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Reduced to Curtain twitchers? Age, ageism and the careers of four women actors

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Abstract

Cultural gerontology has developed critical work around cultural representations of age and ageing and their role in the reproduction of ageism. However, the cultural industries as producers and disseminators of representations remain under researched. This paper draws on a focus group with four older women actors to argue that workforce allocation and assumptions about audience demographics intersect with cultural attitudes around women's ageing to impact on older women actors' career opportunities. We argue that ageism within the cultural industries is limiting our ability to develop diverse and non-ageist cultural representation of women's ageing.

Keywords: Ageism, Actors , Cultural Industries, Roles.

Introduction

In October 2019, actor Linda Hamilton reprised her role as Sarah Connor in the latest instalment of the *Terminator* franchise: *Terminator: Dark Fate* (directed by Tim Miller). Hamilton's last portrayal of Connor, in 1991, was central to a then-emerging trend in untraditional representations of women as 'hardbody, hardware, hard-as-nails heroines' in action films (Brown. 1996: 52). In 2019, 63-year-old Hamilton delivered a Connor who suggests that badass women do not diminish with age. Critical commentator, Ximena Larkin, writing for CNN, draws out the significance of Hamilton's older Connor for younger and older audiences:

> The sight of her shooting heavy artillery with a calm, unflinching look on her face, is shocking. Her hair is gray and wispy. The lines on her face are apparent and deep. She reminds me of my 60-year-old mom who openly questions whether her best years are behind her. And yet, there's Hamilton, right in your face, saying "I'm still in this fight." (Larkin, 2019)

Hamilton's Connor may be a recent example of a 'new visibility' (Dolan, 2014) of representations of older women and of the women actors who play them. This 'new visibility' is not confined to hard-bodied heroines; one of the longest-running comedy series on Netflix,

Grace and Frankie (2015-2020), is led by 82-year-old Jane Fonda and 80-year-old Lily Tomlin. In the UK, there has been a spate of profitable films produced by the British film industry dealing with issues of older life and engaging older actors: *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and its sequel in 2015, and *45 Years* (2015) for example, and on terrestrial television *Last Tango in Halifax* (BBC1, 2012–2020) which averaged viewing figures of over seven million. Dolan and Hallum (2017: 120) argue that the success of these has 'amply demonstrated that screening old age is a viable enterprise'.

However, these new visibilities may be uneven and contentious: the #MeToo movement has highlighted the aggressive sexism facing women in the cultural industries. There is also growing awareness that women actors experience the intersections of sexism with ageism. Amy Schumer's 2015 *Last Fuckable Day,* a comedy sketch that became culturally viral, mocked the still-limited range of roles for women in the performing arts to those of sexual objects (as 'hot') while making clear that 'hot' had a definable expiry date. This was not just a comedic moment; UK and US women actors have for some time spoken out against ageism in their profession, which shortens their careers and limits the number and type of roles they are able to play (Jerslev and Petersen, 2018). Nicole Kidman, Emma Thompson, Liv Tyler, Judie Dench, Meryl Streep are amongst those who have lambasted ageism within the industry. The lived realities of this were best illustrated by the *Hoang v. Amazon.com, Inc. et al* case when the actress Junie Hoang filed a lawsuit against the Amazon subsidiary, IMDb (Internet Movie Database) for revealing her biological age on their site: her concern was that, at 40, her age would expose her to the workings of ageism in the US acting profession (Bardo, 2014: 55).

Given the complexities of age and ageism in women's acting careers, it is timely to examine (i) who gets on our screens and theatre stages and (ii) what roles are available for older women actors to breathe life into. It is timely too because while Cultural Gerontology research has had long concerns with cultural representations and their role in promoting ageist stereotypes (Parcei, 2019), the cultural industries as producers and disseminators of those representations remain under-researched. This tendency is not unique to Cultural Gerontology: it is widely reflected across social science and humanities research (O'Brien et al 2017). That said, there is increasing concern to rectify this. Dolan and Hallam (2017: 123) have argued that there needs to be a 'critical sensitivity to the impact of old age on the viewer, production and performer triad of British cinema and television'; within Cultural

Studies, De Benedictis *et al* (2017) argue for the necessity of complementing research on representations with research on the cultural industries, as this brings the conditions of production into critical focus. Specifically, they call for urgent attention to issues of 'cultural labour, diversity in the workforce' and upon market logics that 'discipline cultural workers' and contribute to the production of denigrating and reductive representations (2017:337.

