SHOW TIME

CAN A REBRANDING HELP BOSTON BALLET SHED ITS STUFFY IMAGE?

BY CHRISTOPHER MUTOR
Mikko Niissen, artistic director of the Boston Ballet, and branding specialist Denise Korn.
Typecast no more?

After a tumultuous few years, Boston Ballet gives its image a modern makeover

By Christopher Muther

In the eyes of Mikko Nissinen, Boston Ballet was facing an identity crisis.

The artistic director of the ballet has introduced edgier, even downright sexy programming — such as last season’s “Black and White.” But while Nissinen spent the past eight years pushing his company closer to the artistic edge, Bostonians still thought of the ballet as being staid purveyors of the “Nutcracker,” and other “museum pieces,” he says.

“It’s important to me that we’re not seen as a museum or a church,” he says, “but a living theater that relates to today’s people.”

Enter Denise Korn. The South End-based brand strategist (and Boston Ballet fan) had been chatting with Nissinen for nearly five years about freshening the ballet’s image and changing how the organization is viewed. Her company, Korn Design, has done image-reconfiguring work for Tony hotels and restaurants around the country. She was even enlisted by Northeastern University last year to rebrand the school.

“It was trapped in this corporate package for so long,” Korn says of the ballet. “One of our big challenges was to shift the perception of what the Boston Ballet is all about.”

The strategy for rebranding the ballet all came down to Nissinen’s desire to make the ballet more accessible. Artistically, he’s tried to do this by staging modern dance alongside classics. The company has also introduced a new slate of dancers and survived a very disruptive move from the Citi Wang Theatre to the Opera House.

To give these changes a public face, Korn’s team created a new font for the ballet, and a new logo. Its website was completely redesigned, merchandise updated, posters oriented to feature the words “Boston Ballet” as the primary image, rather than pictures of dancers.

Of course, a new typeface can only do so much. Changing the ballet’s image also means getting the company out into the city and chipping away at the notion that dancers are stuffy, tutu-wearing divas. To that end, dancers served as models at a splashy fashion show last month, and they’ll model once again at a Donna Karan charity event next month. They’ve even performed the Boston Celtics half-time show. Last week, we sat down with Nissinen and Korn to talk about what it all means.

**Boston Globe**

Mikko, I know pretty much all arts organizations have been struggling since the economy hit the dumpster last year. Is rebranding a way to help build an audience?

**Nissinen:** It’s funny, our organization was thrown into a tailspin after “The Nutcracker” was dislocated from the Wang Theatre. It was a huge piece of our business model. We had to re-evaluate our business and go through all kinds of cuts and repositioning. It’s ironic because now the rest of the world is doing it. Last fall, when everything else fell through for everyone else, we were already putting in place the steps for recovery.

**BG:** Why did you feel you needed to rebrand the ballet?

**Nissinen:** It felt so corporate, and the environment I’ve been pushing for the organization is definitely not corporate. It was obvious that we had moved in a different direction. After we lost our venue for “The Nutcracker,” we didn’t have a chance to focus on rebranding. I felt that the move to the Opera House was going to be a whole new beginning for us. We also have a whole new batch of principal dancers. A really strong, new generation taking over the company at the same time. This was the opportunity to really show a whole new face.

I’ve known Denise for a while. I brought her to the attention of our previous executive director five years ago. I wanted her to work for us at that point. In hindsight, I’m glad it didn’t happen then, because this was going to be better. It is repositioning the ballet on the cultural and social map in Boston.

**Korn:** This is the culmination of two years of Mikko and I trying to figure out how to introduce this to the city. It’s not about a logo. Sure, that’s the icon. This is taking the DNA of the company and not letting it be buried, but celebrating it outwardly.

**BG:** Denise, how did you take the edict that these bold changes were happening and translate that?

**Korn:** The typeface that we used for the end result was hand drawn. It’s called Boston Ballet Sara. It’s a derivative of a typeface called

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One element of Boston Ballet’s rebranding is a new logo, which Korn says has a less stuffy, more open feel.
Continued from Page G18

Petra, Which is a classical-modern font. The way that we treat it is very clean and much more contemporary, but it's still respectful of its roots. We really wanted to show that there really is nothing about the ballet that's corporate and stuck in a box.

**Nissinen:** It needed to capture the classical and modern. We do the big classical ballets, but we're also the only major company that is making a major commitment to modern dance.

**Korn:** I think the ballet really needed to put a stake in the ground and say, "This is happening here, you need to take note." Because no one else would do that for them. One of our big challenges was to shift the perception of what ballet is all about. It's a relatively small market. There's a lot of competition for entertainment dollars, and there's this huge sports presence here.

**Nissinen:** That's another reason why I thought this was important. People in New York know what's going on with the Boston Ballet better than the people in Boston. Our international tour was amazing. We're getting that external validation, and I want to bring that external validation back home.

**BG:** Dancers from the Boston Ballet acted as fashion models at a show at the Liberty Hotel last month called Fashionably Late. I got the feeling that the night was the company's coming out party, its debutante ball for rebranding.

**Korn:** We wanted to have a coming out party.

**Nissinen:** It was the launch for the new image, and a new era. We also wanted to embrace an audience which is not just our traditional audience. We wanted to focus the ballet in front of a crowd that's not as familiar and show the relevancy.

**BG:** Tell me a bit how rebranding works.

**Korn:** The process is about discovery, and gaining an authentic understanding about what the DNA is of a certain message or a certain idea. When you're branding fashion, it's very different from when you're branding a pharmaceutical company. We had no idea what this would look like when we started. I just knew that it needed to feel super contemporary and edgy, but not be disrespectful to the past. I honestly believe that the ballet was stuck inside the wrong image.

**BG:** What is the ultimate goal of the rebranding?

**Korn:** We worked on this for over a year. The process of getting to the end result was very deep within the organization. There's the three pillars of the organization: On the stage, in the community, and in the school. We really communicated with all the constituencies throughout the organization to make sure that whatever we ended up with would not and serve. We have this very robust community online now. The company also has its own ticket sales, which is huge, and we have a platform online to tell the story that is organic and changing and very image-based. The goal was to make it look pretty and package it nice. The goal was to move the dial on perception and to get people to connect and feel that the organization is open to receive them.

**BG:** There are other arts organizations around the country that are rebranding. Is rebranding important for going after younger patrons?

**Nissinen:** I think that is often one of the reasons. People want to refresh to remain relevant. You don't do it alone with rebranding. You do it with your programming and ideas. This is a communication tool that is hopefully aligned exactly with the product. If you have a study product and you unveil a great new logo, it's not going to change anything. I think it's a great tool, but it needs to be rooted in the philosophy of the organization.

**Korn:** Before we were doing this, I went to Mikko's performances and I kept saying to him, "This is so magic" and "This is so world class." I believed in the product. It was killing me. I told him to let it out and set it free.

**Nissinen:** For me, there was part of the old logo that left me thinking "What are we, a dancing bank?"


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**The evolution of a logo**

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Boston Ballet dancers Kelsey Hellebuyck (top left and above) and Melissa Hough (top right), as models at a fashion gala sponsored by the ballet and Boston streetwear company Karmaloop, at the Liberty Hotel last month.