

# More Hip Op than Hip Hop: temporality of the dancing body

**Mark Edward**, Artistic Director of Mark Edward & Company and freelance interdisciplinary arts practitioner, calls for a celebration of the body's life-long journey in dance

**I'm not bad for someone nearing 40.** But I am sitting (not in a Stannah chair lift) writing this, contemplating a pair of magi-knickers (a must for any ex-practitioner of the Martha Graham technique) after overdosing on multi-vitamins. This coming of age is unwelcome, perhaps akin to the dancers' menopause: reluctantly undergoing physical and psychological changes where the aches and pains of my parents' generation now increasingly belong to me. I only need to take a look into the dance studio mirror to realise I was born naked, the rest is just Coal Tar Soap. For a dancer, nearing 40, I am considered geriatric. My mind repeats the same cutting question. If a ballet dancer would hang up their pointe shoes, at what point does the contemporary dancer wash their feet clean after a final performance?

Whilst denying this invasive reality, I still have some options. I could seek a younger version of myself to dance my works. I could explore a slower moving aesthetic and gentle performative that has less impact on the joints. I could become a parody of what I used to be. I could leap out of the studio, dignity intact, whilst I still can, and become a dance maker, researcher and mentor or, I could leave dance altogether. Or I could just simply change the question. Why am I doing this and for whom?

These are, I am sure, all dancers' innermost fears as they head down what seems to be a path of decay (to, in some cases, Job Centre Plus). Here lies the most poignant question of all. Do I self destruct or should I value what I have?

As an undergraduate, I came into dance education at a later age than the average dancer. When I walked through the studio doors at the tender age of twenty, I was asked "what do YOU want?" to which I replied "well what have you got?" I knew very little about techniques and was already deemed too old for classical dance training by the ballet 'establishment'. Fortunately, I was given a life line in the way of a university education in dance, live art and drama. I had a natural ability which was quickly recognised and nurtured by enlightened tutors. I was lucky. But my time was limited.

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choreography (as though this is their inherited right). Yet the very idea of a professional dancer continuing to dance above and beyond a certain age in western culture is somehow deemed a social faux pas.

Gill Clarke agrees, quoting Fergus Early:

"The assumption is that once they reach a certain age or stage in their career, dancers will eventually 'grow up'. This means a move into choreography or teaching, or a management or directorial role, as befitting their 'adult status'. As Early states: "I see the premature retirement of dancers as a colossal waste. In no other sphere would your career end at 35". (1)

I am not claiming all dancers shift from performance into dance creation as they get older. There are vast numbers who, finding themselves older and surplus to requirements, exit the profession totally. Why? We only need to take a look at the current wave of TV (Strictly Come Instant Skill Overkill) dance phenomena to realise the full extent of the promotion of a more youthful dancing body. According to online sources Got to Dance on Sky1 attracted 1.12 million viewers during its finale and So You Think You Can Dance garnished a respectful 8.5 million viewers and while The BBC News at Ten recently claimed that dance was the fastest growing art form (21/7/10), Got to Dance, and So You Think You Can Dance usually feature youth street art groups who might not have had a dance lesson in their lives, but who have (to borrow the language) 'busted ass' to be able to do what they do. This might be the democratisation of dance – anyone can do it if they sweat enough - but it doesn't eradicate the hierarchy or ageism of dance form, it rearranges it: because not all forms are valued. It is important to note at this point that there is an apparent emphasis on youth dance sweeping the nation and alleged neglect of dance with and for the mature mover. The message is clear: dance is for the young.

In 2007 I set about co-creating (with Julia Griffin) Falling Apart at the Seams, an ironic dance theatre piece about the ageing performer, which was selected for the Marks of Time conference on Dance and Ageing, and British Dance Edition 2008. Falling Apart was a Practice as Research project destabilising the nature of performance, setting at its centre

