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The French dancers for whom age is no barrier

Passing the age of 40 once meant it was time to quit, but many performers now continue to dance well into later life



Dancer and choreographer Carolyn Carlson is still performing at the age of 72. Photograph: Jean-Pierre Muller/Getty

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[Carolyn Carlson](#) can't stay put, repeatedly sitting down then standing up again. In the studio and sitting room at her flat, outside Paris, she rises up, straight as a rod, stretches out her arms, in front and behind, crossed and uncrossed. She gives body to what she is saying or gestures to emphasise the angular, yet supple dynamic on which she has based her style.

Carlson, 72, is still here. "That's what they say to me when I go to the market," she exclaims with a laugh. "You're still dancing?"

Yes indeed, and more than ever. Having built her career upside down – she took over at the head of the [Centre Chorégraphique National in Roubaix](#), northern France, in 2004, aged 61 –

and at the end of January she started a month-long series of shows at the Théâtre National de Chaillot, in the capital, featuring two solos. One, [Dialogue with Rothko](#), lasts over an hour.

As her appearance showed last year at Chaillot for the 30th anniversary of France's national choreography centres, she is still on form, displaying total intensity, borne up by timeless grace. "I am my age, I am my body, even if I feel 30 when I dance," she jokes. "That's life. I'm a very ripe peach and one day I'll fall. I fully accept that."

For now motion carries her forward. Nor is Carlson alone on stage. Five years ago France had barely half a dozen professional dancers over 60; now they're increasingly common. At the top of the list, busier than ever since they returned to the footlights, are husband and wife dancers and choreographers [Françoise and Dominique Dupuy](#), aged 90 and 85. "In other words, 45 years into retirement; 20 for her and 25 for me," Dominique says with a laugh.

There is the Senegalese-born [Germaine Acogny](#), 72 like Carlson; [Mariko Aoyama](#), 65, a former member of Pina Bausch's company; [Raimund Hoghe](#), 66, choreographer and also former collaborator with Bausch; and [Ana Laguna](#), 61, the Spanish dancer and choreographer. All of them continue to work. "And I want it to last," says Acogny, whose solo piece, *A un Endroit du Début*, recently had its premiere in Paris. "I don't want to stop. I think we're still giving the audience something."

'I think we're still giving the audience something,' says French-Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny, 72. Photograph: Georges Gobet/Getty

These performers don't believe in a best-before date. They dismiss the notion of dance as the preserve of youthful, technically impressive virtuosos. This is a "very western" view, according to Carlson, who is influenced by Buddhism and eastern spirituality and cites the "national treasures" of live performance in Japan and South Korea.

[Kazuo Ohno](#), a guru in the Japanese dance form *butoh* who died in 2010, often crops up in our conversation. He first performed *Admiring La Argentina*, his emblematic piece, in 1977, aged 71, and carried on dancing into his nineties.

"The thing that 'great age' gives us is the opportunity to be 'on stage' in a more profound manner, less focused on putting on a dazzling show, in which choreography always takes precedence over dance," Dominique Dupuy explains.

"Each age group has its qualities and values," German choreographer Hoghe adds. "We should accept the various stages of our life, as they come. Why are people so afraid of seeing ageing bodies? I remember cellist Pablo Casals' 90th birthday. Someone asked him why he carried on working. 'Because I think I'm making progress,' he answered. I see things the same way. We're giving something we're unable to put across when we're younger."

The official retiring age for dancers at the Paris National Opera is 42, but according to the statistics the average performer stops at 40. [Sylvie Guillem](#), 51, chose to hang up her shoes last year. Determined to stop while still in good shape, she has claimed there's no going back. "I have so much energy and pleasure that I couldn't make do with doing anything less well," she said in June 2015. "My body has given me incredible sensations which I want to keep."

