

Valuing the Older Dancer through Digital Technology

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Abstract

Today's focus on a youth-oriented consumer culture also weighs heavily in the current dance world and for some who are approaching forty years of age; retirement is perceived as the legitimate choice. Should this still be the case? Since attending the Elixir Festival at Sadler's Wells Theatre in London 2014 the research indicates there is a renewed interest within the dance world of the value and visibility of the mature dancer, recognising their lived body experience, performativity and inclusion in western dance culture. There has long been prejudice towards the mature dancer but a new shift acknowledging the lifetime of embodied dance experience is slowly being highlighted. Which is the preferred body to perform, the youthful or the mature, or is it inappropriate behaviour of the latter? By investigating through film and photography, from the personal perspective as a mature dancer, I aim to focus on the mature mover and conserve their visibility in the current dance world.

Keywords

mature dancer, technology

Introduction

Dance is obsessed with youth, like all the narcissistic enclaves of our society. Dance as sport, dance as glamour factory – a passion compounded of physical mastery and an idealisation of the human form. [1].

Valuing the older dancer through film and photography is the aim of this PhD project through the use of digital technology. My personal embodied experience of this journey, from the young performer through to the mature dancer has also been intrinsic to this research. To have this project discussed within the wider dance community would potentially enlighten and encourage all dancers, whether they are young or mature-aged, to acknowledge, that 'dancing does not have to stop' at a set time of life. Ageing dancers have demonstrated that performance is ongoing. Support from choreographers and audiences alike are indicating this to be true. It is not a case of older dancers performing past their corporeal ability but their performance skills are a sharing of their accumulated individual dance knowledge as well as their physicality.

Something intrinsic to dance that warrants the kind of reverential attention paid in each generation to a very few dancers – something about what they do that is different from the achievements of surpassingly gifted, magnetic performers in other arts to whom we pay homage. [2]

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My research, as a mature dancer, through digital media examines the role of dancers who extend beyond the paradigm of age, and the contribution that they make to current dialogues in the field. It explores the mature dancer's perception of the shift of focus from age, (forty) to the body, the change of interest and the new emphasis. The transformation moves from quantity to quality of movement, with perceptions of ability over agility, tempered with maturity over youth. There is an inner subjectivity and honouring of experience that can only be perceived or embodied by a mature dancer. Research on this area highlights these dancers' embodied history and corporeal value, which places new importance on the naturalisation of the older dancer. Dance artist Ann Dickie surmises:

At last, people are beginning to recognize what some of us have always known – the value of the creativity and experience of older people! [3]

French theorist Laurence Loupe describes dance as:

A danced moment carrying its charge of what has been lit up in the bodies of the dancer and the spectator. We are all in search of these brilliant moments and of the indelible mark they make on us despite the elusive transience of their passing. [4]

The opportunity to capture these moments through video footage and/or the digital camera is the creative element of my PhD investigation into exhibiting the ingenuity of the mature dancer in motion. I am currently working with 2 groups of mature dancers, the Australian Dance Artists who are based in Sydney and four British dancers based in London, whose ages range from 57 – 68 years of age. All are either professional classical or contemporary dancers. I intend to produce 2 films, where the dancers will interpret a dance motif of mine in the vein of Sophie Calle's body of work "take care of yourself." I filmed myself demonstrating the movements and the 8 dancers choose how they will interpret this, either by copying the choreography, improvising, changing, ignoring, thereby recreating 8 new pieces of work. Early in January 2015 the filming of the British dancers commenced beginning the creative process for the final film: *Interprete*. This body of work will later be shown in an exhibition space as well as via vimeo.com and social media. This may also be accompanied by a performance from myself addressing the dance dialogue from the 8 dancers; as yet this is to be established.

Mature Dancer: Study of Collaboration

In 2014 I conducted interviews with 2 groups of mature dancers, the Australian Dance Artists, based in Sydney, and four British dancers based in London. Anca Frankenhaeuser (67), Patrick Harding-Irmer (68), Susan Barling (57) and Ross Philip (57) form part of the Australian Dance Artists who perform with the artist Ken Unsworth in site specific performances at his Sydney studio. These four contemporary dancers hail from the London Contemporary Dance Theatre and Sydney Dance Company, all carry a lifetime of dance language and embodiment. These dancers are part of my primary research and their assistance with the project has

been invaluable. These dancers will perform in the proposed film, where the motif will be reinterpreted; this is due to be filmed in April 2015. The second group known as the British dancers are composed of, Jennifer Jackson 60 (former soloist Royal Ballet Company, *Dancing the Invisible*), Susie Crow, 58 (former soloist Royal Ballet Company, *Ballet in Small Spaces*) Ann Dickie 68 (former Rambert, *Tanz Theatre, From Here to Maturity*) Nicholas Minns 62 (Rambert, *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens*).

