

Interview with Janis Brenner (JB) for

Dancers in Their 50's Enhance the Art Form

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CW: What type of dance are you doing – what type of performing are you doing? How often? And just a little bit about yourself.

JB: I started dancing when I was five and I'm 55, so I have now been dancing for 50 years! Even saying it sounds preposterous. Sometimes I wake up and I still think I'm about 28 and I feel like I'm 28; I think I look like I'm 28; and I think I can dance like I'm 28. And then the reality just pops in when I walk across the apartment and say hello to all of my chronic physical injuries. Anyway, I've been dancing for 50 years and I haven't had any major, major injuries that have waylaid me for too long. I still have a company, as they say, on a good day –such as it is. When I'm with my company in rehearsal I have to warm up and I do dance with them. Sometimes we improvise together and sometimes I watch them improvise. Sometimes I try to get in there and physicalize things. I don't have anything that I do religiously on a sort of schedule, but I do study yoga and I have taken Pilates off and on for many years. About 4-5 years ago I joined a spa health club up here in my neighborhood to train by myself. I was trying to get myself in shape for my NY season in early 2007, so a year prior to that I decided to spend the money and join the club. I took Pilates, yoga, I did work on the isolation machines, and I swam – and that was really great. Now I'm just working out in the basement of our building – they have a little gym down there that I didn't know about for years. That sounds like a lot, but in actuality, I'm not really very diligent about doing something every day. I find that sometimes I don't do anything - - I sit at the damn computer for hours - - bemoan the fact that I'm not being physical.

CW: How often do you get to perform these days?

JB: Certainly not enough - - not a lot. I talk to other people in my age group, or echelon, about how we're being wasted as performers because there's something very rich about somebody who is performing in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. I have 10 performances a year. I do feel a lot like my performing persona is being wasted. I would say it's kind of gone steadily downhill as far as number of performances over the last really 10 years, and even more in the last 3 or 4. It is very few compared to what I used to be doing in Murray Louis' company for 7-1/2 years in the heyday when dance companies were touring a lot. In the late 1970s and 80s, where we were complaining about having too many performances, we were physically, totally burned out. It's the yin and yang and at

that stage you wished you maybe had less, and at this stage you wished you had more. There were some years in the second half of the 90s until early 2000s where the company had 20 weeks of work –that included rehearsals and NY season week and touring, and that was a lot for us. And it’s never been like that since then and I doubt that it ever will be.

CW: When you’re training, do you do it all the time or only in preparation for performances?

JB: I do it all the time, over a span of time, but when I am getting ready for the NY season I just up the frequency, making sure I get the yoga class or workout some way. I definitely need to do that before I’m going to perform.

CW: Are there any other things that you do to maintain your mental condition besides exercise? What other performance preparation do you do besides the physical?

JB: I don’t. I’ve never done enough body work –I’ve always wanted to be doing more, to do some somatic practice and I’ve never made the time for it. I have a lot of chronic injuries that could benefit from being massaged, but I’ve never felt like I could really afford it. Afford the luxury – even though it’s not really a luxury. There were a couple of periods where I’d go to a doctor fairly often about injuries and trying to figure out how to heal certain things. There was a year where I did a form of Rolfing, so I had 10 intense sessions of that, which was incredibly painful, but wonderful. I haven’t done that in a long time. Right now I’m trying to look at some back injuries that I have through orthopedic surgeons who are advising me about what I might do.

But, as far as preparing mentally in other ways, I definitely think of yoga and Pilates as kind of a mental and physical preparation. As I’m talking to you I am sitting on a purple roller, so that my tush is elevated off of the chair. At home I sit on a tush cushion and in the theatre I sit on tennis balls and I roll around while sitting in the audience (hopefully people don’t see that I’m sitting on my balls). It’s for my back – I have slightly bulging disks in my lower spine and not enough cushion on my tush and my coccyx feels like its dropping. So when I sit on anything, I can feel my bones in the chair. It’s a pretty big problem – sitting is terrible for me. And, walking is not so great either because I have the same thing happening in the bottom of my feet – like the padding on the bottom of your feet after dancing barefoot for 40-50 years has worn away somewhat, so I can feel sometimes my bones are closer to the floor and it really hurts. So, I like to lie down a lot – lying down is the best. Like an old quote from my father, who says his motto is, “Why run when you can walk? Why walk when you can stand? Why stand when you can sit? Why sit when you can lie down? And why stay awake when you can be asleep?” And, I’m my father’s daughter. Yes, and I’m a dancer. So, in fact, dancing makes all my physical problems feel better and so that’s a little bit of saving grace. If I do go to yoga class or I dance around with students my body feels better.

