PHYSICAL SOCIAL COMMENTARY:

REDEFINING SOCIAL ROLES USING ALL-ABILITY DANCE

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Introduction

You're seated in a dark theatre anticipating the premiere of a new choreographic work by a dance company who have received many good reviews regarding entertainment quality. The sound of feet cracking and popping, one at a time, as they meet the freshly swept stage floor can be heard from the wings. The audience goes quiet, and faint silhouettes of the performers float across the stage as they take their places. The music and lights are brought up together, and the faint figures begin to form. Lights reach full capacity to reveal a small ensemble of senior adults. You're now faced with the decision of what to expect from these dancers. Will you expect a different quality of movement dynamics from them than you would an ensemble of young performers? Will you be shocked if one of them leaps across the stage? Will you clap louder than normal if they all manage to stay on their feet and remember the choreography?

In examining the effects of movement and performance on the development of identity, expectations of senior adults and the physical appearance of dancers in society is analysed within Elderflowers Dance Theatre of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Rather than focusing on the health benefits of dance, this study focuses on the identity of dance artists with varying abilities and how their art defines them. Topics

such as the necessity for redefining the term 'old', society's expectations of a dancer, and the importance of "kinaesthetic reference" (Wulff 1998) will be discussed. This examination is supported by eight weeks of anthropological fieldwork comprised of interview materials, as well as field observations. 'Ruby,' 'Lily,' and 'Percy' share experiences with developing their identities through movement expression, performance, and the ageing process. All-ability dance, an inclusive term for all dancing body types, is currently used as a means to redefine what and who a dancer is within an anthropological context.

There was a significant drop in available resources that discuss this specific topic. Articles on senior adult performers were primarily in a drama context (Basting 1995; Goldstein 2002; Sandahl 2005), and discussions on identity definition in this age group are focused on nursing home residents (Connor 2000; Degnen 2006; Hurd 1999; Lerman 1984). The development of my research came primarily through redefining age (Hurd 1999; Katz 2000; Laz 2003), and becoming familiar with expectations of senior adults from society through dancing and speaking with them directly using various interview methods (Emerson 1995; Farnell 1999; Paxton 1993; Skinner 2008; Wulff 1998).

My aim is to form an understanding of defining elements of identity formation, and how this might develop perspective of senior adults for those outside, as well as inside, the dance community of Belfast and perhaps beyond. Range of ability in the context of all-ability dance is not strictly bound to physical injuries or special needs, so the natural limitations of age need to be taken account. A connection between generations and the various stages of senior adulthood have an opportunity to form within this inclusive context. Limited expectations for senior adults are the beginning of the cycle that lead to a stagnant being at this stage in life (Hurd 1999).

My interest in this topic comes from a personal connection as the "fragmented fieldworker" (Wulff, 1999, p.13) feeling as if I'm a member of the community in which I'm researching with an interest in society's definition and expectations of a dancer. When the stage lights are brought to their highest percentage, I am aware that a short statured non-waif-like female, like me, may not be expected. I will not be discussing theoretical or metaphorical connections to literal light shedding or exposure, but I do feel it is important to acknowledge the stereotype of dancers and dancer bodies. I am also interested in the longevity of a dancer's career. I began technical training very late at the age of 18, not 8. Within my research I have been able to solidify my guttural understanding that there is not a 'right time' to start a dance career, or engage in any kind of creative outlet. My belief for legitimacy of dancers creating and continuing their technical training throughout all stages in life has been supported by my research. Helena Wulff (1998) mentions a moment in a dancer's life that initiates interest through watching a professional performance and desire to emulate them, but much like Wulff, my dance career seemed to find me, not the other way around. This intriguing path to dance became a shared point between Elderflowers and me. No matter which pathway or explanation for committing our lives to this art form, we have all chosen to embrace it.

Defining 'Old'

"The cultural construction of old age is a process; it is the concretization of abstract, unexamined assumptions within the context of everyday interaction" (Katz 2000).

