

## **Dancers, artists, people**

### **The identities of the DANCE ON ENSEMBLE**

*Anna Seidl*

“Today, choreographers are generally the stars,” says Riccarda Herre, who was heavily involved in designing DANCE ON. “Companies are characterised by individual artists, but we wanted to focus on the dancers.” In this ambitious concept, the dancers have to develop their own voice, inviting them, obliging them even, to have their say and to look at questions of identity, internal and external perceptions and notions of age.

The age limit for a career in dance is typically a hidden condition of the sector. DANCE ON makes this condition visible. It throws up questions that reach way beyond dance itself, transcending the socially conditioned boundaries of how we picture ourselves and our bodies.

#### **Embracing uncertainty**

The courage to embrace uncertainty is one of the key premises of DANCE ON. Madeline Ritter explicitly chose to risk investing in a repertoire for dancers aged over 40 and to give the choreographers and dancers free reign – an ideal starting point for the artistic process. Today, not only renowned choreographers are involved in the DANCE ON 1. EDITION repertoire but also notable artists from other areas, such as film, visual art and music. All of them state that there is a special quality to working with ‘mature’ dancers, as they have such extensive experiential knowledge at their disposal. Together, and with continuous discussions and reflection, they are exploring new aesthetic terrain.

#### **Identity**

Although the project explicitly focuses on older dancers, these dancers vehemently resist linking their identity to the idea of age, or to images of age, and refuse to have their artistic qualities reduced to what they are ‘still able to do’. As Christopher Roman says, they want to be “a contributing voice to the contemporary dance scene, not a circus act”. Particularly important for him is human communication, which he says takes on a different quality with age. He demonstrated this very impressively in his solo from the first production *7 Dialogues*.

DANCE ON interrogates age as a blind spot, even a taboo, within the dance sector. This is difficult, because most dancers are socialised to believe that they have served their time once they reach a certain age. Collective interpretations of patterns relating to images of age have thus become inscribed in dancers’ identities. DANCE ON, then, is engaged in a struggle for liberation in which the

dancers nevertheless often deny that age is a boundary, or even an issue. Although they are still forging their way and cannot entirely liberate themselves from the issue of age, their stage works reveal a different dimension, one that can be called 'avant-gardist'. These works have indeed emancipated themselves from issues of age. Rather than dealing with age, they work with its potential.

### **Stylistic diversity**

A company breaking new aesthetic ground and working without a 'safety net', i.e. without a distinct choreographic style, has to examine its own identity more closely, particularly if the project intends to show, in Christopher Roman's words, that "age is no longer relevant in dance". For him it is therefore even more important "to keep reflecting on, talking about and discussing the topic – and how can you do all that better than through dance itself?" Age is implicit in the ensemble's name; it is also a central theme in public statements and publications. As age is always a part of what is being communicated, spectators are compelled to see each piece in this context.

DANCE ON's identity can probably best be summed up by the term 'diversity'. The plurality and simultaneous openness and commitment to civic values of fits with the notion of the diversity and plurality of images of age. In contrast to what one could maybe expect, the DANCE ON dancers' own style hasn't hardened into a personal signature. Their interest is far more focused on questioning their own habits, attitudes and routines, and expanding them through new experiences.

### **Experience and continuity**

The importance of experience and experiential knowledge was a theme that came up regularly in my interviews with the dancers. One dancer said that experience meant knowing what was needed in the different stages of the creative process. Another said that her mental flexibility had greatly increased. It thus seems that, with greater experience, unexpected and random elements can penetrate well-known territory more easily. Breaking through well-rehearsed routines and normative principles can expand knowledge and thereby also the aesthetic field. As these 'irritations' and surprises have to come from outside (dancers speak of "challenges") and cannot be forced, the special framework or open setting of DANCE ON is needed.

For the dancers, confronting age is the biggest irritation. They have to re-organise their routines, are compelled to analyse their ageing physique, and have to ask themselves *why* and under which conditions they wish to continue dancing. There is even a moment of reflection in the dance movements themselves. One of the motivations is no longer having to show what they can do, continually perfecting themselves, but rather to be able to explore new territory. As Jone San Martin says: "I am not on stage to show what I know, I am on stage to find out what else I can know."

The guiding principle of diversity is linked to the notion of continuity. The group's accumulated experience is not abandoned, but being expanded. In this sense, the movement language of Lucinda

Childs, William Forsythe, Merce Cunningham and all the other choreographic styles that have become inscribed in the dancers' bodies in the course of their careers live on in the DANCE ON productions. The dancers are the bearers and transmitters of a cultural memory that is embedded in the body.

### **Emancipation**

One of DANCE ON's main goals is to expand the repertoire for dancers over 40. Madeline Ritter established the company with the following questions in mind: what do dancers gain if they continue to dance? What do audiences and the art form gain? Over the past two years, these questions have generated an emancipatory and political thrust. The study has shown that breaking new ground also changed the way the dancers see themselves. For them, awareness of the requirements of the artistic process was linked to lots of questions they had to answer as a group rather than as individuals. An awareness of form was the foundation for the development of new aesthetic values that prioritised intensity, expression, presence and seriousness.

Breaking with routines was therefore not only a prerequisite for a more intensive examination of form by the dancers, but also for being able to reflect on their own roles, functions and identity. They feel as if they now finally have a voice, that DANCE ON has given them the chance to develop it, and that it would still like to be heard, and should still be heard, even after the First Edition has ended.

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