

When Choreographers Bow to Older Dancers

By WILLIAM HARRIS

WHEN DONNA UCHIZONO'S new evening-length work "The Sage's Passage" has its premiere on Thursday at the Kitchen, the audience will not be exposed to a typical display of downtown dance featuring sleek bodies and spiky haircuts darting through space. Ms. Uchizono's troupe is made up of two men in their 20's, two women in their 30's (including Ms. Uchizono), two women in their 50's, one man in his 60's and one septuagenarian. The four older company members, all professionals dancers, were recruited after a three-month search and dozens of phone calls.

Ms. Uchizono is not the first choreographer to work with older dancers — to challenge the boundaries of what or who is acceptable onstage. The wrinkle, so to speak, is that in two sections of Ms. Uchizono's work, all the dancers will be naked — full frontal nudity under harsh, white light with no musical accompaniment. "The nudity is designed to be confrontational as well as an expression of vulnerability," she says. "We rarely see images of older people nude. Why has that become such an awkward issue?"

Age is not an issue for choreographers like

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Annabelle Gamson and Phyllis Lamhut, both veterans who now make dances for middle-aged performers. So do Liz Lerman and Stephan Koplowitz, who also choreographs for people of various ages, including children. For Ms. Lerman and Mr. Koplowitz, dance is a form of community activism. Sally Gross and Beverly Blossom, in their 50's and 60's, respectively, don't work with older dancers but choreograph for their own mature bodies.

"I feel I'm actually stronger than ever," says Ms. Gross. "It's important to not stop working — to explore new information. Besides, my waistline is still only 25."

Ms. Blossom has a rather different outlook. "When you're a dancer over 50, you sometimes forget how old you are," says the choreographer, who is known for her witty work. "You go by how you feel, and you feel the same as you always did — miserable. Everything hurts just the way it did when you were 20. The great thing about getting older as a dancer is you're used to the pain."

In ballet, dancers typically have a finite performing career, though there have been notable exceptions. Age restrictions have been less severe in modern dance; consider Martha Graham, who danced until she was 75. Both Twyla Tharp and Trisha Brown are in their 50's and still perform with the same athleticism they demand of their dancers.

The 73-year-old Merce Cunningham is the most obvious example of a choreographer/performer who, despite debilitating arthritis

and limited movement, still dazzles audiences with his presence on the stage. That kind of presence, in fact, seems to be what choreographers working with older dancers want to capture. "People like Tharp or Brown put a premium on the virtuosity of the body," says Mr. Koplowitz. "I put a premium on the virtuosity of the spirit."

Older performers are increasingly visible these days. Mark Taylor has danced with his father; Rosalind Newman will perform with her silver-haired uncle at her concert at Dance Theater Workshop later this month. In May Mr. Koplowitz's troupe will also perform there. Some observers have dismissed such casting as a gimmick. But choreographers seem to be searching for social relevance and emotional weight in a field where movement has had more than its share of intellectual exploration.

"People are no longer hemmed in by what they think dance is," says the 45-year-old Ms. Lerman. "The baby boomers are not going to put up with dance companies that don't present pictures of themselves."

While the 64-year-old Annabelle Gamson concedes that "grasping material is much slower as you grow older," she adds: "There's a certain quality of living in the art that you don't get with a younger person. Older dancers are more economical in their performance. They can do things in depth that younger performers can't possibly know about." □



A Beautiful Moment Donna Uchizono says she is not making a political statement about ageism in "The Sage's Passage" (shown in rehearsal with, from left, the dancers Beverly Brown, Eric Russell, Stanley Love, Michael Foley, Ted Dalbotten and Ms. Uchizono). Nor was she inspired to work with older performers based on some personal experience. She simply wants to explore ideas about time. "My work has usually been about speed," the 38-year-old choreographer explains. "I wanted to stretch time. I also wanted to explore time in a linear

sense and felt that to do so with only younger dancers wasn't appropriate. In addition, I was tired of the whole emphasis on youth in our culture."

Ms. Uchizono's piece builds on the movement style she has been developing since moving to New York six years ago. "When pelicans take off from water to fly, they are gangly and awkward," she says, "but they hit this point where they become the most beautiful things in the world. I'm interested in that moment — when the awkward becomes elegant."