

Christina Briggs Winslow  
[cbwinslow@gmail.com](mailto:cbwinslow@gmail.com)  
917-531-8772

**Dance 761- 3 credits**

**Marcia Parsons**

**Survey of Dance Literature & Bibliography Conclusions**

**Dancers in Their 50s Enhance the Art Form**

**Michael Blake, Janis Brenner, Gina Gibney,  
Heidi Latsky, Rachel List, David Parker**

In interviewing six dance artists in their 50s, I am cognizant of the knowledge and maturity they bring to the art form. They have maintained an interest in dance that has endured through many years, injuries and life experiences. With a sustained commitment to dance, they enrich the field through a riveting performance ability that is unique to mature dancers. They are established in their identity and within the dance world. At this point in their careers most dedicate part of their time to community building. The number of performers over 50 is growing and becoming part of the norm. Mature dancers are an asset, driving the art form forward and mentoring up and coming dancers.

These artists were chosen in order to provide a variety of views on dancing in their 50s. I did not sit down and choose a list of artists in advance, but allowed my own interest to guide me to the next interviewee. For the past decade, I have danced for Heidi Latsky and recently witnessed her pass the 50 year mark. Having a profound respect for her as an artist, performer and athlete, I began to examine the qualities required to sustain a dance career. She defines herself first as a dancer and will always have dance as a part of her life. On the other hand, Gina Gibney does not dance or perform anymore and hasn't since 1990, when she was in her early 30s. She is a choreographer first and is driven to create dance without embodying it. She looks forward to going to class again in her retirement. Rachel List just moved into an administrative job, directing the dance department at Hofstra University. She still maintains her performing work with the New York Baroque Dance Company, finding that Baroque dance is a form that she not only loves, but can physically maintain as she ages. Janis Brenner contacted me when she heard that I was talking about aging. She feels strongly that artists of her generation deserve a voice. They have so much to offer both on stage and off. I recognize her sustained achievement in the dance world and applaud her ability to articulate her thoughts on the subject. Then, I thought I should hear from some men. David Parker was recommended to me by all of the women that I interviewed. As both a choreographer and a dancer, he is very dedicated to the art form. He enjoys working

with a variety of ages in his work. I chose Michael Blake because in his 50s he is the youngest performer of Paradigm along with legendary dancers Gus Solomons, Carmen DeLavallade and Dudley Williams.

How do we dance as we age? Dancers must have a drive, an ambition to remain in the field through aches and injuries. By the time a dancer reaches their 50s, they undoubtedly have had injuries. The degree of injury varies between those that I interviewed. Heidi is constantly injured due to her hyper-mobile joints and ligaments. David has arthritis and pain in a knee on which he had surgery on as a teenager. Rachel recently endured a round of chemotherapy after being diagnosed with cancer. Michael is dancing again after a hip replacement. Janis has bulging discs in her spine and is losing the cushioning around her joints.

These injuries are not enough to deter them from their art. Rachel says, “The pluses of dancing for me still outweigh the minuses...I haven’t really thought of anything that fulfills me in the same way.” (4) They adjust and keep going. Heidi spends a couple of hours in the gym 5 days a week strengthening and aligning her body; Janis always sits on a “tush cushion”; Michael does Pilates; and Rachel is dealing with early onset of menopause. But they all keep going. Rachel describes this as a “stubborn streak” that all dancers share.

Gina is the only one of the group who has quit dancing and focuses on choreographing. In rehearsals she is completely non-physical. She sees herself as a choreographer first and never really desired to be a dancer for anyone else. She chooses not to dance now as a matter of time. “It’s time and it’s also that I am a real perfectionist. If I’m going to take class or dance, I would have to do it every single day.” (2) Running her company, maintaining her studio and choreographing take all of her time. She does look forward to dancing again once she retires.

While Gina identifies with being a choreographer, both Heidi and Janis refer to dancing as their identity – an integral part of how they define themselves. They will never stop dancing because it would equate to not being true to themselves. Janis said: “I’ve been doing this since I came onto this earth, and singing as well...and these are the 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.” (7) Things may shift in your life, but your identity remains the same.