Motivated by this argument, this paper draws on a pilot empirical project with women actors, to examine how workforce allocation, role-shaping and ideas about 'type', interfere with older actresses' careers and their ability to bring a range of representations of age and ageing to light. Our paper benefits from our close working with women actors, writers, producers and directors who form RepresentAge – a project, in England, aimed at tackling the invisibility of older women actors in theatre, television and film and countering stereotypical representations of older women (RepresentAge.com). The RepresentAge project is committed to exploring and creating critical and alternative accounts of ageing and is therefore an exciting site for reflections on ageing and insights into the production of alternative narratives. This paper draws on a focus group with four actors during their rehearsal for a RepresentAge play 'My Turn Now'. Our analysis produced three overarching themes: 'the disappearance and marginalisation of older women'; 'typecasting and gatekeeping', and 'embodied experiences of age'. These themes are discussed later in the paper after we explain just why women actors are of specific concern.

Women Actors

We focus our inquiry on women actors because age and gender intersect in ways that are particularly detrimental for women (Walkner et al, 2018, Carney, 2018). This is a consequence of an assemblage of reasons including women's longevity and the cumulative effect of gendered discrimination in work and pay over a lifetime, which has negative impacts on women's older lives (Raisborough, 2019). More specifically, women's worth and social status continue to be associated with cultural perceptions of beauty and appearance, which are often defined in terms of youthfulness. This is what Sontag (1972) refers to as the 'double standard', whereby ageing women are devalued more quickly and more harshly than their male equivalents. This is more than a personal concern: Dean (2005) notes how appearance forms part of aesthetic labour, defined by Warhurst et al (2000) as the 'embodied capacities and attributes' of workers, which are then mobilized and commodified by

'processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into 'competencies' or 'skills' (Warhurst et al., 2000: 4).

Although Warhurst et al were considering service work, Dean applies the concept of aesthetic labour to actors in order to suggest that 'appearance-based differentiation' between men and women materialises in the acting profession to create inequalities based on intersections of age and gender. This is felt keenly in the performance industries because 'there is a centrality of *looking* to performing employment' (Dean, 2005: 769). Women actors may feel the impact of this as they reach, or are perceived to 'look', forty years old (2005: 762). This may go some way to explain why there is still a relative invisibility of older actresses in the UK and in the USA and why there is evidence of their careers petering out when women reach their 40s and 50s (Dolan and Grist, 2017).

Older women actors do of course continue to have careers. There is some suggestion that those who remain visible, and employed, do so because they endorse anti-ageing: they age 'successfully' by looking and acting in ways coded as 'young' (Tortajada et al, 2018; Jerslev, 2018). Dolan (2017:240-241), too, notes that successful older actresses have succumbed to what she describes as the 'rejuvenation imperative'; Jane Fonda serves as an apt example. Jane Fonda has spoken publicly about her own cosmetic surgery and about the difficulties facing women actors in an ageist industry. She is quoted as saying that her decision to have anti-ageing procedures is a direct response to the industry's obsession with youth and her desire to maintain her career: 'I wish I were brave enough not to do plastic surgery, but I think I bought myself a decade' (Shoad 2015 cited in Jerslev 2018: 191). This suggests that postfeminist media culture, which celebrates youthful femininities and the luminosity of young women, does not only hail younger women, but also interpellates middle aged and older women, encouraging them to attempt to maintain youthful appearances and lifestyles (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012; Whelehan and Gwynne, 2014; Jermyn & Holmes, 2015). Fonda's comment also makes clear that economic privilege is needed to 'buy' a youthful appearance and a longer career.

Dolan (2017: 241) adds that some women actors can sustain their careers because they have accrued such a lifetime of 'bankable cultural capital from acting acclaim' that they are 'untouchable'. Dame Judi Dench. Meryl Streep and Diane Keaton are amongst this number.

