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CHAPTER 9

Kalevala in International Masks: A Japanese Aino and Kalevala dell'Arte

Kendra Willson

Since the publication of Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (in the "old" 1835 and the now-classic "new" 1849 versions), the Finnish "national epic" has functioned as a central symbol of Finnish national identity (Piela, Knuuttila and Laaksonen, 2008, p. vii), a canonical instantiation of the international genre of national epics, and a model for other epics (Honko, 1987; Willson, 2012, pp. 154–155). Much of the symbolic strength of the *Kalevala* as a national symbol comes from the ways in which it appeals to both native and international impulses (Anttonen, 2009; Aarnipuu, 2012, pp. 90–91). The language and materials in it stem from Finnish and Karelian folk tradition, but the overall concept of the long written epic is modelled on Homer and Virgil, and the epic as a literary achievement positions Finland as a "civilised" European country.

Stories from Finnish mythology and folklore, largely mediated through the versions presented in Lönnrot's *Kalevala*, have been interpreted in a wide variety of media, including music, stage, film, visual arts and graphic novels. The adaptation of stories found in the *Kalevala* to international genres has also been part of the project of establishing Finland as a modern European nation. Aleksis Gallen-Kallela's iconic visual renditions of Kalevala myths are Finnish national symbols in their own right, and they are central to shaping the perception of many Kalevala stories in the modern imagination (Wahlroos, 2009). Hundreds of other artists have also engaged with these subjects (Knuuttila, 2009, p. 39). The Finnish "national composer" Jean Sibelius composed numerous pieces inspired by Kalevala¹ mythology (Aho, 2008; 2014, pp. 585–589),

1 In this chapter I use the term *Kalevala* as shorthand both for the material presented in Lönnrot's *Kalevala* (both versions) and the folk poetry on which his epic is based. I do this because Lönnrot's showcase is the main vehicle through which these materials have become known to Finnish and international audiences, and it is the form in which the artists that adapt these stories to the stage are likely to encounter them first, although they may subsequently study the background and draw on other folk poetry in Kalevala metre. This metre, trochaic tetrameter with some restrictions on the mapping among word stress, syllable length and metrical position (Leino, 1986, 129–142, 2002, pp. 160–162), was the predominant metre for most genre of folk poetry across the Finnic region, likely dating to Late Proto-Finnic

and many other composers have produced pieces on Kalevalaic themes (Aho, 2009).

Although theatrical institutions have been important in shaping national identities and national solidarity, theatrical genres are also international. Modern European theatre came to Finland in the nineteenth century with Swedish, German and Russian troupes and artists (Wilmer and Koski, 2006, p. 19). A building for a Swedish-language theatre was built in Turku in 1817. A theatre building designed by Carl Ludvig Engel, who planned the city of Helsinki, was constructed in Helsinki in 1827. The first play written in Finnish is said to be Pietari Hännikainen's *Silmänkääntäjä* (The Magician), published in 1845 and first performed by amateurs. Professional theatres in Swedish and Finnish were developed starting in the mid-nineteenth century in connection with nationalist movements, and the Finnish Theatre, which later became the National Theatre, was founded in 1872 (Wilmer and Koski, 2006, pp. 19–22, 24).

Numerous stage plays and operas have been based on Kalevala myths (Knuutila, 2009, p. 39), the first opera being *Die Kalewainen in Pochjola* (The Men of Kaleva in the Northland, 1890–1891) by Karl Müller-Berghaus (Aho, 2009, p. 47). Aleksis Kivi's play *Kullervo* (1860), one of the first and best-known stage versions of Kalevala myths, and one of the first published plays in Finnish, was produced in the National Theatre in 1885; three scenes from it were performed in a celebration of Lönnrot's eightieth birthday in 1882 (Wilmer and Koski, 2006, p. 25). Despite an initial mixed response, the play quickly became a national symbol and classic, not least because it presented a Kalevala story in the form of a Classical tragedy. Sallamaa and Aho (2008) point out the models in great Western literature for Kivi's treatment of the motif: "The topic was national, but it was to be treated according to the models of Classical tragedy, Aristotelian poetics and on the other hand modern literature, first and foremost Shakespeare's Hamlet"². The Kullervo story has also been adapted into operas by Amos Launis and Aulis Sallinen, as well as Sibelius' dramatic choral symphony *Kullervo*; at the time of this writing (2015), Sibelius' *Kullervo* is in production as a ballet by Tero Saarinen at the Finnish National Opera.

