didaskalia
gazeta teatralna

From the issue: **English Issue 2023**
DOI: 10.34762/k8gd-3f45
Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/social-dances-seniors-choreographies-susceptible-fragility

/ EXERCISES IN ACCESS INTIMACY

Social Dances for Seniors: Choreographies Susceptible to Fragility

Alicja Müller | Jagiellonian University, Kraków

The article discusses selected strategies of theatrical collaboration with male and female seniors with no stage experience where the aim is not only to encourage health-promoting behaviours in a group with difficult access to culture, but also to produce events of high artistic value that might be included in the professional theatrical circulation. The author describes two productions – Barbara Bujakowska's *The Voice of Seniors* and Daria Kubisiak's *Przyjaciółka* (Friend) in which senior people are empowered and share in the creative process together with professional artists. The article also draws attention to the dangers associated with tokenistic, i.e. apparent, inclusion and emotional exploitation of other bodies, and points to possible alternatives to the narratives that infantilize older people. Referring to Judith Butler's reflections on frail bodies, the author analyzes theatrical practices of care and concern. The article argues that stage emanations of the frailty of old bodies disenchant the stereotype of old age as a time of radically limited possibilities.

Keywords: frailty; old age; Barbara Bujakowska; Daria Kubisiak; inclusive choreography

Other possibilities

In one of his essays, François Chirpaz writes about somatic non-transparency that becomes an attribute of other (non-typical and

conspicuous) bodies (1998). Crucial to somatic non-transparency is the mode of experiencing the world and being in it rather than the mere visual difference. A body becomes non-transparent when it starts offering resistance during everyday activities, forces us to exert greater effort, or makes it impossible for us to take our next steps. For Chirpaz, non-transparency is synonymous with disability and illness, as well as with fatigue and pain, that is, in general, with conditions in which the situation of the body cannot be ignored and when the physical persistently reminds us of its autonomy, manifesting non-conformity, unruliness and insusceptibility to the activist efforts of the will. Chirpaz argues that illness does not only affect the body but it touches and changes our entire lives, 'a sick person is not just someone with a weakened heart but someone operating in a world that itself is too weak and contracted' (p. X). The French philosopher does not distinguish between chronic pain and motor disability, which does not need to involve pain. He argues that any deviation from the psychophysical norm becomes the source of radical limitations. Consequently, the body's otherness cannot be framed in affirmative terms. Old age is a variant of non-transparency, therefore, for Chirpaz, aging must be considered a process of anti-vital emancipation of the body, which gradually both inhabits and thwarts ever more spaces of the subject's activity. In other words, the body's potentialities become negatively actualized.

In this article I look at theatre practices that reach beyond the discourses that are limited to regarding old age as a period of dramatic reduction in the spectrum of choices and opportunities. However, I am not interested in stories of superheroic seniors or people experiencing a 'second youth.' Instead, I examine theatre works in which senior-age performers explore what from the perspective of the capitalist cult of young and fit bodies would be referred to as spaces of non-normative agency. I do not want to compile a

catalogue of all possible theatrical and/or choreographic formats of working with seniors or to offer a sociological and community-oriented analysis of such work. Rather, I discuss two productions, Barbara Bujakowska's *The Voice of Seniors*[1] and Daria Kubisiak's *Friend*[2] (Przyjaciółka),[3] which treat seniors as partners and subjects and do not stage old age as a source of emotion or existential impasse. *The Voice of Seniors* is a theatre collage of personal and collective stories in which fragments of intimate and, most of all, carnal-affective archives are intermixed with snippets of cultural memory (Bujakowska draws upon texts of well-known women writers). *Friend*, by contrast, focuses on the phenomenon of the iconic magazine *Przyjaciółka* ([Female] Friend), established in 1948, and in some sense reactivates its reading community.

One of the things the two pieces have in common is the involvement of seniors (most of whom have no previous stage experience and are not members of groups based in community centres)[4] and professionalism understood as skills and technical aspects, including music and scenery.[5] Key differences include the subject matter – Bujakowska foregrounds the experience of old age, while Kubisiak zooms in on the phenomenon of *Przyjaciółka* magazine and on what I have termed 'susceptibility to fragility.' By 'susceptibility' I do not mean negatively valued states such as submission or passivity. I define it in affirmative terms as a vulnerability or weakness which, when manifested, can be part of resistance (which, in the case of the works under discussion, refers to resistance against the ideology of the norm embodied in representations of strong, fit and efficient bodies).

In *The Voice of Seniors*, the performers are on the stage alone (except for the musician, who is not involved in the action), and any potential mistakes seem to be part of the idea of the show. In *Friend*, the seniors are (non-

invasively) accompanied onstage by the composer Weronika Krówka. In *The Voice of Seniors* fragility is an attribute, while in *Friend* it is a controlled potentiality. Potential failure is of course integral to theatre – bodies are not infallible and memory plays tricks at any age, but it seems that in Bujakowska's and Kubisiak's productions, precarity becomes an aesthetic-political category.

