



Above: Debbie Lee-Anthony

# Conflict, content and context in the ageing body

In the Spring 2007 issue of *Animated* **Debbie Lee-Anthony** reflected on her creative practice as a mature dancer. Here, this reflection is taken further in her thinking about the 'extraordinary poetry of the ageing dancer'

**This article is a reflection and comment**, two years after writing 'Age, Agility & Anxiety' - dilemmas of the ageing process upon the mature dancer (published in *Animated* Spring 2007).

To begin with, I will refer to some of the stimulating discussions held at the Dance & Ageing seminar held at the Royal Festival Hall, London in October 2007. The seminar tackled a variety of dilemmas facing mature professional dancers, with a lively debate surrounding the issue of the context in which mature dancers might perform in - issues dealing with any subsequent changes in terms of the how and where one might present work.

## **Mature dance in context**

The Dance & Ageing seminar included a most stimulating discussion and debate surrounding issues and dilemmas concerning mature dance artists. Consisting of four highly experienced artists from a diverse range of dance backgrounds, the panel was chaired most superbly by veteran dancer/choreographer Gill Clarke. The focus of the discussion

centered on sustaining professional practice, and how the U.K. is now seeing a substantial generation of mature artists emerge from the genre of contemporary dance. The panel included Canadian artist Paul-Andre Fortier, long standing artist Fergus Early, American Scott Smith and British-South Asian Chitra Sundaram. To open the debate, Gill introduced the artists and invited them to talk about their current practice.

What struck me, after the four artists shared their standpoints with such eloquence, was that there was no sense of conflict in terms of how they viewed or approached their own dancing bodies, but a lovely sense of acceptance regarding change. I loved the opening statement by Paul Andre-Fortier, a professional dancer in his seventies, that he prefers to think of himself as 'a man dancing' rather than a dancer. He explained this before adding that he is dancing now more than he ever did, having found a new context which works for him. Fortier was seen every day throughout October 2007 performing a solo 30 X 30, commissioned as part of Dance Umbrella. The work was a structured

improvisation which he performed in major cities round the world, every day for 30 days, whatever the weather conditions and always in a busy public setting. Prior to the seminar I had the privilege of seeing Fortier perform outside Liverpool Street station; the response was varied with comments from passers by ranging from 'he's actually quite good -though in a strange kind of way' 'it's not really dancing though is it - it's not quick enough' and 'do you think he's getting paid for this?' The responses perhaps not much of a surprise when so much of dance on our television screens and in the media is focused on youth, agility and sexuality.

Fergus Early reflected that he sees his body as a kind of 'encyclopedia of dance' and referred to 'the layers of accumulated experience' that he hopes the audience would read in his performance. He added 'I see the premature retirement of dancers as a colossal waste - in no other sphere would your career end at 35'. Clearly what he is saying here is that it is about accepting the changing aesthetic within your work. But what came across is that there clearly >

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needs to be increased opportunities for older dance artists; strategies put in place that might address how we can support, nurture and sustain mature artists. Whilst there were no concrete suggestions as to how the dance profession can actively sustain equal opportunities for older dancers, there was a very real acknowledgement that more artists are emerging who have clearly made dancing their life - and see no reason why they should stop.

As Fortier expressed ‘the older dancing body has things to offer that are quite extraordinary - there is poetry in it.’ American dancer Scott Smith agreed with these sentiments adding that ‘there is something about the accumulation of experience that merges in performing that has very little to do with dance technique’. He went on to say that ‘as time goes on, dance becomes less about technique and more about somatics, about the uniqueness of the individual body, rather than having to conform to a set of practices and ideas.’ These sentiments were most clearly expressed when I saw him perform earlier this year with Gravity & Levity. Performing alongside dancers half his age, he had a certain power, poetry, physical articulation and assurance that was stunning to observe.

### **My body - in terms of conflict, content and context**

To begin with I shall review some of the pertinent questions I was asking of myself during my sabbatical from the University of Winchester in 2005, in terms of physical, emotional and contextual matters I was experiencing at the time. These were:

- What will change about the work and how will it change?
- What is it that I have to say?
- Who am I making work for?
- Is there a right time to stop and if so, how will I know it?

