

# **Sustainability in dance practice**

## **The case of the ‘mature artist’**

**Liz Schwaiger**

PhD Candidate

Victoria University of Technology

Melbourne Australia

One recurrent theme emerging from this conference is of dancers finding hybrid solutions within an underfunded and underresourced dance industry in Australia, and creatively developing hybrid microcosms of opportunity, in a western culture in which dance is not as highly valued and economically supported as, for example, professional football.

This leads one to suggest that there are two general forms of sustainability in dance practice. Sustainability can relate to the economic conditions under which dancers practice, the viability of sustaining one’s practice under uncertain and unfavourable economic conditions. It can also relate to the dancer’s own disposition and motivation. Feeling valued by one’s culture and society as a dancer, feeling one is contributing something meaningful to the community in which one lives, something that is acknowledged—what I call the ‘cultural valorization’ of dancers—is probably at least as important as getting enough income to pay the rent or mortgage. However, the two aspects of sustainability—economic and culturally valorized—are interwoven, as the dancer’s ‘value’ is reflected in the remuneration and continuity of employment, just as much as it indicates audience appreciation.

My PhD study looks at the plight of ‘older’ dancers in western cultures, particularly in Australia. Of course, the very term ‘older dancer’, like ‘older woman’, is a highly loaded one. This discursive delineation of a performer in culturally normative terms already reflects a society that is ageist. Substituting a euphemism for ‘older’ isn’t much help either in a culture in which normative stereotypes shape language as much as language is shaped

by them. For is the term 'mature' any better? Does it bypass the assumptions we might hold about our older citizens, in terms of 'decline' of physical, intellectual capacities, if we simply select a more politically correct term? I think not. For our society is ageist, and elders are not revered. Being an 'older dancer' in a discipline such as ballet that prizes youth, strength, and that reflects the values of a culture that discursively aligns 'beauty' with 'youth', doesn't mean being a sage, it has ageist connotations. You can't jump as high any more, turn as many times, get your leg up as high as you used to. Does that mean you have nothing else to offer as an artist?

Because of the ageist meanings attached to terms such as 'older' dancer, and because there wasn't a great deal of research on ageing and dancers, I adopted a 'grounded' approach to gathering findings, by using 'life history' interviews (see, e.g., Connell, 1995; Dowsett, 1996). Secondly, I did not want to impose prior theoretical assumptions (reflecting my own involuntary ageist bias) and attempt to 'fit' the data to these preconceptions. For in so doing I would run the risk of structuring and interpreting participants' narratives in terms of the very discourses and practices of culturally normative decline I wanted to investigate.

In my PhD study, I interviewed 30 dancers, mostly over 40 and ranging in age from 27 to 68, not all of whom were 'retired' from dancing. In fact, the term 'retirement' from or 'cessation' of performing was another surprisingly tricky term to define. Did it include occasional performances combined with teaching? Was it defined by the participant's perception of whether s/he was retired, semi-retired, or still active?

The dancer in transition literature shows that dancers are retiring in their twenties (Throsby and Hollister, in press). This particular chronological age then becomes a 'marker' of when one should retire, as *social* ageing is peer-driven. According to reports from some of the 'older dancers' in my study, it also coincides with one's 'physical peak'. But some participants also referred to an 'emotional peak', a point at which the dancer reaches maturity and a certain roundedness as a performer, a point that is reached at around age 40, when the performer has matured as an artist, and has 'lived some life'. This influences their experience and enjoyment of performing, and their ability to express subtleties of meaning in dance that eluded them in younger years when technique was paramount and expressive

ability secondary. Retirement from performing before this point is reached occludes any possibilities of reaching one's performing maturity.

What is happening in western cultures, that brings about such a result? I believe that it is the result of a culturally ingrained valuing of youth, strength and beauty, and that these three terms are conjoined in the very way older people are perceived in western cultures. My thesis therefore addresses pertinent questions, such as: How is the dancer's body constructed or marked as aged? How is it experienced and embodied as aged? How is this reflected in dance institutional attitudes, policies and practices? And what are the implications of our perceptions and expectations of 'older' dancers' physical and aesthetic capacities?