I regard *The Voice of Seniors* and *Friend* as alternative propositions to participatory initiatives that are solely dedicated to promoting health and activizing groups with limited access to the arts, and as such exist outside of the professional theatre circuit. I refer to them alternately as 'productions/pieces' or as 'choreographies.' While movement is not the dominant medium in neither *The Voice of Seniors* nor *Friend*, both are genre hybrids in which dance is the essential element propelling the dramatic development and activating relationships.[6] The choreographies echo back to the era of disc jockeys and old-school social dances, which linger on on the margins of mainstream culture, particularly, but not exclusively, in spa resorts, although they are now less popular than clubbing.

Bujakowska and Kubisiak revive the crude aesthetic of 20th-century social dances, treating the dancefloor as a meeting space. The democratic idea of 'going dancing,' often associated with social dances, frees the performers from the need to pretend to aspire to virtuosity, opening up to uncodified physical expression, to the potential of rhythm-driven yet non-unified being together. In both pieces, the seniors wear elegant, even extravagant outfits. The multi-colour dresses and suits remind me of Pina Bausch's ceremonial processions. The two choreographies might be seen as echoing the practice of the founder of Tanztheater Wuppertal. In 2000, Bausch revived one of her early pieces, *Kontakthof* (1978),[7] the poignant tragicomic tale of a violent

world of interpersonal relationships, pulsating to the beat of sentimental 1950s songs. The revived version had a cast of 26 seniors with no previous theatre experience, who engaged in 12 months of intense work before the opening night.

Bausch did not choose material considered suitable for her performers' age and capabilities, and her piece was not about old bodies refusing to give up. Rather, she worked with ready-made material or, to be exact, with a physical score. Interestingly, she later staged the same choreography with a group of teenagers. Without changing the physical structures, she explored the spaces of youth and old age as spheres of potentiality choreographed by bodies dancing themselves (*sobątańczące ciała*). The seniors' gestures, in a way, extended the initial sequences to include embodied stories of their long lives, while the teenagers' movements were like explosions of curiosity, renewed initiations into adulthood in various configurations. The experiences of the old bodies were not so much the central theme of *Kontakthof* but the factor transforming the choreographic narrative focused on meeting places, taking it in an unexpected direction. The outcome was a production in which the seniors were dancers rather than 'old folk' performing on stage. The subjective treatment of female performers in Kubisiak's and Bujakowska's shows also manifests in a departure from the infantilizing fantasy of old age that sees it as a life stage when the space of creative possibilities becomes limited rather than one allowing for physical experimentation. The two productions offer an alternative to participatory initiatives that emphasize the non-professionalism of their participants and thus position themselves outside the realm of 'serious' art and to works that resort to tokenistic, spurious inclusion, which objectifies their participants.

Choreographies of fragility

In writing about fragility as an aesthetic-political category, I am inspired by the philosophy of Judith Butler or, more specifically, by two of their publications: *Frames of War* (2009) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). The contexts of the philosopher's considerations are, of course, different from the contexts informing this article: *Frames of War* explores media representations of armed conflict; *Notes*, by contrast, discusses protesting bodies that publicly express collective protest. This notwithstanding, the notion of fragility as that which is shared by both human and non-human subjects has an ontological foundation or, in other words, it describes the mode of inhabiting a shared world.[8] I invoke it in a necessarily simplified form without the background built by Butler before proceeding to examine how it applies in theatrical situations. In my approach, fragility is seen as not only a property of every being and body but as a trait of choreographic-theatrical alliances with the Others of the neoliberal norm, established to democratize the 'right to appear.' Butler writes of the right to appear in the context of public gatherings – bodies manifest themselves through voice, movement or just through their material presence, thus changing social choreographies, breaching the established divisions between the visible and invisible. The philosopher focuses on bodies she refers to as 'precarious,' that is, ones that, to a greater extent than others, 'suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (2009, p. 25). The precariousness of these bodies is palpable, overt and, in a way, compounded by their lack of protection. By showing it in public in situations of protest, the bodies demand its redistribution. In other words, they demand the right to live a good life no more susceptible to injury than other

lives. Thus, precariousness becomes not so much a collective identity as an ephemeral alliance of hyper-precarious bodies, the objective of which is to undermine the hegemonic structures of majority privilege. The idea is to generate new rules of interpersonal, or even interspecies, cohabitation, the cornerstone of which – alongside mutual concern – will be, at least, the equalization of our chances of dignified survival.

