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# FINNISH CIRCUS & DANCE IN FOCUS



CIRCUS  
& DANCE  
FINLAND

[circusdance.fi](http://circusdance.fi)

Children are a smart audience with a sharp eye.

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Fresh recipes for comedy.

© Dansé Elargie



Tiia Kasurinen shakes up stereotypes.

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# DANCE AND CIRCUS: OPENING WINDOWS TO NEW PERSPECTIVES

ART IS OFTEN like a mirror; reflecting, weighing, and commenting on the phenomena of the society surrounding it. Yet, the influence may just as well work in the opposite direction. Art is the domain that offers us the tools to see differently – to deconstruct dusty thought patterns and lay the groundwork for something new.

In this issue of Finnish Circus & Dance in Focus, we explore the roles of diversity and otherness in the performing arts from multiple angles. **Jyrki Karttunen**, artistic director of Dance Theatre Hurjaruuth, observes that while children's culture is often populated by archetypal characters, art has the unique power to give a face and a voice to alternative ways of being human.

Our Artist in Focus, **Tiia Kasurinen**, dives deep into stereotypes of masculinity in her new work, *BIRDS OF PARADISE*. Premiering in Helsinki in 2026, the piece draws inspiration from the flamboyant mating dances of male birds in Oceania. By transposing these rituals onto the human body, Kasurinen investigates socially constructed gender roles, posing the question: What form do our mating dances take?

Meanwhile, performance artist and choreographer **Alen Nsambu** opens up about his creative philosophy. As a queer and racialized artist, Nsambu strives to construct alternative worlds where the viewer is invited to look beyond the accustomed gaze.

In an era increasingly defined by the digital and the distant, the performing arts offer a deliciously visceral alternative. Choreographer **Elina Pirinen**, known for her radiantly independent expression, discusses her relationship with elemental forces and her “doom-sibling-like” collaboration with composer **Ville Kabrell**. We also encounter the punk band Muovipussi, whose playful integration of circus elements generates an energy that is nothing short of carnal. Additionally, we turn to circus artist **Jenni Kallo**, among others, curious to discover what truly moves people to laughter.

Now, more than ever, we need fresh perspectives on diversity and a strong, humane presence. We hope this issue provides you with an inspiring dose of both – through the dynamic lens of Finnish circus and dance.

**Emma Vainio**  
Editor

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**On the cover:** Tiia Kasurinen: *BIRDS OF PARADISE* (2026)

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# EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE OULU BURSTS WITH CIRCUS AND DANCE

Faravid's Land.  
 Kati Leinonen

Located in Northern Finland, Oulu is the European Capital of Culture in 2026. During the special year, dance and circus will bring immersive experiences and movement to the city. Here is a glimpse of the extensive program.

The Circus Festival OU, making its debut in June 2026, spans from family-friendly programs to experimental evening clubs, showcasing contemporary circus as a prominent part of the city's cultural scene. The festival is organized by a coalition of Finnish circus artists and collectives, including Arctic Ensemble, Lumo Company, Recover Laboratory, TipTop Walkers, **Milla Kurronen**, and **Merri Heikkilä**. OU Festival takes over Oulu on June 15–18.

Climbing over Oulu is a collaborative project blending architecture, urban planning, and performing arts, created by the Oulu-based production company Flow Productions in partnership with the French Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde. This project brings workshops, site-specific pop-up events, and performances to Oulu in the summer of 2026, all inspired by the city's residents and urban landscapes.

Lumo Company's *Ylitys – Crossing* begins as a community procession through Oulu, culminating in a breathtaking tight-rope walk over the rapids of the Tuira river, by tightrope walkers **Sanja Kosonen**, **Hanna Moisala**, and **Anniina Peltovako**. *Ylitys* takes place on August 22.

*Faravid's Land* is an immersive performance by Oulu Theatre and Flow Productions that combines theatre, dance, and

In November, the Festival of Augmented Dance makes history as Finland's first festival to blend dance with technology.

circus. Set in a mysterious, imagined past, the performance takes place in the abandoned Raksila supermarket area in Oulu, soon to be demolished. The story unfolds in the mythical Kvenland and explores themes of roots, identity, and the search for happiness. *Faravid's Land* premieres on August 27.

In November, the Festival of Augmented Dance makes history as Finland's first festival to blend dance with technology. Over four days, the event features performances where cutting-edge technology adds new dimensions to choreography. The festival is produced by TaikaBox in collaboration with international partners. ■

[oulu2026.eu](http://oulu2026.eu)

## STRETCH FURTHER 2026 – EXPLORING IDENTITY IN OULU

In September, Oulu welcomes a large number of international dance professionals as the Kedja Stretch event arrives in the city. At the same time, the Finnish Kiertoliike dance forum takes place, with the annual OuDance Festival serving as the platform for the collaboration.

The programme explores how the environment shapes identity, examining how one's sense of place – whether local, European, Nordic, or Baltic – affects the construction of an artist's identity and professional field. Sámi perspectives, as well as the impacts and opportunities of digitalisation, bring additional layers to the discussion.

Participants are expected from the Kedja network countries, including Iceland, Scotland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, Slovenia, Finland, and Estonia. The event features keynote talks, lectures, panel discussions, audience engagement projects, dance performances, film screenings, and evening clubs.

An international sustainability report and a rider for the dance field, developed jointly by the project partners, will also be presented during the event.

Stretch Further 2026 – Exploring Identity is part of the official programme for Oulu – European Capital Culture 2026. The event is produced by JoJo – Oulu Dance Center. ■

[kedja.net](http://kedja.net)



Yuka Matsumoto  
received the Jane Erkko  
Grand Prix in 2022.  
📷 JonasLundqvist

HELSINKI INTERNATIONAL  
**HIBC**  
BALLET COMPETITION 2026

## HELSINKI INTERNATIONAL BALLET COMPETITION REMOVES GENDER CATEGORIES

WHEN THE HELSINKI International Ballet Competition returns in the summer of 2026, the event marks not just its tenth edition, but a step forward. The long-standing competition, founded in 1984, is embracing a new era by eliminating gender divisions.

Instead, prizes are now awarded to the three best performers in each age group. The categories themselves have also been redefined as juniors aged 15 to 18, young professionals aged 19 to 21, and seniors aged 22 to 25.

The changes reflect a broader shift in the ballet world towards inclusivity and artistic individuality.

“Taking part in an international ballet competition is a major step in a young dancer’s career,” says **Javier Torres**, Artistic Director of the Finnish National Ballet and Chair of the competition’s international jury. “Even the preparation and reaching the preliminary rounds strengthen a dancer’s skills and provide networking opportunities.”

Over the course of ten days, audiences will witness seven public performances,

The changes reflect a broader shift in the ballet world towards inclusivity and artistic individuality.

where competitors showcase both classical ballet and contemporary dance. The programme includes three classical ballet preliminaries, two contemporary dance semifinals, and two final performances. The contemporary dance semifinals also feature a choreography competition.

During the competition, dancers have access to training, body maintenance, and mental coaching, while teachers have the opportunity to participate in a ballet pedagogy course led by an expert from London’s Royal Ballet School.

The Helsinki International Ballet Competition was founded in 1984 by Professor and Prima Ballerina Doris Laine (1931–2018). The competition, held every four years, is one of the oldest international ballet competitions still being held today.

The competition is organized in collaboration with the Finnish National Opera and Ballet from May 27 to June 5, 2026. ▮

[ibchelsinki.fi](http://ibchelsinki.fi)



CirkusExpo 2025. 📷 Sara P. Borgström

## CIRKUSEXPO PRESENTS THE LATEST CIRCUS ART FROM THE NORTH

CIRKUSEXPO—the Nordic platform for circus arts returns to Stockholm 11–14 February, 2026. Almost 300 people gather during four days filled with live performances, previews, seminars and pitch sessions that give a unique insight into the circus of the future.

It is an excellent networking opportunity to meet with companies, presenters and other circus people from Sweden, Finland and Denmark – and the whole world.

CirkusExpo features six different previews, and 17 artists/companies from the Nordic countries will be pitching their shows. In the meantime, the festival CirkusMania offers a wide program of live performances, open to the public.

From Finland there are two previews: *Culinary Chaos* by Kate & Pasi and *Nonstop Paradise* by Recover Laboratory.