That said, the 'untouchable' actors still face constrained roles, even in the new wave of age films and dramas: Pau's (2018) analysis of Judi Dench playing the authoritative M in the Bond franchise, notes how her power is neutered from Iron Lady or *Ma'am* to Old Lady or *mom* to retro-fit Dench's character into heteronormative frameworks. Analyses of *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* argue that older women's roles are undermined by heteronormativity and domesticity: what Dolan calls 'hetero-happy' (2017:241). Additionally, there is a prevailing whitewashing of representations of women's ageing across mainstream media: Tincknell's (2019:1) recent analysis of representations of older British Asian women in film and television has noted a shift to the 'carnivalesque and the grotesque rather than the submissive and repressed' which suggests that changes may extend only to a still-limited repertoire for older British Asian women actors.

There is a financial aspect to the impact of age on women's careers. Research suggests that female movie stars' average earnings tend to increase until they reach 34 years old, which is when earnings start to rapidly decline: by comparison, male stars' earning power is on an upwards trajectory into their early 50s and then is, on average, maintained (De Pater et al, 2014). Nobis (2015) explains this by pointing to a marked 'dropping off of roles' for older women. This is significant because acting is a precarious form of employment: there is an over-supply of workers and work tends to be short-term and unpredictable. A 'dropping off' of roles and reduced roles can create financial hardship and have negative impacts on family life (Maxwell et al, 2018). If women's roles and earning power are 'dropping off', then we can expect this precarity to be unequally distributed across the labour market, reinforcing gender inequalities which will have a long reach into women's lives if they are unable to save for or make equal contributions to their pension provisions. We may also expect that a 'dropping off' of roles for older women actors will affect the quantity and quality of cultural representations of older women and their lives, on stage and screen. It is timely therefore to explore the lived experiences of women actors in order to understand how ageism may manifest and be experienced over their careers.

Method

Richards et al (2012) have argued that anti-ageing is so pervasive and persuasive that it is often difficult to find participants who can imagine and generate alternative narratives about age and ageing. This paper draws on the empirical work conducted for an initial pilot study;

we joined four women actors from the RepresentAge theatre project in their rehearsals for a theatre play which deals with the issues of women's ageing.

The play 'MY TURN NOW' was a dramatized version of a book *Growing Old Disgracefully* (1993), which was written by The Hen Co-op, a group of women in their 60s and 70s. While the play has an overall author, the script was developed with the support of Arts Council England in close collaboration with the female actors who appear within in – some of whom are included in the focus group that forms the basis of this study. The devising process involved an intensive week of improvising from a number of scenarios, with the scriptwriter consolidating the material into a more formal script.

Through the use of 'backstage' perspective, in which the actors play the parts of middle-aged actors as well as the 'frontstage' characters they are rehearsing, the play speaks directly to the labour conditions of women actors. The actors play two roles each, for example, a Front Stage retired teacher and union activist, and a Back Stage TV soap opera star. Both parts are of similar ages and events on stage are split between the onstage performance and the backstage action which takes place in the dressing room and occasionally the wings. The play includes many of the issues that were raised by the focus group, with storylines that hint at, but then reject, a dementia narrative, and discussion of issues of embodiment, empowerment, sexuality and social media in relation to older women.

We observed the day's rehearsal and held a focus group with the women actors during the day. The women actors are established performers in the UK and USA, on stage and television. Their ages ranged from 50- 70 years old. They were each given a pseudonym: Robyn, Esther, Anne and Greta. The research project was approved by the University's Ethics Committee, with safeguards around anonymity and consent. The focus group was unstructured but started with a prompt asking the actors why they were involved with the play (the play itself was not subject to analysis) and their own experiences and awareness if any, of ageism in the industry. The women's focus group was transcribed and analysed by drawing upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) step framework for thematic analysis. Familiarity with the data is a key aspect of Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis; accordingly, the transcript was read through a number of times while listening to the audio recording. We then worked through the transcript to produce initial codes. We used a manual method of highlighting the transcript, firstly independently so we could check coding

reliability, and then as a team. The codes were herded into themes, which were reviewed and redefined in turn. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on an overarching theme we have labelled 'experiences of age'. This theme incorporates codes relating to the impact of age on women's working life.