Butler addresses issues related to fundamental human needs, in particular those concerning existential and financial security. Precarious bodies are queer, non-normative, disabled, black, immigrant, and so on. The philosopher does not address old age, but they emphasize that patriarchy confines seniors, as well as children, women and slaves, to private spaces and denies them the right to public and politically-related appearance. As Łukasz Wójcicki contends, 'patriarchal culture driven by capitalism is doing its best to erase old age. It would be ideal to convince everyone that there is no such thing as old age' (2021).[9] Wójcicki goes on to enumerate the practices of infantilizing and belittling and of commodifying senior citizens, the purpose of the latter, in addition to reinforcing capital, is to erase difference – older persons are welcome as long as they choose to take part in the performance of beauty mimicry, making themselves look like young people by hiding the signs of approaching death. Seniors are expected to mask their fragility, because its manifestations threaten the capitalist-ablist vision of the world and infect the 'healthy' fabric of the society of success and beautiful, strong and fit bodies.

Testimonies of the impermanence or non-self-sufficiency of human life and its susceptibility to decay, disintegration and the shrinking space of possibilities radically deconstruct neoliberal illusions associated with the rational logos and the slogan 'you can be anything you want.' The

dramaturgy of old age is unpredictable since old bodies are uncontrollable: they get ill, slow down, swell up, lose weight, bulge, cave in. In this regard, they resemble the bodies of children who are yet to internalize discipline and the hegemonic regimes of visibility. This does not mean, of course, that old bodies are completely unruly, or that old age is a time of mental incapacity. I understand unpredictability as an inevitable process of somatic and physiological changes that occur naturally, regardless of a person's health or financial resources. We all gradually succumb to fragility.

By recognizing and accepting the fragility of our bodies and identities, we notice our social nature and interdependence. Creating spaces where bodies can manifest their inherent fragility and precariousness is an ethical act. It also offers a chance to develop an alternative to the capitalist logic of self-sufficiency that promotes resourcefulness, efficiency, entrepreneurial spirit, productivity and competition while invalidating the significance and subjectivity of those who do not conform to that norm. In Kubisiak's and Bujakowska's pieces, seniors take the stage as artists whose fragility is a property rather than a synecdoche. I want to emphasize this, because old age is easily objectified, such as by considering it an embodied metaphor for weakness and helplessness, Butlerian precariousness or vulnerability to disappearance.

In *The Voice of Seniors*, fragility is revealed, among other things, in the performers' lines and stage presence, but it does not become a substitute for identity. In *Friend*, by contrast, it is present in the choreographic sequences, the pace of which is set by Krówka, who also makes sure they do not formally disintegrate. Her supportive role is not a form of depriving the performers of agency or autonomy but an expression of solidarity, concern and support, which should not be confused with pity or paternalism. I also

want to emphasize that neither Kubisiak's nor Bujakowska's piece is about the fragility of bodies. In both choreographies, precarious bodies *appear* and perform. What is at stake is not a mere pro-health involvement of senior citizens or a subversive destabilization of normative aesthetics (and politics) achieved by including bodies representing the visual periphery into the space of the visible. The idea is to develop a theatre event format that will offer seniors the opportunity for creative interaction without having to mount the barricades of critical art, perform inspiring tenacity or agree to embarrassing artistic outcomes for the sake of mere participation.

They made them believe

The Voice of Seniors unfolds in two spaces – live and virtual. In the first scene, seniors in flamboyant rainbow-coloured costumes repeatedly move across the stage. Each crossing is initiated by a different person. The other performers walk together, but their walking is not synchronized: styles and pace very. The walking is collective, because everyone does it, but it is also differentiating, as it opens fissures in a seemingly homologous structure. This is reminiscent of Steve Paxton's 1967 *Satisfyin' Lover*, in which dozens of performers traverse the stage from right to left. The walking affirms a heterogeneous community that shares the same experience and choreographic score, celebrating the individuality of the bodies coexisting within it. For Paxton, a member of Judson Dance Theatre and the postmodern dance community, the use of everyday movement was not only a formal experiment but, above all, it expressed a protest against the esoteric-dramatic and hermetic forms of modern dance, elitist classical dance and against artistic and social hierarchies.

By opening her production with a walking scene, Bujakowska reveals its organizing principles. As is already apparent in the score of the opening scene, *The Voice of Seniors* does not universalize the experience of old age but splits it into a number of parallel scenarios that sometimes converge. At the same time, the walking bodies reveal their own potentials: each has different capabilities and is the source of different movement. In the section of the play that follow, the diversity of physical potentialities does not 'ruin' the choreography, but it makes it less restrictive. The dancing bodies are not hierarchized according to ability or virtuosity, and the open choreographic structures give them expressive freedom. In effect, the choreographer does not expose them to ridicule or subdue them by choosing easy, formulaic forms. In addition to the simple movement sequences that involve changes of direction and rhythmic arm raising, *The Voice of Seniors* includes expressive, lyrical and strongly individualized choreographic sequences in which performers embody longings and joys, or enact everyday rituals in quasi-comical ways.

