

# BACKSTAGE



# STAYING ON YOUR TOES

Tips to Extend Your Dancing Career

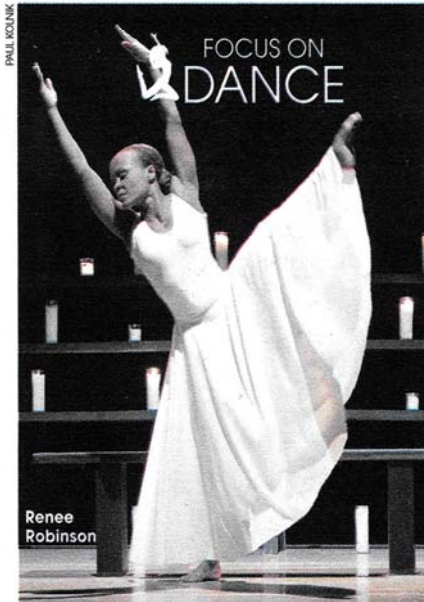
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remember my college dance professor trying to explain to me that it was better to do two or three slow and perfect grand pliés in second position than to rush through 16 careless ones. "Remember," she said, "your knees have only so many grand pliés in them." Blinded by a cavalier attitude toward my body typical of young people, I failed to appreciate the wisdom of her advice. Many years later, however, as I consider how many professional dancers burn out their bodies and are forced to retire before age 30, I understand exactly what she was saying. Yet there are also dancers today who perform well into their later years. I recently spoke with eight artists who are enjoying impressively long dancing careers and asked them what, besides limiting their grand pliés, can dancers do to extend their tenure as performers?

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Clockwise from top: Christopher Barksdale, Kimberly Cowen, and Renee Robinson

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RENEY JOHNSON, EDUARDO PINO



## RENEE ROBINSON

A leading dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Renee Robinson is now in her 26th season with the company. She is stalwart in her commitment to good nutrition and believes it to be the key factor in extending a dancing career. "Your bones, muscles, tendons—they must receive the proper nutrients," she says. "Nutrients are what build your body's structure, and if your basic structure is strong, it will serve you well into the long run. Eating leafy green vegetables does amazing things for the body, but it's really about making healthy food choices all across the board and starting to do so when you're young. Make sure you drink lots of

water. Avoid too much sugar, especially high-fructose corn syrup. Cut out soda. Minimize your alcohol consumption. There's a lot more good information out there about nutrition today than there was when I started performing. So I think dancers can perform much longer now if they really take advantage of all that knowledge."

Because a high level of athleticism is demanded of dancers today, Robinson also feels that professional performers must supplement dance technique classes with other forms of physical training. She encourages dancers to explore Zena Rommett's Floor-Barre technique and Gyrotonic and to remember that cardio work is also very important.

## GUS SOLOMONS JR.

"I've been performing for 50 years," says Gus Solomons Jr., one of the New York downtown dance scene's most respected artists. In 1998, Solomons founded Paradigm, a chamber company of seven distinguished dancers who are all well on in years. The company commissions choreographers to make works specifically for it, because "I wanted to see what choreographers would do with older bodies," he says. "It challenges their imaginations as well as our abilities."

To keep his body going over the years, Solomons has undergone an extensive amount of physical therapy, which has taught him invaluable lessons about correct body usage. He feels it's very important for dancers to pay particular attention to proper use of their spine: "When you're young, you can throw your spine around every which way and it will heal the next day, but if you develop bad usage habits, they will eventually become very damaging. You must be very aware of protecting your lower back all the time."

Like Robinson, Solomons says eating well is essential to extending your dance career: "Eating healthfully keeps your body resilient for longer. Conditions like osteoporosis and arthritis are exacerbated by poor diet. They are inevitable, but the severity of them can be modulated. I'm careful to

eat a variety of foods, and I do eat red meat—because when you're working heavy-duty with your muscles, they need that quality of protein to replenish. You can't do it on soybeans. And I'm also a big believer in glucosamine chondroitin with MSM—that's a joint formula. I take about 30 supplements a day."