Three companies from Finland are pitching: Blind Gut Company, The Nordic Council, and Opus Company. There is also a poetic foot juggling act by a young Finnish circus artist **Sofia Motturi**.

CirkusMania festival program features, among others, the collective Based on Kimberly with their show *Yes Person*, also from Finland.

CirkusExpo is an industry event aimed exclusively at presenters, agents, representatives of venues, festivals, and other performing arts organizations. In order to participate, you have to register on the CirkusExpo website.

CirkusExpo is presented by Riksteatern (Sweden) together with the Swedish Arts Council, Circus & Dance Finland and the Danish Arts Foundation, in collaboration with Subtopia. ▮

[Go to CirkusExpo website](https://www.cirkusexpo.se)



### FUNDING SHORTFALLS FORCE POSTPONEMENT OF ICE HOT NORDIC DANCE PLATFORM 2026

THE 2026 EDITION of the Ice Hot Nordic Dance Platform, originally scheduled for June in Stockholm, will not proceed as planned. The partners across the Nordic region, including Circus & Dance Finland, were forced to make the difficult decision to postpone the event after failing to secure sufficient funding.

The absence of Ice Hot is a significant setback for the international dance community, particularly as it coincides with the cancellation of Düsseldorf’s Internationale Tanzmesse for similar reasons. Together, these cancellations serve as stark, concrete examples of the rapidly deteriorating landscape for cultural funding across Europe.

Organizers must now re-evaluate the future of Ice Hot to adapt to these shifting cultural and economic realities. Despite the postponement, the core mission remains unchanged: to find ways to facilitate meaningful connections between Nordic dance artists and international presenters. ▮

[www.icehotnordicdance.com/](http://www.icehotnordicdance.com/)

## CELEBRATING CIRCUS AT THE THEATRE MUSEUM IN HELSINKI

*Amaze! Tales and Magic of Circus.*  
📷 Jenny Orpana



A MAJOR EXHIBITION on Finnish circus has arrived at the Theatre Museum, located in the Cable Factory cultural complex in Helsinki. In the exhibition *Amaze! Tales and Magic of Circus*, figures from circus history, the earliest circus troupes, and the newest currents in Finnish circus art unfold side by side throughout the exhibition space.

The story of Finnish circus began in the 19th century, when international troupes touring Scandinavia started performing also in Finland. Soon, Finnish travelling circuses began to emerge, passing down their skills and traditions from one generation to the next.

From the 1990s onwards, a new wave of ideas began to reshape the art form. Influences from contemporary dance, popular culture, and visual arts merged with classical circus techniques. By the 2000s, Finnish contemporary circus companies were gaining acclaim on international stages, establishing Finland as a renowned country on the global circus scene.

Finnish circus history is filled with legendary personalities, international adventures, absurd storytelling – and thousands of hours of sweaty rehearsals. The exhibition explores questions such as: What gives circus its spellbinding charm? How do artists train for gravity-defying feats, like hair hanging? And how exactly do you make a person disappear on stage?

And yes, visitors will even get the chance to try a vanishing act for themselves.

Among the highlights are original costumes from the early days of Sirkus Finlandia, juggling clubs and rings used by legendary juggler Björn “Henrico” Gammals, an overhead projector from the contemporary company Portmanteau, and a mechanical hobbyhorse cart created by Race Horse Company. In video interviews, circus artists share their favorite touring memories and reflect on current issues such as the environmental challenges of a touring art form. ■

*Amaze! Tales and Magic of Circus* is curated by Journalist and MA Emma Vainio. The exhibition is open until January 10, 2027.

[teatterimuseo.fi](http://teatterimuseo.fi)

## JARKKO PARTANEN IS THE NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ZODIAK

Jarkko Partanen.  
📷 Sinem Kayacan



ZODIAK – Center for New Dance has appointed choreographer **Jarkko Partanen** as its new Artistic Director. His term began at the beginning of 2026.

Zodiak is the foremost producer and venue of contemporary dance and choreography in Finland, located at the Cable Factory, Helsinki. The program of performances is artistically curated and primarily based on an open call. Zodiak is also an internationally renowned venue for visiting artists, with the annual Side Step Festival as a central event in its program. For programmers, it creates opportunities to discover intriguing works and artists that collaborate with Zodiak.

Jarkko Partanen is best known for his work with the interdisciplinary art collective WAUHAUS, of which he is a founding member. The collective’s works move between artistic genres and take place in diverse settings, from theatre stages to urban sites.

Partanen impressed the recruitment team of Zodiak with his in-depth understanding of the production environment, as

well as his vision for developing programming and curatorial practices.

“Zodiak is a vital institution in the field of dance and performing arts in Finland. I want it to be a place where artists can develop and challenge themselves – and their audiences,” says Jarkko Partanen about his upcoming role.

After his MA in choreography Partanen also completed a degree in curating at the University of the Arts Helsinki. Throughout his career, Partanen has also been active on

the international performing arts scene.

“Premiering new works will remain the backbone of the organisation, but I also want to create space for other forms of encounters and artistic presentation. I hope the Zodiak of the future will be a place of gathering, dialogue, and vibrant events – one where artists, art lovers, and first-time visitors all feel equally welcome,” Jarkko Partanen sums up. ■

[zodiak.fi](http://zodiak.fi)

# ON BIRDS, MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

## TIIA KASURINEN SHAKES UP STEREOTYPES

TEXT Emma Vainio TRANSLATION Claire Ruaro

1.



**ARTIST AND CHOREOGRAPHER Tiiia Kasurinen** has a knack for the unexpected. Over the course of her career, she has created her own drag queen character, performed as a female cyborg inspired by over-the-top beauty standards, and taken interesting approaches to exploring our conflict-strewn times, where even the deepest of emotions

are processed through the medium of memes.

Themes that interest Kasurinen include identity, gender, gaze and popular culture. The internet in its many forms serves as a key source of inspiration.

In her latest piece, the dance artist turns her focus to birds.

*BIRDS OF PARADISE*, which will premiere in Helsinki in 2026, was initially inspired by birds' mating dances. "In particular, the dramatic dances of colourful male birds-of-paradise from Oceania. I saw them in a nature documentary and right away

I realised that they could make for really interesting material," she enthuses.

"It got me thinking that they're male birds – and very showy ones. There's something about these colourful birds and their mating dance that is, in a fascinating way, reminiscent of drag queens, and it felt like I was in familiar territory," she says.

### EXPLORING UNREALISTIC MASCULINITY WITH FLASHY OUTFITS

Kasurinen graduated from Stockholm University of the Arts with a degree in dance art in 2017. Her choreography has been performed at the likes of Dance Base in Yokohama, Japan; One Dance festival in Bulgaria; Inkonst in Sweden; and Helsinki Festival and Zodiak – Center for New Dance in the Finnish Capital.

Before long, the visual idea for the first version of *BIRDS OF PARADISE* was born. Suitable outfits were needed for the pilot of this dance piece inspired by birds-of-paradise, as Kasurinen planned to participate in the prestigious Danse Élargie choreography competition held in Paris. Browsing Instagram, she found Finnish-born and Paris-based Fashion Designer **Leevi**

1.

Tiiia Kasurinen.

📷 Val Nevalainen

2.

TIIA KASURINEN: *BIRDS OF PARADISE*.

📷 Jessica North



2.



1.

Ikäheimo's *No Pain, No Glamour* collection and could not help but be impressed.

Through visually striking play, the collection explores the ideas about unrealistic masculinity and body image that are served up to boys right from early childhood.

"There is nothing bird-like about the clothes themselves, but they are wonderfully dramatic, super-hero-esque and vividly colourful," Tiia Kasurinen explains. "I sent the designer a message and managed to borrow the outfits at very short notice for the competition in Paris."

The artistic ensemble worked, and Kasurinen's pilot was chosen as a finalist for *Danse Élargie* – the first Finnish piece in the competition's history.

#### WHAT ARE HUMANS' MATING DANCES?

*BIRDS OF PARADISE* explores birds, while simultaneously also taking a good look at humans. What are our mating dances like? How is masculinity displayed in birds, and what does it look like in humans?

"Through the human gaze, the ways in which male birds attract females to mate sometimes seem quite humorous. But equally, we can look at humans through the same lens," states Tiia Kasurinen.