The walking sequences in the first scene are interspersed with static introductions of performers. When each performer stops, their video portrait is projected on the screen behind them. The faces in the short videos look at the camera, smiling or remaining neutral. Some seem shy, others defiant. The private and the public begin to converge, the boundary between them remains jittery until the finale. The videos also show the seniors fielding questions about their likes and dislikes, pleasures and longings. The subject of death frequently comes up in their brief answers. The performers talk about loved ones they have lost and about missed opportunities. They also speak a great deal about the good things. The brevity of their answers renders the tone lighter – horrible things do not come across as personal tragedies but as part of the natural order of things. Bujakowska does not

exploit personal stories, nor does she try to elicit compassion. The fact that the seniors remain silent on stage also seems significant, as this and the restrained form of the piece generate distance.

In both the title and format of her work, Bujakowska references the popular TV show *The Voice Senior*, a version of the international format *The Voice*, in which senior citizens (60+) perform well-loved songs vying for the appreciation of the jury of voice coaches and for audience votes. The message of the show is that it is never too late to make one's stage debut and that music invalidates the cultural stereotypes about retirement. At the same time, *The Voice Senior*, like every show of its kind, raises a number of ethical questions related, among other things, to its tendency to intercut vocal performances with quasi-reports offering glances of participants' private lives, often highlighting sad, challenging or traumatic moments. As a result, votes are cast not only in recognition of talent but also for stories.[10] In Bujakowska's piece, vocal performances are interspersed with video portrayals, following the pattern of the TV show, but significant modifications have been made to disallow the exploitation of other peoples' experiences. The choreographer does not replicate the formula of the objectification of suffering designed to strengthen a show affectively – she rejects the emotional *freak show* scenario and proposes a different kind of intimacy. By injecting wit and distance, Bujakowska does not deprive *The Voice of Seniors* of qualities such as honesty and authenticity, and she triggers mechanisms that I believe are intended to prevent responses based on pity. Her piece is neither a tale of the cathartic power of dance, nor an ageist melodrama in which seniors, exposed, and open to ridicule, are merely used to elicit emotions. What seems to prevent the objectification of other bodies is the use of humour.

Unlike in *The Voice Senior*, Bujakowska's production does not follow the dramatic script of a competition, even though one of its scenes includes rivalry. The performers alternate as conductors deciding the tempo and steps. Many of them make triumphant or provocative gestures, which may bring to mind popular dance battles. The director has the performers fulfil choreographic and acting tasks, collective and individual, and the overall tone of *The Voice of Seniors* is tragicomic. It becomes bombastic and sentimental at times, but this is defused with absurdist, grotesque scenes and black humour. The choral recitations of John Lennon's lyrics for the song 'They Made Us Believe' and of excerpts from George Perec's book *The Man Who Sleeps* are juxtaposed with playful lip syncing and a string of deaths enacted to the strains of Edith Piaf's 'Non, je ne regrette rien.' On the one hand, we hear poems such as Wisława Szymborska's 'Teenage Girl' and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński's 'How Many Roads Travelled Together' as well as quotes from Katarzyna Nosowska's book *Return from Bambuko*, on the other, we witness a shot to the head from a banana gun, accompanied by a monkey's guffaw morphing into the first chords of Czesław Niemen's classic song 'This is a Strange World.' The lyrics of the Myslovitz song 'The Length of the Sound of Loneliness' recited by one of the performers is followed by an admonition that can be loosely translated as 'calm your tits, dance with us old fuckwits.'

This patchwork composition combines the bitter with the ironic, the funny and even the silly. The lines fuse together into a song that is as mournful as it is rebellious. The choir of senior performers lambast neoliberal universalism and expose the illusion of individual autonomy. They remind us that we exist in and through relationships. The performers free themselves from the homogeneous regimes of retired persons' being in the world to explore spaces of strangeness and queerness. They do what is often

considered unbecoming for seniors. The grotesque serves not only to alleviate bitterness but mostly to deconstruct and queer stereotypical representations of old age. When one of the performers forgets their lines, their fragility affects the structure of the performance, amplifying the effect of the real. Nobody feeds the forgotten lines to the confused body, but it is not left alone as others carry the scene to its conclusion. In Bujakowska's piece, old age is not heroized, idealized or infantilized, but it becomes the source of potentiality and both good and bad (or challenging) experiences. The old bodies have agency and really influence the shape of the show.

The senior bodies experiment, pretend, explore their creative potential. Karol Miękina, who taught improvisation classes in the process of creating the piece, writes,

> My main role was to open the seniors to creativity, to generating art rather than reproducing it. First of all, I wanted to show the participants that they themselves were the greatest value in creating dance, because their own bodies were their instrument, their material.[11]

At this point it is worth mentioning Simone de Beauvoir's essay 'The Coming of Age' (2011), in which she notes that as we age our somatic reality changes not only in the physical but also in the existential sphere. The palette of our possibilities shrinks, which is not necessarily due to limited mobility but also results from becoming other and the concurrent experience of social marginalization. Miękina's strategy can thus be described as a remedy for this shrinking. Improvisation broadens the horizons of the body and imagination, allowing one to move beyond the socio-cultural scripts of old

age.