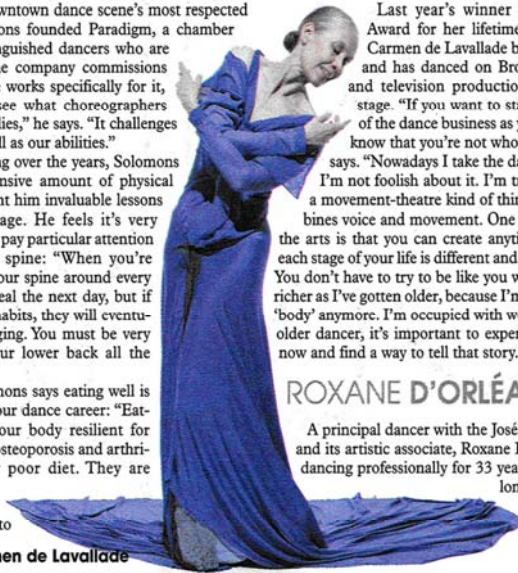
Solomons also participates in a wide variety of dance technique workshops to keep abreast of the latest trends. He recently participated in a workshop on William Forsythe's improvisation technique and is looking forward to a Gaga workshop this summer. "There is no way I can continue as a performer if I don't keep evolving," he explains. "You can't get stuck in a certain time period and just stay there."

## CARMEN DE LAVALLADE

Last year's winner of the Capezio Dance Award for her lifetime contribution to dance, Carmen de Lavallade began performing in 1950 and has danced on Broadway; in films, operas, and television productions; and on the concert stage. "If you want to stay in the performing end of the dance business as you get older, you have to know that you're not who you were years ago," she says. "Nowadays I take the dancing as far as I can, but I'm not foolish about it. I'm transitioning into more of a movement-theatre kind of thing, doing work that combines voice and movement. One of the great things about the arts is that you can create anytime in your life, because each stage of your life is different and you can create from that. You don't have to try to be like you were. My work has gotten richer as I've gotten older, because I'm not so preoccupied with 'body' anymore. I'm occupied with words and emotions. As an older dancer, it's important to experiment with who you are now and find a way to tell that story."

## ROXANE D'ORLÉANS JUSTE

A principal dancer with the José Limón Dance Company and its artistic associate, Roxane D'Orléans Juste has been dancing professionally for 33 years. She credits her career longevity to her adherence to high-quality choices in all aspects of her



TOM CARAWAY

Continued

dance life: "From the time I was 4 years old, my parents made excellent choices regarding my dance training, always trying to discern what was healthy for me to pursue and what wasn't. The expectations that were put on me were matched very carefully to my potential. My training was with teachers who were knowledgeable about supporting what a child could do."

In addition to always searching meticulously for the proper teachers and training systems for your capabilities and needs — which may change over the course of your career — D'Orléans Juste believes that dancers who want to perform for a long time need to listen acutely to their bodies to protect themselves from career-ending injuries. "If you educate yourself about the workings of the body and then listen to the signals your own body gives you, you can make intelligent choices," she says. "But you must really pay attention to those signals and trust them. Your body is your instrument and you must listen to it. If a piano is out of tune, we stop and fix it. It's the same thing with your body. When you are in highly stressful situations, like dancers often are, you must step back, look at the situation rationally, and make a decision based on what your body can realistically handle."

D'Orléans Juste also believes that your high-quality choices must extend to the foods you eat: "When I was younger, I didn't pay that much attention to nutrition, but as I got older I realized I needed to, and when I started eating properly I noticed a big difference in just one week. Your body responds to good treatment. It's all about quality choices — good teachers, good working conditions, good nutrition, good frame of mind. It all adds up over the years and creates a strong foundation upon which you can build a long career."

### **Elisa King**

Currently a member of Zvi Gotheiner's New York-based contemporary dance company, Elisa King is still dancing professionally at age 55. "I certainly wouldn't say I'm identical to my youthful self, but I can still jump and really dance full out," she says. "What has accounted for my longevity, I think, is doing yoga and Gyrotonic." King began Gyrotonic in the mid-1980s; she was one of the original students of the system's inventor, Juliu Horvath. "I was fortunate to be working with him when he was still making the machines in his kitchen and figuring out how to codify his exercises. So that work became very important to me. I also do my own yoga workout every morning. I light candles. It's very gentle, mostly just a way of waking up my joints." In the evenings, King takes classes in Bikram yoga, a rigorous form of hatha yoga done in a heated room. "It's the most intense physical thing I've ever done," she says, "and it's been really good for me as an older dancer — the heat and the ritual of it." In addition, King embraces various other forms of bodywork and sports medicine, including massage therapy, acupuncture, and chiropractic, all of which she recommends to "help relieve the accumulated stresses of dancing long hours."