"With the working group, I looked at show wrestling, boybands and video games, as well as violent themes and

### Kasurinen's pilot was chosen as a finalist for *Danse Élargie* – the first Finnish piece in the competition's history.

stereotypes of masculinity, with an exploration of sensitivity also thrown into the mix," she explains.

The choreographer is also fascinated by delving into what mating dances tell us about socially-constructed gender roles, and how movement acquires its gendered nature when dance is produced for the human body.

#### WHAT SHOULD WE SOUND LIKE?

Tiia Kasurinen's previous piece, *Songbird* (2025) was also inspired by birds. In the performance, she takes on the role of a feminine character who sings, screams and growls at pitches spanning the whole spectrum of high to low. "The character's external form is made up of constructed feminine elements. She is reminiscent of Marie Antoinette, clad in a corset, skirt and huge wig – and that in itself is totally drag," the dance artist elaborates.

"In the performance, I explore the identity of the voice through techniques such as replicating bird calls. Toying with ideas about how we should sound is fascinating. Can my voice



2.

change how I appear to others and what kinds of preconceptions people form?"

The first time Kasurinen used her voice and sang on stage was in 2023, in the piece *ONSTAGE – The Concert*. The performance drew inspiration from pop stars, club concerts and artists' alter egos that take shape on stage, with a particular focus on hyperfeminine performer identities and how they harness and feed on the audience's gaze.

"I like exaggeration, even humorous exaggeration – as a performative device, it's entertaining."

#### FINDING THE STRENGTH TO STAND UP TO SCRUTINY THROUGH DISGUISE

An overriding theme in Kasurinen's work is visual metamorphosis. She is interested in how the external appearance of the body influences movement, and, at the same time, how the audience relate to different bodies.

The theme of metamorphosis played a major role in her artistic identity right from her student years in Stockholm, when she put on her solo drag queen show *Vulva T* (2016) as part of her final year project.



3.

1. **TIIA KASURINEN:** *I'm not entirely here (cybersad)*, co-prod. Zodiac – Center for New Dance. Saara Taussi

2. & 3. **TIIA KASURINEN:** *SONGBIRD*, co-prod. Zodiac – Center for New Dance. Petri Virtanen

In her piece *I'm not entirely here (cybersad)* (2020), she continued with the theme of metamorphosis. The piece brought to the stage a cyborg-like character created with masking, movement and costumes, with the external appearance inspired by the choreographer's social media algorithms. What happens when the idealised, Kardashian-esque body we all know from the internet, with cascades of hair extensions, false eyelashes, and dramatic hips, steps out of the phone screen and into the real world? How do the internet and real world meet here?

Kasurinen has been intrigued by how much disguise or masking can give us the courage to step into the limelight. "Before, when I performed more as myself, I found being on the stage took a lot out of me. Sometimes I'd feel ashamed if someone commented on how I looked. But when I'm in character, I'm completely exaggerated and masked, it doesn't bother me being subjected to the gaze of an audience who have no qualms about picking me apart."

Another theme the artist often comes back to is camp aesthetics and the power of playful exaggeration.

"I'm a very visual person and I often see my work as moving photographs. I like exaggeration, even humorous exaggeration – as a performative device, it's entertaining," she says. "And stirring up contradictory feelings is always interesting." ■

# “CHILDREN ARE A SMART AUDIENCE WITH A SHARP EYE”

TEXT Emma Vainio TRANSLATION Claire Ruaro



**KALLE LEHTO:** *Chevalier - Hobbyhorse Circus.*  
 © Antti Suniala

**DANCE THEATRE HURJARUUTH:** *The Seasons – garden gnomes’ travel photos.*  
 © Marko Mäkinen

“I want to tackle big, philosophical themes: time, identity and what it means to be human, and children are the perfect target group for this.”

**WHAT FACTORS** should be taken into consideration when creating dance performances for children? Can a circus performance aimed at kids be too naive? Is an educational message necessary if a performance for children is to be considered good? And what can children get out of the performance experience at its best? Three Finnish performing artists tell us what it is like to create art for viewers who get genuinely absorbed in situations and approach with eyes wide open – while also not holding back with their brutally honest criticism.

## **BIG PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES CAN ALSO WORK FOR CHILDREN**

Choreographer **Jyrki Karttunen** used to have strong ideas about what kinds of topics or performances were suitable for children. He long identified as a dance artist whose work was strictly for adults.

“But, to my delight, I realised that I was wrong,” Karttunen says. “I want to tackle big, philosophical themes: time, identity and what it means to be human, and children are the perfect target group for this,” he adds.

Karttunen has had a long career as a choreographer and performer, serving as the artistic director of his own group – Karttunen Kollektiv – as well as working with the Finnish National Ballet and leading Helsinki Dance Company, which operates in connection with Helsinki City Theatre. He is currently the



artistic director of Dance Theatre Hurjaruuth, whose programme is aimed specifically at children and families.

His children’s performance, *The Seasons – garden gnomes’ travel photos* (2024) takes viewers on a journey through the year and the four seasons. Four gnomes who express themselves through dance and circus skills explore day-to-day life in spring, summer, autumn and winter with their audience.

“The gnomes bring a perfect carnival feel to all the social hubbub that comes with being human,” Karttunen explains.

“When you bring fantasy creatures into the mix, it gives you licence to exaggerate things. With the gnomes, I want to show children that even we as adults – or gnomes – often have no clue what we’re doing. And that you can get by in life even if things do not go absolutely perfectly every time,” Karttunen elaborates.

But why time, and why right now? “The passage of time offers a wonderful light and comfort, especially in these restless and uncertain times,” Karttunen explains. Time passes – a new winter will always come, and every spring the frozen ground will thaw once more.

## **WHEN A WASHING LINE GETS A SOUL**

What if jogging bottoms hanging from a washing line were to take on a new life as a camel? And what if the socks hanging next to them were transformed into a dinosaur’s skeleton?



1.

1. **DANCE THEATRE HURJARUUTH:** *The Seasons – garden gnomes' travel photos.*

📷 Marko Mäkinen

2.

2. **PORTMANTEAU:** *Pyykki – Lost in Laundryland, co-prod. WHS.*

📷 Luis Sartori do Vale

“There is not really any difference in how we create performances for children or adults.”



2.

Specialising in expressive tightwire walking, **Mira Ravald's** work treads the line between contemporary circus and dance. Together with Circus and Visual Artist **Luis Sartori do Vale**, she forms the contemporary circus group Portmanteau. The Finnish-Brazilian group's pieces are based on unexpected visual perspectives and innovative expression.

The piece *Pyykki – Lost in Laundryland* (2025), intended for the whole family, uses magic, puppet theatre and object manipulation to seek out wonder and surreal encounters with everyday household objects. The piece was inspired by the photo series *Clothing Line Animals* by Visual Artist **Helga Stentzel**, which uses optical illusions to transform clothes and household textiles into playful figures.

“Using circus and dance, we can have encounters with creatures and other characters that materialise on the stage. With our imagination, we can swim in oceans or fight dragons,” Ravald explains.

As a group, Portmanteau are interested in universal themes that are easy to relate to no matter what the viewer's culture or background. The group's first piece for children, *Piste, piste, piste* (2020), is based on themes of growth and change. *Pyykki*, on the other hand, examines the world with a curious gaze and sees magic in everyday things.

“Our performances are non-verbal and do not follow a predetermined story. We want to create a playful, poetic world for our audiences where their own imagination can find its wings,” says Ravald.

And what factors do they think should be taken into consideration when creating circus performances for children?

“There is not really any difference in how we create performances for children or adults – we always devote an equal amount of time, energy and resources to our performances. We are always wary of creating an end result that is too naive,” says Ravald. “We believe that it is important to give children room to form their own interpretations and engage their imagination.”

