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## A look at creative actors during COVID-19

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**Are there ways to turn a passion into a career and start living the entrepreneurial lifestyle? Founder of Oulu Dance Academy Arja Koskela and independent fashion designer Antonina Sedakova share stories about their passion for arts and their work, and how they dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic.**

### THE STORY OF OULU DANCE ACADEMY

Ballet has been a lifelong passion for Arja Koskela, who now owns a ballet school in Oulu, Finland. Arja was born in a merchant family and started her ballet hobby when she was 8 years old. She immediately found that she loved ballet. Unfortunately, during her physical development as a teenager, she had to regretfully say goodbye to ballet, as her physical condition did not meet the standards of a professional ballerina. Afterwards, to continue her passion for the art of dance, Arja trained to be a gymnastics coach. Meanwhile, Arja had the idea that “Everyone should have the right to study what they love, even if they can’t get into a professional performing group. And they shouldn’t be kicked out in the early stages when they are learning.” It was one of the reasons that inspired her to return to university and earn a qualification as a ballet teacher.

When Arja became an adult, she ran the family grocery shop with her parents. After she married, her husband took over the shop and she stayed home to raise their children. A year after the birth of her third child, Arja returned to the University of Applied Sciences and began studying to become a professional ballet teacher.

***“I love ballet so much. If I can’t be a professional ballerina, then I will cultivate professional ballerinas.” – Arja Koskela***

While studying, Arja founded her own dance school, Kulttuuripesulan tanssikoulu, which was officially renamed ODA (Oulu Dance Academy) in 2016 for marketing purposes, since the school often travels abroad for various events, such as competitions.

Running a ballet school was not an easy task. While teaching and running ODA, Arja was often criticised by old-fashioned educators for incorporating



*Arja Koskela in classroom. Photograph: Petri Kekkonen*



*Arja Koskela's ballet class. Photograph: Petri Kekkonen*

revolutionary ideas in the teaching of classical ballet. She has suffered from other situations as well, especially financing problems. She has never been approved for any financial support for art startups, such as the financial assistance for SMEs during COVID-19. However, Arja is a person with a typical Finnish 'sisu' spirit. Nothing could make her give up her beloved art of ballet. She uses all of her savings and income to run the Oulu Dance Academy. Arja has very successfully guided her students to national and EU ballet competitions with her teaching methods and passion. Later, Oulu Dance Academy will be handed down to Arja's daughter as a family business and expanded.

"At the age of 9, I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. As my parents were entrepreneurs, I said I wanted to follow in their footsteps. Also,

I wanted to be a ballerina. Today, I'm very satisfied. While I couldn't become a professional ballerina, I became a teacher and own a ballet school that combines my dreams!" says Arja Koskela.

In the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 exploded and all training institutions had to stop teaching offline immediately, Arja was able to stop the damage in time by quickly adapting online lessons during the 2–3 months' hiatus, while also inviting professional ballet teachers from the USA, Poland and the UK to hold online courses for ODA students.

Based on the students' responses, Arja analysed their different levels of understanding; for example, some were suited to direct copying of the teacher's movements, while others were better suited to offline lessons. Some students improved their ability to understand the language by following online instruction and trying to keep up with the teacher. Arja received increasingly positive feedback, and instead of losing students, ODA increased its student population by 15% in the last quarter.

It has been decided that ODA will continue to offer both online and offline courses, which will be very convenient for students and will continue to bring in new students.

Despite COVID-19, people have spent more time on their devices and are doing more business on the internet than they have been in the past. In particular, the visual arts, such as fashion design and the video game industry, rely heavily on computers and internet technology for their work and presentation.

## **ANTONINA SEDAKOVA – TALENTED INDEPENDENT FASHION DESIGNER**

Antonina Sedakova is an independent fashion designer with extensive art training since kindergarten. Her art journey started with a private teacher after she attended the Hermitage Museum's courses, until she got accepted to Saint-Petersburg State Academy of Art and Design. Later on, she studied at Aalto University and graduated in 2020.

Family is of the utmost importance to Antonina. Her parents are architects and her grandparents are engineers. As a child, she was always surrounded by people who valued education and knowledge. Through her upbringing, she has been motivated to learn, work and keep an open mind, especially with regard to the history and culture of art in Russia and other countries. Therefore, art has always been her passion and means of self-expression. Though she has

been nominated for awards in the field of fashion, Antonina still thinks that she is not a qualified artist and is constantly developing her skills, for example with computers and CG, to enable her to meet the particular requirements of art and fashion jobs.

“So far, it’s quite difficult to see art as a job. When I was in Finland, I worked as a cleaner, English teacher and tailor to make a living. But finally, I went back to my hometown because it was too difficult for me to find a suitable job in Finland.”

Right now, in Russia, people work in offices and everything is open, so it is easy to find a job which could be done remotely, as Antonina does. Antonina usually shares her artwork and views on others’ artworks on online platforms,



**Antonina Sedakova,**  
*photograph: Antonina Sedakova*

such as Behance, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Dots, Instagram and digital magazines (1granary, ID, KingKong, SSAW, etc.). Her greatest wish at the moment is to experience the arts scene in Melbourne, Australia, and she is always ready for international exchange or collaboration.

## IN THE END

As we all know, art knows no borders. Practitioners of art and creative industries have more resolute perseverance and a love for art. However, their situation in the job market is not optimistic, for example in regard to looking for work.

**«Exception de Mixmind»,**  
*Photograph: Antonina Sedakova*

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, limiting communication and making people feel overwhelmed. To return to normal life, everyone is learning how to deal with the difficulties and overcome them. However, thanks to the borderless characteristics of art, our art practitioners are not worse affected by COVID-19. On the contrary, the related development of science and technology has helped their careers.

A friend of the author once said, “art is lonely, especially when artists are engaged in the creation,” but CULTA wants to say, “after you have created your works alone, you may as well get out of the comfort zone, find some like-minded partners to turn your hobby into your career, and never give up your dream.”