CW: How do you keep your body functional as an expressive instrument?

JB: I trained with Alwin Nikolais and Murray Louis, Phyllis Lamhut, and I even had Hanya Holm once a week (she taught at Nikolais/Louis for years) and so I come out of this German expressionist tradition. It's so much about the creative thinking in their language and philosophy and technique. Every day you have a 2-hour technique class, an hour improv class, and one day a week a composition class based on what you are working on all week in improv. And it's a whole course of study -- you couldn't go to Nikolais Louis Lab without enrolling in a whole semester. You had a premise every week, and say the premise that week was volumes in space. The entire week was geared around volumes in space – the technique class, the improv, and the comp – so by Friday you knew the volumes in space work, and it kind of stays with you *forever*. It produces dancers who are open to interpretation of movement. Murray's work was not improv. Once he made a piece it was set, but there's a certain degree of personal interpretation in the work that really allowed for expressivity of your particular way for your personality, which was what was so exciting about it to me. I trained with them for 3 years religiously before I got into Murray's company; I danced with them for 7-1/2 years; and then I taught at the school. Then I worked as a visiting stager, setting Murray's work during a span of several years. So, I was pretty immersed in all of that for 10-15 years, and it stays with you in terms of having become an expressive instrument in that aesthetic. I can call that up whenever I'm performing, or working, or improvising, or teaching. I try to teach that.

CW: Wouldn't that be a fantastic way to teach college students? Does anyone do that?

JB: Well, it is. You can't necessarily have the students for the full 15 weeks, several days a week, to do improv, and comp, and technique. That's impossible – different teachers teach different things and in a university setting different teachers come from different settings, which is fine and good. I think it's good to train in a myriad of styles, but it is a subject that a lot of Nikolais Louis people have been discussing for years and years about this kind of training, the specificity of training getting lost and how rich it was, how many dancers they produced who have this knowledge in their bodies. So a lot of us do try to teach it, but I still teach the language of Nikolais Louis. If I teach technique class I throw in terms that I was learning when I was 20, and I teach it for improv, but not on that kind deep basis. People get it in spurts from different teachers.

The performing persona is what I feel has allowed me to continue to dance. I feel that even when I was at the height of my technical virtuosity, I never felt personally that I was a really fine technical dancer. I went back and I look at some videos that I had from those 28, 29 years, and I see that there was virtuosity there. This perception of what you are capable of and what you're actually looking like – it was interesting to me because it didn't completely match. So now when I think about myself then, it's yeah, I was pretty damn good and there was a reason why I was mentioned in every review – duh. Not just because my leg went up, but because I really did believe in myself as a performer. Since I was 5, I felt comfortable on stage and it allowed me to speak to an audience – like

literally speak. I feel like I'm in a conversation with people in the audience and I think that other people have always seen that in me. So, aging and really not being a technical virtuosic dancer anymore, I think it's become even more prevalent for me to rely on my performing persona and to think about performing nuance – to think about quality, physical quality, and to think about transformation a lot. I mean that in terms of transforming into character, but also just transforming in an abstract sense, like just being extremely present. I have always relied on that to get me through.

CW: And that hasn't changed really?

JB: It really hasn't changed – I think sometimes I'm more self-aware than I used to be on stage – not in a judgmental way, but I can see myself. I am more often taking myself out of the present moment and seeing myself – like how do I look doing this, or worrying about a balance, much more than I used to for sure. But it also may have to do with the nature of the pieces I am doing now.

CW: And that's different from when you were 20?

JB: Yes, there's more vulnerability in the pieces that I am doing now because they are very exposing – a lot of them are about being me – being this woman who is apparently and obviously not 26, and almost like a commentary on the woman who is 50. It's not like I'm taking myself out of the performance but I'm self-reflecting on it as I'm doing it, which I don't recall ever doing before. It's interesting. It's a vulnerability that you see in a 50-60 year old performing.

CW: Sounds very exposing.

