WHEN THE ACTOR JOEL GREY, who co-starred in last year’s successful Broadway revival of *Anything Goes*, was asked by a reporter if he ever thought he’d still be acting at 80, he said, “No — because I thought I’d never be 80.”

While Grey and other seasoned veterans of the stage have packed Broadway theaters with energetic performances, the only ones who seem surprised are the audience members. For the actors, it’s the getting older that took them by surprise — not the fact that they’re still doing what they’ve always done.

“There’s no built-in retirement to being an artist — you don’t get to 65, get the gold watch and leave,” says Joan Jeffri, founder of the Research Center for Arts and Culture and the author of cutting-edge research on the challenges aging artists face in work and life. “Being an artist is not just a job; it’s an identity — you can’t retire from who you are.”

While not all artists and performers remain prolific in their later years, Jeffri says it’s not at all uncommon for older arts administrators to cycle back into the community — as consultants, mentors and volunteers — well beyond their official “retirement.”

“People have said to me that we’re losing their legacy, but we’re not losing them,” Jeffri asserts. “They’re funneling their collective expertise and wisdom back into the community in ways that benefit the entire field.”

In a culture forever obsessed with youth and what’s new, and a belt-tightening business environment that’s overly eager to automate processes, it’s significant that the performing arts infrastructure is an arena in which experience still counts.
InsIDE Arts
FALL 2012

Younger artists respect their roots. And a hybrid now about their community. Now, those elders are respected. “There were always creative people who were concerned about their positive experiences as immigrants in the U.S.-Mexico border, the installation also features bricks engraved with statements from Latinos about their experiences as immigrants in the U.S.

Although not a musician himself, Aguado never forgot the first time that his father took him to see a George Gershwin concert, and he continued to attend Gershwin concerts even after his father passed away. When he became council director, the first concert he put on featured Gershwin. “My role in the arts was always to help appreciate it,” he says. “Part of my job at the council was to stay the hell out of the way of artists. I used to tell them, ‘Please don’t give me what you think I want.’ And it’s worked. I daresay there are no other community art programs that produced two MacArthur genius grant winners. Was it because of me? Hell no. But I was smart enough to provide them with a place to work.’

Now, it’s the not working, and not being a round-the-clock advocate, that Aguado describes as a detoxing of sorts. “The emotional letting go of all the tension you had … you realize that tension was also a support system,” he says. “The tension is not there, where I had to fight every day. And suddenly I didn’t have to fight? That was hard. I give credit to my wife for helping me through that.”

Stepping back from his role at the Bronx Arts Council, Stepping back from his role at the Bronx Arts Council, Aguado hopes that Bronx Music Heritage Center, where he formerly worked as an arts consultant, will foster that continued sharing between genres and generations. “Music is what defines our future,” he says. “It was a creative incubator that allowed people to express their concerns. Now they need a place where artists from different demographics, and different age groups, can come together and share and learn — that’s part of passing legacies along.”

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Aguado says one of the more gratifying projects he has been involved in since retiring last June is the Conversing Bricks installation, a powerful response to anti-immigrant sentiment, set to be officially unveiled at Hostos Community College this September. Made in part from actual bricks sent to members of Congress several years ago in response to anti-immigrant sentiment, set to be a beacon for a lifetime of meaning, often self-motivated and self-generated. This meaning is something to pass on to future generations and as part of their early and continuing education." For more information, please visit www.creativeaging.org/rcac.

I have the opportunity to do exactly what I want to do, to engage in projects that are very positive and reaffirming.”

Profile of an Aging Performing Artist
Profile of an Aging Artist is excerpted from Joan Jeffri’s study Still Kicking: Aging Performing Artists in NYC and LA Metro Areas—Information on Artists IV, about the ways a selection of artists ages 62 and older in New York City and Los Angeles are supported and integrated into their communities and what factors come into play as they mature into old age. “If we wish to prosper as an arts field into the future, it is imperative that we pay heed to the largest and ‘oldest’ aging generation in history,” the report states. “A greater understanding of aging artists’ survival mechanisms, their relationship to their work, to each other and to the social systems which make their work possible can provide a beacon for a lifetime of meaning, often self-motivated and self-generated. This meaning is something to pass on to future generations and as part of their early and continuing education.” For more information, please visit www.creativeaging.org/rcac.

