

ARTICLE:

Theme: Dancers abroad

Title: International herStay

Quote: «To be artistically relevant is a privilege in itself.»

Choreographer, dancer, and performance artist Monica Emilie Herstad is celebrating 10-year anniversary of herStay this year. As part of «På Spissen», a series about dancers abroad, we asked Herstad some questions related to her international shows, especially the ones in Asia.

Main text:

- Why Asia? How come you are connected to this continent?

- In the 90s, I was a dancer and choreography assistant in the Japanese artist Min Tanaka's performances. I was also responsible for casting in his production. As early as then, I learned to take important responsibilities as a leader in big international productions. After audition, I was chosen to take part in Min Tanaka's Munch performance for the Olympic Games in Lillehammer. Then I was invited to dance in his international performances such as The Dance of Life (1994-1997), where in 1997 I was also responsible for the casting of new dancers and leading the rehearsals of 14 shows.

Monica continued to dance in many of Min Tanaka's shows, such as The Ancient Women – an reinterpretation of Swan Lake (1994) and I Saw a Whale in a Grassland (1995). She performed in Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space and Tokyo International Festival of Performing Arts. Altogether she has had the pleasure to accompany Min Tanaka at six of his international workshops, as permanent resident artist in his company in Japan, in Oslo, and in Ghent at S.M.A.K. in 2000. She was also in his productions for Czech and Dutch opera and theatre ensembles. In short, she had a very close apprenticeship with a Japanese master.

- I consider my personal and artistic experiences in my encountering with this part of the professional world as a privilege and a unique training, primarily as a practician, a choreographer and an international production leader. These experiences were also a good starting point for a balanced understanding of the Asian concepts and for mastering an international professional trade.

- What is the reason that you have a large audience both in Asia and in Norway?

- Wherever the performances are being shown in the world, the audience often represents a well-educated and art conscious part of the population. Each place where we play represents a unique quality and new spectators. The similarity between East and West is that all of us reflect facets of the same time and theme within a common contemporary discourse. The difference is that when herStay performs abroad, its shows take place in big metropolises, characterized by their urban population and urban perceptions.

The fact that there have been many offers for herStay in Asia gives herStay and its work a nice mystique and positive distance here at home. As is known, herStay has a large audience in Oslo, with for example 500 guests including Her Majesty Queen Sonja, for the indoor performances as well as the outdoor shows. Its success in Asia is no less than this either. herStay has been very well received by the media and is often invited to perform at festivals in Asia. Now it is going to Shanghai, after having been to Hong Kong, Delhi, Bombay, Bangkok, Tokyo, etc.

- Are your performances related to Ibsen's texts particularly interesting for the audience in other places in the world?

- Those herStay performances which are inspired by Ibsen are made so that women will be able to recognize universal aspects about being a woman and that men can be interested in this. The theme of the performances is the possibility in human rights and the responsibility it brings about to develop oneself as an individual. Applied correctly, this is an eternal theme in international contexts. My responsibility as a choreographer and facilitator is to update the performances for an international audience, in order to meet different groups in a universe of diverse ideas. herStay's practicians are trained to communicate with the audience in any given situation. Since both the audience in Oslo and those who are interested in art all over the world are often internationally oriented, it has always been positive and relatively clear to communicate the universal Ibsenian ideas to our audience.

- What are the biggest challenges about performing abroad?

- It is exciting to see that the code in art is often the same everywhere. As a producer, I start planning and organizing for the presentation 3 months before each tour. The more preparation I do in advance, the easier it is for the performances to carry out. My job is 75% as producer and 100% responsible for the artistic effects. It pays in many ways despite the fact that it is time-consuming and expensive.

- And what are the bonuses?

- To be artistically relevant is a privilege in itself. At the same time, it is important to think about representation when one is travelling. It is important to see one's responsibility in relation to the country one visits. It is of decisive importance for me that I can contribute to reflecting important issues such as democratization, individual freedom, equality and commitment to environmental issues through my performances. It is also important to have more understanding and joy that are related to travelling, meeting new countries and cultures and seeing the world from new perspectives. Part of my pleasure is to see that more and more new dancers have a career through tours and artistic experiences with herStay. There are average 7 contributors involved in each herStay commission.

- How do you use the meetings with audience in the development of the performances?

- By having dialogues with the audience, via presentations, Master Class and Q&A, we receive interesting questions that contribute to the development of herStay performances.