These dancers also share a love of dance and an undying interest in the form. They maintain their interest through problem solving. David stated it best: “...there’s a way

that dance communicates that I haven't quite fully figured out for myself. I'm driven to figure that out and that's why I choreograph." (5) Each of the artists brought up the issue of maintaining their interest in dance. Each of these highly intelligent people would certainly move on if they lost interest in what they were doing.

Although aging makes the physicality of dance more challenging, it enhances the performance ability. There is something captivating about mature dancers on stage that is unattainable in a young dancer. In some of the interviews we speculate on what that quality is and how to articulate it.

According to Janis: "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 downs, and I think that there is something reflected in that on stage. I think that it's also what Murray Louis would call a 'state of presence'...I think that as you age that state of presence gets more vivid on stage." (7)

Older dancers are less inhibited, less concerned with being perfect. There is automatically more vulnerability in being on stage with all of your foibles. David Parker mentioned Baryshnikov: "He is older and he's phenomenal, but he's also beautiful and perfect. There's not a lot that he has to accept. But I find that when people obviously are coping with reduced ability, or they look older, or they're not beautiful – I find that more moving, because they're still dancing and I see that they have taken all of this on and there's no pretense, there's no need to appear to be younger or better or other than they are." (4-5)

Janis said the same thing in a different way: "...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, almost like a commentary on the woman who is 50." (4) Even the nature of her work has changed in relation to her age as she gains an acceptance of her body and her life.

Michael compared this acceptance to a performance theory by Chekov, "where no matter how stressed out or how nervous you might be there's a sense of calm about your work that you achieve just by your experience and your confidence and know-how." (4) There is an acceptance of yourself. Both Heidi and Michael admitted to wanting to be perfect in their youth. Now they can make a mistake and let it go. That takes a self-assuredness that comes with maturity. The security that comes with age is a mentality, a mind set. There is no longer a need to prove yourself, just a desire to do your work regardless of approval from outside sources.

As dancers mature, pressure dissipates. Like any relationship, longevity garners trust and the bond strengthens with time. They no longer need to push so hard for dance. That is not to say that these people are not driven; quite the opposite. Michael goes so far as to say, "As much as I love dance I'm not interested in it that much, in that kind of way anymore." (2) He has struggled and worked to dance for a long time, but now can step back and reap the benefits of all of that work.

David's relationship with dance has shifted as well. At 40, he thought that he was "on borrowed time" and felt pressured that the end was drawing near. In his 50s, he is beyond that and is truly just himself on stage. "Now as soon as I come on stage, whether they know me or not, I feel like the audience is saying, 'Oh, it's you- hello. We know you. Do steps; speak to us.' And that's not been preserved, it has evolved." (4) Janis also feels that she is in conversation with the audience when she performs. "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." (4) There is something special about watching the dancer as a human being and connecting to the performer in that way.

I am terming this feeling "I AM." It is when a performer reaches the level of virtuosity where they can shed all of their pretenses and just be themselves on stage. It transcends physical tricks that seem so important to young dancers. There is less judgment, less striving for perfection and more just being present. This humanity leads to a sympathetic connection with the audience members who recognize their own vulnerability in the performer.

Gina feels this "I AM" as a choreographer. Although she loves dance, she has never seen herself as a dancer. She loves to create and dance is her chosen form of communication. Age has caused her to become more ruthless. As her relationship to dance deepens, her investment in dance increases in size and value. She protects her investment by demanding high standards from her collaborators, staff and dancers.

When Gina decided on dance as a career, she thought dance was her liberation. Now this investment has grown into a responsibility for her community work, her studio/office space and her established company. The creativity is liberating, but the maintenance of the company is not. Heidi also mentioned the burden of the administrative as something that has caused so much stress that her heart has shriveled. She said, "...at least I still have my dancing because that's what I got in it for and that's what gives me joy." (5)

Each of the artists acknowledged that with maturity, giving to the community became a focal point. Gina has an extensive community program focusing on women survivors of domestic abuse, teaching workshops throughout the country and in Canada. She has also created a model for other dance companies to implement a program in their area.