Much like childhood and adolescent years, 'old age-hood' includes stages similar to "infants," "toddlers," "terrible-twos," and "teens" that leave a broad age range absent of recognizable development within society (Katz 2000). From the first discussion with 'Lily', my primary informant, age and ageism was the driving point of

interest in almost every activity in the Elderflowers' workshops. From time spent with the Elderflowers, it became obvious that not only is there a need to re-work the definition of 'old', but there is a need for placement of that definition in a wider context of performance and dance. The question is whether chronology or physical ability define 'old', but within current research and from senior adults themselves, this 'gap age' and its significance appear to be transforming negative connotations of 'old' and what 'old' looks like (Degnen 2007).

'Old' has evolved from a planted, stagnant 'happening' to a multi-layered acquired state of being. Much like childhood, 'old' is a layered process in which "the third age" or "the adolescence of old age" (Degnen 2007) is reliant on a subjective, non-chronological scale of "young old" to "old old" (Katz 2000) and everything in between.   Having a working definition of 'old' allows for reconsideration of expectations within society, and more specifically, age within the performing arts. Being 'old' does not require a person to appear frail or exhibit unstable tendencies. This is commonly understood among the relatives and close friends of Elderflowers members, yet the level of difficulty experienced while trying to convey this message to the general public, their own audiences, and the administration within the arts community of Belfast proves high.

While trying to recruit members, 'Lily' had resistance from a neighbour who is close in age because she "didn't want to be in an elder women's group" due to personal reservations about being 'old'. This correlates with suggestions that elderly women resist their given "devalued status" from society (Degnen 2007), with a battle of internal ageism, primarily a women's issue thought to be regulated by men (Hurd 1999). In addition, the aversion to self-identify with this age group perpetuates its negative connotations.

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> Despite the diversity in the characteristics and experiences of older individuals, old age is frequently assumed to be a homogeneous and uniformly negative life stage. Images and expectations of aging and aged individuals have failed to keep pace with increased longevity, improved health, and changing social norms. (Katz 2000, p.137)

It is not common for older adults to accept their graduation into the "third age," causing avoidance and a fear of stereotypes (Hurd 1999; Katz 2000). Group membership and experiences with others their own age allow for an understanding of their realities and identities in relation to being 'old' (Hurd 1999).

Many of the Elderflowers members seem to be drawn to the group through an individual strength, and perhaps a little bit of luck, rather than a desire to escape the stereotype of the elderly being idle or disabled. An understanding of stereotypes and expectations of older adults, or the 'elderly', does not necessarily mean an automatic yield for these women. Instead, this group of women utilize their intergenerational relationships, particularly those made within a dance context, to highlight their own interests and talents that enhance their present being.

With this in mind, age becomes a "conceptualized something we do", perform, or accomplish based on multiple everyday interactions with people, including those in their own age group (Katz 2000). Age is not a process in which a person can stop doing, but the manner in which one experiences the process lends itself to collectives like Elderflowers Dance Theatre. 'Performance' may imply decisiveness or an intentional act; however, age is viewed here as a subconscious or unintentional accomplishment (Laz 2003). Katz (2000) suggests that within this process of ageing, a mode of expression for realization and achievement is discovered, in this case with dance, and chases negative and constricting stereotypes for 'elderly' adults.

Contention grows during a struggle for self-confidence and positive self-images between the limited expectations of the physically active 'elderly', ageist stereotypes, society's preoccupation with physical appearance, and the inevitably declining fitness level associated with age (Hurd 1999). "Conversely, embodiment has implications for how one can accomplish age. Changes normally associated with the ageing process can set limits on activities and self-presentation. What is true of children with respect to bodily change is equally true across the life course" (Laz 2003). In conjunction with Prout's belief that childhood and the body collaboratively compose realization (Laz 2003), the same theory can be applied during the stages of graduated adulthood. If an adolescent wanted to appear more developed or fully grown, they might embody this with more erect posture and confident walk. In accordance with this idea, a similar embodied approach might be utilized if an older adult wanted to appear younger in effort to contend the stereotype. Rather than utilizing the common phrase "you're as young as you feel," expectations and stereotypes prevent encouragement. Comparison is often used to gauge personal health with that of peers to determine which stage of 'old' one belongs (Laz 2003).

