

Dance that breaks all the rules

By Delia Sava

It is frequently said that modern dance "breaks all the rules." Among those it apparently likes to break is the one that says "you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

How else to explain that not one, but two local modern dance companies — Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and Jane Franklin Dance — incorporate older dancers into their performances and even focus on introducing those of us over 50 to modern dance?

Liz Lerman was in her late 20s when she first started teaching modern dance to residents who lived at the Roosevelt for Senior Citizens, a once-grand, but by then dilapidated apartment building on 16th St., N.W. in Washington, D.C. She choreographed an evocative piece about her mother's death cast with professional dancers as well as residents from the home.

The next year, in 1976, she formed the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, which has continued over the years to first ask the question "Who gets to dance?" and answered it with a resounding "Anyone who wants to!"

Offering classes in modern dance to people of all ages, Lerman established a reputation for working closely and brilliantly with people who had never before considered themselves agile or artistic enough to try, much less perform, modern dance.

Not long after, Lerman started a new company, Dancers of the Third Age, as an adjunct troupe of older adult dancers. She also published a book, *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*.

Though Third Age no longer exists as a separate troupe, Dance Exchange continues to be an intergenerational company of professional dancers whose ages span 50 years.

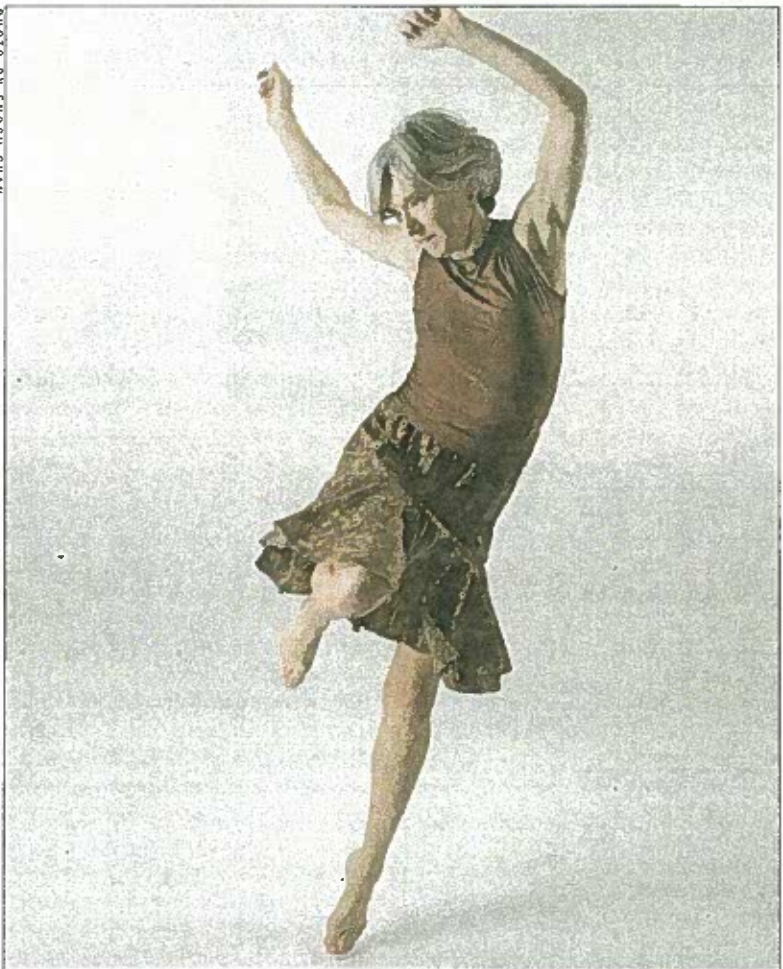
In 2002, Lerman, who is now 62, was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant.

Enter Jane Franklin

Meanwhile, Jane Franklin, who had run her own dance company in Colorado and taught at the college level at several schools, came to this area as a visiting guest artist at George Mason University.

Her specialty was in collaborating on dance projects with artists in other fields

PHOTO BY ENOCH CHAN



Jane Franklin discovered the joy of modern dance more than 30 years ago while in college. Today, her Arlington-based dance company includes a Forty+ troupe to keep older dancers on their toes, and offers classes and workshops for neophytes of all ages.

