

The World Falls Silent – A Practice-Based Performance on Ageism and its Effects on the Dancer

Madeleine Karlsson

ABSTRACT

The World Falls Silent is a practice-based artistic research project that investigates ageism and its implications for professional contemporary dancers. Employing an autobiographical and improvisation-based methodology, the study examines how socio-cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and choreographic practices shape a dancer's agency, visibility, and artistic identity across their lifespan. Drawing on age-critical theory and collaborative inquiry with five co-researchers aged 50–62, the research explores the intersection between lived experience and artistic practice. Through embodied reflection, writing, and performance, personal memories are transformed into choreographic material that problematises the youth-oriented ideals embedded in contemporary dance. The performance comprises ten interconnected parts addressing themes of agency, power structures, conflict, maturity, and the dancer's embodied archive. The study demonstrates how improvisation and autobiographical processes can function as both artistic and analytical tools to reveal and counteract internalised ageism. By positioning the ageing body as a site of knowledge, expression, and resistance, *The World Falls Silent* contributes to reconfiguring the discourse on age within the performing arts. The project offers alternative narratives of artistic continuity, proposing that the ageing dancer's body not only carries history but also generates new possibilities for creation, interpretation, and the future of dance practice.

SAMMANFATTNING

The World Falls Silent är ett praktikbaserat konstnärligt forskningsprojekt som undersöker ålderism och dess inverkan på professionella samtida dansare. Studien är förankrad i en självbiografisk och improvisationsbaserad metodologi och analyserar hur sociokulturella normer, institutionella strukturer och koreografiska praktiker formar dansarens agens, synlighet och konstnärliga identitet genom livet. Med stöd i ålder-skritisk teori och i samarbete med fem medforskare i åldrarna 50–62 år, utforskas relationen mellan levd erfarenhet och konstnärlig praktik. Genom kroppslig reflektion, skrivande och föreställning omvandlas personliga minnen till koreografiskt material som problematiserar åldersrelaterade ideal inom dans. Föreställningen består av tio sammanhängande delar som tematiserar agens, maktstrukturer, konflikt, mognad och dansarens kroppsliga arkiv. Studien visar hur improvisation och självbiografiska processer kan fungera som både konstnärliga och analytiska verktyg för att synliggöra och motverka internaliserad ålderism. Genom att betrakta den åldrande kroppen som en plats för kunskap, uttryck och motstånd bidrar *The World Falls Silent* till att omformulera diskursen om ålder inom scenkonstfältet. Projektet erbjuder alternativa berättelser om konstnärlig kontinuitet och visar hur den åldrande dansarens kropp inte enbart bär på historia, utan också skapar nya möjligheter för tolkning, skapande och framtida danspraktik.

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Introduction

My dance background is rooted in a Euro-American contemporary dance tradition, shaped by a youth-centred perspective, where the dancer's body is expected to be highly functional (Brandstetter and Nakajima 2017). As I age myself, questions have arisen about the norms and ideals that define a dancer's agency in deciding whether to continue dancing as they reach a certain age.

The World Falls Silent is a performance depicting personal narratives from older professional contemporary dancers on how ageism has affected them. The performance is part of my master's thesis titled *The Body is Able and Willing – A Study in Ageism and its Effects on the Dancer* (Karlsson 2025). Grounded in autobiography and improvisation, this practice-led, age-critical research explores how artistic environments,

collective structures, and choreographic processes can either reinforce or resist age-related marginalisation by depicting the lived experiences of older dancers and identifying the factors that enable their meaningful continued participation in artistic work.

There is a place in my garden I usually see only from a distance. One can move between the trees and discover new paths, playfully and curiously, as I remember my dancing once was and still does not feel distant. There are trees standing so close it's impossible to pass through, even though my dancing body wants to continue. How much will the body allow movement when everything narrows? I smell the earth, hear the sounds of nature, the scent of soil, the whispering of leaves, and the powerful aliveness of decomposition.