JB: It is quite exposing. I made a solo for myself in 2002. It was coming up on the 10th anniversary of Nikolais' passing (he died in '93) and I was reflecting a lot on his teaching and what he did to move you – what their teaching did to me as a dancer and how it directed the path that I was sent on from that training. I wanted to try to go back as a 48 year old to see if I could move the way I did when I was 20 and to think about what Nik would say in terms of the movement. So I really tried to put myself back in that kind of body and I made this solo – it was called *Contents May Have Shifted* – and it's based on the line we all know when we're in airplanes and the stewardess comes on and says "Please be careful in opening the overhead compartments, as the contents may have shifted during flight." So it was a double entendre about touring for 20-30 years and hearing that all the time and my own contents shifting. When I tell people about it, they expected it to be a funny and witty solo, because I have done a lot of funny pieces, and it wasn't. It was a very serious solo. I started thinking about this certain kind of vulnerability and how the contents have indeed shifted in my body and things that I cannot do anymore that I could do when I was 20-something. But, what I've discovered from doing that solo and performing it, and the feedback from it, was that there's richness in aging that I could not have had when I was 20-something. I could have physically

done this solo beautifully when I was 20-something – the technicality of it – but it wouldn't have had the same kind of impact because it is about the aging body. Since then I have noticed that I think about that a lot when I am choreographing – things seem to be about memory a lot, and about being in this vulnerable state – even with my dancers – not just with me, even in choreographing, I find that my stuff is much less aggressive than it used to be in the 80's and even 90's. It's mellowed because I think physically I have mellowed, and I am more interested in the beauty and vulnerability and community and getting along than I was when I was younger and my pieces were much more aggressive about obvious relationships. So even the nature of the work has changed because a certain acceptance sets in about your body and your life at a certain age.

CW: How do you cope with all these body changes?

JB: On top of the advance changes – you know the sort of setting in of chronic injuries or accumulation of little injuries that curtail physically what I can do, there's also the issue of menopause, and I haven't gone through it yet. I'm still pre-menopausal, and I'm 55, which is quite late, but I have had some symptoms. I'm trying to go back to a doctor about treating my back problems – they discovered last fall that I have a tiny, tiny little cyst in my spine that's hitting very gently on a nerve, which is why I may have this pain going down my back and into my butt. So I'm looking into a procedure that might alleviate that. I do ice myself; I take a lot of vitamin D and Calcium (because my mother has very, very bad osteoporosis, and has shrunk 5 inches – she's shorter than me now. She used to be 5'2" and she's now 4'9"), so I'm careful about that. I also now take melatonin and valerian at night, which is supposed to make you calm and help you sleep. I'm also going through taking care of both of my parents, who are 80 and 84, and have had some major setbacks in the last year. So the priorities in my life are shifting quite a bit, contents may have shifted, for sure.

On the other hand, I am making 2 new pieces (I'm insane) – one with the company and a solo for myself again. I've decided after all these years of staying away from Joni Mitchell music (because who in their right mind would try to choreograph to Joni Mitchell) to use her. She put out these CDs some years ago, revisiting her old material that she wrote when she was in her 20s. Like *Both Sides Now* – she wrote when she was around 22 – and how does a 22-year old write a song about how you really don't know life? So she revisited this work a couple of years ago and her voice had deepened like an octave or two and was incredibly deep and smoky. When I first heard these versions of her doing herself, I was weeping. So I've decided to tackle it. I would never have had the Chutzpah to dance to a Joni Mitchell song when I was 28 or 38 or maybe even 48. The depth of what she's talking about and how she's singing that at age 60, it somehow gives me more permission to go there with her. And I'm nervous about it – talk about vulnerability – it's just one song – just *Both Sides Now*. I am forging ahead and trying to go there and I think that the dance community (who has known me for a very long time)

will allow me to do that – an audience might allow me to do that if they know that it's about experience.

CW: Are all your company members a lot younger than you are?

JB: Oh, for sure now.

CW: What is that like? Is that frustrating or refreshing, or all of the above?

JB: Yes. I think the evolution of my company went from starting to work with a set group of dancers in the mid to late 80s (there were 5 of us), and I was maybe 5 years older than Eddie Taketa who was my long-time partner for years. I mean everyone else was a little bit younger than that, but we were all friends and we would be in rehearsal, rolling on the floor laughing and doing things. And I would have to say okay stop, we're having too much fun, and that was sort of the motto of the company. And that was part of the reason for doing the work, because there's a camaraderie about it for me, that I needed so badly after I left Murray's company - to go back into a world with other like-minded dancers and play and find myself and find my work. And now, of course, I am in a position where Murray was when he had the company. I was in his company and I was 25 and he was 50-something. The dancer who has been with me the longest, Kyla Barkin, she's been with me for 12 years, and she is a UCLA grad - she was in 4 of my pieces at UCLA – one every year, and so she's really been in my dances for 16 years, and I'm grateful to have her. I feel like there is a big separation between me, Kyla who is 35 or so, and everyone else is in their 20s. It doesn't bother me in terms of maturity issues. Oh, and Pam Wagner, who started working with me just this year for our NY season who has just turned 40, actually. I'm not sure if we will continue to work together because of schedules, but yes, she was definitely another link between the younger people and me, which was nice. So, I would prefer if I had that kind of age lineage in the company – that everyone weren't 20-something, so I do feel like if Kyla were to leave and I had to replace her, and everybody was in their 20s, I would feel a big loss. In terms of actually being in the studio with them, I feel like I did with any dancer that I've had in the company that I've enjoyed working with. I want to get something out of them and they want to be there. So, as long as they are committed and want to be there, I usually don't feel any great chasm in working.

