

SIXTY AND STILL COUNTING

by: **Gus Dick Andros**

General Douglas Mac Arthur said, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away. " What happens to old dancers? I'm just a sneeze away from seventy, still teaching ballet and writing about dance. I, for one, refuse to fade away, and many of my peers agree. In my late twenties I tore a tendon from my ankle bone and thought that my dancing career was over. Instead of leaving the theater, I decided to teach dance and to choreograph.

I have been more active in the dance world as a teacher and as a choreographer than I was as a performer. I feel I have contributed to the education of many younger and older dancers. Having had the good fortune to have studied with the greatest teachers in America, such as The Christensen Brothers, Sonia Wojcikowska, Vera Nemchinova, Margaret Craske, Anatole Oboukhoff, Antony Tudor and many others, I feel privileged to pass on what they taught me. The large vocabulary I learned allows me to teach and to choreograph.

Young dancers think their lives are over when they reach the age of forty. There have been dancers who have continued performing into their sixties, although they are rare. Many more have become teachers and choreographers. How lucky we are to have the expertise of people like Alexandra Danilova, Frederic Franklin and Jerome Robbins. Mr. Franklin, at eighty, is still restoring many classical ballets.

One interesting aspect of being in this select group of dancers over sixty is to know that when we were born there was not a single ballet company in the United States--no American Ballet Theater, no New York City Ballet, no ballet whatsoever. The oldest continuing American ballet company is the San Francisco Ballet Company which originated in 1933. This fact makes us pioneers in the world of ballet and we have done a good job over the years of raising the standards and technique to what we enjoy today.

Many 60+ dancers continue working in the theater after retiring. They are not ready to turn in their dance slippers, although some are now working in jobs far from the footlights. Some of the dancers I worked with are now in publishing, insurance, medicine, physical therapy, etc. They have told me the discipline they learned in dance class has helped them succeed in their present positions.

When I started to write this article, I knew how I felt. To make sure I wasn't speaking for others, I sent out questionnaires to dancers that are 60+, and received back answers that showed many felt as I did.

"When did you start to study and when did you have your first professional job?"
The answers were divided between the sexes. The females started their training early, but because of the World War II most males started after their time in the service.

"Name the teachers who inspired you and why?"

Answers about their teachers were beautiful. Bestowing love and respect on their instructors, and adding names to my list: Mikhail Fokine, Aubrey Hitchins, Edward Caton, Nanette Charisse, Vincenzo Celli, George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm and especially their beginning teachers. Our teachers taught us the use of space, performing skills, taste and style, musicianship, attention to details, love, creativity, professional discipline, and above all else they encouraged us to dance. What they taught was not only for the stage.

We had teachers that would berate us in front of others for some infraction of the rules; sometimes we were embarrassed and angry. Once a teacher said, "You're dropping your back."

"My back was lifted!" I retorted. The teacher just walked away and I knew that that was it for me if I didn't apologize.

After class I went to the teacher and said, "I'm sorry, I don't know why I was so rude."

"It's okay. You're just having a bad day." The teacher smiled. I never spoke out again. From that time on after a correction, I would thank them for the time they spent with me.

Teachers have always been paid by the number of students in class, but our teachers didn't cater to our egos to get their commission.

To the question, "If you had it to do over would you still have become a dancer?" The answer was unanimously YES! Paul Coates added, "Yes, but this time a good one." Many of my colleagues still take class, if only the barre. Why? According to Barbara Walzac, "Habit." Cathy Conklin informed me that it helps the emotional and physical well being.

Very few of us ended our careers without injuries, some permanent but most temporary. The worst injury to us was to tear the achilles tendon, because at that time it was the end of your dancing career. We didn't have tendonitis. We had pain and we knew we had to go on anyway. I tell my students that we are allowed a certain number of

relevés in a lifetime, and not to waste them. Wear and tear on the body has been a small price to pay for the joy of earning a living doing what we love.

As museum pieces we know that we can still contribute to the dance world. Those of us who have been happy in that world for over forty years have a responsibility to keep the tradition of dance alive. Speaking for many, I know we are willing and ready to help the younger dancers preparing for a professional career.

We are aware that dance is different today than it was when we were young, and agree that many of today's dancers are better technicians. Their lack of performing skills can be learned from their older colleagues.

I have many dancers who are 60+ taking my ballet class and they can hold their own with the best of them. Even though the virtuosity of their youth may have diminished a bit. Unfortunately there wasn't a way of recording their skills. Videos didn't exist 25 years ago, so there wasn't a way to preserve their past glories. However, some of today's teachers, directors and choreographers can be seen in a unique video tape available at the Lincoln Center Gift Shop of Leonide Massine's *Gaite Parisienne* danced by Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. A real balletomane, Victor Jessen took film with his eight-millimeter camera over a ten year period, and shot bits and pieces from different locations in the theater. With the help of Frederic Franklin he edited a film showing the excitement and love for dance.

Dancing brought us joy and we hope our young colleagues have the love of "Dance" and not just the hunger for stardom.

This article is about dancers who are 60+. But it is meant for the young dancers who are working today. Dancing is the only performing art that has an age limit for a performer, but there are many ways to stay in the field. The over-60 crowd enjoys the rewards that come with it.

If dance is to continue to improve young dancers must continue as teachers, choreographers or directors after they retire. A complete dance education is a prerequisite. Let me paraphrase the adage from George Santayana's *Life of Reason*. How can we know where we are going if we don't know where we've been?

Teachers today are doing their best to get students to learn more and work harder. Instructors who allow students to dress in a fashion that doesn't allow a complete view of the body are unable to correct mistakes hidden among the layers of clothing.

As a student of dance I never thought of leaving a class before it was over. I don't understand the need for a long delay between barre and center. You work hard to warm the body, and it only takes minutes to cool. When there is an absence of discipline in the classroom and the students are allowed to do an exercise as they wish, it upsets me. A

whole generation of dancers doing what they want will later be the teachers. That is frightening.

When communicating with other 60+ dancers we agree there were no dilettantes in our classes. We were there to learn and take whatever was given. If our feelings were hurt, that was part of the learning process.

I feel very sorry for the young dancer of today. From the end of World War II until the sixties, there were jobs in ballet companies, shows and television. Today ballet companies can't find work enough to keep their dancers eating and shows either do not require well trained dancers (dancers who sing or singers who dance), or the dancing has little meaning. Agnes de Mille brought good ballet to the stage, and now we, the audience and choreographers, have let it go. I am amazed that a group of dancers dancing in unison is considered choreography. If line dancing wins a "Tony" then the Rockettes should have won every year.

If others feel the same as I do and more of us make a concerted effort to pass on the traditional discipline and inspiration of the past, we could look forward to the next 60 years of dance with great anticipation.