

Still dancing: Spring for Seniors at the Sydney Opera House



Spring for Seniors at Sydney Opera House. Photo by Cassandra Hannagan.

There is increasing interest for delivery of different modes of engagement in arts for children and families, but also for older adults. Whilst there is a plethora of options for young people to participate in high quality dance programs, there remain limited options for older adults. The benefits of dance for physical strength, mobility, and mental and cognitive health is well researched. There is also plenty of evidence to support the benefits of active participation of older adults in cultural programs.



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Diane Busuttill runs a company called Creative Caring, which offers dance programs to older adults with different mobility and support needs. "I do sessions in aged care which are seated, I do sessions in Dementia units, and I do community classes," she explains. "Spring for Seniors is a community class. It's a 90-minute monthly dance session specifically for people over the age of 55."

Busuttill adds, "What I like to do is bring in theatrical elements to dance. The focus is in creativity rather than a specific dance style. Which allows the mix of dance and theatre to enhance creativity. During the sessions, I am creating a structure that is making people feel safe. There is a lot of warmth and fun. So that people feel they can do things outside of their comfort zone. I am actively encouraging people to tap into their own creativity."



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At the Spring for Seniors sessions at the Sydney Opera House, Busuttil designs each session with a theme. "After a warm-up, which is based on contemporary dance styles, we talk about the theme, then I set creative tasks, based on that theme. I am in a room full of intelligent wise, experienced people. They are bringing a lifetime to the room. It is absolutely beautiful to watch how older creativity unfolds. There is a strong connectedness between participants."

Busuttil was a dancer in Berlin for 25 years before she returned to Australia to become carer for her father. "My father had Alzheimer's dementia. I kept visiting from Berlin, but it became obvious that I needed to come back and take care of him. He taught me how to adapt to his needs. That level of precision and listening and caring and holding space was my daily practice. I had to sit down and think long and hard about how I could integrate that into my dance practice. Could it be done? Who was it for? It took quite a lot of thinking for me to bring it together."



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Just as children benefit from teachers experienced in working with young people, older adults benefit from specialist facilitation sensitive to their needs. "I am working on a training program, especially for dance artists who are interested in working in a health space," says Busuttil. "There is so much nuanced work that needs to be done to hone in and listen to peoples' needs, who are not directly telling you what their needs are. That's why my work is called creative caring; it is using dance and movement as a caring practice. My father was my best teacher. It is a very beautiful space to work in. It's the most open-hearted practice I have ever done, and I am keen to introduce this work to other people."

You can find out more about Diane Busuttil's practice at www.creativecaring.com.au.

For more information or to join in a Spring for Seniors dance theatre class, visit www.sydneyoperahouse.com/kids-families/spring-seniors.

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