Disappearances and the marginalisation of older women

Despite their recognition of a 'new visibility' for *some* older women actors and a subsequent representation of older women, our focus group was concerned about a wider *invisibility* of older women in British and US acting. They argued that age, or looking one's age, led to a 'dropping off' of roles when they hit their 40s:

'I suddenly realised that the parts were dropping off. Basically that there wasn't the same kind of parts coming up. I'd done all right on and up to that point' Robyn

This dropping off was felt to discourage women from pursuing their careers in acting. All the women spoke of others who had left the profession, often when they were near, or in, their 40s. Robyn described this as a **'**haemorrhaging' of women from the acting profession when unpredictable work made it impossible to maintain work/ life balance or indeed a family life:

'They've haemorrhaged because all to do with childcare, balancing of family, the whole thing of just finances. And survival on a precarious freelance self-employed situation means that a lot of people go off and become teachers. Or if there was two people who were both performers it was usually the man that stays on because he could get more parts and therefore the woman opts to do something else, and that's a generalisation, I know, but there's a lot of people I know that's true for. So, I can think of the people that were around me in my twenties and thirties and a lot of them aren't there now' Robyn

Robyn's point makes clear that ageism in the cultural industries intersects with wider gender inequalities around child-care and domestic life. Despite some changes (Fletcher, 2019) women still perform the majority of domestic labour and parenthood is still a point at which heterosexual couples are likely to adopt traditional gendered divisions of labour (McMunn et al, 2019). As gendered expectations combine with gendered ageism in the workplace, the decision to forego acting in favour of predicable work or to support a male partner, whose gender privileges are demonstrated in better remuneration and roles, may seem a pragmatic response to what is a problem of social power relations.

Our focus group were very aware of the number and quality of roles open to older women actors. They believed that for the women who did remain in the industry, television soap operas enabled a steady career to the age of 40 and, for some women, beyond. Yet the women were clear that ageism operated to further shrink the already limited number of roles open to women: "you know it's like as a woman there's minimal roles and then as an older woman there's *minimal* roles' (Esther). Esther's point about minimal roles referred both to a reduction in the number of roles open to older women actors and also to a reduction in the *quality* of those roles in the theatre and television work. Each woman spoke of being faced with stereotypical depictions of older women who they described as 'curtain twitchers'. 'Curtain twitcher' is a British colloquialism for people whom, while hidden behind their own curtains, watch their neighbours' everyday lives and make judgements on what they see (Tilson, 1998). A more critical approach to the term recognises it as derogatory because it refers, in the main, to *older women* engaged in talk which is coded as idle, malicious gossip in spaces that men have culturally been unable to access: historically it has been argued that the term referred to the talk of midwives (Rysman, 1977). As such, it is deemed a threat to the privacy of those who are gossiped about (Philo et al, 2017). As a *role,* the 'curtain twitcher' referred to characters who *witness* events rather than become involved in the main drama. Such roles had few lines or action and were felt to be one-dimensional. Occupying such roles meant that older women actors felt confined to the margins of dramatic action and, often, to the margins of the physical stage. The other options open to older women actors were advertisements for medical aides for older people, such as side opening baths and 'stairlift things you know or something' (Greta).

The focus group argued that their experiences of ageism were not shared by their male colleagues:

'Whereas our male contemporaries can play judges and barristers and the Head of this and the Head of that. So, you know it's *completely* different' Greta

Indeed, ageing was perceived to afford male actors more characterful roles. The women in the focus group believed that while women are judged on their ability *not to age,* men 'who get a little, shall we say, obese or shall we say crooked or whatever' (Anne) find that their

older bodies allow them access to more detailed, thoughtful work or roles of authority figures and in consequence, enable men to continue with *quality* employment. As men's roles were perceived to deepen in complexity, the women spoke of the different ways that age materialised in the roles offered to them.

While the women reflected on how they were 'not allowed to age' (Greta) they noted how available roles seemed to *shrink* and *stretch* age. There was an ironic awareness that those playing those roles of older women were rarely themselves old and indeed, that older women characters appeared to be getting younger. The role of mother was an example of the shrinking of age: the focus group discussed how mother-characters were increasingly being imagined and cast as younger so that 'sometimes there may only be 10 years in age between characters meant to be mother and daughter' (Esther). The youthfulness of mother-roles was recognised as a further way in which older women actors were being increasingly pushed to the margins of their profession. Similarly, grandmother roles may also be 'shrunk'; Esther recalled an unsuccessful audition for a grandma; at 50 years old, she was deemed too old and 'they ended up getting somebody who's probably forty with like brown hair, like smooth face, like literally forty or something for the grandma role'. Esther's experiences are echoed in wider observations that younger women are cast to play older characters (Jerslev and Petersen, 2018). Yet grandmother roles were also an example of how age was *stretched* when characters were imagined as considerably older. This had two consequences. The first was that many women actors were excluded from these roles *for not being old enough*, despite being grandparents themselves. The second was that the women actors found that the characterisations of grandmothers were dated. Greta stated that 'if they want grandmothers, they want grandmothers that were *our* grandmothers' meaning that the grandmother role has not changed since the 1950s and 1960s, or rather as Robyn stated, the roles seem to be based on 'another era which actually doesn't exist'. All of the women felt that these age-distortions and dated characterisations drastically limited the ability of drama on stage and screen to represent older women and the complexities of their life stories: 'I don't see myself on the television screen in the form of how I live my life now' Robyn.