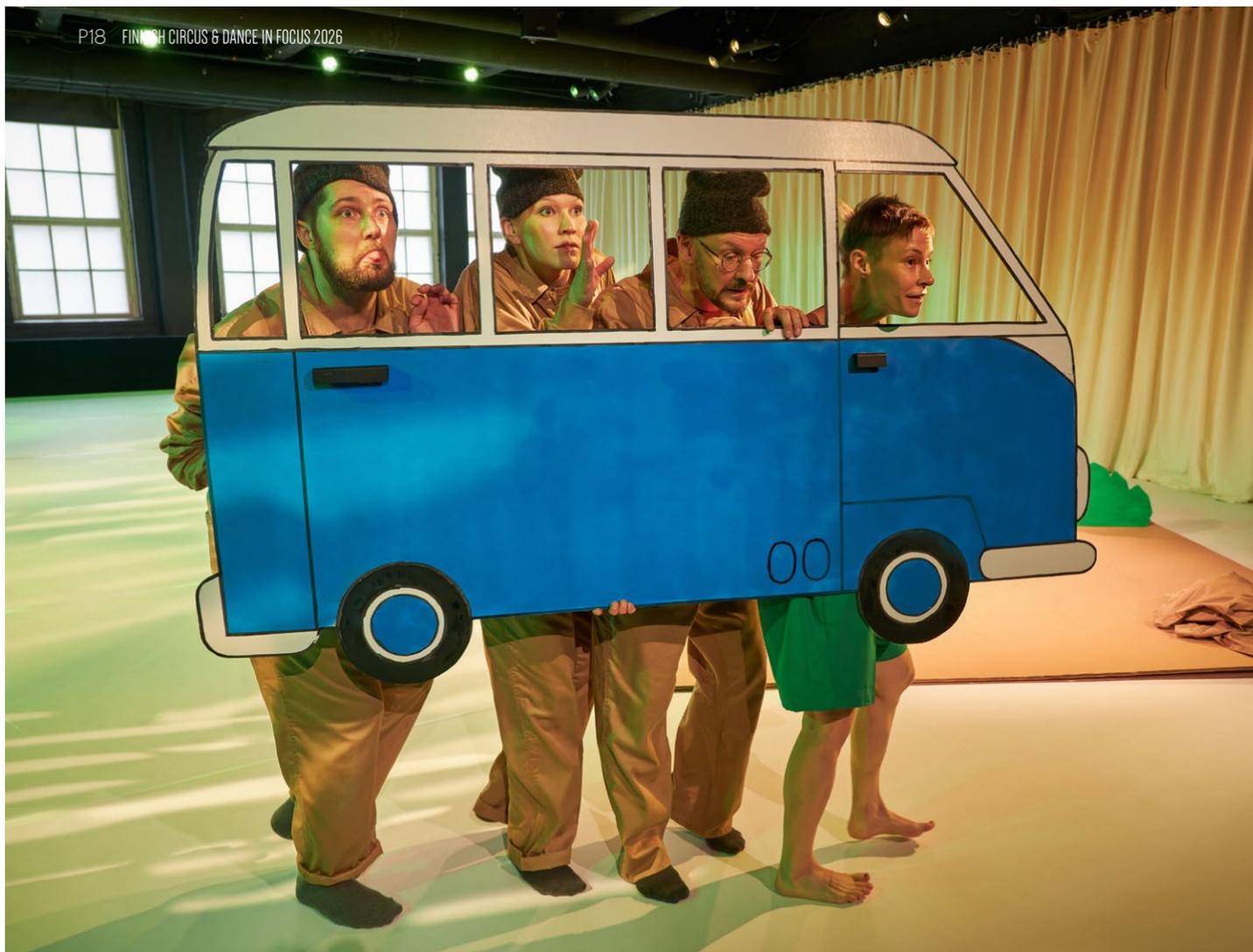
#### A DETECTIVE DUO GETTING INTO ALL KINDS OF TROUBLE

Contemporary circus group Race Horse Company's piece *Detectives* (2024) combines physical comedy and contemporary circus,

inviting onto the stage a peculiar detective duo whose exuberantly irrational actions are interpreted by Circus Artist **Kalle Lehto** and Actor specialised in mime and clownery **Marc Gassot**. The piece is directed by **Sanna Silvennoinen** from Circo Aereo.

The likeable, if slightly loopy, detectives investigate riddles on the likes of a bitten apple and an unusual filing cabinet.

“In this piece, I wanted to focus as a performer more on physical comedy than on circus acts. With two of us on the stage, the humour comes naturally from the relationship between our characters,” explains Kalle Lehto. The performance is set in a classic, dimly lit detective's office, where the two characters find themselves in stranger and stranger situations. “The office has two doors allowing the characters in and out. It was fun to come up with ideas for the space,” he says.



**DANCE THEATRE HURJARUUTH:** *The Seasons* – garden gnomes' travel photos.

© Marko Mäkinen

**“Children should not be undervalued as viewers, instead we should appreciate their innate wisdom.”**

Kalle Lehto is a versatile circus artist and one of the artistic directors of Race Horse Company, a contemporary circus group that has toured the world. Lehto's circus expertise is rooted in RHC's extremely physical and boundlessly acrobatic style.

Before his circus career, Kalle Lehto played in the top basketball league for his age and was a national championship level breakdancer. After touring the world and putting on more than 50 performances a year with Race Horse Company's international award winning *Petit Mal* (2010), Lehto sought balance by creating something brand new – his first solo piece, *Circles* (2012), aimed specifically at children.

Before long, Kalle Lehto's ruffle shirted circus ringmaster character, clad in a uniform complete with epaulettes and fondly relatable in his absentmindedness, was galloping onto the circus stage on his hobby horse. The ringmaster's absurd adventures have continued through many pieces – such as *Chevalier* (2019), a contemporary circus piece that sings the praises of old-time circus horses and silent films.

Lehto likes performing for children, fully embracing their unbridled honesty: “From the stage you can hear perfectly whether the children like something or not. They do not search for hidden meanings in a piece, and instead get genuinely absorbed in situations and approach with eyes wide open, which is a wonderful skill,” he explains.

“Children should not be undervalued as viewers, instead we should appreciate their innate wisdom. In a non-verbal performance, you do not need to simplify anything for children, not even in a private detective story. They understand all the visual elements, sometimes even better than adults do,” Lehto believes.



**RACE HORSE COMPANY:** *Detectives*, co-prod. Circo Aereo.

© Juho Rahijärvi

**“I want to preserve children's belief in good and magic.”**

#### **SAFE SPACE, FOSTERING IMAGINATION, AND A FEELING THAT ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE**

As well as being a choreographer, Jyrki Karttunen is also qualified as a teacher in early childhood education and care, and holds a bachelor's degree in social sciences. In the world of daycare centres and as a child welfare adviser, he has seen what a diverse group children are.

In Karttunen's view, there is no need to emphasise the educational elements in art for children. However, he believes that considering how concepts such as otherness can be explored in performing arts is pivotal.

“Children's culture is full of archetypal characters, but art can also give a voice and face to other ways to be human,” he says. “I hope that these performances offer all kinds of children a safe space and the feeling that they are part of a community.”

Mira Ravald highlights that in our modern digital world, full of devices and screens, theatre offers children a moment to switch off from the fast-paced tempo of their surroundings. Together, they can experience something happening right in that moment, in front of their own eyes.

“Above all, I hope that Portmanteau's performances will foster children's imaginations and creativity, as well as awakening their curiosity to examine the world from new perspectives,” she summarises.

And what does Kalle Lehto hope that audiences of children will take with them from performances?

“In the world of circus, you can disconnect from the everyday reality that can, these days, feel unsafe. I want to preserve children's belief in good and magic. And to reinforce the feeling that anything is possible,” Lehto sums up. ■



**SORIN SIRKUS:** Christmas show 2025 – *Soriversum*.  
 © Kristian Wanvik

## SORIN SIRKUS 40 YEARS OF CIRCUS SKILLS, SWEAT AND JOY

**THE STORY OF** Sorin Sirkus, an ambitious circus school located in Tampere, began more than 40 years ago when two young gymnasts, **Taina Kopra** and **Jouni Kivimäki** founded a small circus club.

“We were 18 years old, just finishing our competitive careers as artistic gymnasts. Who would have believed we’d still be here 40 years later?” says Sorin Sirkus director Taina Kopra.

Today, circus is a popular hobby, but in the mid-1980s the situation was different. Very few people in Finland had any real circus expertise. Kopra and Kivimäki also had to learn all the tricks and techniques themselves before they could teach young people.

“We borrowed VHS tapes to learn tricks, studied pictures and exchanged ideas with older artists,” Kopra recalls. “Today, everything is on YouTube. Back then, it was all trial and error – and we certainly earned our share of bruises.”