For this process I use two cameras, a Nikon D5100, which shoots film footage via a tripod, whilst I use a JVC video camera for zooming in on headshots and close-ups. I filmed the British dancers in London during January 2015. The dancers first improvise to capture their chosen mode of movement, which I then filmed, one dancer at a time, allowing them only one performance, keeping the work raw and original. I also photographed the dancers as they 'warmed up' and experimented with the choreography, using time exposure settings allowed me to experiment and seize imagery as Walter Benjamin describes: "through photography the lens is able to employ such techniques as enlargement or slow motion to capture images that are quite simply beyond natural optics."

It could be argued that the images procured will confuse the viewer as to the age or even gender of the dancer as this is obscured. The slow shutter speed settings allow for a greater depth of imagery in this context whereas the film will display the mature dancers more obviously, highlighting their embodied dance experience, the gestural and corporeal is documented through their danced movements.



Figure 1: Australian Dance Artists, Anca Frankenhaeuser & Patrick Harding-Irmer, Ross Philip & Susan Barling
Sonia York-Pryce 2014

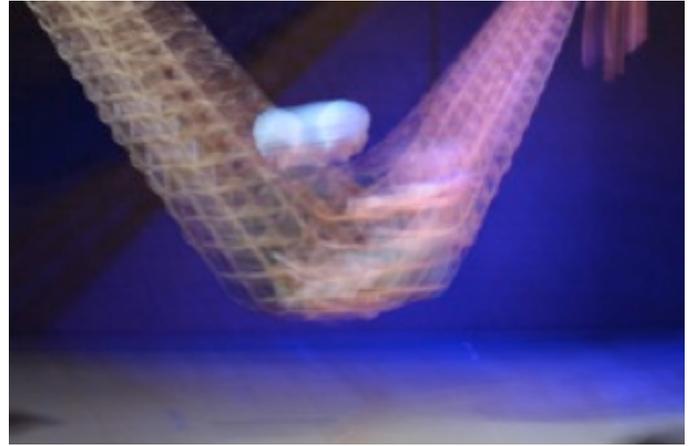


Figure 2: Australian Dance Artists Sonia York-Pryce 2014

Digital Technology – the Motif Film – Interpret

The concept for the creative part of the PhD, *Interprete*, is the film I wish to produce with the idea appropriated from French artist Sophie Calle's body of work titled: *take care of yourself*. Calle asked 107 women to respond (including a parrot) from the realms of anthropology, criminology, philosophy, psychiatry, theater, opera, and soap opera to this letter, reading and re-reading it, performing it, transforming it, and pursuing the emotions it contains and elicits.

<http://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/56>

My intention is somewhat similar though not entirely, in that I will ask 8 dancers to interpret my movements in whatever form they feel appropriate, which could encompass changing the choreography, the intent and or transforming the motif into a totally personal sequence of movements.

I have returned to the studio, filming myself demonstrating the dance Motif, which is now a video to present to the dancers as the original choreography, a type of dance map. The Motif, is a selection of dance moves/steps choreographed by myself when a student at Laban School of Movement and Dance, London, in 1987. This sequence of movements (filmed and edited by myself) shot in the studio and then uploaded to <http://vimeo.com> will allow the dancers to view the choreography via a laptop or iPhone. This footage was shot from various angles, detailing the movements factually, filmed by myself, facing towards and away from the camera, then from the left and right sides consecutively. This demonstrates to each dancer a map of the movements and will act as a guide for them to interpret their own version of the motif.

<https://vimeo.com/112907186> PhD two (Film 3)

Up-loading the film to <http://www.vimeo.com> makes accessibility to the material simpler because geography dictates this to be the best format for all the dancers involved with the project. The Australian Dance Artists and the British dancers, Jennifer Jackson, Ann Dickie, Nicholas Minns and Susie Crowe have found this way advantageous allowing them time to view the choreography and interpret from there. The latter will re-interpret the Motif in a studio space courtesy of Surrey University. The final editing will produce a short film/s of the eight dancers re-interpreting the choreography in a totally unique and personal style. As yet it is unknown until all the filming is complete whether the work will be shown as 8 short films, or 2 films showcasing the Australian dancers and the British dancers or become an amalgamation of all into one film.