Greta extended this line of discussion to state that ageism meant that older women in senior professional roles 'you know, my optician, my dentist, they're all female, they're all in positions you know, very superior positions, positions of power' were not well represented in

drama. Esther added that ageism also denied women actors the ability to progress to equivalent 'positions of power' *within* the creative industries: 'So when I am in my most capable, at my most intelligent with you know, 30 40 years of experience doing things, erm the doors get closed by deep, deep terror that people feel sometimes when they look at us because we are not beholden, especially now.' What Esther spoke of as a fear of older, powerful women accompanies inequalities around caring work to mean the gradual disappearance of women not just on stage and screen but also in positions of power *behind* the screen and *off* stage. As a recent Arts Council England report made clear:

> Female leaders within the creative and cultural industries report that factors that have hindered their progression include a lack of permanently funded jobs, a lack of line management support, caring responsibilities and poor job opportunities. The working environment remains a key factor affecting the progression of any leader. Within the creative and cultural sectors, research suggests that many leaders do not take career breaks, have never had a major caring responsibility and have done little or no part-time work over the course of their career. These features confirm the challenges that some women can still face in balancing family and career. Arts Council England (2014, p. 7).

The discussion of power relations within the industry, lead the women to reflect on some of ways these materialised in the everyday practices of their work.

Typecasting and Gatekeeping

Dean (2005: 762) speaks of casting directors and agents seeking the 'right look' and 'right body' in performers in order to 'convey meanings and conjure particular associations' for audiences. O'Brien et al (2017) have more recently argued that casting directors' ideals of the 'right look' can mean auditions are sites of inequality. More specifically, Friedman and O'Brien (2017) argue that the idea of type (typecasting) operates to maintain an over-supply of roles for white, middle class, male actors while constraining the range and quality of the roles for other actors. This is significant on two grounds. The first is the positive impact on those who have favoured traits: roles for white, male middle class actors tend to be complex, abundant and better remunerated. The second relates to the wider issue of representation. As Friedman and O'Brien (2017: 360) argue, actors have a role in 'representing social and aesthetic reality', yet typecasting can work to ensure the heightened visibility of white, middle class males by making invisible or reproducing caricatured roles for other acting

professionals. Friedman and O'Brien (2017) focus their attentions on the power relations of class and race; that age is also significant is indicated by Esther:

[age] 'it becomes an issue because often that man is the one that holds the key to the door that opens up opportunity for me' Esther

Esther illustrates an awareness shared by the rest of the women of the power of cultural intermediaries: Friedman (2014) refers to them as 'taste makers' because they use expertise and gut feelings to shape what audiences see by predicting what audiences *want* to see. Dean (2008) argues that these 'gatekeepers' are constrained by their assumptions of public expectations and also by commercial pressures. The women were aware of these expectation and pressures:

'It's behind the scenes particularly and now that for instance that the independent the BBC now has a lot of what you see on the screen is made by independent companies. Very little is actually made by the BBC. And those independent companies are run for profit now, they may have originated from public sector broadcasting but, they are now run for profit and their vision of a lot of things it is about selling to America. Selling to the bigger kind of world market and they see it in extremely commercial terms' Robyn

Seeing things in 'commercial terms' involves imagining the age of audiences. Esther argued that production companies privilege an imagined American youth market as the main and only market. This observation has been made too by Jermyn (2018: 168) who draws out the consequences to argue that the assumption that audiences are young, leads to a dominance 'of youth-focused/led, big- budget, often action-heavy' outputs. This leaves a restricted space for narratives about older lives and limits the character roles for older women actors. The focus group were acutely aware of how a hegemonic construction of the 'audience' worked to privilege the screen over the stage and ignored older audiences. They felt that chasing a youth market limited the creativity of the industry:

'The audience in the UK for instance is, you know, the majority of people who buy theatre tickets are older women. The research has been done on that. So it's like, you know, start catering for actually where there is a demand you know? And, the same with television audiences. They'll say 'well we've got to catch the youth audiences, they're all going to the smaller screens and their phones'. Fine, but also service where there is a demand. They[older audiences] just feel negated all the time. They switch soaps on and things and it's the same old rubbish and that, industry wise. I would *like* a change and I know all of us do.' Robyn

The focus group discussed how the commercial pressures of the industry had an 'impact on the writing' (Greta), which they felt generated greater attention to the complexity of younger

roles, leaving older actors with 'more sort of functional kind of playing mother, grandmother' (Robyn). There was however a great deal of sympathy towards the writers as even 'extremely established female writers' found that their characters, written as old, are made more youthful when their work gets commissioned:

'there is still a lot of white men who are making decisions about what type, even if you are a women writer and you're successful. They [elite white men] will potentially control the output by the scenarios and things like that. So, certain people will put an idea forward but that's not accepted. It's then controlled and switched and time and time again. I do know of this, but I can't name names, of television where a person's being of a certain age and it's been changed down to younger.' Robyn

We now move to the third and last of our themes, which addresses how the women experienced their own ageing.

Embodied experiences of age

Research has critically observed that prevailing *representations* of aged bodies draw on denigrating stereotypes of age that depict old people as frail; alternatively, they promote idealistic depictions of age that exclude the physical, emotional and material realities of ageing (Van Dyk, 2014; Westwood, 2019). In combination, these dominant representations are problematic because they deny the diversity and flux of the body's capabilities as it ages (Calasanti, 2007) and they leave little space to talk about the ageing body without recourse to reductionist binaries. Clarke and Korotchenko (2011: 495) observe that despite the 'centrality of corporeality to everyday life' it is only since the 1980s that the body has been discussed extensively in sociocultural theory and research and social gerontology scholarship. Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) understanding of the body's intra-action with the social world and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theorisation (1945) of the body's orientation towards the world can be used in order to understand bodies in terms of *embodiment* rather than solely in relation to body *image* and *representation*. Scholars of cultural gerontology have developed further the work of both Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty on embodiment as it can be related specifically to the ageing process. Distinguishing between body *image* (how older adults perceive and feel about their bodies) and *embodiment* (experiences in and through the body) Clarke and Korotchenko argue that the 'double standard of ageing theory', whereby women's understanding of their own appearance is more negatively impacted by the ageing process, 'may not fully account for older adults' self-perceptions'; they suggest that there is some evidence to support the idea that 'the means by which older women evaluate their bodies shifts from appearance to physical function' (2011: 497).

Rehearsals for their play certainly encouraged the women actors in the RepresentAge project to reflect on their own ageing bodies in terms of lived experience oriented towards the world. Not only did they experience ageing and embodiment in terms of some physical limitations but also in terms of what these limitations *enabled.*

The participants in the focus group were keen to keep the materiality of their age and ageing bodies to the fore;

'I mean the reality of age is that actually the body does deteriorate, the mind need not but the body actually does' Anne

The 'reality' of age meant bodily stiffness and a restriction in what the body might be able to achieve in performance for all the women: Anne who could once 'dance for you for hours' couldn't 'do that for you now'. While all the women spoke of the impact of aging on their bodies and faces, what they concluded was what Esther called a 'trade off' in terms of desire to work, bodily competence, confidence and professional development.