A fellow pupil of Guillem's at the Paris Opera school, [Marie-Claude Pietragalla](#), 53, is still performing. She is currently touring France in *Je T'ai Rencontré par Hasard*, a show with her husband Julien Derouault. They have been dancing together for the last 16 years.

"I don't have any problem with passing time, age and wrinkles," she says. "I no longer resemble the dancer I was a decade ago, but I accept that. Our choreographic work, with Julien, puts the emphasis on the human being. We are man and woman before being dancers, and we're focusing on something beyond technical achievement and performance. [Dance](#) is not a sport."

Obviously one cannot be expected to dance as vigorously at 60 as at 20. To celebrate choreographer [Mats Ek](#)'s retirement, aged 70, Laguna performed *Hâche*, a new pas de deux in Paris in January. During rehearsals she admitted that her footwork was much less complex than in her youth.

"Of course you're not going to do the same things," says Aoyama, who has just put the final touches to a new solo piece as part of a production by [Eric Oberdorff](#).

"I've nothing left to prove," she adds. "I feel closer to theatre and butoh, but there are still things I want to put across on stage. Above all I'm trying to stay on good terms with the old lady I'll become. I have great admiration for nature's work and growing old is part of that."

"Finding another form of beauty", as Hoghe puts it, is a priority for these artists. As technical bravado is no longer the goal, other, more hybrid forms evolve. Sometimes they are more theatrical and utilise less space, but they are just as strong and precise. Age does not alter the artistic signature.

Carlson's gestural language, with extended arm movements, has become concentrated at her extremities, yet remains true to her essential style. "As I never did much on the ground, I'm not going to start now," she says.

The work of Marie-Claude Pietragalla, 53, has evolved as she has grown older. Photograph: Philippe Huguen/Getty

Rooted to the spot, her spinal column doing much of the work, Acogny's style is clear cut. Watching her in *Mon Elue Noire*, a solo piece she did for [French choreographer Olivier Dubois](#), is instructive. "We need to come to terms with age, but I must say this is the first time I've ever dared appear on stage wearing just a bra on top – and I'm shy," she says.

"I'm fortunate to have a 'good body', as they say, even if my tummy is no longer smooth and I don't have sixpack abs. A German critic said I had the back of a 45-year-old man. Which isn't bad. But why not a woman of 45? Anyway, the day I make a fool of myself my husband will tell me!"

Just as performance evolves, so do day-to-day routines and training. Some dancers are reluctant to talk about injuries or infirmities, typically hip problems and arthritis. But staying in shape requires a lot of attention, diaries filling up with massage and acupuncture, blood tests, osteopaths and dieticians.

“I’m really nice to my body,” Acogny says. She lives beside the sea in Senegal and walks in the Atlantic every morning for the good of her knees.

Carlson and Guillem both mention activities such as yoga, tai chi, [chi kung](#) and meditation. Last year Guillem explained that ageing meant “more work, longer warm-ups, getting more in tune with my body and being more sensible too.” She added: “The mind takes over from physical potential.” Acogny and Carlson endorse this view.

The Dupuys regularly adjust their work. “Our dancing finds it hard to accommodate running; our legs just won’t carry us. So we must find other paths,” Dominique explains. “We can only work for one and a half to two hours in our studio to find new ideas ... and that’s a lot, actually.”

In 2010, during their Solo-Solo show at Chaillot, Françoise acknowledged the difficulties. The sudden changes of rhythm, once her hallmark, had become impossible. “It’s mainly my body that doesn’t want to any longer,” she said. “Shifting abruptly from slow motion to a burst of vivacity is quite tricky. Nor do I remember movements as well. In the past my body registered all the steps immediately, recalling them unfailingly. Now, it won’t. That’s the way it is.”

Apparently age makes no difference to first-night nerves, but the pleasure of being on stage is just as great.

“I’m a nomad, I love the footlights. I feel at home here,” says Acogny. “When I dance, I reach beyond myself and feel such joy that I want to pass on this gift to others.”

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