

## STAGING AGE

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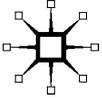
# STAGING AGE

THE PERFORMANCE OF AGE  
IN THEATRE, DANCE, AND FILM

*Edited by*

*Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and  
Leni Marshall*

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macmillan



STAGING AGE

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-62365-1

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First published in 2010 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-38497-6

ISBN 978-0-230-11005-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230110052

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Staging age : the performance of age in theatre, dance, and film /  
edited by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Leni Marshall.  
p. cm.

1. Age in the performing arts. 2. Ability, Influence of age on.

I. Lipscomb, Valerie Barnes, 1960– II. Marshall, Leni, 1969–

PN1590.A34573 2010

700'.454—dc22

2010001961

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: August 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## FOREWORD

*Anne Davis Basting*

A long time ago, when I was a much younger scholar, I remember my dissertation adviser staging an intervention of sorts. As I remember it, he sat me down at an outdoor café on the West Bank of the University of Minnesota, ordered us a drink, and proceeded to try to convince me not to write about aging. “There’s no field of aging in the humanities,” he lobbied. “Your committee is concerned that you won’t be able to get a job.” He urged me to consider broadening my focus. Why not write about gender? With a little aging mixed in? He was right, of course. But I was guided onward by my stubbornness and by the shining example of Kathleen Woodward’s *Aging and Its Discontents*, which had come out the year before, and which I devoured as though it were ice cream. Really smart, provocative ice cream.

In 1998, that dissertation became a book, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*. I was fortunate to find a scholarly home in an English department that was excited for me to teach undergraduates about generational identity in narratives ranging from film and theatre to literature. But it has indeed been an ongoing struggle to establish a *field* of aging studies. A handful of scholars have published lively, interdisciplinary work in subsequent years, but unlike disability studies, aging studies has not found a departmental or curricular foothold in the humanities. In addition to Woodward, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Stephen Katz, Thomas Cole, and Ruth Ray are just a few of the scholars whose books provide the foundation for the growth of a field. They come from English, theatre, sociology, and history. Like aging, aging studies is at once everywhere and nowhere. Perhaps because we’re all aging (if we’re lucky) and because “gerontology” is so interdisciplinary, aging studies has not yet taken firm hold in the humanities.

But momentum is building. In 2007, the Gerontological Society of America launched, at long last, the field's first dedicated journal—the *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts*, a huge milestone for an organization in which the humanities is still a “committee” rather than a section.

The book you hold in your hand is another milestone. Editors Valerie Lipscomb and Leni Marshall—who has nurtured interest in aging studies with her list-serve born of the Modern Language Association interest group—have gathered a fascinating blend of essays on a range of representations of aging. From Cecil B. DeMille to Moliere, from Shakespeare to Al Pacino, from tap dancing to Beckett—this volume of essays demonstrates the rich breadth of aging studies. Here, Marshall and Lipscomb offer us new angles and new voices in aging studies, from cultural studies to psychoanalysis and qualitative interviews.

I am inspired anew by this volume and the blend of voices, approaches, and disciplines it represents. The aging process changes whom we understand ourselves to be, how we see the world, and how the world sees us. It has been, and continues to be, a rich area of research, one I encourage a new generation of students to pursue (and with this volume, it will be easier). A toast, then, to my adviser and to Kathleen Woodward for inspiring me (and so many others) to enter this field, and to the editors and authors here for their insightful essays and for continuing to form the field of aging studies.

## PREFACE

*From Valerie:* My interest in age studies stems from a graduate seminar on Shakespeare. I was convinced that I had no chance of making any critical room for myself in Shakespeare studies, that every possible avenue had been explored. Then, the age difference between Othello and Desdemona jumped out at me, and my mentors encouraged me to shape an article that became my first publication. If age had gone relatively unexplored in Shakespeare's works, I thought, there must be room for me in age studies elsewhere in dramatic literature. I set off in search of the group of like-minded literary critics who had to be out there applying age studies theory with gusto to a broad range of texts. When I did not immediately find them, I figured that I was not searching hard enough. Eventually, I concluded that age studies was relatively unexplored in all of literature, which was both exciting and unnerving. I was (and remain) convinced that increased attention to age is essential to the advancement not only of scholarship, but also of Western culture. My initial reading in the field led me almost immediately to view age as a performance and examine its performative elements; it seemed so obvious to me, yet so absent in the scholarship, that I assumed I was missing something.