Laura Hurd found that "later life is often . . . characterized as a period beset with psychological, social, financial and physical problems and the aged are frequently caricatured as isolated, withdrawn, lacking energy and initiative; as frail, disease prone, poor and sexually uninterested" (1999). As negotiation and reconstruction of the self is found within the stages of 'old age-hood', little consideration is given to the process itself. Without justifying the fragile state of graduated adulthood, the aforementioned disorientation is highlighted and causes a refusal to recognize this stage in oneself. Here, the focus becomes the processual

perspective and how the self is assembled within the existence of being 'old' in society (Katz 2000).

Having a new definition of 'old' for a society that already agrees old age exists will not produce change. Instead, supporting an evolved theoretical definition with evidence of active, independent, and creative individuals of the 'third age' can provide a sustainable impact for the reconstruction of this age group (Hurd 1999). An embodied sociological understanding between identity and interaction is thought to be neglected in the field of social research, including the sub-disciplines like health, illness, age, and age within the arts (Laz 2003).

Victor Turner identifies age as an accomplishment that is created within society that relies on experiences and expressions between persons within a community (Katz 2000). Associations with a group and the feeling of fellowship are important to the reconstruction process. In dance techniques such as improvisation, dancers rely mostly on this heightened awareness for the other and often develop physical relationships before customary social ones. In referring to the group, 'Ruby' admitted not knowing second names to the women she feels are like family members to her. She continues to say, "There's a thread that runs through us, you know, something similar so we can all connect in some way. It's very good." These group members provide a reflection and support system via interactions during the process (Katz 2000). The interactions experienced and the context in which they are made provide insights into these social structures to offer opportunities for meaning. Seeing age as something 'we do' with the concept of accomplishment allows age to be seen as a communal or collective characteristic of life (Laz 2003).

Methodology

Becoming Grounded

In the very early stages of this research, I learned that mental flexibility, professional dance experience, and new found knowledge of anthropological research tactics and theoretical grounding would have to be orchestrated carefully if I were to properly engage in this endeavour. I had previously taught an improvisation workshop for Elderflowers Dance Theatre months before beginning my research. After becoming integrated in the dance community of Belfast through professional endeavours like teaching dance classes, participating in workshops lead by other dance professionals, and becoming involved in projects aimed at the sustainment of a professional dance community, I started to take notice of the unique qualities of the Elderflowers group. They seemingly separated themselves from leisure social groups and other dance organizations.

I met the group for their weekly Wednesday workshop in South Belfast. The group's main dance instructor, and co-founder, 'Brooklyn', had been away so guest artists were on a rotation until she could return the next summer. For ten weeks, an array of styles and modes of moving the body were introduced such as contemporary dance, salsa, somatic practice, and improvisation. Two of the instructors appeared to be nervous to teach a workshop for the Elderflowers because of their lack of experience with dancers in this age group. I had learned through casual conversation from another dancer that the instructors had admitted the apprehension observed, but by the end of the workshops, both instructors seemed to lose their insecurities through modifying their teaching approach for bodies of this ability range and type.

These weekly classes became my main point of contact with the group, but we were not limited to this time slot or location. Interviews were conducted in cafés, the homes of certain dancers, and on location in the United States. As a fundamental element of anthropological research, emotional connections act as a developmental device by shaping the experiences of the researcher (Svasek 2005). Although this can be a sensitive feature of methodology, consideration for emotional connections like trust, adoration, and respect yield opportunities beneficial to research, for both informants and the fieldworker. I had a chance to spend a full day of sightseeing and storytelling around the Northern coast of Ireland with 'Percy.' We spoke of loved ones, professional experiences, theories of age, personal goals, and descriptions of dance and how it relates to our lives.