To immerse themselves in the circus world, Kopra and Kivimäki drove around

Europe, performing as street artists, and watching numerous touring circus shows. In the dim light of circus tents, they memorized details of the tricks they would later teach to young performers in Tampere.

Today, Sorin Sirkus offers circus training for children and youth, families, babies and seniors. The school has 15 teachers and more than 600 weekly students.

Taina Kopra is the artistic director and head coach of the performing troupe, also overseeing international affairs. She is, for example, the president of the Caravan Circus Network, founded nearly 20 years ago, which unites 35 youth and social circus schools from 25 countries. Jouni Kivimäki is the technical manager, handling technical design, production, and crafting circus equipment.

Sorin Sirkus’s ambitious performing troupe trains roughly 15–20 hours per week. Young enthusiasts come straight from school to the circus, and occasionally training continues into the weekends.

“Who would have believed we’d still be here 40 years later?”

This passion has led many to pursue circus professionally. Since 1996, nearly 50 young performers from Sorin Sirkus have continued their training at circus arts universities in Germany, Canada, Sweden, Belgium, France and Italy. The list of these circus professionals includes many familiar names — **Laura Tikka**, **Valpuri Kaarninen**, **Merri Heikkilä**, **Nelli Kujansivu** and **Onni Toivonen**, among others.

This autumn, the son of Taina Kopra and Jouni Kivimäki began his circus arts studies in Turin, at FLIC Scuola di Circo. Their daughter is also a circus artist and teacher. Circus, it seems, runs strongly in the family. ■



Jenni Kallo. © Gemma Tweedy

# FUNNY BONES FROM FINLAND

TEXT Heidi Backström TRANSLATION Claire Ruaro

**DIRECTOR AKI KAURISMAKI'S** films are often flagged as a good example of this unique concept that is Finnish humour. Minimalistic, laconic, everyday – the kind of things that might not make you laugh out loud, but that prompt a buzz of recognition inside and perhaps a wry smile. Comedy is an integral part of circus, so we sat down with two Finnish circus groups, Kallo Collective and Kate & Pasi, for whom humour is an intrinsic part of what they do. Where does Finnish humour come from? Or perhaps it's more universal than we might think?

## FINNISH AUDIENCES AS A LITMUS TEST

Kallo Collective's **Jenni Kallo** and **Henni Kervinen** and Kate & Pasi's **Katerina Repponen** and **Pasi Nousiainen** are unanimous in their belief that Finnish audiences make for ideal sounding

boards. "If something works in Finland, it'll work anywhere!" proclaims Jenni Kallo. For this reason, Kallo Collective aim to always hold their premieres in Finland, as a kind of litmus test.

"Thankfully you can really feel from the stage whether the audience are enjoying it, even if they're not laughing out loud the whole time. In Finland, you know that you've got a hit on your hands when you can see shoulders bobbing up and down in the darkness," continues Henni Kervinen from Kallo Collective. "The happiest nation in the world – we just don't show it on the outside," laughs Pasi Nousiainen, and perhaps he has hit the nail on the head there.

Jenni Kallo was introduced to clowning at Hurjaruuth Dance Theatre in Helsinki in the early 2000s. After first studying circus in Finland, Kallo graduated from École internationale de



KATE & PASI: *Culinary Chaos*.  
© Kai Kuusisto



KALLO COLLECTIVE: *Helga*. © Mihaela Bodlovic

théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris, in 2008. In Paris, she lived in the same flat with **Sampo Kurppa** and **Thom Monckton**, a physical theatre artist from New Zealand. From this trio emerged one of Finland's best-known and most active physical theatre and contemporary circus companies – Kallo Collective. Nowadays, the collective is headed up by the artistic troika of Jenni Kallo, Sampo Kurppa and Henni Kervinen.

Katerina Repponen and Pasi Nousiainen have been performing together under the Kate & Pasi moniker since 2010. Over the course of 15 years, the award-winning duo have toured 26 countries with their comedic partner acrobatics, performing in all kinds of spaces and situations, from streets to theatres and corporate events to circus tents.

Comedy came to the pair by chance: “Originally, our aim was actually to go to Germany and do a traditional romantic partner acrobatics routine. But what can I say, whatever we tried, comedy was inescapable.”

Jenni Kallo's experience was similar. Despite trying to make more serious art when she was younger, it never took long for things to take a comedic turn. “You can't get away from the funny bones,” says Kallo of the innate gift for comedy.

#### RECIPE FOR COMEDY

According to Jenni Kallo, the comedy stems from the performer's desire to get the audience laughing – and, above all, from rhythm. Audience understanding and recognition is another key element: “We know how certain things should go, but with a clown on stage things go differently, something always goes awry.”

Pasi Nousiainen highlights that stunts bring their own challenges when making comedy in acrobatics. “A stunt might not always work, but you still have to keep up the rhythm and that relationship with the audience for the rest of the piece.”

“In performance situations, you have to make it clear to the viewers right from the start that they are allowed to laugh and



KATE & PASI: *Culinary Chaos*. © Kai Kuusisto

#### SOMETHING TO LAUGH ABOUT

“The audience both laughing and crying is a sign of a good performance. It's a confirmation that you're going beyond just being funny,” states Jenni Kallo, describing the audience reactions to her hit character, granny clown Olga.

Comedy that hits the spot can centre around topics that are considered difficult to tackle, but that people can identify with – such as ageing and loneliness. Jenni Kallo's Olga came to life at Hurjaruuth's *Winter Circus Nauru* in 2004 and the character lived on for years. In the true spirit of circus, traditions passed down from one generation to the next: Kallo's granny clown Olga gave rise to Henni Kervinen's clown Helga.

Married collaborators Nousiainen and Repponen sourced their brand of humour from their relationship and their own contrasts: man and woman, big and small, soft and tough. These elements gave rise to Kate & Pasi's popular touring pieces, such as *Suhde* (2014), and their latest work, *Culinary Chaos* (2025), a family-friendly piece that takes place in a kitchen.

The absurdness of familiar situations was also a source of inspiration for Kallo Collective's touring pieces *The Mews* (2025), *Receptionists* (2019) and *Into The Wild* (2023).

“When people laugh, they relax, and perhaps that's what gives you the space to tackle serious topics too,” Jenni Kallo ponders. She is keen to also highlight that humour is one of the cornerstones of life, and its place in art should not be underestimated. “On a serious note, it takes a lot to figure out how to both give and take humour.” ■

[kallocollective.com](http://kallocollective.com)  
[kate-pasi.com](http://kate-pasi.com)

react,” Kallo emphasises. This is particularly important for those who do not wear a red nose – the generally recognised sign that laughter is not only allowed, but encouraged.

For Pasi Nousiainen and Katerina Repponen, listening to the other performer is a key part of their recipe for comedy. “It allows you to incorporate an element of surprise and spontaneity into the performance. As a duo, when we're performing we keep bouncing off of each other, so to speak – the aim is to get the other to laugh. And the audience can see that too.”

Jenni Kallo adds that comedy requires the creators to really delve into and explore the topic and find the right rhythm during practices and rehearsals. “By the time you get to the performance, it all needs to be practised and polished if you want the comedy to work. That said, you also need to allow space to respond to changes on stage and the audience's reactions,” Kallo points out. “Or lack thereof.”

# IN THE SPOTLIGHT

TEXT Heidi Horila PHOTOS Uupi Tirronen TRANSLATION Claire Ruaro

## ALEN NSAMBU

For Performance Artist and Choreographer Alen Nsambu, the stage offers potential that is much needed in today's crisis-ridden world.

### What is the most important topic in your work at the moment?

I am currently developing a piece with the working title *blacklight*, where I explore Blackness, Western rationalism, and the relationship between darkness and light along with the related cultural connotations. In my work, I investigate how stereotypes associated with Black bodies are intertwined with

imagery of darkness and the unknown. As a queer and racialised person, I attempt to create alternative worlds where audiences can see things differently to how they are used to.

In my practice, I focus on optics – i.e. questions of transparency, concealing and revealing. As a performer, I play with the external gaze, transformation and defining

oneself. Movement, use of voice, text, and various alter egos are some of my key tools.

### Where do you find inspiration for the creative process?

Inspiration arises from coming together with others around a particular theme. The process is the reason to come together. Play has a strong presence in my work with others, serving as a necessary counterweight to balance out the gloomy or painful topics that life presents us with or that I explore in my art.