— Ulrika, reflection (2022)



Madeleine Karlsson – *The Body as Landscape* – from *The World Falls Silent*, SIT, March 2023. Photo: Tanne Willow

The World Falls Silent

The World Falls Silent was performed three times at Strindbergs Intima Teater in Stockholm, between '6 and 12 March 2023'. The artistic process was developed in close collaboration with co-researcher Peter Lagergren, an experienced dancer, teacher and choreographer. The content of the performance was based on themes identified in my empirical research and was given choreographic form through the methods I employed. It also served as a movement-based exploration of both my own and my co-researchers' respective dance memories, highlighting how embodied experience informs creative decision-making.

The study was situated within a Swedish context from the perspective of myself and my co-researchers, aiming to illuminate how dance practices can critically engage with age and the experience of ageing as a dancer.

The theoretical framework combines age-critical research and autobiography, where age-critical practice functions as an active stance within artistic methods (Leather 2020). Autobiography forms both the primary methodology and the basis for empirical material. Personal memories were explored through writing, improvisation, video, reflection, and dialogue across four iterative phases that gradually informed performance practice and discussion.

Improvisation was my primary artistic method, as it forms the base of my movement practice. It enables

expression in the present moment regardless of age, linking the self to the body and to dance. The tension between what the body can do and what it wants to do is central, and experience, when combined with artistic sensitivity, can be continuously articulated and refined, supporting lifelong learning, bodily awareness, and knowledge (Martin 2017; Albright 2019).

Ageism serves as a theoretical lens for highlighting normative habits, age-related stigmas, and their impact over a dancer's lifetime (Andersson 2008). The dance profession is particularly affected, as this study reveals.

The study

The empirical material includes artistic practice and discussions involving myself and five co-researchers, as well as the performance *The World Falls Silent*. The co-researchers were Peter Lagergren, Ulrika Liljedahl, Pipsa Puokka, Yvette van der Slik, and Åsa N. Åström. We were between 50 and 62 years old when the study was conducted. Our professional histories partly overlap, giving us shared reference points through improvisational practices. We are all active in multiple roles in dance and have conducted our own artistic practices and teaching alongside our professional careers. The study adhered to ethical research guidelines.



Peter Lagergren –
Peter's Memory – from
The World Falls Silent,
SIT, March 2023.
Photo: Tanne Willow



Madeleine Karlsson
and Peter Lagergren –
Conflict -from *The World
Falls Silent*, SIT, March
2023. Photo: Tanne Willow

Someone might tell me I'm far too old to dance. I don't jump as high or as eagerly, I don't want to run straight into a wall. But being too old to dance is just a mental barrier, partly shaped by society's view on age and also by how we view dance.

— Peter, memory (2022)

Sources of inspiration

Deborah Hay's solo performance *Beauty* in Stockholm 2013, was the first time I saw an older naked body dance on stage, and I remember feeling uncomfortable. Why do we feel repulsion towards the ageing body – one that is no longer taut and youthful? Perhaps it reminds us of our mortality. Norms around youth within dance create estrangement from ageing and convey the implicit message that ageing should be resisted or hidden.

Another source of inspiration is Susanne Martin's dissertation *Dancing Age[ing]* (2017), which highlights agency through improvisation and proposes strategies for performance practices that foster more inclusive age narratives. Her methods inspired my own, which I adapted to a Swedish context, similarly emphasising the professional dancer's perspective, artistic processes, and knowledge.

Elisabeth Schwaiger's *Ageing, Gender, Embodiment and Dance* (2012) also shaped how I think about dance, embodiment, and ageing. Based on interviews with Australian dancers, her study explores how cultural norms shape the dancer's body and experience, proposing non-dualistic approaches that recognise

agency while challenging conventional binaries of age, gender, ability, and embodiment.

I had passed 50 and strongly felt that my dancing needed to evolve alongside my ageing.

— Madeleine, memory (2022)

Choreographic design of the themes

In *The World Falls Silent*, I collaborated with co-researcher Peter Lagergren, dramaturg Sigal Zouk, musician Erik Häusler, and costume designer Kid Falk. Using improvisation informed by memories, reflections, selected text from *A Dream Play* by August Strindberg, and themes from my research, the process became a space for both artistic creation and embodied reflection. The themes, memories and text functioned as a dramaturgical bridge, connecting the personal, the universal, and existing art while framing research insights through movement.

