

THE ACHING BODY IN DANCE

Yvonne Rainer

In the late 1950s I attended a recital by Ruth St. Denis. It took place in a New York dance studio, maybe Dance Players on Sixth Avenue. She was about the same age as I am now (seventy-eight years as of January, 2013). Taller than I by a good four or five inches, she was clad in a long, sleeveless black gown of a filmy texture. Her hair was white, but it was her arms that drew my attention, for not only were they snowy white in contrast to the blackness of her dress, but also were the sole source of movement. The flabby undersides of her upper arms created their own autonomous swaying motion. That was my primary recollection: those ivory undulating arms lifted in supplication or some such appeal to a transcendent spirituality.

Around the same time I attended a “Farewell to Dance” concert of Maria-Theresa, Isadora Duncan’s last surviving foster daughter. In a bare studio she was accompanied by an elderly, white-haired man hunched over an upright piano as he played a Beethoven Sonata. It may have been the *Tempest* (No. 17 in D Minor). I was impressed that she could still run. Trailing a dark piece of diaphanous fabric in the air, she dropped repeatedly to the floor, only to rise again and run while looking apprehensively over her shoulder as though pursued by a gathering storm. It was poignant but a little sad. This was her fifth annual “Farewell,” and I suspected it would be her last.

My favorite Martha Graham performance was *Cave of the Heart*, when she was in her sixties playing the role of Medea. Still riveting, she *bouffé*d ferociously from stage right to left while seeming to gobble the long red entrails of her murdered children, which she pulled from her bodice in a bloody stream. Later she could be embarrassing as she tried to inhabit the roles that she had created for herself in her younger days.

So when is it time to say “farewell to dance?” When and how must we begin to think of ways to avoid becoming objects of pity or caricature as we attempt to engage movement that is ever—and obviously—more difficult? Traditionally the choreographer/dancer performs alongside younger dancers even as she becomes demonstrably older than the members of her consistently youthful company. The young performers leave and are replaced by similarly youthful dancers while the aging choreographer continues to perform. Merce Cunningham made special solos for

himself until withdrawing from the stage. Paul Taylor and Trisha Brown both stopped dancing under physical duress at a certain point while continuing to choreograph. When to leave is a highly personal matter, contingent on will, pleasure, and physical fitness, all of which are subject to the decline that inevitably comes with aging.

My own situation has taken a different turn from those mentioned above. Never having wanted the complications of maintaining a stable dance company, by the age of forty I had quit the field entirely to concentrate on making experimental narrative films. By the time I returned to dance in 2000 via a commission from the White Oak Dance Project (“After Many a Summer Dies the Swan”), I found myself face-to-face with the problematic of aging and dance in the person of Mikhail Baryshnikov, who, though a kind of *éminence grise*, would be performing alongside the five other much younger dancers in his group. Even though Misha was still at the top of his game with regard to the technical demands of the choreography I was dredging up from my past, both his age and celebrity were issues that I felt I had to foreground in some way as an alternative to putting the audience in the position of having to choose whether to notice or ignore his difference from the others. So, in order to shave his aura or stature down to human scale, so to speak, I inserted moments of sly intervention, such as having someone walk on his heels, forcing him to adjust his shoe, retie his laces, and catch up with the others. It was a way of sending the message that the choreographer was conscious of the situation as a problem to be solved. In one of the performances of the piece, I entered the stage and performed some unison movements with the others and then left. It was a cameo, or more precisely, a “fly in the ointment” of the highly professional goings-on, for I was barely able to keep up with them.

For the next few years I stayed out of my dances as a performer, with the exception of standing in for Pat Catterson, who could not attend a performance of “RoS Indexical” (2007) in Los Angeles in 2009 due to the death of her mother. Fortunately the stage décor consisted of an overstuffed sofa, to which the dancers would repair between extended executions of movement. After a brief introduction in which I explained the state of things to the audience, I did what I could, sporadically entering the action and then retreating to the sofa until my next cue. One reviewer mentioned my “stiffness.” Yes, this body, never very limber, was stiffening up despite my most conscientious, daily efforts at maintenance. I could justify my participation on this occasion as a proxy and had been careful to warn the audience of what they would see: my literally “standing in” for the absent dancer.