Heidi's latest project, *Gimp*, includes both disabled performers and professional dancers. Through post performance discussions and workshops, the work instigates discussions about different bodies and our feelings about our own bodies. Being one of the trained dancers in this work, I have experienced first hand this collision between the disability world and the dance world. It challenges you to consider, or maybe RE-consider, your ideas about dance, body image and the disabled. I have identified myself as a dancer and been a part of the dance community since I was 8 years old. The dance world can be very insular. This work forces me to enlarge my community both on and off stage.

David realized about 10 years ago that he wanted to play a role in the community by serving on boards, being a mentor, curating and presenting work of other artists. He maintains a connection with younger artists through his work as a curator. He plays a paternal role with the younger dancers in his company: "if they want to choreograph, I try to facilitate that and show their work and develop their performing through the way they are cast. But I think it matters to me (because I don't have kids) that they be good people by my standards – that they speak well, that they value the right things in dance and in life, because we spend so much time together." (7)

Michael also has a desire to inspire his students and younger dancers and be their role model. "Physically and on a deeper level I want to be there and be solid and be youthful in my way of thinking, but mature in my age." (4) Dance is his vehicle to achieve this. "It gives me a life affirming kind of feeling, which is hopefully contagious because I want my young people to be inspired by it." (4)

After having an extremely difficult transition from the ballet world in her mid 20s, Rachel has dedicated part of her life to being a teacher of college students. "I feel like I came out on the other end of that transition in a really good place, but I see a lot of young dancers who don't and that makes me sad." (5) As the director of a university dance program, she is in a position to help many dancers along their life path.

The last question that I asked each of the artists is what advice they would give younger dancers who want to continue dancing into their 50s and beyond. Maintaining an interest in dance figured prominently in the answers. The choreographers are problem-solvers, constantly seeking answers. Michael encourages students to inspire

themselves. “Nobody can be there holding their hand and pulling them through the ordeal. Be responsible for their own learning.” (4)

The women all encouraged dancers to create a training system for their body. Rachel goes on to advocate gaining knowledge of your body in general and body mechanics, “moderation is the key and being smart about your own personal body.” (6) According to Heidi you achieve this through listening: “To listen, to really understand their body and not compare it to other people...to be organized in your body...and to understand your weaknesses - that takes time and focus.” (6) One thing that Janis added was to know when to shift your practice. Gina places importance on constant re-evaluation: “make sure that you’re really getting to the heart of the matter. Be true to what is the most important to you at every stage as it changes.” (5)

David finds himself telling younger dancers to “take the time that they need to work through things and not to just throw themselves AT things because they are so panicky. They should decide who they want to work with; they should decide what kind of work they want to do; and they should take the time to learn it.” (8) He goes on to say, “I didn’t realize that I had time all along---I had time in my 30s, I had time in my 40s – and now I think that I get that I do. I’ll work these things out. The thing that’s so destructive at any age is the idea that it’s over unless you do something by next week.” (8)

This really resonates with me at age 38, living in New York City where I never feel that there is enough time in the day to get everything done. From these interviews I get the message: invest yourself in what you are doing and know that dance will be there. In my 30s I have danced with a variety of choreographers, started a fledgling dance company, focused on teaching and embarked on graduate school. I am still investing a lot in my relationship to dance and in building my career. I look forward to the time when I’m 50 and will be able to say: “I AM”.

It is easy to get so caught up in dance that you lose sight of everything around you. Rachel made an important point: “Yes, dance demands a lot from you. Yes, you have to really devote yourself to it if you’re going to do it. However, you can also be part of the world. You’re not just in your own little dance studio kicking your legs up- you need to be part of the world.” (6) Dancers enhance the art form by bringing life to dance. They have children and families, other interests and talents that enrich the creative process and the artwork. At the same time, the dance world expands to include life. There are all types of performers on stage dancing – a variety of ages, bodies, and cultures. It is a reflection of the world we live in.

## **Works Cited**

Blake, Michael. Personal Interview. 26 April 2010.

Brenner, Janis. Personal Interview. 14 April 2010.

Gibney, Gina. Personal Interview. 07 April 2010.

Latsky, Heidi. Personal Interview. 26 February 2010.

List, Rachel. Personal Interview. 25 March 2010.

Parker, David. Personal Interview. 21 April 2010.