In the Studio

All of the workshops were given in a large, professional quality dance studio dedicated to Helen Lewis [1] at a local art centre. This studio was complete with full length mirrors, ballet barres, a sound system, and a full wall length of sparkling windows that offered a view of a small park below. The walls were decorated with Rudolf Laban's notation system and a quote by Helen Lewis. Each week the staff of the art centre outfitted the studio with chairs for the group to use for their pre-formatted workshops. Breaks were often used as opportunities for the group to sit in a circle and discuss the focus of the workshop[2], as well as aches and grandchildren which is when my contribution to the circle discussion became limited.

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[1] Helen Lewis is considered a pioneering woman of the dance community in Belfast for her work as the first contemporary dance company founder.

[2] Before beginning my research with EDT, it had been decided the next show to premiere would be centred on age and ageism.

In the initial phases of my research, I was interested in viewing the group as professional artists before interviewing individuals. I felt that understanding them as dancers would tell me more about them than a conversation in an interview. Anthropology has a history of not recognizing movement as a legitimate source of information (Farnell 1999), but my own understanding for the potential cultural knowledge within the body was enough for me to choose this method first. Jewett considers "good dancers" to be "good physical listeners" (2005, p.10). Following Merleau-Ponty's perspective on embodiment, I've used this concept as a kinaesthetic agent for understanding the other dancers (Jewett 2008). I have witnessed many dancers develop personal relationships out of improvising together. Learning about the body patterns and movement intentions of others through non-verbal communication can be applied regardless of context.

On one occasion, I became more of an observer than 'participant observer' by stepping out of the dancing role, and behind the lens of a camera. I witnessed a few of the dancers learning through mimicry and moving their bodies in non-specific shapes while watching the instructor for further guidance. Despite the seemingly limited engagement, when performance quality was added, modifications to the movement were made such as extending through gestures that appeared to be somatically satisfying. Another characteristic witnessed in the dancers is the tendency to close their eyes in order to heighten other senses that allowed for their bodies to physically listen to others. 'Percy' said she dances with her eyes closed as a way to heighten the experience, "it's like somebody has taken a tap off [to allow for artistic expression]." Movements that were suspended or released weight in the body appeared to be the favoured way of dancing to possibly benefit from the physical ease on the body and indulge in its gentle dynamic.

Sharing a Cup

Upon my arrival to Belfast, I quickly learned that the cultural standard for discussion begins with a hot beverage, usually either tea or coffee. Most of my interviews, both semi-structured and unstructured, were scheduled around tea-time with efforts to maintain the casual friendly relationship established in the studio. With the many cups of coffee and tea shared between myself and my informants, a fondness and respect grew for them. I was greeted one morning with a new nickname, 'Elder-bud', which I considered confirmation of acceptance. With this great reception and the emotional connection to it, I remembered that the "true anthropological moment" (Strathern 1987, p.8) fights for its place and authenticity wins. The "trueness" of fieldwork can only be related to the researcher's reality. There is no certainty for complete objectivity; however, the research can offer a representation of my reality.

FINDINGS

Warning

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple

With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.

And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves

And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.

I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired

And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells

And run my stick along the public railings

And make up for the sobriety of my youth.

I shall go out in my slippers in the rain

And pick flowers in other people's gardens

And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat

And eat three pounds of sausages at a go

Or only bread and pickle for a week

And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry

And pay our rent and not swear in the street

And set a good example for the children.

We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?

So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised

When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Joseph (1992)

Appearances

One particular Wednesday morning held the first of many discussions regarding age, and what it meant to wear the colour purple. As we were sitting in our usual circular arrangement of chairs, each of us read a stanza until we had experience reciting the poem, which offered a platform for sharing feelings regarding age and the aging process. I could imagine several of the Elderflowers members running sticks along railings and picking flowers from other people's gardens as I listened to them take turns reciting each stanza. Even when it was my turn, I could imagine them pressing alarm bells and daringly wearing a hat that does not match an outfit. This moment was recalled after reading the work of Stephen Katz (2000) and his findings regarding appearances and using comparison among the elderly within a nursing home for self-definition. The residents within the nursing home compared themselves according to the appearances, ailments, and sicknesses of others (Katz 2000). These criteria for comparison hardly seemed to be an issue with

