

## **Pathways to producing international dance performance for dance students**

Vantaa Dance Institute (Finland) and Eesti Tantsuagentuur (Estonia) produced together a 40 minute contemporary dance performance as part of their Erasmus+ program. The following description and observations are based on our experiences while working with the project.

The aim was to produce a full length dance performance together with two choreographers and 20 students from both above mentioned dance schools. The choreographers were selected by the dance schools, and they did not know each other from before. There was an audition in both schools for the dancers ending with a group of 16 dancers, 10 from Estonia and 6 from Finland.

We wanted to explore if this kind of project would have an impact on the students' abilities to work in an international group, use foreign language and stand for their own ideas. We also wanted to provide the students an understanding of the international field of dance and what it is to operate in this context – what is expected of a dancer, what sort of abilities one needs in order to be able to work in an multicultural environment, how to stand for one's own ideas and how to express one's views. Another important goal of the project was to develop the students' skills as dancers, both in technical and artistic sense.

### Timeline

The project started in the beginning of 2022 and the performance dates were set to September 2022, 3 performances in Vantaa and 3 in Tallinn. The choreographers worked online and also met a few times in spring. Originally the plan was to bring the choreographers and students together for altogether two weeks in August (one week in Tallinn and one week in Vantaa), but we soon realized that the choreographers needed to meet the dancers from another school already in spring. Therefore both choreographers made an extra one-day trip to the other school in order to see and get to know the students already before the planned time together in August.

Otherwise the project proceeded the way it was planned. The Estonian students spent 6 days in Vantaa and the Finnish students 6 days in Tallinn in August, 2022. The first set of performances happened in September in Vantaa, and the Estonian students spent a few days in Vantaa to before the shows in order to practice the piece and stage it in Vernissa Theatre. The second set of performances happened in Tallinn next weekend, for which the Finnish students traveled to Estonia.

### About the results

Overall the project proved an excellent opportunity for the students in all the ways we hoped and anticipated for. We provided the students with a questionnaire before and after the project asking their expectations and feelings. The expectations could roughly be divided to two categories:

#### 1. Dance-related aspects

The majority of students saw the project as a possibility to work as a dancer in a wider context than the typical dance school could provide. They wanted to improve their skills as dancers and work with new people and ideas.

#### 2. International aspect

The students clearly understood the internationality of the dance world and saw the project as an opportunity to work in another language and with people from another country. Also the possibility to perform abroad was thrilling to them.

The answer to the final questionnaire show that many of the students' expectations were fulfilled. Many of the dancers described the experience in a very positive manner, feeling that they had learned a lot. A clear boost of self-confidence, a lifetime experience, personal growth, inspiration – these are the words the dancers used when describing the project. Almost all expressed their wish to do similar thing in the future.

#### What we learned

Also we the organizers were very happy with the results of the project. Neither of the schools had done similar project before, and we were pleased to see that the concept worked well and are already working to find ways to produce similar projects also in the future. However, there are a few things we learned to do differently next time. The main thing to mention here is the schedule of the project. We managed to pull it through within the planned timeline, but it was clear that more relaxed timetable would have greatly diminished the stress and added to the overall wellbeing of both the choreographers and the students. As it was, the pressure of producing the performance was looming heavily above the time spent in a dance studio. The students would definitely have benefitted of spending more leisure time together and getting to know each other better, and the same goes with the choreographers.

We started the project by visiting each other's schools, which proved a good start to the project. It turned out that both schools had differences, but still a very similar attitude and values when it came to teaching dance. This greatly helped us to understand each other and smoothed the way also in practical matters when advancing the project towards the performances. We therefore feel that a good and shared understanding of the project and the values that the project is built on are essential in making this kind of artistic process work.



Tail but no Head, chor. Karoline Suhhov and Anna-Maria Vairio