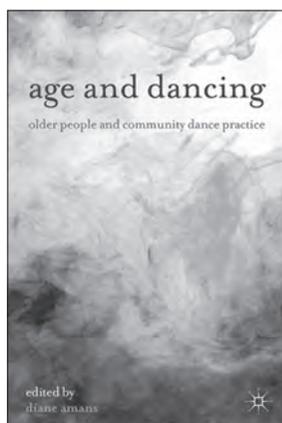


34 Dance and older people

Animated doesn't usually publish book reviews, however as the importance of working with older people in the arts becomes increasingly prominent we thought we should offer the authors of two recent books in arts/dance and older people a chance to offer some reflections about the work.



Winter Fires – Art and agency in old age by François Matarasso, published by the Baring Foundation **visit** www.baringfoundation.org.uk



Age and dancing – older people and community dance practice edited by Diane Amans, published by Palgrave Macmillan **visit** www.palgrave.com

Celebration

François Matarasso, writer and independent researcher

Some artists use their creativity directly as a way to challenge stereotypes of age and to celebrate its distinctive quality. Dance, particularly in contemporary and folk forms, has become very open to the ageing body in recent years, even celebrating its different quality of movement and expression. Merce Cunningham marked his 90th birthday with a new work at Brooklyn Academy of Music and remains an inspiration to many contemporary dancers. After his death in 2009, the Guardian's dance critic wrote:

"Even in his 90s, when he was ravaged by arthritis, his dancing contained a burnished intelligence. And the choreography he created was just as compelling, just as rich." Judith Mackrell, 2009.

Seeing Cunningham was a highlight of Colin McLean's journey into dance. It had been a passion from earliest childhood but not one he had imagined might be his path in life. A performance by John Gilpin with the Festival Ballet was Colin's first glimpse that men could dance professionally and to the highest standards, but his own career began only when he retired, after careers in the army and the church. After first steps in local dance classes, he auditioned for the Laban Centre at the age of 69 and was accepted onto a course with students a fraction his age. It was an exhilarating and liberating experience as the joy he had always felt in physical movement was harnessed to knowledge, technique and training. He gained his diploma with distinction and has been working as a dancer ever since, performing in dance pieces, films and at one-off performances.

"I just grab everything I possibly can. I dance for anybody, go anywhere. I have the advantage of being retired and so I'm not totally dependent



François Matarasso. Artist: Mik Godley

on dance income. It's absolutely wonderful."

Colin's story is unusual because he trained late and because his grace and presence in performance have drawn choreographers to work with him. But dancers such as Fergus Early (born 1946) and Liz Lerman (born 1948), among many others, have pioneered an engagement in dance for older people that has become, in the best sense of the word, almost commonplace. Other forms of dance, from ballroom to folk, also attract and welcome older dancers. Joy and Eric Foxley are in their 80s but still very active in traditional dance, where age has a different relationship to the form's values.

The growth of Indian dance in the UK has made accessible another form that sees old age differently. Bisakha Sarker, who has been performing Indian creative dance as pioneered by Uday Shankar, since the age of five, initially sought to conceal the effect of age in her performance, before rethinking how to deal with it as part of who she is:

"I cannot hide and I don't need to, so I'm saying, take me as who I am. I'm not pretending to be able to do what I cannot do. You accept that you cannot

do it, so you find another way.” Bisakha Sarker.

The narrative of her dance has also evolved as she has worked through complex feelings about vanity, ageing and mortality. Her dance has opened up to other stories that draw on a lifetime’s experience: she naturally sees things differently in her late 60s than in her early 30s.

Fortunately, her artistry and technique are capacious enough to accommodate such explorations.

There is something very important in contemporary dance’s openness to age. Dance exists in the body, where time inscribes itself also. A writer or a painter can expect their work to represent them; a musician like Kate Bush can stop performing in public so her persona ages slowly in her work. But the dancer is the dance. This is the great embodied art and its celebration can be a profound discovery even, or especially, when it comes late, as it did for Colin McLean:

“I was a bit stunned when my dance tutor wrote in my report, ‘He’s a beautiful dancer to watch’. I found that hard to take on board because no one had ever said that to me. The affirmation of my body – that’s something enormous.”

The best make up, the most expensive surgery, can change our appearance but will not make us look young. So perhaps, precisely because they cannot avoid it, dancers have been courageous in the face of ageing. Dancers know everything there is to know about losing suppleness and strength, about quick injuries and slower recoveries, about stiffening joints, arthritis and disability: no one is more in touch with their body than a dancer. But they also know about how new feelings and expressions become possible if you slow down, if you are avoiding or failing to avoid pain, if you listen, sense and appreciate. Perhaps artists in other disciplines, and people with no artistic ambitions too, could learn something important from the dancers.