King is also on the dance faculty at New York's LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts and feels that the steady paycheck has helped her sustain her performing career. "I think that dancers get worn down by being constantly impoverished and also by being referred to as boys and girls, never being allowed to grow up. Being a teacher, being the one who is looked up to, has helped balance that for me as I've gotten older, and also, of course, working for a choreographer like Zvi, someone who really honors dancers. I think all of that has fed my longevity."

### **Harold Cromer**

Still performing in tap festivals at age 86, hooper Harold Cromer began dancing professionally in 1929. He made his Broadway debut as a featured tap dancer in the 1939 musical *Du Barry Was a Lady* and enjoyed a lengthy career in vaudeville, supper clubs, and television as part of the dance duo Stump and Stumpy. "The desire to keep learning, to keep trying new styles of dance — I started out as a roller-skate dancer, then studied tap, ballet, flamenco, even singing and acting — that's been my motivation from the beginning, and that's what's kept me going this long," he says. "To keep your career going, it's important to continue to get to know lots of different people, from different places and backgrounds, and to travel a lot. For example, I just got back from China, where I was exposed to a completely new style of dance, which provokes me to now go on and create something different. It's also a matter of never giving up, no matter how much you've achieved or even if you never meet your goals. You must always move on to something new. That's what keeps you interested and gives you the energy to continue."

### **Kimberly Cowen**

Unlike Cromer, Kimberly Cowen, a leading dancer with the Kansas City Ballet, finds that staying in one place has contributed significantly to her ability to maintain a lengthy performing career. Because of KCB's unusually diverse repertory, Cowen has felt challenged and gratified throughout her 17 years as a company member. And not having to travel from company to company as she built her career has allowed her to settle into a stable personal life outside the dance world — support, she feels, that has been instrumental in extending her career.

Cowen advises young dancers who want long careers to abandon the traditional mindset of a dancer and begin protecting their bodies from the outset. "When the boss asks if you can do something," she says, "you'll automatically say yes because you want the part or the opportunity. As a dancer, you'll keep going no matter what, dragging your leg behind you, even if it's no longer attached. But as I've gotten older, I've learned how important it is not to do that. You must be aware of and respect your body's limitations. If you don't take the proper amount of time off when you get an injury, the condition may worsen, become chronic, and force you to end your performing career at a much younger age than you might otherwise have to."

Cowen also thinks it's beneficial for dancers to perform different dance styles, as the choreography of many contemporary ballet companies now requires: "Having to dance a wide variety of repertory really balances out your body better, rather than having to use the same muscle groups in the same way all the time." Not only does that balance prevent the muscular overuse that can shorten a dancer's career, but "getting to do all those different styles keeps dancers invested in being in the field longer," Cowen explains. "When you're young you may feel that ballet is all you ever want to do, but as you get older you begin to crave new feelings and the sense of freedom and broadening of yourself that other styles can bring. When you're young the draw to dance is more physical, but as you get older it's more about the mental draw."

## **Christopher Barksdale**

"I go to the gym almost every day and do some weight training as well as some cardio work," says Christopher Barksdale, who has danced with the Kansas City Ballet for more than 20 years. "I've always been very flexible, but I really have to work on keeping up my strength now to balance that. As you get older, you have to take much better care of yourself and remember that you're never done learning." Even though you may know quite a bit about dancing, as an older performer you need to stay abreast of any new information that comes out about health or body issues, he says: "For example, I just learned recently that as we get older, even men have a hard time getting as much calcium as we need. And you may need to take a vitamin supplement with your calcium to make sure it's absorbed properly."

In addition to maintaining his physical instrument, Barksdale has found that as an older dancer it's important to maintain a healthy attitude to and relationship with younger dancers, particularly when it may seem as if they're coming in to take your place. "I try to go around the room and have fun with the younger dancers and make them laugh," he says. "I also try to give them advice to help their performance, and I compliment them when they do well. It's reassuring to them, and it also helps to keep me in a better frame of mind about it all. And another thing that really keeps me going is doing what my mother always advised: I say the Lord's Prayer just before I go on stage. It's a way of reminding myself to be thankful for the gifts I've been given."