



In 2011 The Dutch Dance Festival, together with Centro per la Scena Contemporanea Bassano del Grappa (Italy) and Dance House Lemosos (Cyprus), initiated the international program Act Your Age. The aim of this international project, still continuing, is to overturn and, at the same time, complement existing perceptions of ageing and being old with dance as the point of departure.

A range of different projects has been developed since, from bringing retired dancers on stage, to engaging the elderly living in nursing homes in dance with their caregivers and family, creating a choreography together. Experts from the arts sector and health care, and from medical and social science are involved, and a growing intergenerational audience is appreciating the different outcomes. Our most recent project is called (Old)Fashion(ed), where men and woman of 70 and older, most of them discovering dance for the first time, work together with up-and-coming and established choreographers. Together with young fashion designers and retired craftsmen, they created fashion, and a series of short performances, a cross between a fashion show and a choreography, touching a diverse audience when it was performed recently.

I would like to take the opportunity to share with you what we have experienced and learned since 2011.

We learned that it is important to create projects that are inviting all participants, and I underline, all participants, to gain new experience.

When we started our projects some years ago, we were surprised to find out that very often potential partners, from different institutes to individuals, talked about the elderly as the Other. The Other, waiting to be stimulated, or activated.... or to be discovered as a wonderful, exotic, beautiful specimen which would look great on stage.

The fact that we all grow older, each day, and that aging, in the wider sense of changing, gathering more and more, but also having to learn to let go more and more, seemed to be denied. Despite it being something that we all know, and with which we are all occupied. The dominant attitude of the professional was, to be ready to facilitate the elderly, to be at their service.

But was this the collaboration we were looking for? We were thinking of a collaboration in which each partner was able to receive and give. In which each partner could have an equal appeal towards the other.

So, to take our last project (Old)Fashion(ed) as an example, we interviewed each partner. From each individual older participant, to the established choreographer, to the young fashion designer, to the craftsmen. And we asked them... What would you like to experience? What would you like to develop, to learn? We were looking for a balanced collaboration. A collaboration where each participant could ask the other participant to step out of their known practice, or known activities, discovering new – yet shared- territories together.

It seems so obvious, but it is not. It conflicts with the presumption that a truthful project with the elderly is a project where the desires and needs of the older participants are always at the centre,

the other participants ready to respond. But is this a serious encounter? In (Old)Fashion(ed), the choreographers and fashion designers did challenge the elderly, but the elderly challenged them as well. The elderly were aware of their often younger collaborators desire to learn, and were empowered because their contribution to this learning was seen and acknowledged. Working together, and learning together, was and is the starting point of our different projects.

Again, it seems so obvious, but it is not. It questions the existing formats and criteria created by us, artists, governments, scientists, decision makers, and funding bodies. When we start to think inclusive, intergenerational, and we want to create projects where personal and professional learning is intertwined, we have to fight existing models and patterns. Our patterns, our models. This working conference is an important step. Our encounter today is an important step..

Talking about encounters...

Via art, we express ourselves. We communicate. We communicate differently, body and mind intertwined, we open new worlds, we have a different dialogue within ourselves, with our colleague human beings, with our environment.

The encounter in the process of making art, with all the involved participants is essential.

But the process of showing is as essential. Another thing that we have learned is that there is a growing audience of different generations, that is inspired, touched and sometimes provoked by the works we have created with the elderly. They are longing for more, hungry for experience and images, helping them to connect to their own process of aging. Perhaps I should add that the individual craftsmen and dancers, working in (Old)Fashion(ed), were partly found via their grandchildren. These audience members, in their twenties, had seen previous work with the elderly in our festival, and were keen to see more.

We have to present our work. In the main venues and festivals, in public space, on the internet.

During The Dutch Dance Festival, the performances with the elderly, programmed next to the selected choreographies of the most established professional dance companies, were highly appreciated, both by our audiences, and by the dance critics. The works were recognised as works touching the core of our human existence. The works talked about us.

Us.

The participants were lifted, and the audience was lifted. New images were created, new practices were developed.

I like to think that this is exactly the responsibility we can embrace today and tomorrow. Let us examine existing images, formats, and beliefs. When we talk about the elderly, we talk about ourselves as well. We are all growing older, and part of us is seen already as old, or very old.

Let us have honest encounters. Playful and profound questioning. Balanced dialogues.

Thank you.

Peggy Ollislaegers, director Dutch Dance Festival

**London, Working Conference Long Live Arts - Cultural participation by older people.  
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