

# WE WHO ARE STILL HERE

BY FERGUS EARLY

## *1. some memories*

1966, Stratford upon Avon

*Leonide Massine, in his seventies, a redundant hairnet ensnaring his thinning black hair, hobbled painfully down the stairs. First he would do his barework, his muscles and joints following the ingrained patterns of 45 years, since Maestro Cecchetti has first laid out for him Monday's adage, Tuesday's rond de jambe. What he did might look a parody of the technique of the young dancers of the day, but his body and his mind needed these shapes, these repeated forms, needed their energy and their pulse. Later, in rehearsal, he would sit thinking darkly beneath his low eyebrows until with a cry of sheer frustration he would leap out of his seat into a ferocious rendering of the Can Can dancer from *Le Boutique Fantasque*, his hands flapping at the wrist, his head thrown back and precisely inclined, his feet, which had seemed so arthritic, prancing like a young dressage pony. Then the moment passed. He subsided like a spent sexual organ and age sank over him like an old blanket. Painfully he regained his chair. We'd seen it though, that handsome Russian youth, filled with an almost diabolic energy, visiting us from the past, forty years earlier, of the famous, fashionable, audacious Ballets Russes. It was no illusion, Diaghilev's young actor-dancer lover had been there with us.*

1979, The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

*At first it seemed like blasphemy. Martha Graham, the queen of anti-ballet, to appear at the Royal Opera House! But as the red curtains swept up and aside and Copeland's airy prairie music for *Appalachian Spring* sung out over the vast expanses of the old stage and as the chorus of young girls with their formal*

*sweetness and the preacher with his terrifying stiff-legged sexuality started to make their choreographed magic, it was soon clear that here was a fine match - a truly classical choreographer taking a truly classical stage. On the same bill, Graham herself in Acrobats of God. There she was - long slit skirt of her figure-hugging dress, black hair flattened back with its bun pierced by crossed skewers, ludicrous up-sweeping Cleopatra-like make up - all just as it should be. Forward she came, down below the proscenium to a place where, like a true comedian, she could «work» her public. Behind her slaved the dancers, now halted by a single gesture, now waved into ever more absurd efforts by her, Martha, God-choreographer in charge of her menagerie of acrobats. An eyebrow raised was all she needed to make us complicit in her callously mischievous schemes. We giggled, we roared. She had us, too, in the palm of her hand. Effortlessly she commanded her dancers. Effortlessly she commanded her audience.*

#### 1992. Queen Elizabeth Hall

*The young dancers in their body tights spread, group, run off, run on, do important things in obscure corners and trivial things centre stage. Their technique is almost balletic, with just that slight skewing, that awkward angularity that is the hallmark of the old wizard of Modern Dance, Merce Cunningham. The choreographic form is satisfyingly unsatisfying. Never predictable, never derived from elsewhere. The dancers are immensely skilful, with an ability to change direction, to divert energy flow with a suddenness that is astonishing. Still something lacks; some spark that I remembered from earlier times. Then, unexpectedly (of course), a tall old man in a purple all-in-one leotard hobbles onto stage. Someone has left a clothes horse on stage. The old man, feet recoiling gingerly from the floor as if the stage were covered in shards of glass, reaches the clothes horse. Ah, no! It's a portable barre. He clutches the barre, executing some steps, nimbly, in almost sprightly fashion. He lets go the barre and his hands do something that look like a madly accelerated martial arts exercise. The curly hair is grey, the face more knobbly than ever, the feet tortured with arthritis, but a ripple runs through us in the audience. This man is performing. The other dancers, none even half his age, are dancing, dancing wonderfully, but he, Merce, is performing.*

#### 1996 A London rehearsal room

*A woman in her eighties, spine, ribs, hips out of alignment, her hair white, her face alert and strong, pushes herself from her feet to standing, using the arms of her chair. She gives one hand, then the other to each of the two men standing*

*beside her. She takes three steps diagonally forward, then three on the other diagonal. The steps are not evenly spaced on the pulse of the Schubert impromptu, but deliberately asymmetrical. She uses the support of the men without acknowledging them. Her body twists and the arms, unexpectedly long, extend wide, hands still held by the men, while her head turns in opposition. It is an effort too much and her body subsides over the back of one of the men, one arm hanging loosely down in front. On another beat of the music her shoulder seems to dislocate and the arm drops a further nine inches. It is a supreme gesture of fatigue that only this body, in this position could achieve. Later, the woman walks to the front of the stage, still supported by the two men, and lets go their hands; as the piano climaxes, she lifts her hands up in a conscious re-creation of Isadora Duncan's gesture during her rendering of the Marseillaise. The moment is balanced on a knife edge of tension - can she stand alone? Will she fall? The meaning of this moment is focused through the precise physicality of its performer. No younger dancer could achieve the moment, for it could never contain this doubt and therefore this triumph. Jane Dudley, dancing after a recent hip replacement and a knee operation is showing us the power and danger of pure gesture and consummate performance.*

