

# A DANCE FOR THE AGES

Chauncey Parsons is an artist in his prime, a principal dancer with Oregon Ballet Theatre since 2009. But in a field where careers not only start but end early, he no longer qualifies as a young dancer.

"I'm just getting to the point where stuff's starting to hurt, starting not to work like it used to," he says. "Previously it was always 'push harder, jump higher, get better!' I'm starting to be more realistic with things. You're trying to stay at the top of the art form while also realizing that your joints aren't what they were when you were 21. How do you find your way around that?"

Gregg Bielemeier, four decades into a career as perhaps Portland's most enduringly endearing contemporary choreographer and improviser, is adjusting to harder physical realities. "The past three years have certainly been interesting, from cancer to two new hips," he says. "I've had to learn to dance all over again — the cancer took away all my muscle mass — but it's going to be better. I'm much more relaxed in how I approach everything. I don't need to rush anymore."

Though she's at an age where some folks retire, Susan Banyas continues to build her skills, drawing on the vulnerability, trust and other strengths acquired through a varied artistic life as writer, director, teacher, and performer. "Aging is a multifaceted experience, it doesn't have any one trajectory," she says. "I feel like I'm a stronger mover than ever."

Such perspectives on time and aging — the challenges they present and the gifts they offer in the life of a performing artist — are the stuff

of *Beautiful Decay*, Nicolo Fonte's daring and deeply moving ballet set to classical music by Antonio Vivaldi and contemporary sounds by Max Richter and Ólafur Arnalds.

Fonte, a favorite of OBT fans for such thrilling works as *Bolero*, *Pe-*

What crystalized the idea for him was a visit to the Portland Historical Society to see an exhibit by a friend of his, Mark Golebiowski. The series of 3-D photographs featured dead, yet somehow still very vibrant, exotic flowers. "Even though they were almost withered away, the essence



Photo by Mark Golebiowski

*trouchka*, and last season's collaboration with Pink Martini, *Never Stop Falling (In Love)*, created the ballet in 2013 for Philadelphia's BalletX, based on an idea that had been in and out of his head for awhile, he said. "I've dealt with this theme — the idea of the continuity of time — in other ballets, but it always was really abstract. This time I wanted to deal with it in a really explicit way, because it's an idea I come back to often."

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of flower-ness was still there," Fonte recalls. "There was still this sense of identity: 'I am still present!' And I thought, 'What a perfect metaphor for a performer.'"

Excited by the notion of contrasting younger and older dancers, Fonte

also knew he didn't want to make what he calls "an outreach ballet," something that included elders simply for diversity's sake. Not only did the work need to avoid sentimentality, it needed to fully integrate its older guest artists into the dynamism of a ballet troupe. (In Philadelphia, the guests were Group Motion Workshop founders Brigitta Herrmann and Manfred

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Fishbeck, both a decade or so older than Banyas and Bielemeier, who take on those roles here.)

Once a dazzlingly athletic dancer himself, Fonte understands both the rush of youth and an at once more measured and more fluid sense of time that comes, well, with time. He insists that *Beautiful Decay* isn't a thesis on aging so much as it is a theatrical construct about the arc of inevitable change in an artistic life.

"You're compelled to move forward, yet there is at the same time a resistance to moving forward," Fonte says. "You can consider that the fear factor, an unwillingness to change, an unwillingness to recognize the inevitable — there are many abstract or poetic ways to think about it. What I'm interested in is how you — specifically as a performer at this time in your life, not just as a person who is aging — relate to that. Do you accept it or not? There's an ambiguity there and I love watching how that plays out.

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Reflecting on that question, Parsons adds, "Dancers are supposed to be immortal, young and vibrant — and then they just disappear and the next generation comes along. The concept of being in the spotlight and then



**TOP** Photo by Bill Herbert; BalletX production of *Beautiful Decay*; Dancers foreground: Manfred Fishbeck, Brigitta Herrmann Dancers background: Chloe Felesina, William Cannon

**BOTTOM** Photo By Blaine Truitt Covert; from left Nicolo Fonte, Gregg Bielemeier, Susan Banyas

having to step out of it is like death for a dancer. It's a real factor, every time something hurts a little more you're a step closer to losing everything you've worked so hard for. But this piece shows you that you don't have to panic."

More than freedom from panic, what Banyas sees in *Beautiful Decay* is seeds of learning and new growth. "Looking time in the face takes courage," she says. "When you start to lose a parent,

or family members, or your own body starts to change — radically, sometimes — you have to be willing to enter into that experience rather than resist it. We're prompted constantly in this culture to feel bad about such things. To drop all that nonsense and look directly at the mystery we're entering into is difficult. That's why I think this is such a courageous work."