### What do you want to give the audience through your art?

I think that shape-shifting inner worlds that end up on the stage, realised with others, can wash over and permeate the audience, like a wave rolling onwards and forwards. This process always leaves some trace, which can create new space for dreaming or shape your existence in the world.

## ALEN NSAMBU, 27

Performance artist, choreographer

Graduated with a degree in dance and choreography from the Danish National School of Performing Arts, Copenhagen (2019–2022).

His debut solo piece, *NEON BEIGE*, was selected to be part of the international Aerowaves network.

[alennsambu.com](http://alennsambu.com)

## KARITA TIKKA

Circus Artist Karita Tikka believes that everyone deserves the space and opportunity to experience art.

### What is the most important topic in your work at the moment?

I want to support diversity and wish to create space and working opportunities for those representing different marginalised groups, such as queer creators and those from trans backgrounds.

My aim is to facilitate encounters between artists and cultures from different backgrounds and to invite all kinds of audiences towards art. Sustainability and longevity in the lifecycle of pieces are also very important, as is a safe working environment.

I work in Finland, as one of Art Organisation Silence's artistic directors, and in France as an artist, with La Compagnie D'Elles and Cirque du Docteur Paradi. My life is divided between Kittilä in northern Finland and Toulouse in France.

### Where do you find inspiration for the creative process?

Public spaces and their unseen potential fascinate me. I experience things in an intense flurry of colours, and intuition guides my work. I am influenced by the resonance between space and movement and how energy is channelled into me, making the invisible visible. At the Silence Festival in Kittilä, we often use the same unconventional performance spaces, such as a tractor hall or village house, which are transformed into something different and unique each time based on the energy of the people working in them.

### What do you want to give the audience through your art?

I hope that it awakens not just feelings, but questions, above all else. Art cannot, or does not need to provide answers, but it can pose the right questions. A certain level of vulgarity or discomfort fascinates me and is present in my own work. I try to pierce and challenge boundaries to open paths that lead toward the edges of the self.

## KARITA TIKKA, 33

Circus artist, contortionist and dance acrobat

Completed degrees in circus arts at Salpaus Further Education in Lahti, Finland (2012–2015) and Le Lido – Centre des Arts du Cirque de Toulouse (2016–2018).

Joint artistic director of Art Organisation Silence.

[hiljaisuusfestivaali.fi](http://hiljaisuusfestivaali.fi)



## TEO ALA-RUONA

Interdisciplinary Performance Artist Teo Ala-Ruona delves into deep information through dance, movement and manipulation of body parts.

**What is the most important topic in your work at the moment?**

I have long worked with issues to do with body image and trans identity formation. I call my work the opening up of Western body image, realised using my own body and those of the others performing with me. In previous works I have focused on things like the lungs, skin and anus, while my upcoming piece, which has the working title of *Damn*, has to do with the brain and digestion.

In the history of Western medicine, the concept of the body is generally fragmentary and obsessively medicalised.

In my own work, I explore the body comprehensively, with the aim of opening up and expanding understanding and experiences of it, reforming the language associated with it into something beyond words. An exploration of digestion problems can be seen as a critique of capitalism, for example.

**Where do you find inspiration for the creative process?**

For me, inspiration comes from places like different texts I have read. Recently, I've been reading both medical books from the past and Samuel Beckett, who reorganised language in a captivating way.

I am heavily inspired by the people I work with. My artistic aesthetics are distilled by thinking together with others. At best, this process forms a life-sustaining force. I feel that other people are like doors or portals opening up new possibilities in the depths of the body.

**What do you want to give the audience through your art?**

I would like to offer ways to relate to humanity and the world, to expand the perception of trans corporeality. The presence of the audience plays a huge role in my works, bringing wonderful and unpredictable elements to the fore. The materials come alive through the audience, taking on a whole new life each time.

**TEO ALA-RUONA, 35**

Performance artist

Completed master's degrees at Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy (2016–2018) and Aalto University (2014–2016).

Represented the Nordic countries at the 19th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice (Biennale Architettura) in 2025.

[teoalaruona.net](http://teoalaruona.net)



## HANNA MOISALA

Circus Artist and Tightwire Walker Hanna Moisala thrives outside of her comfort zone and seeks roots through her work.

**What is the most important topic in your work at the moment?**

My current focus is solidly on premieres taking place in Oulu, northern Finland, European Capital of Culture for 2026.

In the piece *Ylitys* (Crossing), along with two other tightwire walkers I will cross the river Merikoski close to the centre of Oulu on a tightwire. The location has a particularly sombre reputation as a place where numerous people have chosen to jump and end their life. The aim is not to glorify the history of the area, but rather to create shared bridges through art to break free from the past. We want to draw attention to topics of mental health and controlling the mind – topics that we all have in common.

More broadly speaking, I seek to go beyond my comfort zone. Throughout a tightwire walk, balance is the exception sought amidst the prevailing imbalance.

**Where do you find inspiration for the creative process?**

I recently created a work called *Phloem* (2025), where as a working group we explored the making and history of bark bread, a food eaten in wartime in Finland. In this multidisciplinary piece we ground a bark powder from phloem, the inner bark layer of standing dead pine trees, and used it to make pancakes that we served to the audience. Food art is a real area of interest for me at the moment. I thrive on getting my hands stuck in, delving down to the roots and core of things.

Moments where not everything seems so bright also spur me on. Without those moments where we hit the bottom, we

cannot create new things or help those that already exist to flourish.

**What do you want to give the audience through your art?**

Experiences and participation that are open and accessible to all. For example, in *I will cross the river Merikoski* (2026) we will offer the audience the opportunity to try tightwire walking just a short height above the ground. ■

**HANNA MOISALA, 44**

Circus artist, tightwire walker

Graduated from the Arts Academy of Turku University of Applied Sciences with a degree in circus arts (2008) and completed a master's degree at the National Centre for Circus Arts in London, UK (2013–2014).

[lumocompany.com](http://lumocompany.com)

[hannamoisala.com](http://hannamoisala.com)



# MUOVIPUSSI: A BAND FROM THE YEAR 3000

TEXT Mira Ursić



1. & 2.  Melis Albayrak

3.  Cosmin Cirstea



The Finnish band Muovipussi – translated as Plastic Bag – boldly blends electronic, metal, pop, rap, and punk music with skilled acrobatics and unexpected, theatrical elements. Shattering artistic boundaries, the group is formed by three artists whose backgrounds span both circus arts and music: Milla Lahtinen, Niklas Blomberg and Heidi Finnberg. Writer Mira Ursić experienced Muovipussi's performative concert at the 2025 Peculiar Family Festival in Split, Croatia – and was in for a surprise.

**WHERE TO START**, how can I explain this band? Let's start with facts. As with many bands, Muovipussi's journey began with a rehearsal. Friends randomly jamming together in a studio and having fun. All three, **Milla Lahtinen, Niklas Blomberg** and **Heidi Finnberg**, have a background in music, from singing to playing instruments. Milla and Niklas are also circus artists. This might sound straightforward enough, but there is nothing typical about Muovipussi.

The name in Finnish means plastic bag – and inside that plastic bag, you will find firecrackers with instruments. Sometimes on stage, their outfit involves plastic bags; sometimes it doesn't. Their aesthetics go hand in hand with their music and performance, and their mantra seems to be: let's play with all of it.

Their appearance was the first thing I noticed before the performance began. All three of them looked like teenagers who simultaneously enjoy girly pop and death metal music. But each of them had their own aesthetic expression. These three strong and different personalities have known each other since high

school, and their intimacy is the fruit of years of bonding. This confidence in allowing themselves to push their own physical limits is palpable on stage, where they playfully seem to push each other through complicity and humour.





1.  
 1. Sabine Baakman  
 2..  
 2. Melis Albayrak

## The absence of fear to experiment is exactly what makes Muovipussi unique.

As they say, it's okay to collide sometimes. That is the point; that collision brings creativity and artistry, which you can definitely recognise in the art of Muovipussi. They play with sounds, words, and physical expression combined. It's not uncommon to hear a hardcore, aggressive melody with sweet and gentle lyrics. This curiosity and the absence of fear to experiment is exactly what makes Muovipussi unique.