As Hurme (2013) points out, innumerable further possibilities for stage productions inspired by Kalevala themes remain to be explored. Since the 1970s there has been a renewed interest in adapting Kalevala stories for the stage. Knuutila (2009, p. 39) traces the modern boom to the Hungarian Thalia company's production adapted by Karoly Kazimir, which had a guest run in

² probably early in the first millennium AD (Leino, 1986, pp. 140–142). *Kalevala* is italicised when it refers to Lönnrot's work but not when used in reference to Finnish folk poetry more generally.

² Translations of quotations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Helsinki in 1970 – a foreign perspective that awakened Finns to theatrical possibilities in the material. Productions represent many different genres, from rock musicals to puppet shows (Kalevala nyky näyttämöillä).

This chapter discusses two theatrical productions from Finland that combine mythic materials found in the *Kalevala* with traditional theatre forms from other parts of the world – that have their own strict languages, archetypes and traditions from other parts of the world – Italy and Japan. International artists active in Finland and Finns with international training blend the thematic elements of the Finnish myths and of the other traditions, finding resonances that enrich both. These syntheses highlight different aspects of Kalevala material and explore the possibilities of the theatrical genres. They also project a modern multicultural identity for Finland – arguably a contemporary successor to the nineteenth-century quest for nationhood – as well as for its international artists.

Both these productions combine Kalevala material with traditional genres that involve masks. The *commedia dell'arte* production by Teatteri Metamorfoosi (Metamorphosis Theatre), *Kalevala dell'Arte*, used leather masks created by the actors with the help of Italian mask-maker Stefano Perocco di Meduna (Eloranta, 2014, p. 626). Aki Suzuki Spirits' *Noh* and *Kabuki*-influenced *Aino – Kalevala* (*Planet Earth no. 3*) did not make use of physical masks, but the actors' faces were frequently mask-like, with stiff expressions and stylised makeup. Masks have a transformative function and are strongly associated with shamanistic practices in many cultures. In this way, they resonate with the shamanistic elements of early Finnic religions preserved in some of the poetry included in the *Kalevala* (Pentikäinen, 1989, pp. 177–199).

In contemporary theatre, mask theatre has emerged especially following the school of Jacques Lecoq, who developed methods for physical theatre that draw on diverse influences from around the world (Lecoq, 1996). Mask work in the Lecoq tradition has been part of theatrical pedagogy at the Finnish Theatre School (later the Helsinki Theatre Academy, now part of the University of the Arts) since it was introduced in 1964 by director Elina Lehtikunnas (Kumpulainen, 2011, pp. 219–227). Carlo Bosso notes that masks make characters more general and archetypal: "The mask makes the character more general, someone who represents nearly all the world's soldiers or merchants and appeals to a wider group" (Carlo Bosso, quoted in Vuori, 2007). Mask theatre appeals to the universal, but does so in ways that are coded through culturally specific convention.

Commedia dell'arte and *Noh* are both canonised mask theatre forms that developed in the sixteenth century. Diana Devlin (1989) says that, whereas (p. 58) the *commedia* character types stem from caricature, "*Noh* masks symbolise

the essential traits of a role" (p. 61), reflecting a Japanese "emphasis on ritual, ceremony, symbolism, economy and discipline" (p. 59). Carlo Bosso notes that both *Noh* and *commedia dell'arte* have a formalised language from a particular tradition. However, in his view, the "codes" of *commedia* may be more accessible (at least to a western audience):

Commedia can be compared to Japanese *Noh* theater; both contain many cultural codes. If, however, you do not even know the Japanese language, you can only understand a fraction of the codes of *Noh* theater. Deeper meanings require familiarity with culture, history, even religion. The codes in *commedia dell'arte*, however, are significantly more general. The majority of them can be understood even without knowledge of the language.

CARLO BOSSO, cited in VUORI, 2007

This difference is reflected in ways in which the Japanese-influenced Kalevala performance emerges as more abstract than the *commedia dell'arte* version. However, Aki Suzuki Spirits' production freely combined elements of traditional and modern, Japanese and western theatre modes, making the performance more accessible to a western audience.

1 Aki Suzuki Spirits: *Aino – Kalevala – Planet Earth No. 3*

Aki Suzuki studied traditional dance, classical ballet, jazz dance, modern dance and *Butoh* dance in Japan. She emigrated to Finland in 2000 through the Japan Foundation Dispatch Person program, and she developed her own dance style combining Japanese folk and traditional dance with *Noh* and *Kabuki* theatre. In 2010, she founded the dance group *Aki Suzuki Spirits*. *Aino – Kalevala* premiered in 2013 at the Annantalo municipal cultural centre in Helsinki and was performed at another Helsinki cultural centre, Stoa, in 2014.

