

National Dance Forum - 2019 Darwin Belonging and the Aging Body

Good morning and welcome to this session - Belonging and the Ageing Body:

How is the creative power of the ageing body held by the Dance Sector?

My Fellow panel members

For information about our presenters today, check out their bio's on the NDF App

Helen Herbertson: Helen has a wealth of experience as a dancer, educator, and choreographer, mentor and continues to reinvent herself and her practice.

Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr Stubbs is a local Yolngu woman and clan elder, who's been teaching for more than 30 years. Born and raised in Arnhem Land she is Co-Principal of Yirrkala School and is passionate about children, education, language, and self determination.

I am David McMicken the Artistic Co-Director of Tracks dance. I have been working in the Northern Territory since 1991 and oversee the Grey Panthers seniors dance troupe - a group that was formed in 1988 and in continuous motion ever since.

We have split this keynote into three core aspects.

1. I will be talking about senior dancers from a community aspect, particularly the Grey Panthers Seniors Troupe

2. Helen as a professional dancer, choreographer, but also from the aspect of training dance artists into future careers, and
3. Merrki as a senior eEder in her community and teacher of deep knowledge, she will approach this from a ceremonial point of view coming from long traditions.

First I will present a short paper, and then we will go into some provocations with merriki and Helen.

You have just seen the performance of Who Can Remember Sweet November by local choreographer Joanna Noonan. Performed by the local over 60's dance group The Grey Panthers who formed in 1988. They were joined by the GOLDs (Growing Old Disgracefully) from Canberra. GOLDs is also a group for Senior dancers 55 + who have been going since 2011, and have come to Darwin for this forum and to join the Grey Panthers performing in Tracks Darwin Festival show - GLobal Positioning

Tracks has a long term relationship with the Grey Panthers spanning over 30 years. They are a unique Northern Territory dance troupe. They formed as a result of a community dance performance where it was recognised that people over 50 were not present. They began in a performance and have performed ever since. At that time the Community Dance Development Officer Sarah Calver continued the group through classes, dance making, and performances. Making dances and performing them publicly is their reason for being - health and wellbeing are flow ons from this. They explore what it means to be part of the Aging population and the role of the elder in contemporary Northern Territory cultural life. Most do not come from dance backgrounds.

The GP's are 'successful', 'productive', 'healthy', 'positive' and 'creative' role models for active ageing and life long learning. They set high expectations for themselves and enjoy their lives to the fullest. They show us what happens when you commit to long term extended relationships and links into your community. They see dance as more than a saleable commodity, more than a season of work, more than a tourable product. They see dance performance as an important part of their civic lives.

Learning from our years of work in the Indigenous community of Lajamanu, we applied the notion of being an Elder to this group - community members with wisdom, experience, and acknowledgement and respect of them as holders of deep community cohesive knowledges.

For my part of this keynote I will draw from a research project published in *Dance and the Quality of Life – Dancing in the Setting Sun – Performance, Self-actualization and the Elderly – Dr Nicholas Rowe, David McMicken, Tim Newth*. We researched with the Grey Panthers over a number of years and Dr Rowe also utilised them as dancers in his film *Dancing7cities*.

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"Respect your elders" is an adage older than the individuals it urges us to revere. But for ours to be a healthy and functioning community, I believe we need to do more than just respect. We need to listen to them, be inspired by their experiences, learn from them – their successes and mistakes, and lift them up.

But can we give more than just respect or acknowledgment? The Grey Panthers provide **Visibility**: seeing, and hearing and experiencing and using the wisdom. Retaining the knowledge. Passing it on. It's about placement: in the body, emotionally, and intellectually, as well as placement geographically –

knowing yourself in the place where you find yourself, and the place you know the most about. Invisibility can create too much focus on the visible: the young, the emerging, the midlife. When we pay respects to our Seniors, what are our ongoing assumptions about their creative concerns and aspirations?

Quote from Dr Rowe - "While research into young people has contributed to the advancement of dance in formal education, academic attention to elderly people has tended to focus on the remedial functions of dance and creativity in affording mental and physical well being. There has been scant consideration of how dance performance can enhance the personal and creative development of older participants".

In many work practices aging can lead to lack of self-value - a reminder of what we can no longer do. However, there is evidence that aging people have something to offer that only age affords. At Tracks we talk about dance as a whole of life activity. This is accepted in many other cultures, but may be under threat in our Contemporary Western professional dance perspective. It is timely to turn our focus away from the burden of age and onto its benefits.

As a 60 year old dance practitioner I seek to understand more fully our Elders experiences of learning, creating and performing dance, and to consider how particular choreographic practices might support or inhibit my aging engagement in the creation and expression of my lived experience and culture. How as a collaborative collective of individuals can we use this to enhance our broader cultural sector?

