing as a person, as a human. I'm a human first. I forgot to mention that in the beginning! I want to keep developing and to keep on opening up dialogue during the creation process. While I do like to work with institutions and places where you can create without also having the production work on your shoulders, I also think the beauty of freelance work is that you can really affect the structure of the process. I have become more aware of this, and I really make the work structured so we are not just reacting to things, but there is a structure before we start that takes us through, along with space for dialogue. I think it's important to remind everybody to not get stuck in our expectations. Whatever I do in life, I will do it as long as I feel it's the right thing for me. If it keeps shifting into something else, then let it shift. This was very clear to me when my intuition and my energy started to direct me away from the, for example, classical company structure. I felt I had given my all. Yeah, because I had. And it was such a beautiful moment that I can look back on with a smile. And I had such a beautiful last role. So the transition was a really beautiful journey, and I was active in it. I let it shift. Let's not hold on to something that doesn't have any movement in it anymore, and which doesn't challenge us. So yeah, being very in tune and aware of when it's time to move on or start to shift your choreographic method, for example. So I really respect the people who are bold and say, 'hey now I do things differently'. I change it up and then return to the starting points after five years and to the methods and become even more clear about them.

Samuel

Yeah. Change it out, yeah.

Johanna

This is healthy, I think. And not to hold on to something, feeling like I have to continue with this, and that's why I think there has been and I have felt a massive evolution within myself.

Samuel

I feel excited for you. Just listening to you get excited.

Johanna

I hope that's the future.

Samuel

How can we keep up to date with what you're doing Johanna?

Johanna

I guess nowadays it's this Instagram website (@johannanuutinen_co), Facebook (johannanuutinenpage) and then signing up to our newsletter on our website, www.johannanuutinen.com

Samuel

It's been such a treat just sitting down and listening to you and talking to you. So thank you so much.

Johanna

Thank you and I have to mention, you had the best questions ever. The trickiest and the best!

Samuel

Too kind, but yes good luck with all your upcoming and ongoing processes and see you around! Thank you.

Johanna

Absolutely. Hopefully. Thank you.

Samuel

That's it for DancePod this week. Head to our website skanesdanseteater.se for more information on upcoming performances and workshops. From all of us here at Skånes Dansteater: thank you so much for listening and catch you next time.