



FONTTEYN

OLDER

Margot Fonteyn's stage career stretched to her 60th birthday. Following in her footsteps, today's star dancers increasingly defy time. **Deirdre Kelly** asks if age is just a number.

Having their moment...
clockwise from left:
Alessandra Ferri in
Duse; Sonia Rodriguez;
Nazareth Panadero
(centre) in *Bon Voyage, Bob*
Photos: Kiran West; Karolina
Kuras; Mats Bäcker



Margot Fonteyn retired from dancing in 1979 on her 60th birthday, nearly 45 years after first joining the Royal Ballet as one of its youngest ballerinas. She ended up as a national treasure and international star whose impeccable technique, flawless proportions and compelling stage presence were as legendary as her longevity and work ethic. Age never fazed her.

The most dazzling chapter of Fonteyn's storied career, in fact, began in her forties, a time when most ballerinas have already quit. The average retirement age for a ballet dancer is 29 and around 40 for modern dancers, according to the latest research. Fonteyn got her second wind with the arrival of Rudolf Nureyev in London following the fiery Tartar's defection from the USSR in 1961. He was 23, she was 42. But together they formed one of the most thrilling alliances in the history of ballet.

'In retrospect, I don't think our partnership would have been such a success if it weren't for the difference in our ages,' Fonteyn told an interviewer in 1989, just two years before her untimely death. 'It charged the performance in that we were both going out there inspired – egged on as it were – by the other one.' She competed with his virility, he with her maturity and grace; a formula that made the 19 years between them all but disappear. 'We danced as one person,' Nureyev later said, 'as one soul.' He would follow Fonteyn's example, dancing into his fifties, stopping only for the illness which claimed his life in 1993.

Fonteyn helped break the age barrier, but she wasn't the first to spotlight the often surprising potency of the senior dancer. Maya Plisetskaya, Anna Pavlova, Marie Taglioni, Marie Anne de Camargo and the early 18th-century's Françoise Prévost, one of the first professional ballerinas on record, all danced into their forties and beyond. Only later in the 20th century when ballet, as reinvigorated by George Balanchine, became more valued for youthful vigour than nuanced delivery (the stock-in-trade of the mature dancer) did age appear an abomination.

Late in the 1990s when the National Ballet of Canada wanted to justify its firing of principal dancer Kimberly Glasco for non-artistic reasons, it claimed that at 38 she was too old, past her best-before date. Glasco would

eventually sue for wrongful dismissal and the courts would uphold her right to return to the company after establishing that age had not withered her but on the contrary had made her stronger. A precedent-setting case, it was possibly responsible for advancing a sea change in people's thinking of older dancers on the stage.

Today, with 55-year old Alessandra Ferri guesting with the Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre, and Tanztheater Wuppertal's Nazareth Panadero receiving rave reviews at age 64, senior dancers are having their moment. This accompanies the ageing of the world's population. Seniors now outnumber children in Canada, according to the latest census data. The population in the UK is also getting older: official statistics show 18 percent aged 65 and over, and 2.4 percent aged 85 and over. Older dancers



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SONIA RODRIGUEZ



mirror a greying demographic, reflecting back dignity, staying power and depth of experience.

'The ageing population is booming and many are refusing to take it sitting down,' says Claudia Moore, 65, a contemporary dancer and founder of Older & Reckless, which provides senior dance artists, both choreographers and interpreters, with an outlet for continuing their craft.

Born in Buffalo, NY, Moore trained at Toronto's National Ballet School in the 1960s and briefly danced with the National Ballet of Canada before decamping to join the contemporary company Desrosiers Dance Theatre. She founded Moonhorse Dance Theatre in 1996 as a vehicle for the solo senior dancer she had become.

Older & Reckless, launched in 2000, is an adjunct enterprise that has grown in popularity, moving from a renovated warehouse venue with a capacity of 60 to the nearly 500-seat theatre at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Performers in their fifties, sixties and seventies have included Peggy Baker, Margie Gillis, Kit Johnson and Douglas Dunn. The next performance in November will feature senior indigenous dance artists from across Canada. Beforehand, Moore will perform and present a talk at Ageless ('A Dance Festival Reimagining Age'), presented by Yorkshire Dance in Leeds, England. 'When I'm dancing, I don't think about age,' Moore says. 'I'm trying not to think at all.'

Age has become a hot topic in dance, growing in intensity since Czech choreographer Jiří Kylián founded Nederlands Dans Theatre 3 in 1991 exclusively for dancers in their forties. Closed in 2006, NDT3 showcased the heightened artistry of such seasoned dancers as Sabine Kupferberg, Gérard Lemaître and Martine van Hamel in works created for them by Kylián and Hans van Manen, among other illustrious choreographers (Gioconda Barbuto, the Commissioned Choreographer at this year's Genée, also danced with NDT3 – see interview on page 64). 'One



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CLAUDIA MOORE

Ageless... Sylvie Guillem in *Rearray* and (right), Wendy Whelan with Edward Watson in *Other Stories*
Photos: Bill Cooper; Andrej Uspenski/ROH

of the strong points about NDT3,' said van Hamel in 1994 when she was 49, 'is that, first of all, we are all still dancing so we must have something to offer.'