A content analysis of the transcripts from my interviews unveiled eleven recurrent themes addressing ageing, gender and dancing. Two of these are particularly pertinent to the sustainability of dance practices in Australia. These are:

*Lifestyle and family*: how negotiating the demands of everyday life impinges on the experience and practice of dancing throughout maturity. Lifestyle and family were important factors in the decision to leave full-time performing—and for many people in a standardizing culture it occurs at fairly close age ranges; and

*The cultural valorisation of dance*: dancers were keenly aware of whether their status as dancers and their professional contribution was valued in the cultures in which they live and perform. This also reflects whether the dance form is mainstream or more experimental.

How do these themes translate into the everyday survival of the mature dancer? Several main strategies emerged from comments by the dancers in my study. One is to freelance, and move from project to project. Another is to earn one's living through teaching and occasionally guest in works requiring a mature dancer, such as in ballets or musicals. Here a number of participants commented that, as freelance performers, they often felt they were competing with younger dancers for what funding and short-term contract positions there are available, and expressed reluctance to do this as they wanted to give the younger dancers a chance. A third strategy, and one that several participants felt was vital in order to continue one's involvement in dance in a changing world of work, is to diversify. This

meant that, for example, a dancer proficient in a number of styles, a dancer who also directs, choreographs, can run a small business, or who has developed the skills to adapt to her or his environment, will succeed where another without such skills will not. In other words, in order to sustain one's practice one needs to wear more than one hat. This becomes particularly important for dancers as they mature, smoothing the career path of what has traditionally been referred to as the 'dancer in transition' in the literature.

However, to maintain that all a dancer needs to do is to diversify her or his skills in order to continue to practice is simplistic and ignores the economic constraints on opportunities to create and perform art in cultures such as Australia, in which it is undervalued, and in which competition for limited funding is intense. For example, while some participants in my study felt the key to sustainability is to offer diverse skills and obtain work through networking, others painted a bleak picture of their attempts to sustain their practice. To illustrate, the following quotations represent two contrasting views on whether making a living from project based work is economically sustainable. Both are from participants in their late 30s:

**George:** "Once, going back years ago, people stayed in the companies for as long as they possibly could, because basically there wasn't a lot to choose from. Whereas today there are a lot more people out there that are applying for government funding, and the government's funding, the way it's set up, allows you to have project groups. So you might have enough funding to last you only for a few months. So what happens is that you find out that someone here is looking for some dancers for a couple of months, and you put your hand up or audition. And you get in and then you find that while you've been working with that, because it's a small community, through the grapevine, someone says, 'oh, someone else is going to do a project in a few weeks, about three weeks after you finish'. So then you approach them as well. It can be a thing where you can actually almost bunny hop from project to project."

**Cilla:** "If for some reason your grant [application for a project] doesn't get accepted that round, you've got to go out and find some menial job, which means...hours are crappy so you probably can't go to class, you probably aren't available for any rehearsals, because you've got to go and do paid work because you've got kids to feed and rent or a

mortgage to pay. So it's really inhibitive in that respect...And so then you make a choice. You say, 'OK, I've had the kids, now I'm going to have to get a *real* job. And that's wrong.'

Attitudes and expectations towards ageing within one's culture play an important part in enabling or hindering dance practice in mature artists. For example, at the time of interviewing I wondered, perhaps naively, whether it might be possible to start a mature age dance company in Australia, on the model of overseas companies such as Jiri Kylian's Netherlands Dance Theatre 3, offering repertoire geared to the physical capacities and performing strengths of mature dancers. Here the 'life stage' and 'lifestyle' factors crept in, however, for I was forgetting that dancers, as people in midlife, generally have different life commitments from most 20 year olds, such as a mortgage, perhaps children to support, and/or ageing parents to care for, and different lifestyle issues.

These commitments, I want to stress, are not driven by biological ageing; rather they are peer-driven. That is, they emerge from the lifestyle, or what Bourdieu (1984) calls the 'habitus', of a particular age cohort that comprises one's peers, and it is through our peer network that we socially age ourselves discursively and through practice. In midlife, many people have responsibilities that are not part of the lifestyle of 20 year olds, and they simply do not have the time to commit themselves to their practice to the exclusion of all other responsibilities. As one male interviewee commented:

**Anthony:** "There's certainly a number of people around who I know are interested in working with more mature artists...somebody ought to...do something. People say, 'why don't *you* do something'. I think, oh yeah, I'd love to do something, but...I don't know, it's... a big struggle to do something like that, and it would require sacrificing a lot of the lifestyle one has at the moment. I'm referring to time with children, things like that."