Dance, which is a generator of contact and a conduit of intimacy and empathy, fulfils the same function in *The Voice of Seniors*. As Pamela Bosak writes,

> Movement, getting around the stage and disposition within the space become an operational choreographic strategy in which simplicity and expressiveness play a central role, particularly in the context of happiness, which seniors seek, and intimacy, which they want and need. A silent disco with other people or slow dancing creates an atmosphere of warmth, tenderness, mutual support and fun (2022).

Bujakowska's practice, which I term 'sensitive choreographing,' enables forming empathetic alliances not only between the particularly vulnerable bodies of the seniors but also between them and the audience. The source of the empathy, however, is not the concern about the predicament of others and a difference-erasing identification with it but the interaction space pervaded with intimacy and tenderness on the one hand and with distance on the other. As Anna Łebkowska argues,

> Empathy cannot be reduced to the pursuit of complete identification, because it involves a perpetual tension between otherness and the pursuit of intimacy. In other words, the relationships in question tend to be based on the paradox of empathizing and standing aside, of deliberately suppressing one's expression while at the same time refraining from excessively

interfering with another person's autonomy (2008, p. 33).

The Voice of Seniors, due to its grotesque-comic elements, presents exactly that sort of paradoxical blend of simultaneous strangeness and intimacy and, therefore, a deliberate exercise in choreographing empathy.[12]

The club of *Przyjaciółka* lovers

Eighteen women and one man perform onstage in Daria Kubisiak's theatre event. The story they enact is not based on their personal experiences but on letters to the editor and advice published in *Przyjaciółka* ([Female] Friend), a magazine that was extremely popular in communist Poland.[13] The structure of *Friend* corresponds to the diverse thematic range of the magazine, which, as we learn from the play's description, published 'legal, matrimonial, psychological and life-practice advice.' The set seems a nostalgic fantasy about a bygone era, organized by nostalgic imagination rather than by historical memory. The cluttered editor's desk with an old-style typewriter looks like a museum piece but it is just an ordinary table dressed up with communist-style trimmings. The darkened space is tainted red by warm light or it vibrates in the lights of a mirrored disco ball, while Anna Jantar's songs transport us to the world of a 1970s musical. The archival copies of *Przyjaciółka* the performers clutch in their hands serve as media through which the past is made present.

Kubisiak draws parallels with ritual and festival, opening a choreographic fantasy about the community-forming role of the magazine. A multi-hued procession of beautifully dressed figures saunters around the editors' desk, picking up copies of the magazine. They sing a festive song that includes the iconic slogan 'bądź przyjaciółką *Przyjaciółki*' (be a friend of *Friend*). This

choral parade is led by Krówka, who loudly announces shifts in its dramaturgy and marks time. Her role is not so much to discipline the seniors as it is to support them with her presence. The walking bodies perform the pleasure of reading in various ways – by swaying, marching, waving to loved ones, or taking slow, tentative steps.

The composer's role throughout the performance can be described in terms of embodied care. In a sense, her body becomes a prosthetic extension of the seniors' memory, but it does not command all the attention. She is an affectionate ally, not the star of a show in which the seniors' dancing serves as an interesting or touching backdrop. The composer-cum-performer feeds the right steps and transitions. She is not unlike a wedding dance leader tasked with making sure that everyone has a great time. Importantly, Krówka's actions do not seem intrusive or condescending. One reason for this is that she is not someone from outside the scenic world of the show whose role is to oversee the unruly bodies of the performers or possessively protect them from potential failure. She becomes one of the performers, taking on the role an the eccentric conductor.

Kubisiak's empathetic directing, which focuses on the performers' needs and accounts for their varying abilities, is reflected in the structure of *Friend*, which includes a complex support system. Some monologues are read from cards, so that the seniors do not have to rely on their memories. At one point, Kubisiak, who is in the audience, strikes a conversation with one of the seniors, giving her subtle hints as to which lines she should utter next. In *Friend*, the seniors are cared for, but it does not mean they have no agency. Their agency manifests in their often surprising interpretations of their physical tasks and in the way they approach their acting parts, demonstrating the diversity of their acting personalities. The director

constantly reminds us that allied collectives can help expand the range of their members' creative and existential possibilities. The structure of *Friend* may be seen as a theatrical embodiment of the solidarity-based ethic of care.[14] Kubisiak creates a horizontal support network, which is inclusive and flexible and in which fragile and precarious bodies can feel at home and act creatively. Fragility is accepted and strengthened rather than negated or overcome.