the Elderflowers. They knew about each other's ailments and what they were able to do/not do, but it was rarely discussed during workshops. A few of the dancers with limited physical ability would reposition themselves in the room to accommodate their modifications and allow others to use more of the dance space in the studio. Most modifications to movement sequences were made without interruption to the class or verbal acknowledgment. 'Percy' lives with debilitating arthritis and wears a pressure sleeve out of necessity to control swelling and aid circulation. During a contemporary dance workshop, 'Percy' travelled across the studio floor focusing on her lower body while maintaining full engagement, rather than attempting the intended arm initiated movements of the exercise. 'Percy' shared:

> I'm very arthritic. We're working with what we can do and the important thing is that she ('Brooklyn') always says 'it doesn't matter, just do what you can and I will rearrange things so you can perform to the best of your ability within your set of circumstances,' which was great. You have no idea how much I've enjoyed it.

Like most dancers of the group, she expresses herself through movement unique to her body and her body's abilities. The choreographic process used by 'Brooklyn' utilizes their unique movement styles to create choreography all of the members will feel confident performing.

Being 'Old'/Feeling 'Old'

The concept of age, and the need for redefining 'old' (Degnen 2007; Katz 2000) became more poignant in several interviews with Elderflowers members. 'Ruby', a soft spoken veteran of the group, shared her experience of society's expectations of senior adults from the perspective of someone her age. 'Ruby' had run into an old school friend at a department store in search of a new dress. 'Ruby'

was delighted to share the news that she had joined Elderflowers Dance Theatre, along with a few other art related activities, but while catching up with her friend, she was humiliated and teased about her involvement with Elderflowers. She shared:

> It took my pace away. Then I doubted myself. I went back into my 'old self' [very shy], you know, maybe I have just...[heavy pause]...So whenever I went home, I told my husband what had happened and he said 'she needs to get a life' which was great and I said to him 'you would tell me, you know, if I, you know, was just doing something that was just a step too far for somebody my age?' And he said to me, 'you are wonderful.' So that was that, gone."

Katz's (2000) suggestion for comparison being a judgment scale proves true to a certain extent. It is possible 'Ruby's' friend was amused by her activities because she, herself, was not aware of the option to do so. Perhaps the idea of someone in their age group engaging in activities primarily meant for self-gratification is unsettling to her friend because it is not considered an expectation (Hurd 1999). 'Percy' offered her own understanding for why people of their age group find this activity daunting:

> When I say to other people [that she dances with Elderflowers], I get changes from light surprise, and I'm talking to people of my own age group very often, rather than young people. The first couple of years, I did a lot of work to promote people to come [join]. A few people came, but that's a small number. The real thing that held people back, not so much the dance, but the drama. The idea of having to speak, to have something to say. That has put a lot of people off.

'Percy' suggests that people of their age group are intimidated by the opportunity to be heard. Public speaking is a common fear, but for senior adults the

fear can be heightened by limiting expectations for this age group. Although 'Ruby' represents herself as a confident woman, her identity is still proven to be defined by external entities or personal relationships like that of her husband. By seeking approval from her husband, 'Ruby's' encounter confirms vitality within this age group, and the possibility for personal growth (Katz 2000; Laz 2003). With evidence for self-improvement in activities such as dance, this age group can use this example's momentum to alter society's expectations.

Regarding developmental opportunities within the senior adult age group, degrees of this concept emerged as a cultivated entity. With the use of dance and performance, 'Ruby' revealed what being a member of Elderflowers Dance Theatre has done for her:

> We did our first show in March, loved it. Absolutely terrifying because the terror is very, very strong, but then the pleasure afterwards is just even more…it's just fired me up for it and now I can hardly contain myself . . . . I never in a million years would describe myself as a performer. I am the shyest person, painfully, painfully shy. Even as an adult, I would blush before somebody spoke to me. I would be mortified, just so really, really shy, but somehow the Elderflowers has brought out something that's obviously always been in me, inside me and it's a freedom. You don't feel silly. Nobody judges you. Nobody looks at ya thinking 'oh' [said with eye roll]. I just feel so comfortable...I'm still terrified, but I love it.

