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Balancing Act

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Article abstract

This article discusses the challenges of being a professional artist and parent working in the performing arts industry and the measures being taken to create increased accessibility in the sector. It opens with an anecdote by the author recounting moments of exclusion from professional opportunities due to caregiving responsibilities. The article goes on to outline global initiatives created to support artist caregivers in the performing arts and then points to various media responding to this issue. The article introduces the national initiative Balancing Act being developed by Theatre Direct, which aims to support artist caregivers in Canada and concludes with a personal reflection from the author, herself a professional artist, scholar, and mother.

Balancing Act

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Dans cet article, Lisa Marie DiLiberto s'attarde aux défis qu'entraîne le fait d'être un artiste professionnel et un parent qui travaille dans les arts de la scène et traite des mesures prises en vue d'améliorer les conditions d'accès à ce secteur. Le texte s'ouvre sur un témoignage au sujet d'instances où DiLiberto s'est fait refuser des occasions professionnelles en raison de ses responsabilités parentales. Elle décrit ensuite des initiatives mises sur pied à l'échelle mondiale pour soutenir les artistes-aidants dans les arts du spectacle et cite différentes réactions à cette question parues dans les médias. Elle présente enfin le projet « Balancing Act », une initiative nationale mise sur pied par Theatre Direct visant à appuyer les artistes-aidants au Canada, et termine avec une réflexion personnelle, livrée à titre d'artiste professionnelle, chercheuse et mère.

Mots clés : parentalité, garde d'enfants, accès, aide-soignant, Theatre Direct

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Keywords: parenting, childcare, accessibility, caregiver, Theatre Direct



In 2016, when my second child was only six months old, I applied to take a workshop offered as part of an established Canadian theatre festival where I had previously presented work, led workshops, and attended as an industry delegate. Upon registering, I informed the festival organizers that I would need to have my breastfeeding baby with me, and they responded:

Your kin in the room could potentially play a distraction to you, as your attention will be split between the work that is being asked of you from both the facilitator's and your babe's. With too many unknown factors—of who else is going to attend—I'm left having to recommend alternative arrangements for child care while you attend the workshop. So sorry, I hope you can understand. (Anonymous)

I was gutted. It was not the first time I had to miss out on an opportunity because I was not welcome with my baby, but it was one of the most impactful. And I would be flying all the way to Whitehorse for this festival, where not only had I been shut out of the workshop, but also whereupon requesting seats near the exit for festival shows so that I could sneak out if need be with my babe-in-arms, I was told that this could not be arranged. There are so many other examples, too many to list here, which upon recalling make me weep just as they did in the moment of exclusion. Though at the time I questioned whether it was simply the hormones, the post-partum, the lack of sleep, or the fear of being left behind that caused such tears, or if I was actually being denied access to professional opportunities because I had a baby.

My determination to continue creatively carving out my niche as a professional theatre artist while parenting two small humans over the last several years has inspired me to explore the issue of accessibility for artist caregivers in our industry. I was encouraged to find that support for artist parents has already become an advocacy focus across the globe. In the UK in 2015, a national organization called Parents and Carers in Performing Arts (PIPA) was born and launched a strategy that “enables and empowers parents, carers and employers to achieve sustainable change in attitudes and practices in order to attract, support and retain a more diverse and flexible workforce” (“Welcome”). PIPA led the way for the creation of other like-minded organizations including Mothers Artists Makers (Ireland), Mothers Who Make (UK), and the Parent Artist Advocacy League (US). In addition to the rhizomatic sprouting of these highly respected and supported initiatives within the sector, the problem of how to keep parents in the creative industry has been making mainstream headlines: “Parents in the Arts Need to Stage a Childcare Revolution” in *The Guardian* (Gardener), “Career or Children? Why Theatre Parents Feel Forced to Choose” in *Playbill* (Purcell), and “Taking your Child to Work, When Your Job Is Making Theater” in the *New York Times* (Paulson). While the international players galvanizing around this issue are inspiring, here in Canada, all I can detect are sporadic, isolated efforts to support artist parents on a project by project basis, with no formal national network of support. As a sector we need to come together and bring about our own innovations for change.