— music, multimedia and the visual arts.

She decided to stay here, and about 10 years ago began offering workshops for older adults as part of an artistic project.

"I was working with a visual artist, and one of the outreach, engagement parts of that project was to work with some senior adults." It struck a chord with Franklin. "I just kept coming back to it," she said.

Now Jane Franklin Dance, based in Arlington, Va., features an older dancer troupe called Forty+, and she conducts classes and workshops for older adults at area senior centers, as well as after-school classes for youth. The company performs at venues throughout the metro area.

Franklin's fluency in the language of movement is evident as she conducts a Saturday morning class for dancers over 40.

The sunlight streaming in from the skylights in the rehearsal studio at the Cultural Affairs Building in Arlington, and the upbeat Latin jazz number playing, set the mood as the women follow Franklin's lead to learn the steps to a routine.

In her 50s herself, Franklin has an appreciation for the challenges modern dance can present older adults. But she firmly believes studying dance is not only possible, but desirable.

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"You just feel better because you moved, laughed and interacted with others, no matter how much you could do, how long you could dance, or what the physical capacity," Franklin said.

Gerda Keiswetter, 63, has been taking classes with Franklin for nearly four years. She finds they not only exercise her body, but her mind. "I like the stretch and challenge for my brain because you have to think about how your body moves," Keiswetter said.

The physical benefits are undeniable: Dance uses the whole body and offers a heart-healthy workout, improving flexibility, coordination and strength.

Last year, a Scottish study focusing on older women found that dancers were more agile and had stronger legs than women of the same age who took part in activities such as swimming, golf and walking.

But certain adjustments may be required, all the same.

Lee Bory, another four-year student, said she appreciates having a long, slow warm-up, unlike other classes designed for younger students that have very limited warm-up periods.

Jennifer Wright agrees. "It's nice taking Jane's class because she'll accommodate your physical needs."

Students also appreciate Franklin's sensitivity and support. "It's about the camaraderie we have," Keiswetter said. "It's a wonderful group of people."

The art of experience

Franklin said many people tend to think that they can't do dance unless they have a certain physical capacity or type of body.

But she believes older people bring a wealth of experience into the process of being together and creating dance — something more important than technical proficiency.

"That's the whole spirit of social dance," Franklin said. "I direct the participants from one activity to the next, but it's very loose."

"People move what is comfortable for them to move, and everybody is accepting of everybody else, no matter what the ability is. If people get tired, then they sit down," Franklin said.

"Even in the choreography I do for the young company members, it is not so much about the patterns or steps, but it is very much about the relationship of the performers to one another," she continued.

And for that reason, there are no membership rules, either. "There are no auditions for Forty+. Anyone is welcome to come and observe or participate," Franklin said.

"There are a variety of levels of involvement, from those who have never tried to dance but always wanted to, to those who have danced for a lifetime, to others who danced when they were young, had a whole other career and then retired, and finally came back to dance."

Franklin's company will next perform on Jan. 29 and 30 at Artisphere, a new cultural center in Rosslyn, Va. The show, a premier, is titled, "A Vivid Sense of Place" and incorporates a live saxophone quartet.



Members of the Jane Franklin Dance Forty+ troupe take a break during rehearsal. Franklin herself is on the far right. Dancers with all levels of experience can take part in the group.

The Forty+ group will perform a piece called "Long-Term Memory."

Local workshops offered

Separately from the Forty+ performing troupe, Franklin offers free four- to six-week workshops called the Joy of Movement at several senior centers throughout the year.

The workshops are open to all, and are casual: participants come in street clothing and shoes.

Franklin starts with chairs set in a circle and leads simple exercises that gently encourage flexibility, strength and coordination. She moves on to partnered and group dancing set to diverse styles of music from around the world. The lessons always circle back to a chair so those that need to sit can stay involved.

"The population for those workshops is very diverse. For some people, English is not their first language," Franklin said. "It's also diverse as far as physical abilities: Some are much more proficient, and others are not able to walk without assistance or without a walker," she said.