In a way, the dramatic development of *Friend* follows the eclectic mix of themes featured in the magazine. In *Przyjaciółka*, tips on how to handle and store canned food and whisk eggs sit alongside advice for those discovering the oft-terrifying world of dating and courtship, for girls who want to exit patriarchal structures and for women stuck in toxic relationships. *Przyjaciółka* writers celebrate girlhood and offer an alternative to the narrative of one correct model of womanhood. They address gender inequalities as well as alcohol and co-dependency problems. Some stories cited by Kubisiak are shocking, but the advice given to the readers is prodding and sobering, as well as tender and supportive. *Przyjaciółka* appears to be a medium of grassroots allyship and an alternative non-paternalistic quasi-support-institution dedicated to extending support to anyone who asks for it, regardless of their background or gender.

The seniors take on a number of roles, such as editors, letter writers and story protagonists. They perform scenes of crude courtship and tragicomic intoxication. They speak their lines with impressive intensity or restraint. At times they clown around. Their movements are sweeping and exuberant as well as graceful and charming. There is no single rule – we witness a fusion of diverse energies. The acting parts are interwoven with physical scenes in which the senior bodies explore expression through various dance forms.

In their introduction to *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, the editors Gabriele Brandstetter and Nanoko Nakajima examine the potential for reimagining the language used to describe the movement of senior-aged bodies in order to highlight the different potentiality of these bodies, eschewing phrases such as ‘not so fit anymore’ or ‘not so spry any longer.’ They propose the term ‘different ability,’ which is not intended to refer to loss but to imply ‘gain,’ ‘access of new possibilities’ (Brandstetter, Nakajima, 2017). In the same volume, Kaite O’Reilly describes the aging body as a source of creativity and inspiration. Embodiments of this kind of affirmative practice are present in *Friend*. The repertoire of bodily possibilities is expanded in the aerobics scene. Instructions such as ‘heel to bottom’ or ‘the sun is rising’ mean different things to different people, because each person has a different mobility range. In effect, the seemingly conventional movements that normally tend to unify rather than differentiate become unorthodox, unusual. The same thing happens in the waltz scene in which a formalized sequence becomes softer, transforming into friendly, rhythmic swaying. The disco improvisation to the Diana Ross song ‘I’m Coming Out,’ by contrast, marks an explosion of physical diversity that pays no heed to convention.

***

In their productions, Bujakowska and Kubisiak create spaces of equitable interdependence, founded on the affirmation of fragility as that which is shared and which is a testament to the social and relational nature of human existence rather than to negatively valued weakness. Both artists choreograph empathy that is born out of the sense of being entwined with others, rather than out of a difference-erasing identification.

The Voice of Seniors and *Friend* dismantle the stereotypical representations

of old age as a period of radically shrunken potentialities. They explore and amplify the creativity of bodies with altered mobility instead of accentuating their limitations. Another aspect positioning the two productions on the side of an alternative imagination that emancipates otherness is the fact that age is not their sole subject. Although the performers in Bujakowska's piece speak and dance primarily about the experience of old age, the critique of the difference-erasing capitalist logic is strongly underscored. Kubisiak, by contrast, creates a space in which senior citizens explore a cultural phenomenon and enact various roles, not only ones connected with their age-related somatic condition.

Notably, neither of the creators stop at including other bodies in their choreographies. They share agency with them, which manifests both in the improvisation-driven scenes and in the adherence to the principle of expressive-motor diversity. The senior bodies are not forced into ready-made forms. Their individual potentials co-choreograph the generated meanings and affects, which is revealed in the scenes based on improvisation tasks. Thus, Kubisiak and Bujakowska empower the seniors, offering an alternative to neoliberal narratives that position old age as unproductive and therefore redundant.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

Niniejsza publikacja została sfinansowana ze środków Wydziału Polonistyki w ramach Programu Strategicznego Inicjatywa Doskonałości w Uniwersytecie Jagiellońskim.

This publication was financed by the Faculty of Polish Studies as part of Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University.

A Polish-language version of the article was originally published in *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna* 2023, no. 177, DOI: 10.34762/q7fa-gz96.

Author

Alicja Müller, PhD (alicja.muller@uj.edu.pl), is a dance critic and researcher. Her book *Sobątańczenie: Między choreografią a narracją* (Dancing Oneself: Between Choreography and Narrative) was published in 2017. ORCID: 0000-0002-3490-1419.