My next dancing foray occurred in 2010 when I performed what had become my signature dance, *Trio A* (originally titled *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part 1*, created in 1966 at age thirty-two). This version of *Trio A*, subtitled *Geriatric With Talking*, encapsulated what might be called my philosophy of aging in dance, namely, “Let it all hang out.” If you’re going to make an appearance in front of an audience and you can’t execute the material as robustly or as accurately as you once did, then be honest; tell them what’s going on moment by moment. This is exactly what I decided to do. It was language that would add the necessary consciousness to the performance, hope-

fully waylaying any tendency on the part of the spectators to pity or condescend. As I threaded my way through the dance, I extemporaneously told them what I was experiencing, without interrupting the flow of movement:

This move is supposed to be a slow rise of the leg, not a battement, but why can't I get my leg up any higher than this anymore? Oh, just do it and get it over with.

And, I have to tell you that what you are just now witnessing is a state of extreme stage fright. I haven't performed for a while, so I hadn't anticipated what it would be like.

And while trying to rise in a particular way from the floor after a series of rolls:

I can no longer do this in a smooth fashion, like rise up over my turned out bent left leg. But why isn't this other method just as good? [as I scramble up] As long as I keep moving and don't stop.

Not entirely to my surprise, the audience thought it was a hoot and laughed at everything I said. I have no doubt that more than half of them were familiar with *Trio A*, a fact that I remarked on at the beginning of the performance—"You've probably seen it on YouTube"—so they had a double consciousness of what they were viewing: the 1978 film of me doing it at the age of forty-four and the then-present incarnation at age seventy-five. I am certain the dance was quite recognizable, still bearing the imprints of uninflected flow and refusal to look at the audience (which I persisted in maintaining even as I spoke, thus creating another impetus to the general hilarity). What it lacked were the bodily extensions and sheer physical power of the 1966 version—age thirty-two—that has been documented only in photos.

How have I recently dealt not only with aging in my choreography but with aging performers, including myself, a group whose ages range from thirty-eight to sixty-six? First and foremost in my approach to this issue are the titles of my last three dances: *Spiraling Down*; *Assisted Living: Good Sports 2*; and *Assisted Living: Do You Have Any Money?* Once posed, the matter of aging is out in the open and can even encompass material that may have nothing to do with it. Most of my movement ideas these days stem from found sources: Laurel and Hardy, Sarah Bernhardt, Robin Williams, Steve Martin, Jacques Tati, Groucho Marx, as well as conventional ballet combinations and everyday actions. I no longer think of choreography in terms of innovative movement. Though I do not demand of my dancers an excess of athletic prowess, my choreography does require a certain amount of virtuosity, such as dancing in unison, recitation of long monologues, the content of which—economics, sexual identity, bad jokes, legal issues, political reports gleaned from the news, et al.—does not mesh with simultaneously executed steps, and, lately, deadpan slapstick and pratfalls. The work requires dancers with diverse training and skills.

In these recent dances I have given myself roles other than that of dancer. Mainly through the reading of texts (authored by others), I variously enact a carnival barker,

a historian, a social critic, a political analyst, master of ceremonies, and narrator of my brother's cognitive decline. My preferred mode of self-presentation is "existence." I love to exist on stage. I no longer "dance." The oldest in my group—informally known as the "Raindears"—is sixty-six and still going strong. She does *Trio A* forwards and backwards. She teaches the others tap routines. Her face is lined but her body looks as lively as that of the youngest. She warms up for an hour, giving herself an entire Cunningham workout. Her body, like mine, is her enduring reality. The difference is that hers has continued to "dance."

In conclusion, here is another quote, recalled from *Trio A: Geriatric With Talking*:

I would like you to think of this version of *Trio A* not as evidence of deterioration and decline, but as a new form of avant-garde dance. The aging body is a thing unto itself and need not be judged as inadequate or inferior if it can no longer jump through hoops.

In fact, the evolution of the aging body in dance fulfills the earliest aspirations of my 1960s peers and colleagues who tore down the palace gates of high culture to admit a rabble of alternative visions and options. Silence, noise, walking, running, detritus—all undermined prevailing standards of monumentality, beauty, grace, professionalism, and the heroic. It is high time to admit the aging body of the dancer into this by now fully recognized and respected universe. Aging is the ultimate goal and hurdle, one that I myself must confront. So I tell myself,

Yvonne, keep on reading your texts, but continue to dance, aches and all. Farewell to mewling "I no longer dance." Dance, girl, dance, and to all who observe me, I challenge you, "Pity me not."

Granted, I shall need a little empathy from my friends.

YVONNE RAINER was born in San Francisco in 1934. She was one of the founders of the Judson Dance Theater in 1962, and later made several films, including *Lives of Performers*, *Privilege*, *Journeys from Berlin*, and *Murder and murder*. She is the author of *Work 1961–1973*, *Radical Juxtapositions 1961–2002*, *A Woman Who . . .*, *Feelings are Facts*, and *Poems*.