The story of *Aino* appears in runos 3–5 of the 1849 edition of the *Kalevala*; the young man Joukahainen loses a singing competition to the ancient Väinämöinen. In order to save his own life, Joukahainen promises Väinämöinen his sister *Aino*'s hand in marriage. *Aino*'s mother is pleased with the match to a powerful sage, but *Aino* refuses to marry an old man. Rather than subject herself to this fate, *Aino* drowns herself – or transforms herself into a fish. She later returns as a salmon to taunt Väinämöinen. The name *Aino*, meaning "one and only", was invented by Lönnrot, and was not in use as a personal name

in Finland until after the publication of the *Kalevala* (Vilkuna, 2005, p. 35 sv. *Aino*). In the source poems, the girl is referred to as *aino tytti* "only daughter".³

Aino – Kalevala presents the story of *Aino* within a frame story of The Monk's Dream, a type of *Mugen Noh*: a *Noh* story that comprises a dream or illusion. An old woman approaches a monk and begins to tell a story. She is the spirit of *Aino* and will appear in his dream and continue her story. The *Aino* story resonates with the *Noh* tradition in presenting a young woman that drowns herself over a marital dilemma (Brown, 2001, p. 91). The costumes in *Aino – Kalevala* combine Japanese and Western influences, with both kimonos and echoes of Finnish peasant dress. Much of the movement language comes directly from Japanese formal traditions. Tossavainen (2013) identifies *Noh* and *Butoh* elements. The deliberate, stylised movement gives the piece a slow, meditative tempo. In some ways, this can be compared to the style of Kalevala poetry – the use of incremental repetition and lexical variation within the strongly rhythmic Kalevala metre creates an abstract tapestry of words and draws out the action. The Japanese–Finnish fusion is also reflected in the musical score, an arrangement of a Karelian folksong by Yüko Tadeka, *Ljuuli ljuuli*, resembles Japanese pop music.

In *Aino – Kalevala*, Väinämöinen appears as a warrior-sage. The formal movement of the language highlights the nature of the poetic duel between Väinämöinen and Joukahainen as a form of stylised combat. Tossavainen (2013) describes Väinämöinen's dance as containing "*Kabuki mie* poses, crossed eyes and all". Tossavainen (2013) sees the production as seeking catharsis, a purifying effect. The show ends with an epilogue in which *Aino* is reborn in modern times. Tossavainen (2013) interprets this as a message of forgiveness, which is "not at all a bad addition to the Kalevala". At the same time, the production is eclectic in its influences; in one somewhat incongruous number, the characters introduce themselves in Broadway musical style. The production's Facebook event challenged the audience, "Are you traditional enough?" ("Aki Suzuki Spirits: *Aino – Kalevala*").

Aino – Kalevala presents an original interpretation of the *Aino* story that draws on Japanese theatre and dance as well as other traditions. It can also be read as the Japanese-born artist's relationship to the canonical icon of Finnish identity. Suzuki boldly blends elements from different traditions and frames the *Aino* story in her own way. Apart from the US-trained Japanese actress Yüko Takeda, who has resided in Finland since 2009 (Takeda), the other

³ See DuBois (1995, pp. 263–273) on Lönnrot's adaptation of the source poems, *inter alia*, changing suicide by drowning into escape to the natural world (p. 271).

artists involved in the production were Finns. *Aino* – *Kalevala* emphasises the mystic side of Kalevala, supernatural transformation, as well as the pathos of the young woman promised in an unwelcome arranged marriage. It uses the story to build a bridge between Japan and Finland – both rapidly modernised countries where people seek ways to keep traditional culture relevant in a postmodern world. This quirky production seeks connections in ancient traditions, but the resulting synthesis is distinctly modern.

2 *Kalevala dell'Arte*

The *Kalevala dell'Arte* project began in 2005 as a collaboration between Davide Giovanzana and Soile Mäkelä, who in the same year founded Teatteri Metamorfoosi: a theatre company devoted to bringing mask theatre to Finland, which, in addition to productions, offers schooling in mask theatre and mask-making and produces masks. The show premiered in 2007 at the Koko theatre in Helsinki, and performances continued in tours and various venues (with some cast changes) until 2012 (Eloranta, 2014, pp. 617–618).