Ballet superstar Mikhail Baryshnikov has always had something to offer. But when ballet started to take a toll on his body he transitioned into modern dance as a way of prolonging his career. His first non-classical venture was the White Oak Dance Project, founded with choreographer Mark Morris in 1990. The company closed in 2002, but they continue to work together. When Baryshnikov turned 65 in 2013, Morris created *A Wooden Tree*, highlighting the dramatic artist Baryshnikov had matured into as opposed to the jumper he once was. 'I choreographed specifically for what he can do,' Morris said. 'But I also do that with everybody.'

Not everyone welcomes ageing. The popularity of Botox and cosmetic surgeries is ample proof of that. Several dancers of a certain age, in fact, did not wish to participate in this article. They did not divulge the reasons. They simply looked the other way, which, frankly, many of us might do when asked to comment on what it means to be a senior in a youth-glorifying world. To age means to concede to the passing of time and to mortality. Greying hair, sagging flesh, shortness of breath, forgetfulness – not quite a pretty picture. Yet dancers who continue performing past their prime say that dance keeps them vital. Ironically, they find themselves gaining in emotional power even as their bodies grow more fragile.

Ballet is notoriously difficult; its codified virtuosity typically favours the young. Contemporary dance, by comparison, is freer and less discriminating. It can evolve with an ageing body, expanding its range of expression beyond the merely physical. When Sylvie Guillem, one of the great ballerinas of our time, transitioned into contemporary dance in the 1990s, she, like Baryshnikov before her, not only extended her career, she grew as an artist. Working with choreographers like Mats Ek, Akram Khan and Russell Maliphant, she gained in eloquence and artistic control.



Wendy Whelan can relate. Since retiring from classical dance in 2014, the 51-year old former New York City Ballet star has commissioned contemporary choreographers to create work for the barefoot dancer she is today. 'It's about continuing my development as a dance artist,' Whelan says, 'and having a say in the artistic process.' Contemporary dance, she adds, 'is a completely different way of moving and thinking.' Recently appointed associate artistic director of NYCB, Whelan is set to dance later this year in a new work by the 78-year old postmodern choreographer, Lucinda Childs.

At 63, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Evelyn Hart is also making a comeback, performing a contemporary work created for her by James Kudelka. Haunted by arthritic ankles and audiences who still remember her as Giselle, Hart, who retired in 2005, didn't think she could do it at first. But when Kudelka told her that 'heartfelt walking' was what he had in mind, Hart dove right in. Their latest collaboration, *Four Old Legs*, debuted at Citadel + Compagnie's Bright Lights season in Toronto in April. 'I



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WENDY WHELAN

had been missing the inner joy of creating a character, working to embody that character and the joy of all that,' Hart says. 'But mostly I missed that unspoken dimension I connect to when performing, and which allows me to experience a greater state of being.'

An ageing dancer can't often reach such heights alone. Teams of physiotherapists, massage therapists, chiropractors and even orthopaedic surgeons are at the ready to address the specific needs of the senior performer. The spirit might be willing, but the flesh, well, that's another story. 'A decrease in aerobic capacity (heart and lungs), a decrease in muscle size, coordination and strength, a decrease in balance and reaction time, a decrease in bone density, flexibility and other factors increase the risk of injury as we age,' says Paul Papoutsakis, a certified athletic therapist at the National Ballet of Canada (NBOC) who has treated a wide range of dancers for 15 years with the company's Dancer Health and Wellness Programme.

As a registered kinesiologist, Papoutsakis also practises at Toronto's Cleveland Clinic where his clients presently include two dancers in their

forties and four in their sixties. 'I utilise a combination of manual therapy skills, therapeutic modalities and exercise prescription to minimise the severity of breakdown in the ageing athlete,' he says. 'I have to take a different approach for every patient, as there is no one-size-fits-all treatment.' Older dancers are unique, in a class of their own.

'We have earned the right to call our own shots,' says NBOC principal dancer Sonia Rodriguez who is still going strong at 46, commanding lead roles in a career spanning 30 years. A brilliant interpreter of John Neumeier's psychodrama ballets, *A Streetcar Named Desire* among them, the Spanish-born ballerina credits age for giving her a renewed sense of confidence and artistic purpose. 'I couldn't have danced Blanche DuBois 20 years ago,' Rodriguez says. 'I didn't have the life experience.'

That experience typically measures up to her being more than a generation older than the person next to her at the barre during company class. But as Fonteyn once did, Rodriguez views the age difference as a gift. 'I like to mentor the younger ones, teach them what I know,' she says. And that knowledge makes all the difference. 'With experience you become more than a dancer,' Rodriguez continues, 'you become an artist. You have so much more to give. Age really is just a number. I personally have never let it restrict me. Right now, in my forties, I am at the height of my powers.'