Footnotes

1. Bujakowska's piece, co-created by Karol Miękina and Łukasz Laxy and produced by the Kraków Choreographic Centre/Nowa Huta Cultural Centre, was co-financed by the governments of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from the International Visegrad Fund. The work was produced as part of the 'Lifelong Art in V4 Countries' project. For details, visit the website of the Kraków Choreographic Centre: https://nck.krakow.pl/kcc/projekt-artystyczny-dla-seniorow (in Polish) [accessed: 14.04.2023]. Photos by Klaudyna Schubert, video by Alexander Hordziej. The cast includes Barbara Morgan, Małgorzata Chodzińska, Włodzimierz Żurek, Grażyna Ladra, Grażyna Kuświk, Janina Zarzycka-Bem, Ewa Michałowicz, Bogumiła Simińska, Marta Kuklicz, Urszula Kłosowska and Jacek Dyląg. The production premiered on 2 August 2022 during the Kraków Dance Festival. *The Voice of Seniors* is part of a triptych directed by Bujakowska, who reprised the same format with children and with forty-year-olds.
2. Produced as part of the City of Kraków Scholarship awarded to Kubisiak, the play premiered on 3 March 2023 at the Juliusz Słowacki Theatre in Kraków. Weronika Krówka composed the music. The producer is Oliwia Kuc. Cast: Krystyna Herej-Szymańska, Mirosława Gruca, Beata Grzejdziak, Krystyna Kruk, Anna Malkiewicz, Marina Belokoneva-Shiukashvili, Maria Marzec, Krystyna Maciurzyńska, Danuta Namaczyńska, Henia Nowak, Danuta Oczkowska, Wiesława Porębska, Józef Potrzebowski, Neli Rokita-Arnoud, Małgorzata Santorska, Nina Stepanko, Alicja Skotnicka, Barbara Sztandara, Danuta Walecka.
3. Daria Kubisiak is my colleague, with whom I co-curated, together with Zuzanna Berendt and Izabela Zawadzka, the programme 'New Choreography: Directions and Practices,' funded by the Heritage Priority Research Area of Heritage Open Courses (Edition A) as part of the 'Excellence Initiative' programme of the Jagiellonian University (2022). Barbara Bujakowska was our guest speaker together with the cast members of *The Voice of Seniors*. In 2020 I worked with her on the second edition of 'Rollercoaster: Experience Collectors, An

Educational Programme,' which I coordinated. At the time, I watched her intergenerational workshop focused on Kantor's *The Anatomy Lesson of Rembrandt*.
4. This distinguishes their work from productions such as *Once Upon a Time There Was an Old Man and an Old Woman* (Był sobie dziad i baba), directed by Agnieszka Błońska and choreographed by Anna Godowska (2009), which featured retired dancers, or Mikołaj Mikołajczyk's piece produced since 2012 in collaboration with the senior choir Wrzos and the Polish House in Zakrzew, which also included Iwona Pasińska, Adam Ferency, Paweł Sakowicz, Edyta Herbuś and the choreographer herself.
5. This is confirmed, among other things, by the accolade awarded by Katarzyna Waligóra in the 12th episode of Theatre Podcast, Theatre Roundup 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR7CkHpz_1Q, [accessed 14.04.2023]. Kubisiak's piece was created as a scholarship project, which will make its further exploitation difficult. Projects of this kind tend to have a limited lifespan. In other, more favourable circumstances, the production could become part of the repertory.
6. In their publicity materials, *Friend* is referred to as 'stage event' while *The Voice of Seniors* is described as 'dance piece.' Kubisiak is not a choreographer – she is a director, playwright, dramaturg and educator. Bujakowska has a background in dance and choreography, but she eschewes labels. Speaking to Katarzyna Waligóra, she said, 'Who am I? A dancer? A director? A person who makes theatre? I don't know what to call myself, and I don't know if I need it. I often feel I'm not really welcome in the dance community, because there is too little movement in my work. I don't belong in the theatre field, because I have a background in dance, and looking from that perspective, there is too much movement and not enough words in my work' (Bujakowska, Waligóra, 2022).
7. It was revived in 2000 as *Kontakthof: With Ladies and Gentlemen over 65*.
8. Butler defines precariousness, which I treat as synonymous with fragility, as social rather than as a property of individual subjects. The philosopher writes, 'precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.' (2009, p. 14).
9. In his column, Wójcicki focuses on agism in the field of dance, noting the fact that dancers are prematurely excluded from their profession. In this article I do not address this topic or examine work that features older and old bodies of professional dancers. Yet I would like to note that ageism in the Western dance community is systemic – the presence of older bodies on stage often has subversive overtones, as it involves a radical breach of the status quo (cf. Nakajima, 2011; Burt, Foellmer, 2017; Franko 2017).
10. This is of course only one of the problems associated with this format. One might also examine the differences in prestige between *The Voice of Poland*, *The Voice Kids* and *The Voice Senior*, which are due, among other things, to their unequal airtime and different awards, and the decision to launch a version for seniors, considering the fact that the rules of *The Voice of Poland* do not stipulate an upper age limit (https://s.tvp.pl/repository/attachment/e/d/0/ed04a75d084a4f75a8d32bcbe8d7234f.pdf [accessed: 9.06.2023]). Such an analysis, however, would significantly exceed the thematic scope of my article.
11. The quote comes from the project website: https://nck.krakow.pl/kcc/blog/projekt-artystyczny-dla-seniorow-o-procesiepracy/ [accessed 14.04.2023].
12. The notion of kinesthetic empathy – related to the sensation of other people's movement and the work of mirror neurons but not necessarily to emotional empathy – figures