It is important to consider how we might connect the desire expressed by participants to avoid stereotypical depictions of both frailty or idealised aging, to the admission made by the actresses that they either take pride in the physical work they do to stave off aging or, in time gain comfort with that deterioration. On the surface it does appear that there exists a tension in the experiences, desires and efforts articulated here. However, it should not be overlooked that the lived experience of the process of stereotyping: stereotypes are internal(ised), self-perpetuating and visceral components of one's identity and should therefore be understood as an internal, cumulative process throughout the life course. Levy (1996) describes the process whereby the formation of self-stereotyping can be understood as beginning in childhood, when children internalise stereotypes about older people which are then reinforced throughout adulthood, to eventually then become self-stereotypes when a person reaches old age. The rejection of the ageing body by society is both an individual and social process, as Moore reminds us: "Just as subjects deny their aged reflection, similarly the rejected image of old age extends to the social body; society […] rejects a reflection of itself in old age that is disintegrating, failing or dependent" (p.188). Being 'in' and 'of' society, the actresses are just as susceptible to such processes despite demonstrating a greater awareness too of such

stereotypes. This is evidenced when they articulate a taken for granted schema around deterioration. Indeed Levy et al (2002) attribute such inner-reflections to Mead's ideas around the social basis of the self, as negative perceptions of age persist within society, so such attitudes become internalised and subsequently part of the individual's self and, potentially then, in late adulthood, such perceptions of hitherto others become a personal reality. Horton et al (2010) make the point that, although decline is assumed with age, debate continues as to how much of that decline is the result of inevitable biological processes and how much may also be attributable to environmental or social variables (p.354). Weil and Lefkowitz (2019) highlight how, within stage depictions of age themselves, the co-existence of both positive and negative depictions of older characters can be clearly observed, with theatre culture itself therefore being just as entwined with the processes of dissemination of particular templates of age. Their observations around counter-narratives of depictions of age in the theatre are particularly interesting in the context of our research. Resilience, self-reflexivity and resistance were noted as key ways in which alternative views of aging were shown in the plays they were analysing, with such tropes used as conscious moments of expressing hostility towards perceived cultural norms. With this in mind then, in displaying seemingly contradictory logic in wanting to avoid reinforcing specific iterations of aging in their roles, whilst at the same time seeming to 'admit' that they are fragile and possibly trying to resist 'inevitable' deterioration in various physical and mental ways, our actresses are demonstrating the very real hybrid experience of being and resisting internal and external stereotypes, and exemplifying the multiple and complex ways in which a gradual accumulation of selves can be represented by one body (Moore, 2014) They inhabit bodies in which they describe experiencing decline, but simultaneously acknowledge too that they are still able to commandeer and recalibrate those bodies and minds in ways that represent strength in new ways – through, as they described, increased professional confidence, heightened awareness of the need for self care, and the gaining of greater knowledge of aging. This duality of both decline and growth that was so evident in their self-narratives is a promising response to Moore's (2014) call for the need for the emergence of "new age-effects whilst dramatizing a range of complex, significant, and even frail older women" (p.191).

Weil and Lefkowitz (2019) draw our attention to the important discursive relationship between subject and audience as well as between characters themselves and how such relationships produce significant cultural narratives about aging. Given our discussions here,

we would suggest too that it is worth adding to that nexus, the relationship between the actors themselves and the characters they play, because our participants' reflections on these experiences demonstrate the extent to which so much of the portrayal of their roles is reliant upon their own personal didactic resistance, reflexivity and resilience.

It may be unsurprising then that when talking about their careers, Anne, the oldest of the group, described herself as 'raring to go' and 'wanting more'. The other women were enthusiastic in their agreement with Anne that acting was propelled by a creative impulse that was not easily ignored:

Well as a performer one wants to carry on working so you have that inbuilt desire always, maybe financial maybe whatever, but if you're an artist, if you're a painter, you'd paint until your fingers dropped off don't you? Anne

The 'trade off' also involved a deeper sense of the body and a stronger desire to 'look after' oneself. There was pride and some joy to be had in knowing the body and in a specific competence that the women developed as they faced the material, corporeal aspects of ageing. Robyn described this as 'a kind of knowledge';

'So not only did I do the show which is extremely physical for three hours at a shot, but I also used to go off and do Pilates and things in the morning or whatever to balance out what I was doing. So, I had a kind of knowledge of myself and I knew I could go out for a drink sometimes but not every night, so there's kind of *knowledge* there' Robyn

This 'knowledge' meant that Robyn, the oldest member of the cast on a recent tour, was the only one to escape injury. Likewise, Esther described her body as 'growing' and 'changing' which she enjoyed because of the self-attention and bodily awareness it brought:

'I'm enjoying kind of growing, my body's changing, I have to do more to maintain the abilities that I had before, so if I'm doing a physical show before I would have to warm up an hour. Now I have to warm up an hour and a half before the show that kind of thing' Esther

For Esther, body knowledge created new depths to performance. Speaking of a dance troupe working in to the 'late sixties, even up into their seventies', Esther described how age and experience allows the dancers to engage in 'modifying and they're also deepening in their work'. Now unable or unwilling to do 'the jumping around', experience allows them to put

‘all of those years of work… in one gesture, as opposed to the jumping around, so it’s just this one simple gesture that is so deep and so profound and so all of their training is almost condensed or distilled down into a depth of work’ Esther.