CW: And you feel like you can get what you want out of them? As you're aging and maturing and you want different things out of dance, can you get that with younger dancers?

JB: You know, I think I could get that with younger dancers, but the situation that my company is in right now, and for the last several years, really hasn't allowed me to go deeper into what each of these dancers really, really can do. I have glimpses of it, but we don't work together often enough to make a consistent style even for that one piece, because a lot of my pieces jump between very different kinds of looks. It's hard to kind of pin down what my work looks like a lot of times (that's what I'm told), because I do

try to work in different qualities – in different emotional states in different pieces, so I haven't been able to afford the luxury of developing these particular dancers into one cohesive unit like everybody looks in Paul Taylor Company or even Petronio – you know they all look similar ways because they've all been doing that thing for a long time together. So I do bemoan the fact that I don't have that cohesive feeling with them that I can go deeply into really exposing something new in myself and them. I miss that, for sure.

CW: Describe how your mental attitude and maturity support your dancing.

JB: Well, I think it's just a matter of plugging away – it's like what we were discussing at the beginning – this feeling of there's a little part of you that just wants to throw in the towel, call it day, or call it a life, and move on. And I've actually seriously contemplated that at several phases of my life over the last 15 years I would say. Turning 40, I started to think: Why the Hell am I doing this? Like gee, Janis, you should go off and be a cultural ambassador in Indonesia –part of my brain would like to do that. And then I found out that I'd have to go back to school to be a cultural ambassador and I'm not doing that. So, I think it's a matter of you come to these little revelations through crisis that says (at least for me) – I've been doing this since I came onto this earth, and singing as well. I started singing when I was a little kid and I still do – and these are things not only that I love, but these are the things that have formed my identity. Being who I am, I just keep forging ahead – vividly saying to myself, Janis, this is who you are and you can't just become a different person. Maybe you can segue into other areas and still be you, which is probably what is happening now with the culmination of my company not having much work, dancers becoming younger, my parents being so aged, getting this MFA degree for some reason, not being able to tour as much --- you know, something is happening, but I'm still going to be dancing and singing, hopefully.

When we first sat down you said there's not enough of us – there's not enough people in my generation still working and there's something so unique and special that we have to offer – especially on stage performing.

CW: Yes, I think that's what I was really trying to go for – what is it about older dancers that's so special and unique that makes you just rooted – I'm so much more interested in watching someone older on stage than younger most of the time – what is this?

JB: Well, I find I have to ask the same question. It is slightly intangible. I don't think it's that easy to define what that is, but let's say it's a combination of seeing someone's life experience on stage. You carry that. You carry your history in your body and you carry what's happened to you in your ups and your downs, and I think that there is something that's reflected in that on stage. I think it's also what Murray would call a state of presence. I am remembering now that he and I did an interview together when I was in the company for Newsday on Long Island and he said something about me to the reporter

of why I was being interviewed and why I was being featured in the season at City Center. He said something like Janis has a particular state of presence. I think that as you age that state of presence gets more and more vivid on stage. Not for everybody.

I also think that older dancers are less inhibited; they're not afraid to be foolish or to look foolish or to sort of play; I've had workshops where I've taught a variety of ages in the workshops. When Claire Porter and Judith Steele were taking my workshop – just like totally clowning, uninhibited, nutty – it really allowed the younger dancers to jump in there and say, okay, let's go for the ride. And I think there's a certain kind of risk – almost a sense of more risk on stage when you're older that you're not judging yourself in the same way as you did when you were 20 – about trying to be perfect, of trying to get that turn exactly right. So maybe there's a kind of liberation in the older performer that even though you're more vulnerable looking, you're up there because you're brave enough to risk something that I think you don't know about when you're 20 or 30.

CW: I just have one more question - - What advice would you give younger dancers so that they can continue to dance and perform as they age past 50?

JB: Definitely get more massages than I ever did! Do a body practice fairly religiously that feels right for your body. I stopped ballet about 10 years ago because I thought this is really killing my hip, why am I do this – this turnout thing – let's stop. So you kind of have to know when to shift into other practices.