prominently in dance theory. The spectator, Gabriela Karolczak explains, '"resonates" with the performer of an action through partial simulation of the same movement at the neural level' (2012, p. 107). Susan Leigh Foster (2011) writes about 'choreographing empathy,' referring to Edith Stein's ideas, for whom empathy involves both the bodily experience of connection with another person and the awareness that that experience is not directly ours (in Karolczak, 2012, p. 109). Following Foster's proposal, which chimes with Łebkowska's theory cited above, one should seek the possibility of an empathic relationship with the Other through the recognition of difference rather than through building an illusion of unity or identity. When discussing 'choreographing empathy' in the context of Bujakowska's work, I primarily mean the dramatic development in which distance, irony and (black) humour combine to inactivate the difference-erasing mechanism of 'getting inside someone else's skin.'

13. At its peak in 1952, the circulation of the magazine reached two million copies (cf. Zajko-Czochańska, 2021, p. 156).

14. Following Carol Gilligan, I understand the ethics of care in opposition to the 'ethics of justice' (2015). The former is not founded on universal principles and, as Joanna Różyńska explains, it situates 'the ideas of autonomy, pure rationality, impartiality, objectivity, functionality, normal equality and universality in opposition to a completely new set of values, foremost among which are interdependence, care and empathy, particularity, contextuality and focus on the needs of the other' (2005, p. 44).

Bibliography

Beauvoir, Simone de, *Starość* [*La Vieillesse*], trans. Z. Styszyńska, Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2011.

Bosak, Pamela, 'Trwaj w ruchu, bądź,' *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, 2022, no. 171, https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/trwaj-w-ruchu-badz, [accedded: 14.04.2023].

Brandstetter, Gabrielle, Nakajima, Nanako (eds), 'Introduction,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Burt, Ramsay, 'Yvonne Rainer's Convalescent Dance: On Valuing Ordinary, Everyday, and Unidealised Bodily States in the Context of the Aging Body in Dance,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. N. Nakajima, G. Brandstetter, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London and New York 2009.

Butler, Judith, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London 2015.

Foellmer, Susanne, 'Bodies' Borderlands: Right in the Middle. Dis/Abilities on Stage,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. N. Nakajima, G. Brandstetter, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Chirpaz, François, *Ciało* [*Le corps*], trans. J. Migasiński, Warszawa 1998.

Foster, Susan Leigh, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, London and New York 2011.

Franko, Mark, 'Why Are Hands the Last Resort of the Aging Body in Dance? Notes on the Modernist Gesture and the Sublime,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. N. Nakajima, G. Brandstetter, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Gilligan, Carol, *Innym głosem. Teoria psychologiczna a rozwój kobiet* [*In a Different Voice*], trans. B. Szelewa, Warszawa 2015.

Karolczak, Gabriela, 'O choreografowaniu empatii i neuronach lustrzanych,' *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, 2012, no. 112.

Kuppers, Petra, 'Somatic Politics: Community Dance and Aging Dance,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. N. Nakajima, G. Brandstetter, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Łebkowska, Anna, *Empatia. O literackich narracjach przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Universitas, Kraków 2008.

Nakajima, Nanako, 'De-aging Dancerism? The Aging Body in Contemporary and Community Dance,' *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 2011, no. 3.

'Spektakle w stylu vintage – z Barbarą Bujakowską rozmawia Katarzyna Waligóra,' taniecPOLSKA.pl, 21.01.2022, https://taniecpolska.pl/krytyka/spektakle-w-stylu-vintage-z-barbara-bujakowskarozmawia-katarzyna-waligora/ [accessed: 14.04.2023].

O'Reilly, Kaite, 'Silent Rhythm: A Reflection on the Aging, Changing Body, and Sensory Impairment as a Source of Creativity and Inspiration,' [in:] *The Aging Body in Dance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. N. Nakajima, G. Brandstetter, Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Różyńska, Joanna, 'Etyka troski, czyli jak kobiety myślą i mówią o moralności,' *Prawo i Płeć*, 2005, no. 2.

Wójcicki, Łukasz, 'Starość na scenie tańca: potencjał porażki,' *Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna*, 2021, no. 166, https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/starosc-na-scenie-tanca-potencjalporazki [accessed: 14.04.2023].

Zajko-Czochańska, Justyna, '*Przyjaciółka* jako źródło do badań nad tematyką kobiet w Polsce (1945–1989),' in *Badania historii kobiet polskich na tle porównawczym: kierunki, problematyka, perspektywy*, ed. M. Dajnowicz, A. Miodowski, Instytut Badań nad Dziedzictwem Kulturowym Europy, Białystok 2021.