The show started softly and plushly. Pink dress, shirt, jacket, ponytail, a guy with a hat behind a synthesiser. They entered the stage and greeted the audience with a cute, almost shy 'Good evening' and 'Thank you for inviting us'. An innocent smile on their faces, for the first minute, everything was normal. Niklas is behind the synth, Heidi is playing the bass, and Milla is holding the microphone. What a nice trio, I thought to myself. This is going to be a pleasant performance to end the festival.

After the misleading, gentle, and calm intro, all hell broke loose in the best possible way. I've been to many punk, metal, and all the other genres' concerts, so I knew what kind of energy to expect, but this was something completely different. Most "regular" concerts deliver similar performances: loud singing, lots of guitars, drums, slam dancing – you know it will be pretty chaotic since you know what to expect.

Muovipussi's performance was chaotic and loud, but it had a certain unpredictable flow to it. This wasn't some copy-pasted act done automatically. Their energy spread all over us, and the

whole audience was dancing, headbanging and laughing. They are super professional performers who don't take themselves too seriously, something which I appreciate a lot.

When Milla, a fragile Barbie girl with a big smile on her face, starts to sing, you will definitely hear her. She defines herself more as a vocalist, rather than a singer; she has an impressive death growl voice and screams that will send a shiver down your spine like an electroshock wave. Her stage presence comes naturally through her circus skills, almost like it's not rehearsed. Awesome contortions, all kinds of twists, hanging in the air and climbing fences.

Heidi is the only band member without a circus background, but her stage presence is very circus-like, and it's feral, theatrical. At first glance, Niklas seems like a boy who enjoys baseball and video games, but if you look closer through his fluo-pastel nerd attitude, his appearance hides the temperament of a geeky sound engineer. I found him to be a true musical chameleon, a one-of-a-kind energy ball that takes over the stage. I enjoyed his physical presence and his trippy sound design.

All three together represent one full-bodied artist, unique and eccentric. They are crazy, in the best way, without inhibitions and boundaries. An adorable and diabolical trio screaming dadaistic lyrics accompanied by punchy synth beats, electronic and punk lunacy, machine-gun rapping and growling, all spiced up with a great sense of humour.

These three witches of sweet darkness offer performance, music, and laughter; after their show, you will ask yourself: What did I just experience? And that is exactly what they want. ■

**This article by Mira Ursić is a collaboration with the digital media Around About Circus.**



# SARCASTIC HUMOUR AND BLOWING UP BOUNDARIES TWO CHOREOGRAPHER- COMPOSER DUOS SHED LIGHT ON THEIR COLLABORATION

TEXT Maria Säkö TRANSLATION Simo Vassinen

Choreographer Susanna Leinonen, who comes from a ballet background, and Rap Musician Kasper Laine have found a shared frequency in dark themes and sarcastic humour. Choreographer-Musician Elina Pirinen and Contemporary Composer Ville Kabrell, meanwhile, describe themselves as “doom siblings.” In their works, the combination of music and movement is powerfully transgressive – breaking boundaries.

**SUSANNA LEINONEN** and her working group’s latest piece *Pain Killer* (2025) fuses movement, music and video to capture the cruelty of the present moment and, in its own distinct way, to push back against it. While it carries traces of Leinonen’s earlier works, it also takes a markedly different approach.

“I’ve been exploring movement language through the lens of contemporary medicalisation,” says Leinonen.

The dancers, with their tightly trained backgrounds, appear laconic, dropped and deliberately unpoised. For Leinonen, this is an entirely new direction. For the music, **Kasper Laine** has ventured into the hazy borderlands between noise and music, chaos and order.

“The central question here is how to hold things together. I had this image: what if there were an orchestra where nobody’s OK? One has depression, another has a serious drug problem, and so on.” Laine feels that in contemporary dance the music often follows what happens on stage. But not in Leinonen’s world.

“In our collaboration, the music functions almost like a script.

At times, it even forms a kind of dramaturgical foundation,” says Laine. With his background in rap, making music without words feels liberating. Letting go of words and definitions is, in fact, a defining feature of their collaboration.

When Susanna Leinonen starts a choreographic process, Kasper Laine’s music doesn’t yet exist – the dance is initially created to entirely different music. The dancers, whose roots lie in a neoclassical ballet tradition, mustn’t fall in love with the rehearsal soundtrack.

“I first develop the movement material using other rehearsal music. This grants the freedom to shape a diverse and independent movement language, since the final musical dramaturgy doesn’t yet restrict expression or structure,” Leinonen explains. Once the movement is sufficiently formed, she begins adapting it to Kasper’s composition.

“This way of working allows for the creation of contrasts. For example, if I’ve created a movement sequence to very dramatic music, I might then transfer it to one of Kasper’s extremely



SUSANNA LEINONEN: *Painkiller*. @ Mirkku Merimaa



ELINA PIRINEN: *Mortal Tropical Dances*, co-prod. Zodiac Center for New Dance, Dance House Helsinki. @ Venla Helenius

minimalist soundscapes. Something that was born from very harsh and loud elements might then be set to something tender and quiet,” Leinonen says.

Over two decades of collaboration, the duo’s shared process has evolved. Kaspero now knows how to leave pauses in his music, while Leinonen’s choreography has found simpler forms.

Their shared, sarcastic sense of humour keeps them connected. It carries a transgressive power. Just when you think *Pain Killer* is completely serious, a viewer might suddenly let out a surprised chuckle. These logic-twisting jolts break the boundary between art and reality.

#### COMPOSING AGAINST A BODILY FIELD

Ville Kabrell and Elina Pirinen began working together about ten years ago. At the time, Pirinen had been examining the compositions and iconic status of deceased Russian male composers like Shostakovich and Rachmaninov – and longed for a new vision. She wanted to surprise herself and her brand, and share a creative process with a living composer.

“Rhythms, ritualism, and hybrid images of sound and body are damn important to us. The pulses of aliveness are deeply present in our collaboration,” choreographer Elina Pirinen sums up her and Ville Kabrell’s work together.

For audiences, their first joint work, *Brume de Mer* (2018), seemed to open a door Pirinen had long been knocking on. It emerged from the shared volume of a psycho-physiologically charged circle dance and organ music. This was followed by *Mortal Tropical Dances* (2023) and *Doves and Bloods* (2024).

“As a choreographer and dancer, you’re so exposed with your body and your own expression. I seek out a neo-primitive channel that creates a connection with the audience. It’s important that Ville isn’t afraid of that. And vice versa. Ville’s music is fierceness, and therefore physical!” describes Pirinen.

For both, creating counterpoints is vital. In Kabrell’s compositional work, physicality informs the sonic image: “I spend time with the dancers and observe what moves me – what the moving elements are in the sound, the music, and the body. What creates resonance. In a way, music should open up the possibility for the body to transform, from everyday being into fantasy.”

When developing a piece, Pirinen asks whether the emerging image of the body is feminist:

“Is it sexual, mortal, disturbing, multi-tempered, colourful – what comes out of the body? Does it carry many expressions?”

Pirinen’s practice and voice often draw on the earth, on maternal and vulvic power. The entire team shares an experience of life and reality danced through ancestral traumas and phantasms. Kabrell composes in response to this bodily field.

According to Pirinen, within a choreographic framework Kabrell’s musical material is as full and rich as the body is in her own choreography.

Ville Kabrell and Elina Pirinen’s collaboration thus began when Pirinen temporarily set aside her concept centred on Russian male composer-genius. Next, however, they will return to a Russian icon when *Ghosts of Rosegarden* premieres in autumn 2026. In it, Pirinen and Kabrell draw on Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* – but no one is sacrificed. ■



ELINA PIRINEN: *Doves And Bloods*, co-prod. Viirus. © Jussi Ulkuniemi



HEL Treats 2025.  
© Antti Suniala

## HEL TREATS: GLOWING LIGHTS AND DISMANTLING CATEGORIES

TEXT Valentina Barone

IN AUGUST 2025, Circus & Dance Finland invited international presenters, programmers and journalists to Helsinki. During the two days of the HEL Treats visiting programme, we got a crash course in the work of more than 20 Finnish artists or companies, and visited nine studios and venues, e.g. Cirko – Center for New Circus, and Zodiak – Center for New Dance.