At Theatre Direct, a company dedicated to creating and producing theatre for young audiences, where I am the artistic director, we have responded to this need, spearheading Balancing Act. This new initiative aims to raise awareness about the challenges faced by caregivers in our industry and to experiment with innovative solutions for long-term, sustainable change in attitude and working practices that will increase accessibility for caregivers in the performing arts here in Canada. In order to work within the limitations of the pandemic we are all living through, we have had to shift our 2020/21 Balancing Act plans, but perhaps there is a silver lining. While strategies such as on-site childcare, a five-day work week, creating a family room at the theatre, and best practices for touring have become less relevant during this time, working from home, flexible hours, and adaptive artistic practices have moved to the forefront for us all. Only months ago, centring family life seemed unfathomable for theatre artists, whereas now, for caregivers, there is no choice but to make it work. To this end, Balancing Act has launched four new virtual experiments designed to inspire intergenerational learning, support artist caregivers, and engage young people through art (<http://www.balancingactcanada.com>). As we navigate through this period of social isolation as a sector, we hope the resources we develop will prove to be useful for organizations and artists not only during this moment of crisis, but also when we return to business as usual and look towards implementing proven approaches to working flexibly and supporting caregivers.

I am crossing my fingers that our work with Balancing Act will give artists the courage to believe that having a career in the performing arts and having a family is an attainable dream, knowing that they will be supported and encouraged instead of shut out and looked over. But let us not fool ourselves: caregivers are not the only ones who will benefit from this revolution. The art form itself will be richer by the creativity these artists will bring, most of whom are at the height of their careers as they become parents. That is, if we prop open the door and allow them into the room with their children in tow.

While looking to other leaders in this crusade I was lucky to meet Sarah Cullen, the founder of MOTHRA, an artist-parent project with a mandate to “push the boundaries surrounding the attitudes towards childcare, artist-parents, and the inclusion of children by creating a multi-generational co-working space for artists” (“Raison D’être”). When I asked Sarah about her motivation to start MOTHRA, she responded, “I need to help start this change while it’s relevant to me. In a couple years both my kids will be in school and I’ll have more time to just get on with other things and I’ll be like, uh, enough of that new parent stuff, you know.” I can relate. As each day goes by, it gets a little bit easier to switch between the role of mother, wife, artist, producer, and scholar. Part of me wants to forget about the struggles I had in earlier days. I secretly want to remove the stigma that comes from being outed as a mother in the theatre. But then I remember how terrifying it was to advocate for myself when I was in the thick of it; how almost impossible it was to keep all the balls in the air and keep juggling on my own; how much I longed for someone to step in and help me find my balance. Even now, while I am so determined to keep playing, I still sometimes feel I am barely able to stay in the ring.

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Contributor

LISA MARIE DILIBERTO is Artistic Director of Theatre Direct, a company dedicated to creating and producing work for young audiences, now in its forty-fourth season. She is the founder of FIXT POINT Arts and Media, the co-creator of *The Tale of a Town—Canada*, a multi-year theatre and media project that has toured to every province and territory, and the co-creator of *Main Street Ontario*, an animated series now airing its second season on TVO. Lisa Marie is a guest instructor at Queen's University and on faculty at Centennial College, where she teaches Clown and Acting. Lisa Marie holds a Master of Arts in Theatre and Performance Studies from York University and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. She is Artistic Advisor for the National Arts Centre of Canada, a graduate of George Brown Theatre School and École Philippe Gaulier in Paris, France. Lisa Marie is a Dora Award-nominated director, an advocate for artist caregivers through her work with Balancing Act, and the proud mom of two wild children.