The performance consists of ten thematic parts, each connected to the research questions and exploring specific aspects of ageing and embodiment: *Agency* reflects the dancer's need for influence and creative control; *Paradise/Hell* examines the tension between love for the art and feelings of inadequacy; *Power Structures* recalls hierarchical dynamics in dance; *Re-Take* investigates adaptability and finding new ways to continue dancing; *Peter's Memory* traces Peter's transition from ballet to contemporary dance through

a non-representational approach; *Conflict* illuminates internal struggles with self-evaluation and performance, performed in silence to foreground the daily labour of dancing; *Darkness is Falling* captures the tension of still feeling capable while being perceived as outdated; *Maturity* explores the older dancer's ongoing desire to explore despite societal norms; *The Body as Landscape* situates the body in relation to nature, ageing, and death; and *The Dancer's Archive* embodies a lifetime of personal expression and embodied memory.

Through this process, choreographic design became more than a performance structure; it was a reflective practice. Each section offered an opportunity to think with the body, explore ageing and embodiment, and generate knowledge through doing, highlighting how practice-led research can illuminate both artistic and lived experience.

I have always experienced the external conditions of dance as complicated. Where is dance allowed to exist? Who gets to dance, and who does not? Who decides?

— Pipsa, reflection 2022.

Culture of silence

The title *The World Falls Silent* stems from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1996), where ageing is described as a process of becoming invisible – the phone stops ringing, work disappears, and friends die. For dancers, this silencing often begins much earlier. Peter reflects: 'If you reduce your dancing, you lose the connection to the dance world, and eventually, you leave it altogether.' Ulrika similarly observes: 'I wished to continue dancing longer than I did, but the dance field told you that you should stop, not with words, but in the subtext. That's just the way it was.'

The fear of erasure creates a culture of silence within both the dancer and their environment. The dancer and the field often assume the dancer is out of date, and many choose to shut down emotionally and move on.

The performance is a choreographic response to this erasure, positioning ageing as an artistic and bodily asset. The work explores how bodily resonance between dancer and audience fosters shared understanding (Lansley and Early 2011; Hansen and Kenny 2019). By articulating the research questions choreographically, the process heightened awareness among co-researchers, the artistic team, and the audience, demonstrating how



Madeleine Karlsson and Peter Lagergren – Agency – from *The World Falls Silent, SIT*, March 2023. Photo: Tanne Willox

practice-led research can generate knowledge through embodied experience and relational engagement.

Summary

In my study, I wanted to understand what happens to a dancer's agency as the body ages within a field long tied to functionality and youth ideals. Through the artistic work and collaboration with co-researchers, it became clear that ageing does not weaken the dancing subject but opens new ways of creating, perceiving, and understanding dance. The work shows how both internal and external norms affect our sense of value and belonging and how experience, sensitivity, and bodily memory become central resources for continued artistic practice.

Drawing on personal memory narratives, improvisation, writing, and text, *The World Falls Silent* explores themes such as agency, power structures, conflict, identity, and maturity through the lens of age and lived experience. Reflecting on the artistic work with Peter, it became apparent that the conflicting emotions we and the other co-researchers encountered were closely tied to an underlying sense of reduced agency. The ability to determine whether – and how – one wishes to continue within the profession emerged as essential for sustaining both the desire and the courage to keep dancing.

Within the research group, we also recognised how we had internalised age-related norms by accepting them, often without questioning their impact on our practice. Taken together, these insights highlight not only the physical but also the deeply personal and relational dimensions of continuing dance as an older dancer – a practice involving ongoing self-discovery, negotiation, and creative engagement as much as movement itself.

Conversations with audience members revealed that age discrimination is often intertwined with feelings of shame. People described feeling devalued and excluded – whether following redundancy, denied opportunities, or failed career transitions (Andersson 2008; Schwaiger 2012; Jönsson 2021). Younger audience members also recognised this tension noting how expectations around youth and productivity shaped their own sense of belonging. The work thus demonstrates how power structures of ageism cut across professions and generations, creating a shared point of recognition (Andersson 2008; Jönsson 2021).