When asked to describe a feeling mentioned earlier in the interview that she gets while performing, 'Ruby' claimed, "it's like euphoria...it's wonderful. Nothing can describe it unless you've actually been there. I feel sorry for people who haven't." She continued to suggest that joining Elderflowers has improved her creativity and

confidence, ultimately developing her identity. 'Ruby' compared herself to an imagined 'younger self' that may not have been interested in dance as she is now, but that if her 'younger self' had the same drive and interest for dance, she'd be "unstoppable." 'Percy' shares 'Ruby's' excitement by saying, "I love it. I love the group. I always feel better when I dance. (laughing) A few people have come because I'm enthused about it." There may not have been a disorientating incident to spark interest in learning a new activity (Katz 2000) or initiated by a refusal to acknowledge her age (Hurd 1999), but by engaging in activities like dance, 'Ruby' and 'Percy' are participating in a social movement for the change of stereotypes of senior adults.

Conclusion

> A most pervasive influence on the health of older people is the negative image of ageing and the poor status of older people in the community. (Connor 2000, p. 72)

This research has examined senior adult dancers and their legitimacy as artists. Despite society's expectations of this age group, dance and performance has been utilized to redefine the identities of each member of Elderflowers Dance Theatre. The study began with a thesis to argue the effects of all-ability dance and how it can be used to reconstruct expectations of senior adults. My fieldwork has gone beyond the initial aims by offering an understanding of this age group through its phases and the criteria that is used to define it. With this in mind, the analysis shows us that senior level of adulthood is not an obstruction for living; it is a juncture for self-defining. Aging is a continuous process full of opportunities for expression, experiences, and interactions (Laz 2003). 'Old' is no longer an acceptable adjective; the multiple layers within the term 'old' require the user to acknowledge the scale of 'young old' to 'old old' based on physical and mental agility. In addition to

understanding the phases of 'old,' negative connotations with this term must be considered. During the process of identity development, limited expectations act as a 'glass ceiling' and prevent optimal progression.   The state in which people engage in reciprocity and approval with those around them is a process experienced at any age. Reaching the age of 'senior' isn't the social kiss of death regardless of what is expected.

Elderflowers Dance Theatre members have a personal understanding for this stage of adulthood, and are demonstrating to those outside of their age group, as well as inside, that identity redefinition can happen at any age. Through community performances, they are assisting in the evolution for what a dancer looks like, expanding the body of modern dance, and raising expectations for professionalism within the dance community of Belfast.   If time allowed, an investigation into the organization and political aspects of this publically funded dance company could be considered regarding the structure of the relationship between Elderflowers and the society in which it exists. More information on this relationship would have been useful for gauging where they are regarding the process of redefining their roles as senior adults.

Any commitment to an art form from an individual deserves acknowledgment, regardless of age or ability. By not expecting an intense level of devotion or focus toward their art form, the individual is almost denied the full experience. All-ability dance is an inclusive term that supports the artistic endeavours of dancers with a variety of abilities. Elderflowers Dance Theatre can be seen as a small army in this struggle for acceptance. Creative exploration should not be limited to one type of body or brain (Lerman 1984). The game of exploration should be open to all, regardless of context. In movement exploration, the presentation of findings should

not be judged by the body in which it is displayed, but instead, the meaning and ideas behind it. Ultimately, the expectations of a dancer require redefining. Perhaps it starts within the dancer themselves, and augments through the studio, stage, audience, and back around through the individual dancer. The limited time frame of this study does not allow for an investigation of this new theory, but with further analysis, this cyclical progression can be confirmed. This body of research does confirm the legitimacy for senior adult dance artists, their place in society, and an acceptance for dancers of all abilities.

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