June Gibbons, 1950's  
Vaudeville veteran.  
Photo: unknown



performer rather than performance. Interrogating able-ist notions of performer, as part of this process I invited the Vaudeville veteran, Ms June Sands, to re-enact her act along with the other performers. Ms Sands was 81 and brought a wealth of performance experience dating back several decades: she had toured the British music halls with her renowned father, Fred Brand (who taught Roy Castle to Tap Dance) and worked with Hylda Baker, George Formby, Old Mother Riley, and Arthur Askey. During this period of research and development we shared an amazing creative dialogue of cumulative knowledge, resulting in a rich practice which was invaluable to the performance making process. This subverted notions which discriminate against the ageing body, and highlighted instead work which

evolves with the ageing performer. This embodied knowledge was understood through the 'felt', the doing and being in the moment. It was a lived process that draws upon knowledge that has been gained through connections to the living body over a period of time. It was a phenomenological process demonstrating movement experience which has (hi)stories, endurance and a physical knowledge (a lived encyclopaedia of dance practice) which can be given back to the next generation of dancers. The learning and experiential encompasses many forms and comes into existence through the bodies fleshy rubbery substance which is constantly evolving, shifting and experiencing. Such journeys can be shared but never owned nor have intellectual and physical copyright.

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Left: Mark Edward & Julia Griffin, *Falling Apart at the Seams*.  
Photos: Stuart Rayner

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These questions are focused on the learning, the learner and the learned with an emphasis on the development of the individual with differing needs and abilities. I am very much into a diverse learning community of ages that encourages growth through ownership and personal agendas. I am constantly reminding people that learning does not stop when the dance studio light goes off: rather you are text; you are data; you are the subject, the object, the dance, the dancer, the doer, the doing. The lens that I look through is epistemological and is focused on the body as a locus for change, the 'felt' and knowing from being and doing. My research does not seek universal positions or concrete answers, merely to explore a journey of change, reflection and exploration in order to educate dancers as they get older on re-patterning their dance forms and thus successfully moving them away from material that may no longer serve their purpose. Is this not a better alternative to finding ageing an end?

David Massingham, Director of DanceXchange says:

"No one told me how I would feel at the end of my career. What end? I am not an end, am I? There are very few absolutes available to us in the dance industry, but of one thing I am sure. A business that leaves you high and dry between 35 and 40 is a tough one." (2)

Such issues in dance and the ageing body are being addressed in the wider dance community, which appears at last to be moving on considerably in its appreciation of the mature mover and embodied arts practice. This has been evident over the last decade. It must be noted that the ageing dancer and the embodiment of physical knowledge is a key area of debate currently entering the academic dance community's agenda. We only need to look at the current demand in the UK for such post graduate programmes in Somatic Dance practices, Body Mind Centring, intensive summer schools and conferences around dance, ageing and health related areas to understand that there are positive changes taking shape throughout the HE sector and other educational dancing environments.

We should acknowledge that dance is a broad arena, and that each individual is a work in progress in a unique process of a state of permanent evolving, growing and becoming. I like the notion of mapping the body in space

through self identity and ownership of the dance language (whatever that maybe) that you execute through performance. I am a firm believer in people being a habitant of their own skin. We are each an embodiment of our living C.V. In dance the older performer tends to become more refined and 'knowing' in their bones. Organically, as I have got older, I have moved away from having to conform and perform to a set of soul-crippling codified established practices and dancing ideas, and have come to recognise that I am free to dance as I like when I like. As an older artist, I can readily engage with and draw upon a range of embodied knowledge with substance, truthfulness and lived experiences. This personified process cannot be fast-tracked in any learning culture nor can it be bought: it has to be experienced and sensed over a period of time. It comes as a result of (inter)change, migration and most importantly constant movements. Our bodies evolve, develop, and change: intimate relationships begin and end (not only with others but with ourselves) and it is this richness that is brought to the studio and should be openly celebrated.

There's nothing tragic about getting older. I have friends who are still dancing in their 60's and I have friends who are nearing 40 and slowing down, and the tragedy is the prejudice that informs them that they ought to do so. Embodied knowledge is of great value. So celebrate your life's journey in dance and wave goodbye to the pity party. I don't know about you, but I am still ready for my close up, Mr De Mille!

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#### References

- (1) Gill Clarke, What's age got to do with it? Celebrating the Mature Dance Performer. Time Out Magazine, N01939. (October, 2007 Edition).
- (2) David Massingham, Environmental Issues. Animated, Summer 2000 edition, page 18.