



Finishing school

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Kenneth Kvarnström busts a move with dancers from the Sydney Dance Company

Sydney Dance Company caps its season with a bold new work by guest choreographer Kenneth Kvarnström.

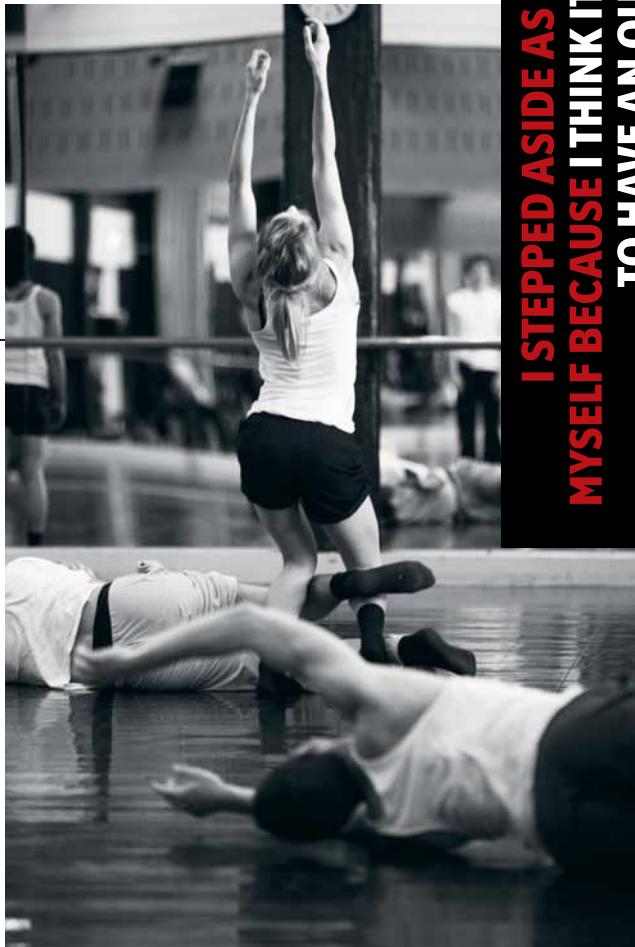
FINNISH CHOREOGRAPHER **KENNETH** Kvarnström likes to collect car numberplates and road signs. “Inexpensive art,” he says, as well as souvenirs of countries he has visited. But he has stopped short of dismantling any street signs pointing toward the Sydney Opera House. “I don’t think the police would like to see that in my luggage,” he says. “Mostly I’m given signs as gifts or I just find them. I don’t take them, really, I don’t.” When he’s not poking around hardware stores or eyeing off the street signs, Kvarnström, who packs only coordinated black and grey clothing, can be found checking out the art galleries or dipping into a book.

Kvarnström, 46, is in Australia to choreograph *Mercury*, a new work for the Sydney Dance Company, opening this month. His contemporary works have entertained European audiences for more than two decades with demanding, high-energy – sometimes brutal – physical language, juxtaposed with tenderness, sensuality and humour. In his version of Bizet’s *Carmen* (wittily titled *Carmen?!),* he kept the leading lady offstage entirely and used four male dancers – lusty matadors – who tossed their underwear into the audience in >



Kvarnström (right) lays down the challenge to Sydney Dance Company dancers (above and below)

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the finale. Other works have reflected his passion for architecture, a career he intended to study on completing a year of compulsory military service in Finland. Architecture was soon sidelined by a love of dance. "Architecture is now my hobby. I think it has some similarities to dance when you think about shapes moving in space. I work with triangles and circles in dance, but as an art form, dance is more flat; we are close to the ground. In architecture, you can build on top of each other. We can't jump so high."


As he is accustomed to working with only five dancers, Kvarnström plans to divide the Sydney Dance Company into smaller groups and only occasionally use the whole company for *Mercury*, a show inspired by the liquid and dangerous properties of quicksilver as well as the fleet-footed messenger of Roman mythology. He says the Australian dancers are of a very high standard, but they are all challenged by his style of continuous motion, a style he calls "dance-dance", in which the performers rarely stop moving.

"All of their muscles were sore for the first two weeks. My work is a little bit softer and lower to the ground than they're used to. It looks easy, but it's very complicated. The dancers must have full control of their bodies to get the ease and lightness I want. I like to find the musicality of the movement. The choreography should sing the melody like in a band."

Kvarnström came relatively late to dance, starting his formal training at the age of 20. Before that, he succumbed to the acting bug in Finland's strong amateur theatre scene, including one memorable performance as a tap-dancing parrot. He was hooked on films such as *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever*. "I wanted to dance like John Travolta. So after the army, I moved to Stockholm for one year to see if I could dance. If not, I would go back to Finland to study architecture. I never went back to Finland."

He formed K Kvarnström & Co, his own dance company, soon after graduating. From its base in Stockholm, the small group of Finnish and Swedish dancers toured throughout Europe, North America, Latin America, Africa and Israel.

After living in Stockholm for most of his adult life, Kvarnström will return to Finland next August, after Sydney, to become artistic director of the Helsinki Dance Company.

"I stepped aside as a dancer myself because I think it's better to have an outside eye. But I still do class, which is very important as I'm getting older, because I want to do what the dancers do and show them how to do it and make sure I'm not asking too much of them." 

Mercury, Sydney Theatre, Nov 17-28. www.sydneytheatre.org.au