Challenging Traditional Roles

As a mature dancer and Luddite, the involvement of technology in the project has been both a positive and negative experience. Keeping abreast with the endless changes with digital media is a constant source of angst for the mature artist. The positives are the ability to instantaneously record and document movement and imagery that can be assessed and critiqued personally as well as viewed on social media; a great platform for feedback and advice. The change from the times of the 1970s when video was just beginning to be utilised for teaching purposes in dance schools when I was a student to the technology available today it is staggering what can be achieved in the studio context. It is evident today that dance and film go hand in hand for promoting the work be it via social media, theatre publicity or otherwise.

As a dancer I have had to garner new skills to adapt with the ever-changing proficiencies needed to promote my arts practice, this was evident when I had to edit Australian Dance Artist's film: Soiree Sforza from 54 minutes to under 10 minutes duration, with kind permission from the cinematographer Paul Nicola, for the Elixir Festival at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London. (September 2014) I had to learn very quickly how to 'rip' a DVD, then edit, upload onto the net, then export via <http://www.dropbox.com> for Sadler's Wells Theatre. The edited version went safely to London and was viewed for 4 days during the Elixir Festival.

<http://vimeo.com/104217911>
Soiree Sforza The original uncut version.



Figure 3: Jennifer Jackson
Sonia York-Pryce 2014

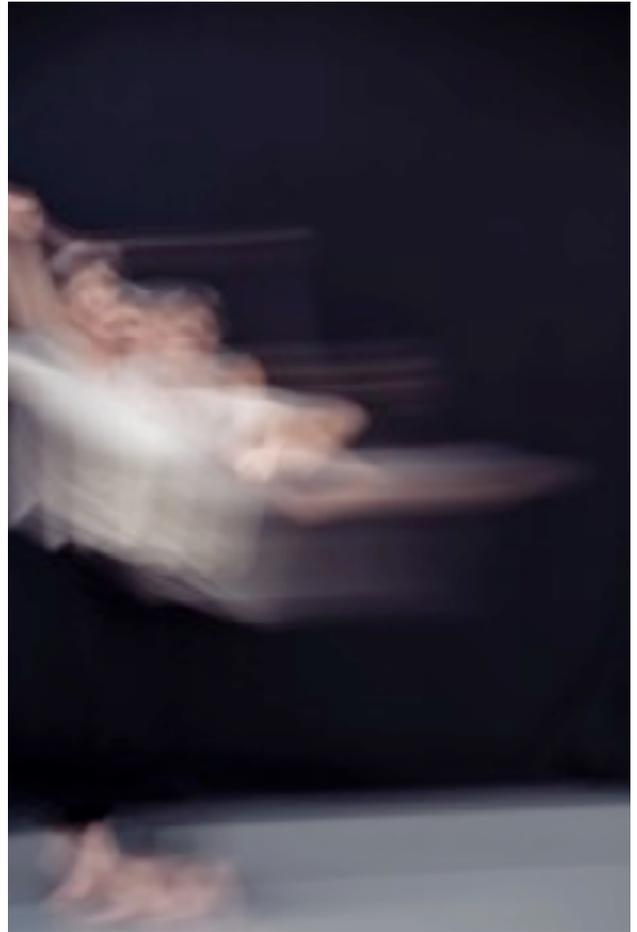


Figure 4: *Making Room*, Jennifer Jackson
Sonia York-Pryce 2014

Research Aims

The research aims to highlight the value, validation and visibility of the mature dancer through film, photography and the questionnaire which forms the primary research, that has been submitted to 20+ dancers in the UK, Australia and Canada. This section of the research gives the mature dancer a voice and could conceivably become a publication; the data is ongoing as more dancers add their comments. The creative work produced for the PhD will be part of an exhibition and could lead on to other avenues of performance or further discussion in the dance world.

Immediately after the Elixir Festival

<http://www.sadlerswells.com/screen/video/3884457938001#>

closed, I was able to secure some studio time with mature dancer, Jennifer Jackson (part of BDM (Hons) and PhD primary research) who was rehearsing at The Ivy Studios, Surrey University, for her current work: *Making Room*. I was fortunate to capture time and fast exposure motion images for the research. She anticipates using some of the stills to promote her work.

Approach

My studio process is haptic. I decide a time to be in the studio with a digital SLR camera and a video camera. I have no fixed ideas of outcomes, rather I aim to produce images and sufficient film from which to reflect on and refine. The process commences as if I were choreographing a dance. I select a specific soundtrack as background accompaniment; this assists my process allowing me to concentrate on the project whilst moving in the studio space. In most cases the chosen soundtrack will be used in the final work. Here I am hoping to use music by composer Bill Ryan, with whom I have been in contact and I am awaiting permission to use the score. Through dance improvisation I experiment with movement, this helps to get me started, whilst the video or digital camera records. This investigation allows me to warm up the body, move in the space and to experiment freely captured by the video or the SLR camera. These images or movement sequences reference what is required to experiment or I may choose to not view the work at that time and observe at a later date.



