

Images of Age in Dance

The results of a DANCE ON survey

In two survey cycles, we asked a total of 455 spectators of our performances about their ideas of age vis-à-vis dance. Our aim was to discover how older dancers are perceived and to gauge the level of interest in seeing them more regularly on stage. The following report presents and evaluates the survey results and draws possible conclusions from them.

When do you think performing arts careers end and why?

Respondents estimated the respective age for actors to be the highest, on average at 74 years of age. The reason why they end their careers is presumed to be an increasing “lack of roles”. By contrast, musicians’ careers were thought to end seven years earlier – because of a personal decision. Modern dancers’ careers end much earlier, respondents said, on average at the age of 48. The main reason for this was presumed to be increased physical wear and tear resulting from the increased strain. Ballet dancers’ careers were estimated to last only up to the age of 37.

What makes you feel that a dance performance has been successful?

Respondents see three factors (in descending order) to be decisive: authenticity, expression and physical virtuosity. The “physical beauty” of dancers is less important to them.

Have you ever perceived older dancers on stage in negative terms?

One-half of the respondents said that older dancers almost never come across negatively. The situation is different only if their role doesn’t suit their age (85 respondents) or if they appear to be overexerting themselves (71 respondents). Only six people explicitly rejected older dancers, citing aesthetic reservations.

Why do you think older dancers want to continue to dance?

173 respondents think the main reason is love for the job while 123 respondents consider artistic curiosity to be the motive. Only 31 times was a lack of alternative fields of activity suggested.

Do you know of any companies or choreographers who work with dancers aged over 40?

Less than one-half of those asked this question, 91 out of 214 people, knew of relevant ensembles. They mentioned a total of 60 names, with five coming up regularly: Pina Bausch and Tanztheater Wuppertal (46 mentions), Nederlands Dans Theater 3, disbanded in 2006 (15 mentions), closely followed by the Dance On Ensemble (10 mentions), the former Forsythe Company (6 mentions) and finally Sasha Waltz & Guests (4 mentions).

Would you enjoy seeing more older dancers on stage?

A clear majority answered yes. Only nine respondents, including six men, said no. It is not clear whether this can be traced back to male socialisation and its corresponding demands on physical beauty or whether it is merely coincidence.

Demographic data

373 of the 455 respondents were aged between 20 and 60. The second-biggest group comprised 60 to 80-year-olds. Female members of the audience are in the majority at dance performances, which is also reflected in the gender ratio of the respondents – 395 women, 53 men and 7 people who allocated themselves to another / a third gender. Only one-third of respondents are involved in dance themselves.

Summary and outlook

The difference is enormous: according to survey participants' estimates, dancers have to end their careers almost 40 years earlier than actors and 30 years earlier than musicians. The difference between ballet dancers and modern/contemporary dancers seems less huge at 11 years, but this difference is also wholly worthy of note.

Compared with the statutory retirement age in Germany, the estimated "retirement age" of dancers seems shockingly young. The difference presumed by audiences corresponds with reality: there are hardly any dancers aged over 40 in state and municipal companies. Rather, they have to anticipate serious ruptures in their professional biographies and look around for alternative income sources while still at a comparatively young age.

The public's correctly perceived "super-elevation" of young bodies in dance – it seems that particularly classical ballet is meant here – is therefore in striking contrast to the general development towards an "older society". In this sense, too, engagements for older dancers are in keeping with the times and desirable, as the survey has shown. The DANCE ON concept confirms this.

The audience members surveyed are remarkably consistent: more older dancers on stage would be welcome. The traditional notion that "no one wants to see them on stage" seems obsolete. It should be noted, however, that our survey was conducted within the DANCE ON series, which attracts a correspondingly interested and open audience. The next step should be a survey conducted outside of this field. More dance producers should also be included in order to gain insights into the attitude of the "scene" to these questions.

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