Participating in a Modern Language Association (MLA) session that Leni organized to honor Kathleen Woodward's work was a turning point for me, as scholars attending the panel enthusiastically shared interests, and Woodward welcomed us into the conversation so graciously. Leni particularly stood out as an organized, fearless advocate for age studies in literature. When she later proposed a session focusing on the performance of age, I was delighted to see a colleague taking up the cause. Without Leni, I would not have attempted assembling this volume—I am eternally grateful for her initiative and expertise.

*From Leni:* Valerie and I both were returning scholars in graduate school. I had been out of academia for seven years, managing a senior care home and then working for a managed health care consulting firm. I knew absolutely nothing about contemporary critical works. In the time

between my undergraduate and graduate work, for example, Judith Butler had gone from being an unknown scholar to having published three books and being “old hat” feminist scholarship. Much like when I encountered Butler’s writing, when I started reading about age studies, I assumed that the ideas I found were accepted critical works, probably older than Butler’s—after all, people were arguing with Butler and other feminist scholars writing about bodies and identity, but no one was arguing with the age studies scholars. From Kathleen Woodward’s exploration of *méconnaissance*, I learned that age was a mask; reading Margaret Gullette, I came to understand that cosmetics and narratives affected people’s performances of age; Stephen Katz was most generous in sharing his thoughts about performances of age in advertising images; Peg Cruikshank challenged me to describe an old person’s physical and mental attributes using positive language. For the MLA’s 2003 conference, I proposed a session in tribute to the foundational work of Kathleen Woodward, and the MLA accepted it. To me, this seemed confirmation these ideas were well established. On that tribute panel, Valerie gave an illuminating presentation about theatre and age; afterward, when she started talking about age as a performative, I assumed that all of this scholarship had been around forever.

Three years later, a looming deadline for submitting a call for papers for the upcoming conference of the MLA was mere hours away. In a fit of late-night desperation, I borrowed Valerie’s topic. She was quite gracious about it, really, and that generous spirit continued as we turned those conference proposals into this book. This is her turf, and when I tromped in uninvited, she did the academic equivalent of offering me high tea on her best china. As a coauthor, Valerie’s gracious spirit and writing skills are unparalleled.

*Together:* Each of us feels fortunate to be working in the field of age and aging studies, and to have been able to create this collection of essays. This volume is a contribution, a tribute, and an invitation. We view this book first as a valuable addition to the field—a collection of writings to advance the collected understandings and parameters of age and aging studies. Many of the people whose ideas we found so relevant and engaging at the beginning of our studies have generously mentored our scholarship. Thus, *Staging Age* also serves as a tribute to those people who made it possible for the two of us to be involved in this scholarly arena. Furthermore, we hope that the essays’ ideas will engage a broad audience, and we invite artists and critics to join this conversation. We look forward to future developments in age and aging studies, knowing that there is an expanding circle of colleagues who will be there with us, taking on the challenge.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors wish to thank the contributing authors, the staff at Palgrave Macmillan, and the many other people who have provided encouragement and support during the creation of *Staging Age*. We gratefully acknowledge colleagues at the University of South Florida, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin–Stout, as well as our students, who inspire us daily. Among individuals who should be singled out for thanks are Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, Donald Ross, Mike Levy, Michael Misfeldt, and Jan Hare. Finally, we are forever grateful for the patience, love, and support of our family members: Kevin, Vanessa, Natalie, Mara, Sylvia, Meghan, and Julie.