Across Europe, the borders between dance, theatre, circus, and visual art continue to dissolve, giving rise to hybrid practices where movement, image, and spatial composition intertwine. Within this fluid landscape, Finnish contemporary circus cultivates a distinct visual identity where light design, spacial awareness and geometrical structures are interwoven with rhythm as dramaturgical partners to the bodies.

At Cirko, Blind Gut Company presented an extract from *Umbra*, a site-specific performance using glowing juggling sticks, aerial choreography, and digital projection. The piece speaks in a uniquely Finnish visual language, sculpted from neon light, powerful colours and suggestive electronic soundscapes.

As if a tableau vivant suddenly came to life, in *Naapuri / Neighbour*, Siivun

Ensemble & Kallo Collective invite the audience into an imagined apartment block with each performer framed in a window-like cell. Blending physical theatre and dance, the work resonates with a longing for social connection, seasoned with Finnish black humour and a keen sense of spatial choreography.

*Tempo*, a collaboration between visual artist and magician Kalle Nio and choreographer Fernando Melo, offered another kind of enchantment, a dialogue of darkness and light. In the scenes built around dance and stage illusion, three dancers drew the audience into a cinematic meditation where motion and time slow down, reverse, and come to a halt.

At Zodiak, the following day’s pitches focused on creative process and artistic philosophy, offering insight into how Finnish contemporary dance engages with broader European conversations around materiality, ecology, and identity.

Dance and performance artist Sonja Jokiniemi’s interdisciplinary research combines performance, textiles and installation into a choreography of matter. Her work resonates with debates on posthumanism and neurodiversity with a personal, hand-made

intimacy, mixed with a deep interest in language systems and psychonormativity.

Interdisciplinary artist Teo Ala-Ruona’s practice, in turn, aligns with international currents in queer, posthuman ecological performance. *Industry Muscle: Five Scores for Architecture* interlaces the built environment, the trans body and ecology, imagining alternative modes of inhabiting a collapsing world.

Seen through HEL Treats, Finnish performing arts emerge as both connected to and distinct from Europe’s broader circus and dance trends, with an aesthetic rooted in space and matter and a deep sensitivity to the ways individual and collective identities are shaped through performance.

HEL Treats demonstrated that it is possible to condense a programme without losing intensity. Its compact format favoured genuine dialogue, creating space for reflection and connection among the participants. I would have had room for one more show, but I savoured its absence like a refreshing fast. ■

Valentina Barone is the Performing Arts Manager and Editor of the digital media *Around About Circus*.

HEL Treats 2025 was organised by Circus & Dance Finland in collaboration with TINFO Theatre Info Finland, Helsinki Festival, & Espoo Theatre, Zodiak – Center for New Dance, Cirko – Center for New Circus, and Viirus Theatre. It was supported by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.

Stay tuned – the next HEL Treats is planned for 2027.

## CIRCUS IN FINLAND

40

CIRCUS COMPANIES

2 000

SHOWS PER YEAR

2

MILLION EUROS STATE FUNDING  
FOR CIRCUS ART

500 000

SPECTATORS PER YEAR

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100

DANCE COMPANIES

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SHOWS PER YEAR

11

MILLION EUROS STATE FUNDING  
FOR DANCE ART

400 000

SPECTATORS PER YEAR



Ismo Dance Company: Anybody's Architecture © Minna Hättinen

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& CHOREO-  
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compania.fi  
@companiakaaaronimartin

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Tero Saarinen Company: Macbeth © Ilkka Saastamoinen

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nomkollektiv.com

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@wekc\_danceyourheartoutsessions

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hiljaisuusfestivaali.fi  
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@jojoouludance

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@nayttamo

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zodiak.fi  
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pirkanmaantanssikeskus.fi  
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**REGIONAL DANCE CENTRE OF EASTERN FINLAND / ITAK**  
itak.fi  
@itasuomentanssinaluekeskus

**REGIONAL DANCE CENTRE OF FINNISH LAKELAND**  
tanssikeskus.fi  
@kstanssikeskus

**REGIONAL DANCE CENTRE IN NORTHERN FINLAND**  
The regional centre is formed by two companies/producers in the area:  
jojo.fi  
routa.fi

**REGIONAL DANCE CENTRE OF OSTROBOTHNIA**  
pohjanmaantanssi.fi  
@pohjanmaantanssi

**REGIONAL DANCE CENTRE OF WESTERN FINLAND**  
l-tanssi.fi  
@lantinentanssinaluekeskus

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### CIRCUS FESTIVALS

**CIRCUS FESTIVAL OU**  
Oulu, June 2026  
oulu2026.eu

**HELSINKI CIRCUS FESTIVAL**  
Helsinki, September 2026  
cirko.fi/en

**OBJECT FESTIVAL**  
Helsinki, November  
objectfestival.fi

**RED PEARL**  
Helsinki, March  
hurjaruuth.fi/en

**SALO CIRCUS FESTIVAL**  
Salo, July–August  
salocircus.com  
@salocircus

**SIRKUSFESTIVAALI PUSU**  
Lohja, July  
sirkusfestivaalipusu.com  
@sirkusfestivaali\_pusu

**SYSÄYS FESTIVAL**  
Orivesi, July  
@sysaysfestivaali



Arctic Ensemble © Mikko Pirinen

## DANCE FESTIVALS

### KUOPIO DANCE FESTIVAL

Kuopio, June  
kuopiodancefestival.fi  
@kuopiodancefestival

### LONELY IN THE RAIN

Joensuu, November  
itak.fi  
@yksinsateessa

### MOVING IN NOVEMBER

Helsinki, November  
movinginnovember.fi  
@lmfestivaali

### ODANCE FESTIVAL

Oulu, September  
jojo.fi/oudance-festivaali

### SIDE STEP FESTIVAL

Helsinki, February  
Helsinki  
www.zodiak.fi/en/sidestep

### TAMPERE DANCE CURRENT

Tampere, May  
tanssivirtaa.net  
@tanssivirtaataampereella

### TANSSIN AIKA - JYVÄSKYLÄ DANCE FESTIVAL

Jyväskylä, September  
tanssinaika.tanssinkeskus.fi  
@tanssin\_aika\_festivaali

## MULTIDISCIPLINARY

### ANTI - CONTEMPORARY ART FESTIVAL

Kuopio, September  
antifestival.com  
@antifestival

### BALTIC CIRCLE

Helsinki, November  
balticcircle.fi  
@balticcircle

### FINFRINGE

Turku, May  
finfringe.fi  
@fin\_fringe

### SILENCE FESTIVAL

Kittilä, June  
hiljaisuusfestivaali.fi  
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Helsinki, June  
kiasma.fi/en/urb-festival  
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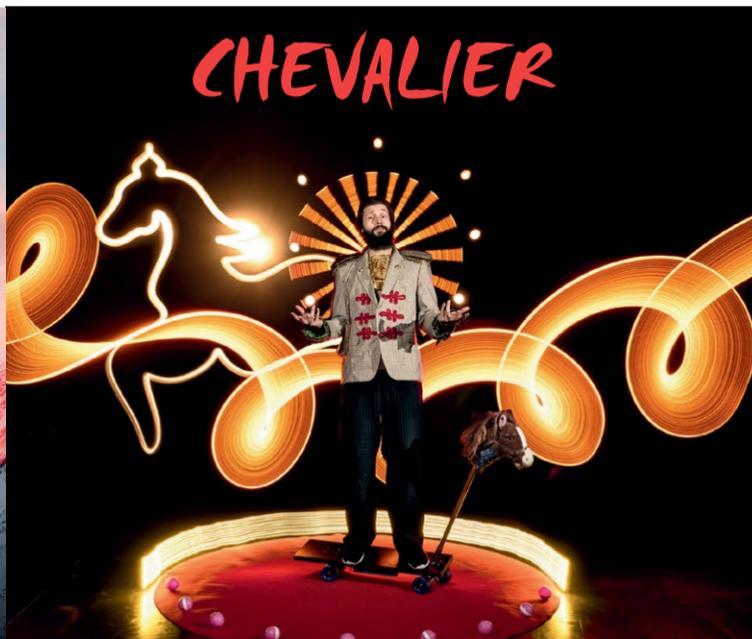
Wild Poetry by Hofesh Shechter © Lennart Sjöberg

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# 40<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY as an artist

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