Figure 5: *Self Portrait*. Sonia York-Pryce 2014

The filming of movement has revealed greater scope to experiment with space and motion, as the camera can record freely. I have experimented with the video camera in a fixed position on a tripod and intend to investigate by moving it around the studio, capturing the movement from as many different angles as possible. I have had interesting results from mounting the video camera high up on a ladder to give the appearance of aerial shots. This elevated position will give another interesting angle to capture the dance Motif in motion, should I choose to use this process. Studio assistance is going to be necessary to capture the imagery I aim to display.

Generally, I investigate and experiment with slow shutter speeds using a digital camera accompanied with simplistic lighting, in this instance with 2 redhead spotlights. I will revisit techniques that were previously explored in my Bachelor of Digital Media (Hons) film

Does the Dancing have to stop? <http://vimeo.com/78251127>

and the accompanying self-portrait photographic project, with atmospheric lighting which produced interesting images. So far I have limited the filming and photography to myself, allowing opportunities to experiment and this has produced both positive and negative results.



Figure 6: *Self Portrait with iPhone*. Sonia York-Pryce 2014

The studio investigation has also provided enough material to produce 2 short videos as a starting point plus some much-valued film editing experience. These experimental techniques will assist in the process of creating a new body of work, as learning new skills. My previous videos have featured myself as the dancer, filming and editing unassisted but this body of work will give me invaluable experience creating alongside mature dancers as well as the technical assistance of an experienced cinematographer. It is anticipated that the final film *Interprete* will give a voice to the mature dancer's body.

1st video work:

<https://vimeo.com/101821186>

2nd video work produced, the promo for *Interprete*:

<http://www.vimeo/103689205>

Analysis

Dance and digital technology in today's dance world is a great asset, being able to revisit dance I have filmed in real time is a valuable creative tool as well as engaging audiences through the avenues of Facebook, Twitter, vimeo, YouTube and www. Indeed, the Elixir Festival 2014 and my recent visit to Resolution 2015 at The Place, London, exhibit how dance and film are enveloped within each other, either used in the performance space or through publicity it gives the viewer immediate access to a dance company or choreographer which is invaluable. How did we ever manage before the intervention of these modes?

Individual Reflection

As a dancer, apart from being challenged in the technical sense, the documentation of process is necessary and somewhat daunting, hence the 'tongue in cheek' suggestion of 'dance your thesis' for the PhD. This example was recent-

ly exhibited at my MVA Confirmation, recorded via my iPhone, where I documented myself dancing as a dance dialogue to my proposed MVA thesis. This process, at the time was also an invaluable tool for the instant viewing of a dance performance, something unheard of in my days as a young dancer. Most dancers and choreographers in the past had to rely on dance notation as a form of reference or old film footage, quite the contrary to the immediate results viewed through digital technology today. The value of documentation through digital media is a necessary accessory for many dance artists today and personally forms the main creative element of the PhD and beyond.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Schwaiger, posits that the dancers' body, at any age, carries a specialised embodiment, their instrument is their physicality. The aged dancer's body carries such a strong dance vocabulary and should be valued. Schwaiger embraces the mature practitioner's experience and embodiment, perceiving this passage of time is personally relevant, as it is in my case as a mature dancer. She posits positive qualities in mature dancers, their grace and fluidity plus the change in their performativity that could only exist because they are ageing. Dancer Susan Barling, Australian Dance Artists:

Maturity helps my performance, I'm not trying to pull off a triple turn – I'm aware of the infinite possibilities I have to express myself within the dance. Before I thought it was more about perfection, now I feel it is more about connection. [11]

As such, dancer and educator Jillian Harris posits:

Years of knowledge and wisdom stored within these older bodies go to waste and audiences lose transformative experiences as we, as a society, revel in the virtuosity of youth and fail to see physical feats as merely one aspect of an artistic investigation. [12]

Furthermore, Kathleen White notes, "to deny the older artist participation is to deny audiences the full power and pleasure of artists who have ripened and fully developed their expressiveness and grace." [13]

However, western culture's obsession with youth is being challenged by the recent interest and fascination with the 'new' mature dancer whose visibility on the performing stage is becoming more vibrant and acceptable than ever before. Digital technology is integral to my creative process and though this medium I hope to exhibit the grace, performativity and presence of the mature dancer is vital in the dance world where ageing is still a taboo issue.

Using digital technology to portray my arts practice is a means to exhibit these extraordinary mature dancers but it can never replace the immediacy or intimacy of a live performance in the theatre but for many it is the only way to view the craft of great dance artists.

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Figure 7: Self Portrait. Sonia York-Pryce 2014

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