The *commedia dell'arte* form is traced to sixteenth-century Italy, and it is the only canonised theatrical form in the European tradition. It is believed to be the first European genre that allowed women to appear on stage; generally, male actors wore masks, unlike their female counterparts. The characters usually represented archetypes, and the plots were based on folk tales and ancient comedies. Driving themes were often the conflict between the younger generation's desire for love and the older characters' lust for power and money. Lines were improvised within the schema of the plot, and the tradition was mainly transmitted orally. Although *commedia* had a strong influence on later theatre (such as the plays of Molière), the *commedia dell'arte* tradition ended in the eighteenth century. However, Jacques Lecoq revived or reinvented it in the mid-twentieth century, based on old drawings and descriptions, and adapted it for modern audiences as part of a practice of physical theatre influenced by, among other things, Japanese traditions (Lecoq, 1996, pp. 141–142). Modern *commedia* as presented by Teatteri Metamorfoosi is based on the Lecoq school.

Giovanzana (2009) describes the challenge of finding commonalities between Kalevala and *commedia dell'arte*, which seemed to him at first to be “two different worlds without any similarity” (Giovanzana, 2009, p. 11). Whereas *commedia* is irreverent and bawdy, focused on bodily needs and social class differences, Giovanzana perceived the *Kalevala* as having a lofty, mythical tone. Upon further study, however, he learned of the bawdy and earthy folk poems also collected by Lönnrot (Giovanzana, 2009, p. 17) and began to discern different



FIGURE 9.1 Johanna MacDonald as Louhi and Soile Mäkelä as the slave in *Kalevala dell'Arte*

layers and traces of different genres within Lönnrot's *Kalevala*. Whereas the *Kalevala* is driven by linguistic variation and metre, the language of *commedia* is primarily physical. The methods of storytelling are very different. The *Kalevala* as compiled by Lönnrot has an episodic rhythm and events unfold in an unhasty “epic” manner without suspense (compare Auerbach's [1946, pp. 7–30] analysis of the narrative functions of delay in Homer's *Odyssey*). Repetition and lexical variation are central to the poetic technique of Kalevalaic poetry. The action of epic stories may also be delayed through insertion of additional materials from other poetic genres – such as charms, ritual poetry or lyric poetry – that Lönnrot included in the middle of narrative sequences in order to create a full-length epic (a practice also picked up by some oral poets; see Tarkka, 2015). *Commedia*, by contrast, has a dramatic structure building to a central climax and turning point (Giovanzana, 2009, p. 18).

However, Giovanzana and Mäkelä found points of commonality between the *Kalevala* and *commedia* in the use of archetypal characters, as discussed below. They also noticed that the dramaturgy of runo 15, in which Lemminkäinen's mother assembles the parts of her dismembered son and brings him back to life, contains a healing ritual, which showed an affinity to fertility rituals represented by *commedia* performance in a carnival setting (Giovanzana,

2009, pp. 14–17). In addition, they learned in their research that some of the characteristics noted above do not reflect Finnish folk poetry so much as Lönnrot's selection and presentation in the "national epic" (Apo, 2004, p. 292) and, likely, the reverent attitude toward the *Kalevala* as national symbol. For *Kalevala dell'Arte*, they thus selected stories from the *Kalevala* that lent themselves to dramatic treatment (Giovanzana, 2009, p. 19), and they aimed to oscillate between a "dynamic and explosive theatrical style" from *commedia* and a more "poetic and hypnotic" Kalevalaic world with "lyrical and elegiac qualities" (Giovanzana, 2009, p. 18).

The figures in the *Kalevala* material were associated with archetypes from the *commedia dell'arte* tradition; the witch Louhi was given some characteristics of the *commedia* figure Strega, also a witch. This is an exceptional female character in that she wears a mask (Eloranta, 2014, p. 623). However, the character of Louhi has a higher status than the traditional Strega, and the fusion of these two led to an original new persona. Along similar lines, Väinämöinen, the sage, became Pantalone, the lecherous old man (Eloranta, 2014, p. 623). This equation draws on an element present in the source, namely his lusting after the young Aino (see H. Mäkelä, 2013). However, at the same time, this interpretation lowers Väinämöinen's status, making him more laughable. The smith Ilmarinen became Il Capitano, a proud soldier and a braggart (Eloranta, 2014, p. 624). The roles of the young lovers were occupied by Lemminkäinen and by Louhi's daughter, in this production called Kanerva (Eloranta, 2014, p. 623). Because the interplay between characters of different social status, especially masters and servants, is central to *commedia dell'arte*, *Kalevala dell'Arte* added servant characters for each family. (Eloranta, 2014, p. 622) Figure 9.1 shows Johanna MacDonald as Louhi with Soile Mäkelä as the slave.