However, these artists also try to survive in a culture that pays lipservice to the value of mature performers in dance, that offers no pension to dancers at retirement, and that has as yet no official policies or guidelines on the dancer in transition. This brings me to the second of the two themes mentioned earlier: the cultural valorisation of mature artists. The following two examples illustrate the differences in the way mature dancers are valued in

Australia, and that dancing as a cultural practice is valued differently according to one's gender:

**Monique:** "Some friends who are older, and particularly male friends, once they stop performing if they don't get a regular teaching job it's really hard for them to make enough money to survive. It's interesting, I mean, just here, the difference between how you're treated in Australia to if they were living in Europe, they'd be on a pension. You know, there's this lack of respect for artists here. I think when I was in Holland I happened by chance to see the first performance of Netherlands 3, which is the mature dance company. It was so amazing, not so much—I mean, they were all fantastic, and the works, some I liked and some I didn't, but what was amazing was the audience, they were on their feet within seconds, and I just sat there and went 'Wow'. This would happen at a football game in Australia, but not at a dance performance."

**Cilla:** "Australia is two things; it's not a cultural country in terms of what you see in Europe or Canada or places like that, where the arts are *revered* and respected. Here it's a hobby, and if there's anything that's revered and respected, it's sport. And *they* get all that regalia and...My God, the financial rewards of being a footballer, it's ridiculous, it's so out of the water. And here we are, saying, 'Excuse me putting my hand up, can we please pay ourselves ten dollars', or something."

To make sustainability viable in dance practice for dancers, let alone for mature dancers, we need to overcome a cultural disregard and devaluation of older bodies on stage. Here I am arguing that we are referring not so much to physical capacity as to a culturally normative conflation of youth and beauty (and/or athleticism), one that is discursively and institutionally perpetuated.

An apt example is the following text from the website of the 2003 Melbourne International Arts Festival: "The festival celebrates the body through dance and movement and will include the elegant bodies of dancers, beautiful young bodies and sprightly ageing bodies." Here one might contend that younger dancers' bodies are discursively constituted as 'beautiful' and older dancers' bodies are constituted as 'sprightly'. However, while only young bodies are beautiful, both young and ageing *can* be 'elegant'.

My argument is that this binary distinction between youth and ageing on bodily attributes such as ‘beauty’ that keeps popping up in discourse perpetuates an image of older bodies that, in effect, discursively constitutes them. As soon as we perceive an older person, we already age-grade that person as well as grading a number of other attributes of the activity that we think somehow belong to what we see rather than to our culturally normative preconceptions. Just as Bourdieu (1984) argued that the aesthetic perception of a work of art is enculturated, is endogamous to our culture rather than exogamous or somehow ‘innate’, so our perceptions of the mature dancer’s body is already loaded with naturalised stereotypical perceptions and expectations of what is ‘normal’ at ‘that’ age.

Thus we might commonly believe that older dancers are no longer able to sustain dance practice, due to their proneness to injuries or waning stamina in sustaining an endurance testing lifestyle that inarguably *does* encompass strenuous touring, irregular hours, and high physical demands on the body. However, the romantic ideology of the ‘older’ dancer gracefully resigning and hanging up her or his shoes because of ‘naturally’ waning stamina or endurance is underpinned by such implicit cultural perceptions and discourses of older bodies as in ‘decline’, as no longer beautiful, regardless of what else they may offer audiences, and in contrast to young bodies. This process of course perpetuates and reinforces the cultural alignment of youth with strength and beauty.

Theorists such as Bourdieu also maintain that specific types of bodies are culturally legitimated to perform certain practices, such as theatrical dance, elite sport or modelling. Interestingly, sociologists have recently applied Bourdieu’s framework in studying older dancers, notably Bryan Turner and Steven Wainwright’s studies of dancers from the Royal Ballet (Turner and Wainwright 2002). Like others, Turner and Wainwright did not address gender in their analysis of age studies. However, to ignore such factors homogenises human ageing and runs the risk of masking structural inequalities based on such factors as gender, class, life commitments, and so on, and here I want to say a little more on how the performer’s gender might relate to how her or his body is ‘always, already’ perceived and evaluated by culture in ways that have not generally been considered in research on ageing.