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Not planning on leaving metro area
Satisfied with lifetime performing career

Would choose to do it all over again
Communicates daily or weekly with other artists
Has a deeper creative experience

Belongs to a performers’ union
Takes more risks in the artistic process than when younger
Lives alone
Has health insurance
Current health places no limitations on performing work
Still training in his/her art
Lives in a rent controlled apartment

Ears money through his/her art

37 years old NYC
35 years old LA

Has a will

Education: B.A. in French, M.A. in Urban Studies
Experiences: Non-profit executive director, arts administrator, arts consultant, artist, arts writer, Gates Millennium scholar, former cultural arts program manager for a National Endowment for the Arts-funded program, founder of the Pan-African Film Series, founder of the Bronx-based educational non-profit...
Latinos. And they walked through those doors and said, “I want a family. I want to have a life outside of my work.” And that’s all right. It’s part of having moved the ball forward. But we still need people to keep pushing.”

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“I want a family. I want to have a life outside of my work.”

And they walked through those doors and said, “She was very much aware of her role — and because of that, she invited everyone else to make the most of theirs,” recalls Theresa Harlan, a writer and curator of Native American Art who worked at the California Arts Council in the early ’90s. “I was able to watch that, and try it out on my own.”

Harlan admits working for the state was a rough transition after having worked in the field as an artist. “I told Josie I hated it after one week,” she says. “She said, ‘Give it a year. You’ll see what kind of impact you can have.’ And I became aware of the role the legislature played, and the importance of legislators understanding the needs of the people they represent. And in the end I really did understand. I thought, Wow. You really can — you really can make change.”

MENTORING THE NEXT GEN

A public arts funding continues to dry up — not because the economy is tanking, Talamentez asserts, but because “we’re cycling back again to where arts funding isn’t a priority” — she has taken an interest in younger artists who are operating under an entrepreneurial wing.

“I found a couple of guys this past weekend — they sell designer artists’ clothes, sell paint for graffiti art — with that, using it to support creating art that isn’t market-driven,” she says. “In talking to them, I was so excited. Now, when young artists ask about becoming a 501c3, I ask first, why? You shouldn’t NOT get it. But you shouldn’t get it at the expense of entrepreneurial possibilities. We’ve started to bridge the two, so I’m saying, bridge it further. Build more to sustain the nonprofit part of what you’re doing.”

It’s just one example of the ways in which Talamentez continues to constructively use her influence — not by yelling from the sidelines about the way things used to get done, but by engaging in a back-and-forth between artists and an arts infrastructure that doesn’t always adequately support them.

“I think the next generation of multi-cultural organizations, they may not want to take up the arms their grand-parents were taking up — equity and civil rights. They’re in a different playing field now,” she says. “I do believe they have deep appreciation for cultural roots, but they’re doing it differently. They don’t necessarily want the nonprofit翼. They’re finding ways to do what they do, in a different format. They’re still doing what they do, but in their own way becoming who they are.”

NOT THE RETIRING TYPE

José Talamentez, who left her post last year as the chief of programs for the California Arts Council, where she’d worked for 26 years, describes experiencing a similar free fall when she first decided to leave the colleagues she loved. But cuts in the state budget had been brutal for the Arts Council, as it was for all arts orgs, and an already heavy workload had become unbearable. “I didn’t want to die from stress,” she says.

Evidently, the arts field wasn’t ready to let her go. So far the co-founder of Chicano Park in San Diego has fended off two job offers, although she continues to work on a consulting basis, and she has since concluded, “I don’t think I’m the retiring type.”

Turning her attention more toward cultural resource management and historic preservation, Talamentez admits she still works as much now as she did pre “retirement,” but now it’s all on her time.

“I don’t know what retiring means. If it means I can take a trip to Brazil or whatever, I’ll do that — but I don’t know what it means not to work,” she says. “I have a firm commitment to service, and I just feel like I have all this experience, and how to perpetuate cultural diversity. This is a dialogue I have heard the multi-cultural community having for me not to use it feels like a sin, almost.”

One of the great advantages of experience, as Talamentez has shown, is being able to anticipate and influence the pendulum swings of public policy and public arts funding.

“I was at an Americans for the Arts council session recently, and they were talking about being inclusive, and how to perpetuate cultural diversity. This is a dialogue I have heard the multi-cultural community having since the ’80s,” she says. “I can remember [California Representative] Maxine Waters asking how much of our budget was going toward encouraging cultural diversity when we were giving substantial grants to large-budget organizations, and at the time, people kicked and screamed. Now, those same organizations are model organizations of integrating diversity.”

Colleagues say it’s that keen awareness of the big picture that has long inspired sincere imitation among the many artists and administrators Talamentez has mentored over the course of her career.