Reflecting upon these questions now, it is clear to me that the content and nature of my work has changed and is continuing to do so. In terms of stimulus for the content of recent works, both created for myself and with my dance students at Winchester, I have noticed a certain desire - or rather need - to express ideas connected to recent life experience that, albeit unconsciously, relate to my ageing body. For example, *Holding The Moment* (2006) a solo which I made as part of the *Body of Experience* National tour, was an investigation of notions of holding on, letting go and loss. The piece was created as a personal response to the death of a very close friend of mine to cancer. Choices I made in terms of movement vocabulary, imagery, shape, quality and dynamic, were, I noticed after completing the work, clearly mirrored by changes in my ageing body. Whilst recurring images within the work directly made reference to the particular journey with the loss of my friend, the movement material had a resonance about it that reflected vulnerability, strength, stillness, softening, retaining and releasing to finally ‘let go’ - these, to my mind and understanding at least, being phenomenological, physical and emotional manifestations of my current experience as a dancer. Perhaps this duality of ‘holding on’ and ‘letting go’ as an integral concept of the solo,

suggests that notions of content and context in the body collide in, at times, unknowing ways. I would say that dance as a communicative visualization and embodiment of thoughts and feelings has become more heightened as I have reached middle-age.

Another example of the symbiotic relationship between content and context is a work I created for D@win, the student company at University of Winchester. *Reservedly So* (2007) explored ideas of privacy, reserve and sharing of private moments. Taking a quote from *The Celtic Heart* written by Liz Babbs, ‘The journeys we make express who we are’ the piece explored ideas relating to the dancers’ individual vulnerabilities. The creative process involved a synthesis of their personal histories allied within the context of their own dancing bodies. To take this point further, each of the dancers had a solo and without exception their individual movement choices were directly informed by their own personal journey of a particular recent life experience. Interestingly, four out of the five dancer’s material specifically related to a recent injury or illness; in other words, each dancer adopted a phenomenological approach to the devising of their work. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone expounds ‘There is an experience, and the experience must be had in order to be described.’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1979, p11). To my mind, their solos were made all the more engaging due to a real sense of seeking the heart of the experience itself.

Whenever the opportunity arises I attend master classes and workshops



**Above:** Reservedly So (Debbie Lee-Anthony work for students 2007), D@win Dance Company; Nicola Bobb, Emily Moore, Sarah Haddow, Kylie Appleby, Emily Nunn. Photo: James Rowbotham (2008) [www.rowbotham-dance.book.fr](http://www.rowbotham-dance.book.fr)

and find it difficult to hold back. Occasionally, I am forced to 'sit out' when presented with some of the more athletic movement being asked of me. I have noticed that I have become increasingly resistant to the concept of my body ageing and find it difficult to accept that I cannot jump or perform a full plie without some strain upon my knees and hips.

Thinking back on when I was a young dance student at The Place, I have vivid memories of two inspirational teachers of mine in the late 1970's, Jane Dudley and Bill Louther. Both were extraordinary teachers who demanded high standards, drawing the very best from their pupils; they were teaching and choreographing beyond middle age (Jane well into her seventies). Neither could physically fully demonstrate the articulation of the movement - but the passion, imagery and qualities they were looking for were of the utmost clarity in the way in which they held their bodies and spoke about their craft. So I need to find new ways to follow their example as, increasingly, I find myself in some pain after

teaching. A good deal of the leading artists from the Graham generation, including Jane and Bill, underwent hip or knee replacements and this is something I am, not surprisingly, wishing to avoid!

Currently I am experiencing uncomfortable, at times extreme, symptoms related to the menopause - I believe the 'change of life' was how my mother used to refer to it! The physiological, biological and emotional changes in my body are having a considerable impact upon my well-being and therefore how I 'feel'. Ultimately this has a significant impact upon my creative practice.