“This isn’t a long-lived career for women. Your choices just decrease with your fertility.”<sup>1</sup>

This comment was made by an actor (or ‘actress’), but it could just as easily have been made by a dancer. Here I want to argue that, in western cultures, the body types represented in mainstream dance signal ‘sexual capital’, which roughly translates as sexual currency. Sexual capital is a term that Bourdieu (1984, 1986) did not explicitly develop, although others have done so after him (e.g., Caputi 2003, Martin and George 1997).

This notion of sexual capital has some affinities with Dance historian Sally Banes’ idea of ‘marriage plot’ in dances, in which she argues that variations of a trope that she calls the ‘marriage plot’ predominate in forms of western theatrical dance (Banes 1998). What this trope requires is for the female dancer’s physique to reflect a specific point of her lifespan: in her youth and at the point of surrendering her agency to marriage, after which she becomes invisible:

In dance, [the] conspicuous framing of the moment of marital choice is a favored theme...the physical conditions of the vital people portraying the action in dance overdetermine the preeminence of the marriage plot. Although older dancers may still perform in ancillary roles, the central performers in both ballet and modern dance are young women at the peak of their powers as dancers. And on stage their job is to move—to be active. The medium of dance—lively young bodies, with a preponderance of female bodies, in motion—itself militates against depicting sedentary states (like domesticity) and leans instead toward issues of sexuality and the social governance of mating through the marriage institution (Banes 1998: 6).

The usefulness of sexual capital in understanding the cultural basis of gendered ageing is that, through problematising concepts such as natural (exogenous) attractiveness, it enables a strategic loosening of the binary of beauty-youth, by providing an alternative account of how aesthetic (or sexual) [perception looking] might function, if not innately or ‘naturally’. Rather, sexual capital, like physical capital, is linked to what the materiality of the body represents to culture, where this materiality signifies a preferred disposition or *taste*. For example, perceiving a body as ‘aesthetically beautiful’ can be likened to Bourdieu’s interpretation of perceiving a work of art:

---

<sup>1</sup> Natalie Portman, actor, aged 23. In *The Weekend Australian* (Review), 14-15 August 2004, 16.



The encounter with a work of art is not ‘love at first sight’ as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy, *Einführung*, which is the art-lover’s pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code ... the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education (Bourdieu 1984: 3).

This is a rather radical notion indeed. The reason Bourdieu gives for it is even more interesting: to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.

What the older dancer’s body can do is therefore confounded with how the body should look according to social parameters, but as far as I know no one so far has spoken out about this notion in relation to dance. Interestingly, feminist dance scholars have concentrated on gender and race, but very few have considered how ageing intersects with these issues and with other factors such as class.

Therefore, if older dancers, or mature artists, are to continue their practice in a culture in which ageism is ingrained in the very perception and judgment of which bodies are legitimised to perform, then we need to look not only at the physical capacities of the dancer and the economic needs she or he faces, but also at the ageing, gendered body as a signifying tool, in its capacity for representing prevailing cultural norms and values, such as those of beauty or athleticism. If the body is inseparable from culture, then we need to examine such underlying ageist assumptions in order to further the sustainability of practice for older dancers, in a culture that values them as artists and values their special contribution to their art and their community. This involves reshaping cultural understandings of what it means to age.

## References

- Banes, Sally. 1998. *Dancing women: female bodies on stage*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. The forms of capital. In *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, edited by J. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Caputi, John. 2003. Sexual capital and sexual aesthetics. Paper presented at Meeting of the American Sociological Association, at California.
- Connell, Robert W. 1995. *Masculinities*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Dowsett, Gary W. 1996. *Practicing desire: Homosexual sex in the era of AIDS*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Martin, John L, and Matthew George. 1997. Theories of sexual stratification: Towards an analysis of the sexual field and a theory of sexual capital. Paper presented at Meeting of the American Sociological Association, at Toronto.
- Throsby, David, & Virginia Hollister. (in press). Dancers in transition report. ADvANCE. Australian Dance Council.