

Dancing Down the Years

Dancers of retirement age reflect on why they're still dancing. "Why not now?"

By **Gia Kourlas**

Dec. 19, 2017

The bravest thing a dancer can do is grow old.

Dancers exist in a world in which youth is overly prized, and in which the window for a body to maintain its flexibility and speed gradually closes — until the day it seems to slam shut. The body's deterioration is real for everyone, but dancers better than others grasp how imperceptible shifts weaken the greater whole. Growing old is not for the weak, but dancing old is grit incarnate.

"The reason I've been able to dance for so long," Gus Solomons Jr., 79, said, "is absolute willpower."

Mr. Solomons, Douglas Dunn, Eiko Otake and Brenda Bufalino are the subjects of this exploration of dancers and the aging body. All maintain a physical practice; all have naturally experienced a decline.

But as a dancer ages, there are gains as well as losses. Dance artists are deeply in tune with their bodies, and for that reason each of our subjects has a distinctive perspective on aging.

"I am less concerned about what's better," said Eiko, who is 65 and known artistically by her first name. "I only have what's now."

The allure of an older dancer comes down to the wonder of a lived-in body and all the subtlety, grace and patience that it holds within tendons and bones that accomplish more with less.

Even when movement quality becomes less robust, what can emerge is a renewed sense of the heroic. And with any dancer who has put in decades of performing and training, the ability to be still — to shift space and time through presence — is not to be overlooked. Older

dancers are like magicians of stagecraft: What do they show, and what do they leave behind? How do they get to the essence?

Julie Kent, the former American Ballet Theater principal and now artistic director of the Washington Ballet, told me that for years she added layers and layers to the roles of Juliet and Giselle “to weave a very detailed, beautiful piece of fabric.”

Eventually, she began stripping away to reveal what was there. “In the end, you have this beautiful, gossamer, effortless, weightless piece of fabric.”

And that is the beauty of the aging dancer: feather-light yet full of power. Mr. Solomons, a former member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, has forged a second career in Europe, where younger dance-makers are eager to highlight his regal, singular beauty.

He’s much less vain about his dancing now. “When I was younger, I remember wanting it to look like something it never was going to look like,” he said. “I remember thinking, ‘I wish my body looked like Erik Bruhn,’” the Danish ballet star.

“You play the instrument you have and that makes the most eloquent music,” he said. “I think that that’s probably a big part of what makes it easier to relax and just be who you are.”

For Douglas Dunn, now 75, another veteran of the Cunningham company, the first thing to go was his jump. (Not the takeoff, but the landing.) When he was in his 60s, he went through a couple of years of being extremely jealous of younger dancers.

“And then I realized that it was a tremendous waste of energy,” he said. “And so I just stopped being jealous and went about what I was already doing actually, which was to see what limits I had and what can I do within them.”

Eiko, the Japanese dancer who was known for years as one half of the choreographic duo Eiko and Koma, has been working as a solo artist of late. In November, she performed for hours on end at each of the Metropolitan Museum’s three spaces.

“Now I do things and it’s how *dare* I do things?” she said. “Even though I’m not doing anything so different, there’s a sense of daring to it. I see it myself or people see it, which is another motif, another texture: ‘Oh my God, she’s still doing that? Oh my God, she’s not young.’”

As a solo artist, Eiko is realistic. She said she never wanted to be an old performer, but the question “Why not now?” was a strong motive for her to start solo work. “I couldn’t wait another 10 years.”

In the aging dancer, there's both an urgency and a letting go. The tap dancer Brenda Bufalino, 80, doesn't particularly care about getting better; what's more important to her is maintaining her physicality "as long as my feet will do what my ears hear, and I have something to say that matters."

What makes her sad now, she said, is how quickly she loses her breath. But the aging process has made her appreciate different parts of her physicality. "It's very strange: The body has this incredible way of healing itself, of finding itself anew," she said. "Now that I can sit and actually be still for a while, I get to experience my body in a different way. It enjoys being still now as much as it enjoys moving. Maybe even more. Breathing. Listening. Experiencing sound."

Mr. Dunn, who often dances with his wife, Grazia Della-Terza — she is 63 — said he can't judge what he brings to the stage now. He counts on the opinions of others. "Everyone says it's so great to see the two of you out there with the younger dancers because there's a different sense of what dancing is when the two of you do whatever you do compared to what they do," he said. "They like the contrast. So that makes it possible to go on."

Being afraid of growing old is pointless. It happens. The lesson from these dance artists? Never stop moving.

Merce Cunningham passed along the idea that dance has infinite possibilities. If you can't do one thing, replace it with another. This is a different approach to aging. If there is a possibility for new expression, why ever stop? The idea of a dancer being in his or her prime is meaningless; sometimes the oldest dancer in the room is the most enthralling of them all — the lightest, the most precise and the least mannered.

"When I put on my shoes, it's so interesting," Ms. Bufalino said. "I still get a thrill. I say, Oh God, I don't feel like doing this. I really don't feel like doing this. As soon as I stand up and as soon as my foot hits the floor, it's like, Oh, hello! Hello. What are you going to show me today?"

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 17 of the New York edition with the headline: Dancing Down the Years