Making a new solo work that mirrors and investigates my experience of the ongoing biological and metabolic processes within my body, and questioning how a once seemingly ageless, agile dancer deals with concepts of ageing and the unpleasant symptoms of the menopause, is something that interests me. How to approach this without being glib, literal and self-indulgent will perhaps provide a series of provocations and challenges.

Consequently I am faced with trying to find new strategies for demonstrating when teaching technique; being a dancer who relished nothing more than moving at speed in and out of the floor, this has become something of a challenge. I have always been a dancer who found the idea of 'marking' impossible - performing the movement anything less than 100% was just unacceptable to me. Reflecting upon this perhaps is why I increasingly admonish myself for not being able to sustain the high levels of stamina and physicality I once held. I resent the changes in my ageing body; in terms of lost muscle tone, stiffening of the joints, weight gain (regardless of how much I run or exercise) and changes in texture and appearance of the flesh. It is like I am being robbed of my once supple toned body. Of course one must accept that physical changes will inevitably occur in the body as part of the ageing process; a gradual slowing down of physical capacity, the muscle tendons losing their strength and a general deterioration of muscle tissue and bone density. Whilst I accept that this >



**Left:** Rehearsal shot for *Holding the Moment* (2007) Debbie Lee-Anthony.  
Photo: Elizabeth McAuley (2006)  
[www.performance-art-photographs.co.uk](http://www.performance-art-photographs.co.uk)

is all part of the ageing process, I find myself struggling to try to recapture and hold on to what I once held dear. Kenneth Dutton in 'The Perfectible Body' (1995) talks about the level of preoccupation with our own physical appearance and how we need to feel 'socially acceptable'. Whilst this is not necessarily directed towards dancers, reflecting on this I can say that my physical appearance is of paramount importance to me, as a teacher and practicing artist. Dutton suggests that this preoccupation persuades us to overly focus on our outward appearance, as opposed to the control of the inner body. I often wonder if I stop teaching and making work whether my pre-occupation with my outward appearance will remain as heightened. According to Dutton the body is the focal point of our individual identity, in that we not only have but in a sense are our bodies. This is certainly something that I can identify with.

I return to one of my earlier questions dealing with finding a context - exactly who am I making work for? Considering this, some new questions have arisen for me. 'Is it 'enough' to present my work once or twice in an academic/research seminar setting?' 'Do I/should I tour the work?' (of course this inevitably poses crucial questions and considerations regarding funding). Since 1999 I have been lecturing in higher education and an integral part of my practice-based research has been concerned with widening access and notions of innovation and accessibility.

Considering this it seems futile to present my work in an exclusively academic environment. As I delve deeper into my research, I hope to become clearer regarding finding the most appropriate context for the work.

Recently I attended an intensive two days training in technique and repertory with American dancer Kurt Douglas (ex Limon Dance Company, currently dancing with Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in New York). I was very apprehensive about going, concerned that I would be amongst mostly young, athletic, agile dancers (which I was) and would not be able to keep up. The teacher (who was excellent) surprisingly singled me out several times to demonstrate the quality we were aspiring to. Whilst I have difficulty in jumps and leg extensions (due to tightness in the hip flexors and joint pain) the joy of experiencing the fullness of the movement must still come through. This of course was a tremendous encouragement to me and has gone a long way to boost my self confidence, when at times those doubts about continuing to perform set in. It is clear that dancing, regardless of age or level of technical dance training and in whatever style or context (be it professional or community), is good for the soul. The benefits relating to health, healing and the human spirit can be transformative for both dancer and viewer. In my view what lies at the heart of dance is the passion, beauty and enjoyment of moving and the desire to communicate this - whatever

age one might be, and whether in a professional or community dance context.

To conclude, the most pertinent of the questions I was asking at the beginning of my study in 2005, 'Is there a right time to stop and if so, will I know it?' has now become redundant as the question need not arise. It is my hope that, as an increasing number of 'ageing dancers' are continuing to perform, a variety of further opportunities and performance contexts will emerge in order to nourish, nurture and sustain dancers with a lifetime of experience and something poignant to say.

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