Certainly, all the women felt at the ‘top of their game’ (Greta) and felt their professional experience has deepened and sharpened their work, which made the reduction of roles increasingly frustrating.

The ‘trade off’ of ageing was also a boost in confidence that all the women experienced:

‘there’s trade off, there’s wonderful things that are happening, a lack of deep insecurity, you know, a lack of neurosis, anxiety that used to be, that used to kind of plague all twenty-one year olds’ Esther

Robyn described herself as at her ‘most capable, at my most intelligent with you know, 30 40 years of experience doing things’. For Anne, ageing brought a new confidence to try new ventures and to push oneself creatively and personally:

‘I think that the thing about aging is consistently getting rid of one’s own ceilings or self-imposed ‘can’ts’. The minute you say ‘can’t’ everything stops, the world comes down, shrivels, the minute that you say ‘can’ something happens, and you try to find a way forward’ Anne

For Robyn, this confidence coincided with a lessening of responsibility at home (as children left home), resulting in a stronger ambition to get involved in union work and take more risks professionally.

I think as I have got older and I’ve got less responsibility at home I’ve definitely taken that on and I’ll be at the barricades, I’ll probably die on a barricade or a march somewhere but you know what I mean yeah’ Robyn

Robyn expressed this confidence as ‘being scary’ and this helped Esther to explain why older women actors were marginalised; it wasn’t just ageism, she argued, but that men were terrified of older women who spoke out:

‘erm the doors get closed by deep, deep terror that people feel sometimes when they look at us because we are not beholden, especially now. I remember seeing when we had the pill, thinking literally ‘this is going to change *everything*’ you know, we don’t *need* partners, there are so many things we don’t need any more in order to be respectable members of society in order to live. I don’t need a husband to live, for a home, I can vote, I can own my own car so it’s this incredible sense of confidence in the world and that’s terrifying, terrifying because

we also get to the point where we are like 'I'm not interested in supporting your persona or bullshit anymore' so without saying *anything'* that's like already freaking a whole bunch of people out' Esther

It was clear that for these women, the ageing process brought differing levels of body/self awareness which when combined with a lifetime of experience and developing one's craft, led to them being at the 'top of their game' (Anne). That this coincided with the workings of ageism in the creative industries made the women's marginalisation to 'Curtain Twitchers' feel like a terrible blow.

Conclusion

In this paper we sought to examine the extent of the 'new visibility' for older women actors on stage and screen. Our pilot study with the RepresentAge theatre group focused on examining the cultural mechanisms of work-allocation (getting the roles) and work opportunities (women's perceptions of the roles) as they intersect with typecasting (availability of diverse roles), gatekeeping and entrenched power dynamics off stage and screen. In addition, our study found that caring responsibilities in the private sphere in tandem with the effects of gendered age stereotyping dramatically impact the visibility of a variety of diverse ages on stage and screen and the numbers of older women in positions of power behind the scenes. On a more positive note, all the women we spoke to felt empowered by a new confidence in their own experience of ageing embodiment and subjectivity. If they could not always express this fully in more commercial stage and screen contexts, through their own theatre company and the play we saw in rehearsal, they were beginning to challenge the histories of gendered ageism in the cultural industries. As their website states:

We will:
1. Campaign to change the way older women are represented
2. Create projects for stage and screen that tackle ageism head on
3. Create spaces for older women to connect with their confidence and voice.
We're passionate about combatting the invisibility and ageism that women experience as they age and we can't do that alone!

Our pilot project with RepresentAge adds to the impetus for us and other scholars to examine further the contexts of production which shape representations and are, accordingly, implicated in reproducing or disrupting ageist stereotypes. As Esther suggested:

'I mean I get like a lot of people are like "how can you be that age" well it's like you need to change your idea of what this age is then' Esther

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