Peter and I felt strengthened by these exchanges, as audience reflections resonated with the experiences of ourselves and our co-researchers: Ulrika, who felt pressure to stop dancing before she felt finished; Yvette, who questions her right to remain in the field as an ageing dancer; Åsa, who wrestles with her own internalised ideas of what a dancer should be; and Pipsa, who has lost trust in the field due to patterns of arbitrary inclusion and exclusion. Across these stories, ageism shapes the conditions of dancers throughout the life course (Andersson 2008; Schwaiger 2012; Martin 2017; Jönsson 2021). The shared reflections, both by audience members and within our research group, highlight how deeply embedded these structures are, and how they influence not only career trajectories but also the emotional and relational dimensions of artistic practice.

Our discussions also made clear how vital it is for older dancers to feel a sense of dignity in relation to the knowledge and embodied expertise they carry. This dignity is closely connected to being able to re-articulate movement as a way of reconnecting with the mature body, explore its possibilities, and move beyond ideals and expectations that were ingrained during youth. My work emphasises the need for approaches that support range and expressivity, creating space for this exploration and enabling older dancers to rediscover freedom and nuance within their practice.

Throughout the artistic practice, Peter and I noticed that the body responded to sustained physical engagement, gradually becoming stronger and more flexible. He felt that the body is still capable, noting that *'this experience remains an important factor in our work'*. In my own practice, after challenging my body intensely, I realised that it could move in ways that reminded me of the vitality and freedom I experienced as a younger dancer. From this, I conclude that many older dancers are seldom given the opportunity to perform or to be placed in contexts that genuinely stimulate and challenge the body. For me, this underscores the importance of creating more spaces in which older dancers can engage physically and artistically in ways that honour both their accumulated experience and their current capabilities. Such opportunities are, I believe, essential for sustaining both artistry and vitality in dance (Lansley and Early 2011; Hansen and Kenny 2019).

Through the study and the creation of the research performance, my own perspective on ageing as a dancer

has shifted. Together, Peter and I have noticed how our views have become softer and more permissive, enabling us to recognise and appreciate the ways in which experience shapes the form and expression of our older dancing bodies. The co-researchers described increased self-confidence, awareness, trust in the body, and a changed view of ageing as dancers. In our conversations, we reflected on how we now meet ageing – both in ourselves and in other older dancers – with a broader and more embracing attitude. This shared insight, I believe, may encourage others to approach their own ageing in dance with greater kindness, patience, and self-compassion, thereby opening space for continued creativity and artistic engagement. These experiences illustrate how age-critical practice and improvisation can function as forms of resistance against internalised and structural ageism, highlighting the dancer's agency and creative potential across the lifespan. The work demonstrates how practice-led methods can change perspectives – both for those directly involved and for the audience – making visible how the older dancer's body holds knowledge, expression, and forms of embodied resistance.

The World Falls Silent reveals how artistic processes can reframe normative ideas about ageing by presenting alternative narratives of what it means to be a dancer throughout life. It emphasises the importance of collective exploration, listening, and artistic sensitivity in creating inclusive practices for older dancers. Ultimately, it is through collective exploration, listening, and artistic sensitivity that a new dance practice can emerge – one in which the ageing body is not silenced but allowed to speak, move, and take its place in the future of dance.

BIOGRAPHY

Madeleine Karlsson is a choreographer, dancer, and educator. She holds a master's in choreography and a teaching degree in dance from Stockholm University of the Arts as well as a dancer's diploma from the Ballet Academy in Stockholm. Her artistic practice explores themes such as intimacy, vulnerability, and belonging. As a choreographer, she has created approximately 35 works, including *Voicing* (2025), *Hope* (2024), and *The World Falls Silent* (2023). Her award-winning film *Shades* (2022) has received international recognition. She is the artistic director of Maka Dance Productions and teaches contemporary dance at the Royal Swedish Ballet School.

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