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Older people dancing

Diane Amans, independent dance artist

“...older people are not a category apart. We will all grow old one day – if we have that privilege, that is. Let us therefore look at older people not as people separate from ourselves but as our future selves. And let us recognize that older people are all individuals with individual strengths and needs, not a group that are all the same because of their age”. (1)

In the above quote Kofi Annan challenges a society in which older people are seen as somehow separate. I agree and yet I am happy to contribute to conferences, books and professional development events that focus exclusively on older people. Surely this is promoting the development of a branch of dance practice that is seen as somehow separate?

I appreciate the tension line here but, if our work is going to be inclusive and supportive of all participants, community dance artists need to have an understanding of ageing and society so they can ensure their practice does not reinforce some of the stereotypes surrounding older people.

Media coverage of older people frequently uses the language of burden. In Europe’s newspapers there are daily references to economic concerns and these inevitably mention the ‘problem’ of paying for an increasingly ageing population. Fewer younger workers and many more pensioners have resulted in references to a ‘demographic time bomb’ and ‘silver tsunami’.

The arts can challenge a dominant culture in which older people are often presented as different in a society that champions youth. Yes older people are diverse individuals – just like people of any age. And many of them enjoy dancing:

Judy – member of GODS Growing Older (Dis)Gracefully: “We are a group of 25 women, aged 50 to 80 years and over, who love dancing regularly, even better we love showing off the



Diane Amans. Photo: Rachel Cherry

dances we have created together with many different choreographers: contemporary, modern and asian, musical theatre, storylines or abstract.”

George and Molly attend weekly dance sessions at the local working men’s club. George, aged 78, has just had both knees replaced and is delighted he can dance again with his wife. His friends nickname him ‘Fred Astaire’.

Susan and Kath attend Marple Movers, which is a fusion of creative dance and structured improvisation. They invite guest choreographers to help them make dance pieces that challenge stereotypes of older people. “I was 54 when I was first called ‘a dancer’ – I grew about six inches. The feeling I wanted to express was being acknowledged.” (2)

These dancers are enjoying their right “freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts”. (3) It may be that “the availability of practising that right may need adjustment at different stages of life”. (4)

In this sense, making adjustments because someone is older is just part of inclusive practice. Community dance practitioners work hard to achieve the >

right 'fit' between the activities they offer and the needs and wishes of participant dancers. Older dancers are only different in the sense that children or teenagers are different. Some community dance artists may need a specialised course or other form of continuing professional development to help them understand how to make appropriate adjustments. After all – they know what it feels like to be a child or a young adult but most practitioners do not know what it feels like to be 75 or 85 years of age.

As we see performances by more diverse dancers, there are shifting expectations about older dance artists. Fergus Early, an inspiring performer and choreographer, argues the case for valuing and celebrating the contribution of older dancers.

"...there are probably more opportunities for the mature dancer now than there used to be: choreographers and audiences are a little more aware of the value of 'difference' on stage than once they were...as our age demographic tilts the balance of the population towards older age, society is slowly waking up to the fact that older people, in all spheres, not only have needs and rights, but also vast and important gifts to bestow. The 'baby boom' generation, born in the ten years that followed World War Two and now in their 50s and 60s, are far from content to retire into oblivion for some considerable time yet, and we can expect dancers, like everybody else, to claim a much increased career span. This offers the prospect of dance emerging from what can be seen as an infantilised youth into a rich and varied maturity where it can fulfil its potential across the full spectrum of human experience." (5)

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- (1) Kofi Annan (2002) UN World Assembly on Aging Madrid <http://bit.ly/11IO4Ng>
- (2) Amans, D. (ed) (2008) An Introduction to Community Dance Practice
- (3) Article 27 Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- (4) Organ, K. (2013) After You are Two
- (5) Early, F. in Amans, D. (ed) (2012) Age and Dancing.

Professional Practice

Development Needs Analysis (DNA)

- Are you wondering how to improve your practice?
- Do you think there are aspects of your work you could develop further but don't know how?

FCD's DNA is a free resource available to members that helps you consider all aspects of your practice (in line with the National Occupational Standards for Dance Leadership).

The DNA helps you reflect on your own practice and identify your own continuing professional development (CPD) needs and is linked to FCD's wealth of online support materials providing links to and suggestions for CPD opportunities.

See how the DNA can help you expand your practice.

www.communitydance.org.uk/dna



Dance, Deaf and Disabled People

National Networking Day

Thursday 3rd October 2013
Embrace Arts, Leicester 1pm – 6pm
Lunch and registration from 1pm – 2pm

Focusing on the key themes of Leadership and Quality identified at our previous event, the day is for anyone involved in or with dance and disabilities and will explore and debate issues such as 'What do we mean by quality?' and 'How do we become more powerful leaders?'

Guest speakers will include DaDaFest's Ruth Gould and dancer and choreographer David Toole.

There will also be the opportunity to take part in two short practical sessions, network with the other delegates, eat some lovely food and be involved in shaping the future of dance for Deaf and disabled people.

For further information or to book a place please contact Louise Wildish louise@communitydance.org.uk or call +44 (0)116 253 3453

www.communitydance.org.uk/disability