## 2. Some reflections

Four performers, different times, different contexts. But what is shared is an excitement, an encounter with the richness of experience, a sense of the power of performance, not diminished but *enhanced* by age. It is undeniable that these dancers and many others of many different disciplines can continue to deliver a profound experience to audiences and one which the dancer with less experience of life, art, dance, cannot equal. But we who are *still here* (!) are moving in a territory without signposts. There are few systems for the nurture of the mature dancer; there are few teachers who have an interest in fostering dancers as they mature beyond the simple athleticism of youth; there are few critics who can restrain their contempt for those who, as they might put it, inflict themselves on their audience after their sell-by dates; there are few choreographers or artistic directors who seriously look at the potential of this massive resource of artists who have actually lived enough to have something meaningful to say.

Green Candle Dance Company, the company of which I am artistic director, has been in existence for 12 years. Its artistic policy rests on the understanding that dance is everyone's birthright, both to watch and to participate. This policy led us quite early to consider various disenfranchised groups - children, people with learning difficulties, people with physical disabilities, older people. At first, our work with older people was confined to developing recreational forms of dance for non-professional older people,

and this continues to be an important strand in our work. But as I myself continued to perform and dance into my fifties, and observed that almost all those people with whom I started out my career had long since retired, I became more and more concerned at the terrible waste of talent and artistry that was being perpetrated by the obsessive stress on youth and athleticism which dominates the dance scene.

What is this about? I think it has to do with the sexualisation of dance in western society. In the early years of ballet, for example, dancers were seen as the sexual playthings of the upper classes. The Paris Opera of the Third Empire was in effect a sophisticated brothel where the aristocracy could take their pick of the young women and men as they fancied. This projection of sexual fantasy onto dance required youth above all - sex and age is a bigger and older taboo even than sex and dance.

Whether one considers the male roles danced *en travestie* by women dancers of the Paris Opera of the 1870's in order to be able to show extra lengths of leg, or the sleek, cat-suited contemporary dancers of the last 40 years, sex is a major engine in dance, and sex means youth. Such ideas are immeasurably reinforced by the barrage of advertising promulgating images of young, thin, androgynous people, often, as it happens, dancing. In this virtual fantasy world, the immense beauty to be found in the reality of the human condition is disparaged and ignored.

For the reality is that humans are of all shapes, ages, sizes, colours, and that each of us moves and expresses ourselves with a unique character and a unique beauty. In dance, we limit ourselves to a ludicrously small segment of the range of humanity. Imagine a novelist limiting her or himself to writing only about young people between the ages of 18 and 35, each character weighing not more than 60 kilos (women) or 80 kilos (men), all nearly identical in musculature and physique and all corresponding to a Martini advertisement's criteria of beauty.

That is something like the reality for much of the professional dance world. But that is not our world, we who are still here. We are altogether more disparate, lumpier; we are creatures of the ever-changing world of reality, not the unchanging Shangri-La of virtual ad-land. We must wrestle with these changes, with life. And what is it like to inhabit the dancing body as it matures and changes? Athletic virtuosity may no longer be the aim, but a body still needs suppleness and strength, a heart still needs exercise. When I mounted *Tales from the Citadel* with my company, Green Candle, I assembled a cast of mature performers whose age ranged from their forties to their eighties. In the course of devising the piece, we became so interested in each others' idiosyncratic warm-ups and training regimes that we introduced a «warm-up» section into the production where we all simultaneously practised our warm-up exercises together on stage.

From this experience and from talking to many other dancers still practising their art at an age which defies the (absurd) conventions of the dance world, I have come

across a great variety of solutions to the problem of our continuing need for a physical discipline. Some, as Massine did, carry on what they have always done, a ballet barre still serving their needs long after the time when dancing the classical repertoire has ceased to be a reality. Steve Paxton claims his main training is to labour on his farm, doing everything, as he says, «like a Chinese peasant», using virtually no labour-saving devices. Others practice Yoga, T'ai Chi, Aikido, Capoeira. I find it a problem that there are very few dance classes I would willingly attend. As younger dancers, we all submit to an incredible mixture of good and less good teachers, of styles and techniques that are at best approximate to and at worst in complete opposition to what we perceive as our needs. It is a peculiarly a dancer's dilemma. In other disciplines it is different. The singer finds him or herself a teacher and works with that teacher on a one-to-one basis, sometimes for years, in rather the same way that most athletes do with their coaches. In dance, this kind of coaching is limited to the big ballet companies, if it is available at all, and by definition does not apply to the more mature dancer.