The dramaturgy for *Kalevala dell'Arte*, which combines a number of stories known from the 1849 *Kalevala*, was developed without a script using "devising" methods of ensemble development (Eloranta, 2014, p. 621). Devising is a theatrical technique developed in the 1960s as a way of democratising theatrical production; rather than working from a pre-written text, a production is developed collectively by the company through an iterative process of bringing in new material and selecting from that material. The director's primary role is to define the process by which the production will be developed. That process in turn shapes the form of the final production (Oddey, 1994). The actors improvised innumerable scenarios based on *Kalevala* stories, and the directors gradually streamlined the dramaturgy (Eloranta, 2014, p. 621). Preparation for the production also involved workshops on Finnish shamanism (Eloranta, 2014, p. 619), and masks aided in effecting transformations.

Both *commedia dell'arte* and the folk poetry on which the *Kalevala* is based are oral traditions; *commedia* plays are not scripted, but improvised in each

performance following a schematic plot outline, a type of composition in performance. An analogy can be drawn between the use in *commedia* of *lazzi*: personal "tics" or short verbal/physical routines that become part of a character's repertoire and can be inserted into the play spontaneously at any point (even if not directly relevant to the progression of the story), and the formulae that characterise oral verse and facilitate composition in performance.⁴ Giovanzana (2014) has described *Kalevala dell'Arte* as a re-oralisation of the *Kalevala* material; the dialogue is improvised and each actor speaks his or her own dialect. In *Kalevala dell'Arte*, Canadian actress Johanna MacDonald in the role of Louhi spoke in her native English, with passages in what Eloranta (2014, pp. 623–624) describes as Shakespearean iambic pentameter. The blank verse metre has been claimed to be "natural" to the rhythms of English and is culturally embedded, widely recognised and associated with centuries-old cultural heritage, not unlike the *Kalevala* metre in Finnish. At the same time, this connotation connects the production with an English "high art" tradition – as well as with the "global" language English, increasingly present in all areas of cultural life in Finland.

When compared to the previous case study, *Kalevala dell'Arte* brought out the social, irreverent side of the *Kalevala* stories, emphasising issues of status and lust – the human side, in contrast to the more spiritual *Noh*-inspired *Aino* – *Kalevala*.

3 Conclusion

Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala* combines many different genres of oral poetry: mythic and heroic epic, lyric, ritual and charms. It ranges from comic to tragic, from concrete to abstract, from the creation of the world to everyday life. Theatrical productions will resonate with different aspects of this showcase. Composer Einojuhani Rautavaara has stated, as paraphrased by Aho (2014, p. 601), that the *Kalevala*

does have something that constitutes the core of Finland's national culture. Anyone seeking to get to grips with this must always do so in a new creative way. "But it may put up a tremendous opposition, because there is a tremendous volume of baggage, junk attached to tradition. It is absolutely buried in rubbish."

⁴ See, for instance, Harvilahti (1992) on fixed elements and variation in Finnic epic poetry.

One way of finding a fresh approach is to come to Kalevala materials as an outsider to Finnish nationalism, and to put them in dialogue and negotiation with other traditions that have their own "baggage".

Both the productions discussed here simultaneously respect and subvert both the Kalevalaic materials as well as the respective theatrical traditions; the fusion of old things from different places produces something new. It conveys the spirit of both traditions and flexibility as a tool set and an artistic vocabulary. The *Kalevala* as an export ware (see Aarnipuu, 2012) comes home when immigrants express their own relationship to Kalevala myths and to the *Kalevala* as an artefact and symbol. This implicitly entails simultaneously an original take *on* and a contribution *to* Finnishness, while also defining a relationship to the traditions of their countries of origin. To judge from Eloranta's (2014) account, the Finnish artists involved also discovered new sides to Finnish folk tradition, the backgrounds of the *Kalevala*, as well as new ways of integrating the foreign theatrical traditions that the productions drew on into the Finnish context.

The productions discussed here were initiated by skilled migrants from "prestige" countries working in close collaboration with Finnish artists. However, engagement with Kalevala themes has also been part of an integration program for a broader group of immigrants; Westerling (2009) and Westerling and Karvinen-Niinikoski (2010) report on a Kalevala-themed multicultural theatre project in Helsinki in 2005 and 2006. They found that engaging with the Finnish national epic helped promote integration, visibility and empowerment, expanding immigrants' contacts with Finns, demonstrating their interest in participating in Finnish culture and promoting the idea that they could bring something to it – both among the immigrants and the native population. Through the endless number of possible reinterpretations, this national symbol becomes a vehicle for integration; new potentials are continuously discovered in these old stories now that Finnish national identity is adjusting to an increasingly multicultural and globalising reality.

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