

Freer and More Fragile

Embracing the benefits and challenges of dancing and aging

BY ANDREA DOWNIE

In a culture dominated by images of youth and in an art form that sees its practitioners retiring from performing at an average age of thirty-five, aging is often portrayed as a negative phenomenon. Although aging does involve inevitable physical declines, it also brings important cognitive and emotional advantages. Focusing on these benefits while wisely navigating the changes and challenges of getting older can help dancers to stay healthier and to continue dancing in their later years.

Challenges

Dancers face significant physical and psychological demands. Improper training, faulty technique, biomechanical imbalance and negative stressors like fatigue contribute to the prevalence of injuries seen in dancers of all ages. Older dancers more commonly suffer from degenerative injuries like osteoarthritis due to years of wear and tear on joints. This can result in joint pain and stiffness. Older female dancers may also have issues with bone density and core and pelvic floor function due to child-bearing and menopausal changes.

A number of strategies reduce or prevent dance-related injuries. These same strategies can help dancers manage the physical challenges of aging, including natural declines in bone density, stamina, muscular strength, flexibility and joint mobility. Dancers should ensure that technical training includes safe in-class practices such as warm-ups, cool-downs and attention to movement mechanics. Older dancers may need to arrive early to classes and rehearsals to allow extra time to warm up with movements that *gently* raise the body temperature and heart rate, mobilize the joints and lengthen the muscles.

With sufficient physical fitness, older dancers can meet the technical requirements of continued dancing. They can also ensure that they have the requisite core support and adequate joint stability and mobility to stave off injuries. Engaging in supplementary physical conditioning can improve cardiorespiratory stamina, flexibility and muscular strength and endurance.

Avoiding fatigue is essential to physical and emotional health and well-being. Disregarding patterns of overuse and failing to get adequate rest can lead to poor performance, increased injuries and burnout in dancers. Age-related declines in stamina may necessitate changes to a dancer's training regimen in order to avoid undue fatigue.

Benefits

Getting older is not only about challenges – even in dance! Dancing is known to maintain or improve physical, mental, emotional and social well-being in the elderly. Associated with improved emotional stability, self-acceptance and self-esteem, aging can bring increases in overall happiness. The combination of dancing and aging, while challenging, can provide important advantages and opportunities.

Dancing involves complex multi-joint movements and motor skills that take a long time to learn, refine and master. Long-term training and increased knowledge lead to expertise. The resulting movement automaticity frees older dancers to attend to and nurture other capacities like artistry and creativity. The ability to focus attention on more, and other, things can benefit a dancer's practice.

With proper self-care, careful attention to dance training and practices and a focus on the benefits of aging, dancers have great potential to remain healthy and dance for longer. ■

Andrea Downie, Hon. BFA Dance, MA Dance, is an experienced dance educator and the president of Healthy Dancer Canada. She is passionate about holistically healthy dance practices for dancers of all levels, ages and abilities.

THREE DANCERS REFLECT ON DANCING WITH AGING BODIES



Claudia Moore

DANCER/CHOREOGRAPHER, TORONTO – AGE 63

Continuing to dance after two hip replacements, Moore finds that conditioning with tai chi and Pilates protects her joints, keeps her muscles strong and helps her to prepare mentally for performance. Moore now finds more pleasure in each moment of moving. “Despite all good efforts to stay strong, toned and focused, you never know when one of your body parts is going to give out. It’s a bit scary but also part of the daring.”



Louise Lecavalier

DANCER/CHOREOGRAPHER, MONTRÉAL – AGE 57

“Dance has always been a beautiful struggle,” says Lecavalier. “With time, I have become stronger and more fragile at the same time. Some parts of my body have been [over]used. I have to train more smartly than ever.” After forty years of dancing, Lecavalier strives to remain physically, mentally and spiritually flexible but consequently feels freer and more creative with dance. Although no longer able to dance eight hours a day, she notes that she no longer wants or needs to. Aging has taught her the importance of knowing when to stop rehearsing and not overtraining. “I deal with stress better,” she says. “Time and experience have shown me that the work keeps evolving even when I leave the studio to do something else. Everything nourishes the dance.”



Connie Moker Wernikowski

DANCER/EDUCATOR, SASKATOON – AGE 62

“I have to work emotionally to accept each new physical limitation as my body ages.” A longer warm-up and a series of daily exercises help Moker Wernikowski deal with joint stiffness and arthritic pain. The physical limitations of aging require her to be efficient, which allows expressiveness to flow easily through every movement. “Dancing and performing are still deeply satisfying.”