But then, I suppose we are mostly loners in our physical practice. Life brings so many more and different demands to us as we grow older - children, elderly relatives, mortgages, friends making messes of their lives, ourselves making messes of our lives - that we have to find ways to slot our physical training into the complex jigsaw that we live, and we know that this is not just a short burst for a few years, to catch some imagined peak of physical prowess, but an ongoing life process, inescapable, perhaps to the grave. My osteopath has told me that I must exercise every day of my life if I am not to succumb to serious injury. Our bodies are exercise junkies - once hooked they need their fix for ever more. Over the years I have gradually developed and refined the dosage I need to feed this addiction and keep me functioning as a dancer and a person.

In the mid to late seventies I was part of a collective group of dance and performance artists based in a studio we called X6 Dance Space. We had come together with a number of views in common - principally that the trainings then current in both ballet and contemporary dance were frequently both psychologically and physically oppressive to the student; also that the traditional relationships, then still the norm, between choreographer and dancer, needed re-examination and redefinition. Among the many inputs into that process were some of the first contact improvisation workshops held in London, Mary Fulkerson's version of release technique and much new information then filtering in to dance via athletics and other sports. Here it was that I first learnt of the value of aerobic exercise - something that 7 years' training and 12 years' professional dancing had not taught me. Also here that I began to discover more effective ways to stretch. These are vital lessons that have stood me in good stead as I grow older yet have no desire to quit dancing. When not in rehearsal, my exercise regime might look like this:

Venue: Hampstead Heath, London (weather permitting)

Time 7.30 am

Running: 10-15 minutes at a gentle pace, including a steep climb and descent

Stretching: 10-15 minutes of stretching main muscle groups; many stretches are yoga based and involve being in a position for 10-30 seconds. Strengthening: 10 minutes of particular strengthening exercises, relating to abdominal muscles, lower back, backs of the legs and shoulders and arms.

Swimming: 10 minutes swim.

This is a non-winter regime, all taking place in the open air. When the weather is too cold or wet, I will often transfer much of the exercise to a gym. Quite often I will also cycle to work (about 20 minutes). I will seldom manage this amount of exercise every day of the week; administrative or other demands on my time will probably reduce it to about 4 times a week.

It will be obvious that this is a regime without any actual dance. Of course I dance when I am in rehearsal for a project, though I will still for preference run and stretch first. In the studio, I will often use a form of release technique, rolling, crawling, walking, falling, swinging and shaking, rather than a formally structured set of exercises. When it comes to dancing, this form of preparation is useful and adequate for much, if not all the demands I put on myself. In *Tales from the Citadel*, I set myself a task of performing a ballet enchaînement - a quite complex sequence of petit batterie, including brisés volés. I had not done anything like it for perhaps twenty years and at first thought my knees might find it too much... However, after a little while, my muscles began to find a little bounce and elasticity. Kinetic memory and repetition did the rest. Recent research shows that although muscle fibres become smaller as we age, each muscle fibre shows the same potential to improve as younger muscle. «*In a study at London's Royal Free Hospital Medical School Human Performance Laboratory, women aged 75 to 93, training three times a week for 12 weeks, increased their strength by 24 to 30 per cent*»<sup>1</sup>. This heartening statistic gives the lie to the idea that we gradually become debarred from particular sorts of practice as we age, or that we can no longer dream of improving our physical capability in a specific direction. In a quite different arena, I am a keen recreational cricketer. My main expertise is as a slow, «spin» bowler. This season I have developed an effective quicker type of ball to use as a surprise weapon which requires considerably more bodily effort than my normal style of action. It is an enormous pleasure to find a way of still improving physically at an age when deterioration is thought of as inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> «Fitness for Life» by Susie Dinan and Dr Craig Sharp. Pub 1966 by Judy Piatkus (Publishers)».

It seems to me, therefore, that those of us who carry on dancing often develop very idiosyncratic trainings for ourselves to fit our physical, emotional and practical needs. Our privilege is that we have such regimes at all. Research shows more and more conclusively that an essential factor in preserving health into late old age is regular exercise comprised of the sacred trinity of stamina, flexibility and strength. We can potentially lengthen both our artistic and our physical lives at one and the same time. Roll on the third millennium.

### Abstract

El trabajo de Fergus Early y de su compañía *Greencadle* consiste fundamentalmente en la exploración de nuevos espacios narrativos que incluyan todo tipo de bailarines. En los últimos años sus esfuerzos han estado centrados en el trabajo con ancianos. Por ello este artículo recoge una serie de reflexiones personales a cerca de su experiencia como bailarín que se hace mayor y que continúa su búsqueda con un cuerpo que ahora además habla del tiempo vivido.