Charlotte Hollister, president of the board of directors of Jane Franklin Dance, feels Franklin's work at senior centers is "the activity that seems most unique to me."

"When Arlington County recently failed to fund this effort for the coming year, the senior centers dug into their own funding to keep the program going because they found it so valuable," Hollister said.

With dance, Franklin finds that the interactions between people and the relationships that are established contribute a great deal to the whole experience.

"They'll come into that class from very different backgrounds, but almost immediately people start to get to know one another and talk to one another."

"They might not see each other outside of that class, but it really gives them a reason to come back to class to see the other people who are involved," Franklin said.

The music she uses, like Latin jazz and Zydeco, is "music that makes you want to move," she said. The combination of the upbeat music and movement can lift someone's mood.

"There's something about moving your body that can break you out of that place, if you're feeling down or closed-in," Franklin said. And by the way, "It's never too late to start."

To learn more about area dance classes or attending a performance, see "Care to Dance?" on the following page.

BEACON BITS

Ongoing

CLASSROOM AIDES NEEDED

The Rosemount Center, a bilingual early childhood center at 2000 Rosemount Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C., is looking for volunteers to assist pre-school teachers with reading, talking and playing with children in the classroom. Call Diana Gonzalez at (202) 265-9885 to learn more.

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Care to dance?

If you're feeling footloose, here are some local classes designed for older dancers:

Jane Franklin's Joy of Movement Workshops incorporate social dance forms to a variety of world music, along with simple exercises to gently encourage flexibility, strength and coordination.

The free classes are offered Wednesdays, Jan. 12 to Feb. 4 in Arlington, Va., at both the Langston Brown Senior Center, 2121 Culpeper St., and Walter Reed Senior Center, 2909 16th St., South. Classes are from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. at Langston Brown and 11 to 11:45 a.m. at Walter Reed.

A dance technique class for older adults will also be held at the Walter Reed Senior Center each Wednesday from 2 to 3 p.m. from Jan. 18 to Feb. 22. Call (703) 228-0955 for more information.

To learn more about Jane Franklin Dance, visit www.janefranklin.com or call (703) 933-1111.

On Jan 9 and 10, the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange will hold its Winter 2011 Senior Dance Institute for those 50 and older, both those new to dance and experienced dancers.

In two half-day workshops, dancers will learn technique and dances, working on ensemble collaboration and solo dancing. Participants will have an opportunity to perform work created during the institute at Dance

and Aging Night at the Dance Exchange on Jan. 10 from 5 to 7 p.m.

The cost for the program is \$150. It will be held at 7117 Maple Ave., Takoma Park, Md. For more information, contact Shula Strassfeld at shulas@danceexchange.org, see <http://danceexchange.org> or call (202) 506-3382.

Many senior centers also offer dance classes. Call your nearest center to ask, or try out one of these upcoming classes:

International folk dance classes will be held at Holiday Park Senior Center. A six-week class starts Jan. 7 from 11 a.m. to noon. The cost is \$24 for center members and \$28 for non-members. Line and ballroom dance also start in January. Holiday Park is located at 3950 Ferrara Drive, Wheaton, Md. For more information, call (240) 777-4999.

A free line dancing class is offered on an ongoing basis each Wednesday from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. at the Camp Springs Senior Activity Center, 6420 Allentown Rd., Camp Springs, Md. Call (301) 449-0490.

A new square dance program begins at the Senior Center Without Walls on Jan. 11. The free class will continue each week from 1:45 to 3 p.m. for eight weeks. The class will be held at the Woods Community Center, 10100 Wards Grove Circle, Burke, Va. For more information, call (703) 324-5544. —Barbara Ruben

BEACON BITS

Jan. 16 THE STORY OF GREEN SPRING GARDENS

Green Spring historian Debbie Waugh will present photos from the garden's archives that span 120 years on Sunday, Jan. 16, from 1:30 to 3 p.m. Learn how the landscape evolved and how the gardens were laid out to create this unique and ever-changing public garden. Refreshments will be served. The gardens are located at 4603 Green Spring Rd., Alexandria, Va. Call (703) 642-5173 to register.

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