The same year that the GP's first performed, two of the 5 artists that later formed Tracks, Sarah and Tim, started a relationship with another group of Elders, in the remote Indigenous Warlpiri

community of Lajamanu. These two groups have performed together in several full length works, notably: The Miss Pink series - Olive Muriel Pink (1884 – 1975) was an Australian botanical illustrator, anthropologist, gardener, and was seen as an agitator for Aboriginal rights. She was the first white person many of the Elders in Lajamanu ever saw. We also had GP's who, as public servants, had to deal with Miss Pink's prolific letter writing to the government - talk about advocacy.

And in the performance season of Lipstick and Ochre, we celebrated that both these groups of Elders took delight in getting painted up and dancing in front of others, it gave them deep joy. The knowledge gained through working together continues to flow between the two cultures. That it is not just the act of dancing, but dancing as a way to maintain and grow community together.

The Grey Panthers, and the Warlpiri Elders of Lajamanu are my role models as I too age.

Our Elders have had more time to contemplate just what is important to them. As some things become more important later in life they make definite choices as to how they wish to invest their time and energy. Performing dance can be a means of generating enhanced feelings of having and using imagination, creativity, new skills, and other positive and valued attributes. The Grey Panthers use dance-making and performance to share their understanding across a holistic spectrum - aesthetic, physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Central to the dancers' fulfillment has been their developing confidence that their performance work is valued - by each other and by the local community.

The dancers enjoy presenting work of particular **aesthetic quality**. Repertoire is initially created with and for local

performers in response to local circumstances, and maintained locally as repertoire. Creative exploration affords aesthetic satisfaction when personal and local histories gain artistic quality.

Regular dance class, and performing, helps **psychological challenges of aging** such as recovering from illness or injury, and the increasing isolation from the rest of the community. Instead of a reason to stop dancing, age becomes a reason for this group to start or keep dancing. Performing dance provides emotional highs and endorphin boosts, with much laughter along the way. Science says that we are hardwired to learn through play. Physical interactions also allow for a safe place to **express sensuality**.

Being part of a group provides **emotional safety** through overcoming shyness. Doing it with friends builds confidence. Coming together each week creates community by providing a focal point for friendships, sustaining and growing the circle. Performing together is community building, enhancing social bonds, sharing their contribution wider, and increasing camaraderie. Performing becomes a peak experience and the **self and group esteem** that this builds grows confidence.

As Val said: On the census they asked, “What do you do to help out in the community?” and someone said to me, “Well, you do plenty! You sing with the Chorale. You dance with Grey Panthers! I’d never thought of it as giving to the community...I felt pretty great”

Cognitive Needs – Through learning choreography the Grey Panthers are constantly learning new things, such as having the body explained in different ways, how they interact individually and as a group. “It’s like always growing up” said Maria. Performance gives a bit of a rev with the dancers having

to maintain concentration, memory, and performance pizzazz. “I always perform better than in rehearsal ... performance pushes me further, because there is an audience.”

Building confidence in memory is very important when working with the Grey Panthers – learning, retaining, repeating, refining. Where aesthetic needs are concerned, “one size does not fit all.” Grey Panther works are made to fit the dancers, adapting movement for each individual in a group of up to 30+ dancers. The choreographic process involves an “unspoken constant negotiation” in which performers’ talents, capabilities, and limitations are explored as the central part of the creative practice.

A Balance between the familiar and the novel is important. The feeling of comfort and confidence when performing something you know, or the difference when performing a dance for the first time. Choreographic methods include varying degrees of collaboration, and so the creative process may involve shared conceptualization of the dance, movement generation, composition, or improvisation during performance.

So in wrapping up – Let’s agree that the creative power of all of that wisdom is a force to be reckoned with. (In the case of the current Grey Panthers it is over 2,500 lived years of experience.) And hey, what about a council of dance elders - let the wisdom flow!

Discuss with Helen and Merrki

Helen, in the early days of knowing you when you were a teacher of mine, I remember you coming to a point, around about the same time as Nanette Hassell, where you were reaching an age where most modern/contemporary dancers stopped, and you felt that that was not for you. It opened my eyes into lifelong dancing. What drives you to continue this bodily experience.

Merrki - given that the dancing and painting-up, and song and ceremony are intertwined and linked, can you tell us how dance fits into your community. How does it emerge or present itself?

Helen: Can you tell us about how you personally feel connected to this thing called dance? Where do you find your ideas, and how do you realise them.

Merrki, I was once in a show when an Indigenous choreographer gave us the moves and some of the non-Indigenous dancers felt uncomfortable performing those moves, saying they felt it was not right to do so. Is there a way that non-Indigenous Australians can learn from your dancing as participants?