

An excerpt from *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film*
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INTRODUCTION

In preparation for a theatre performance as a 285-year-old woman, Phylicia Rashād¹ says this: “I began to watch elderly women more carefully, and I fell in love with what I saw. . . . My sensibilities about growing older changed because of performing this role. I began to feel like, if this is what it means, growing older, bring it on. *Bring it on!*” Performing the role of Aunt Ester in the Broadway production of August Wilson’s drama *Gem of the Ocean* profoundly affected Rashād. She says that Aunt Ester “is the most beautiful woman I have ever been.” For Rashād, the conscious performance of advanced age held a transformative power.

Rashād is not alone in experiencing a new understanding of age via performance. The chapters in this volume demonstrate the many ways in which audience members as well as performers alter their perceptions of age, aging, and old age through staged performances. The concept of using non-embodied experiences such as drama and literature to access a broader range of bodily experiences than any one individual can have is not new.² Performances of age can similarly transport audience members to new enactments, conceptions, embodiments, and performatives of aging and old age. The articles in *Staging Age*, however, go beyond just demonstrating the myriad ways in which age can be enacted and the enactments of age can affect viewers. In addition, the combined articles in this volume lend additional credence to the concept of *age as a performative*.

The chapters offer analyses and theories intended to stimulate further research and undergird pedagogy, as we hope to broaden interest in studying age across disciplinary boundaries. This collection is, in part, inspired by Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s call in *Aged by Culture*: “About age as a performance, we need to start the arguments” (159). The volume also follows in the footsteps of Kathleen Woodward’s discussions of the masquerade of youth and old age, and Anne Basting’s connections among aging, identity, culture, and performance.

Staging Age rests on the premise that age is both a performance and performative. While this study will employ the common meanings of

the term “performance,” a brief review of performativity in relation to age is appropriate. We begin with the foundational *Gender Trouble*, in which critic Judith Butler posits a performative as a constant iteration that transforms an action into a reality, “a doing that constitutes a being, an activity that creates what it describes” (Hedges). We contend that age as well as gender can be viewed as performative, in that each of us performs the actions associated with a chronological age minute by minute, and that the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and for those who interact with the subject. Critic Mary Russo has suggested that “a theoretical reconsideration of aging as cultural repetition or performativity” would be valuable, but scholarship has yet to pursue this avenue thoroughly (21).

In positing age as a performative, age studies scholars encounter criticism similar to what Butler met: As with gender, age is at least in part biological; a person does not get to choose a different age or gender from the wardrobe each morning (Butler, *Bodies* x). And that critic would be right, of course. As Butler argues, though, the *meanings* associated with the biological aspects of gender (or age) *are* constructed: “[T]he matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects” (*Bodies* 2). One cannot discuss the materiality of the body without engaging the issues of power associated with it. As with gender, age may be socially constructed and performative, but that performativity is in tension with the undeniable ongoing change of the body as it physically ages. With each performative iteration, a person’s age changes ever so slightly, and the performance must accommodate the shift. Because the change happens so slowly, the repetition that is the hallmark of performativity seems more salient than the shift in the individual performance; however, the constantly changing body cannot be dismissed, no matter how imperceptible physical change may be from moment to moment.

Those performative alterations are enacted in a variety of media. As we assembled this volume of essays, we focused on arts that center on the performer’s body: theatre, film, and dance. These media lend themselves readily to critiquing the multifaceted relationship between art and the construction of age in Western culture. In *Aged by Culture*, Gullette asserts that live theatre is the most promising site for examining the “‘meatiness’ of bodies” (163). Moreover, Gullette posits that viewing the performance of age on the stage holds out the possibility that individuals will then regard “*themselves* as bodies with watchable presence” (177). We extend the discussion to include other media that are concerned with the appearance of age, so that scholars may not only analyze textual



messages about age in scripts and choreography, but also attend to the performers' attitudes toward their own aging processes and the opportunities and limitations of their fields. The darkened theatres of stage and screen become sites of potential transformation, challenging actors, dancers, and audience members to reassess social norms and assumptions about age.

Among those social norms is the belief that the only people who will take aging and old age seriously are the aged. As Anne Davis Basting mentions in her foreword to this book, for years, attention to aging in the arts has met resistance from scholars and artists, mirroring the general anxiety about aging in Western culture. For example, leaders of the Senior Theatre focus group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education have even tried omitting the word "senior" from their conference session titles so that people reading the program would be more likely to attend. During the past generation, much scholarship has questioned and perhaps transcended binaries of race, class, gender, ability, and other categories of identity; too often, age has been overlooked, omitted, or "Othered" with a vengeance, a marginalization that age studies scholars suggest is a manifestation of fears about aging. Rashād questions these anxieties: "Why are you nervous about growing older? What are you scared of? What kind of way is that to live? How can you live being afraid of the inevitable? Please, darling, are you the same as you were at age two?" Of course, none of us is, but the impression that only the aged would be interested or qualified age critics lingers in far too many circles.

