**Fellow of The Arts Foundation /Dance UK Mentoring Programme 2015**

**Does the dance industry lose its female dancer leaders to Motherhood?**

Over the past few years there has been a surge of interest in the lack of female choreographers and leaders within the dance world. Luke Jennings has written various articles about gender inequality in dance and Charlotte Vincent also wrote for the Guardian in 2012.
I wrote this back In 2016 when I was at the end of the Dance UK mentor programme, so I am aware things may have moved on since then, however I still think it is helpful to keep the conversation buoyant and many of the issues are still relevant.

During my time on the Dance UK mentor and leadership programme, I wanted to re-engage with the industry and chose to observe artists and companies that inspired me. One of my realisations, as an established artist and mother going back into the industry, was that not only was there a void of women leaders but also a void of 'my era' of established women in the dance world in general. There were few women I could relate to, most were young girls in their 20's. I decided to contact around the 20 women that I performed alongside during my career, most of whom now had children. I was inquisitive to see how they felt about being part of the dance industry a few years down the line.

It felt that there were deeper underlying issues around female leadership in the industry, and I questioned do we lose future female choreographers, dancers and leaders to motherhood? Motherhood that could, perhaps be supported and valued more robustly by the dance world?

I have been a professional dancer for over 15 years working freelance with various choreographers and companies including Mathew Bourne's New Adventures, who have been very supportive about keeping me connected to industry throughout my career. Since becoming a mother of two, there have been many obstacles that have led to me taking a pause in my career. This is true of many female dancers that become mothers.

The response from many was that there was a general feeling of a void in their creative lives and they felt bereft that they would not be able to access dance again in a professional capacity. There was also feedback about the lack of mothers in dance that are able to contribute to the industry, they felt frustrated and that "they had far more to give emotionally and artistically now, than ever before"

My point is that, as women develop their practice in the dance industry and start to become confident about their physical voice, and possibly their choreographic voice, it is also an age that their biological clock is ticking. It seems as a women you have to make difficult choices that are not always evident at the time you decide to become pregnant, which can be an unforeseen cliff face to navigate, and the consequences only becomes visible after having a child. Opportunities to finds to find a way back into the industry, that aren’t in the field of teaching, are few and far between.

We know that dancers sculpt their bodies from an early age to succeed in the vocation that they feel passionate about, their body is their tool and female dancers also use every part of their body during pregnancy to create a child and give birth. During pregnancy it can feel as if the body is hijacked; pelvic floor, breasts, muscle tone, loosening of ligaments, spinal alignment, nerve damage etc. are all effected. There is a huge demand put on the body whilst pregnant, the list is endless depending on the individual. Karen Laing, a post-natal exercise expert, quotes in her blog ‘Anxiety, childbirth, pregnancy, breast feeding and sleep deprivation all take their toll on a new mum's health and fitness” and “Complications like diastasis recti (abdominal separation), adhesions, post stitches pain or pelvic floor dysfunction (such as prolapse) can cause problems well beyond two years” you can read more about how long it really takes to recover from birth in her blog here: <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/karen-laing/post-baby-body_b_8739254.html>

For the few that have family support and no complications during childbirth it may be an easier path, but for many trying to find time, childcare resources and funds to get yourself back into shape and re-finding your confidence emotionally and physically, ensuring the 'work tool' is sufficient and safe to engage as a professional dancer again can, feel like an impossible task and an uphill struggle. I think there’s a beginning of a support system for mothers to find their feet again in the professional dance world, but to make a real impact, opportunities also need to be flexible and fit with the exterior physical and emotional demands that mothers have to navigate.

There are many hurdles that present themselves when embarking on motherhood as a dancer; freelance contracts and lack of structure for maternity time, and few programs to fit back into after the ‘normal’ 9-month period, when most women return to work. Childcare in London is wildly expensive, trying to fit it in with the

Often unsociable hours that are needed to work within the industry can become difficult. Moving out the city, as many often do when entering into family life, presents its own problems as there is little work in suburban or rural areas for dancers and performers.
Because of the inconsistencies, low budgets / wage allowances in dance, many women and mothers are not the bread winners of the family. Taking even one year off to have children (not alone additional years for further pregnancies) can make such an impact on the careers of women. Finding the time, alongside being the main child carer to rekindle connections and contacts can be timely and unsustainable.

These are just some of the issues that female dancers face if they make the choice to become mothers. Many females in the dance world decide not to have a family but instead continue to develop their careers for the fear of losing it to motherhood, or possibly postpone trying for a baby till later, encountering problems and costly procedures to conceive.

Admittedly there has been a recent surge of opportunities for women and It seems that there is a growing voice in the arts in general about the support, or lack of it, for parents in the industry. PIPA and Mothers Who Make are shedding light on issues, but there is a much quieter noise out there voicing the issues for female dancers and it can be an isolating feeling for the few mothers that are out there navigating some of the is- sues, so I would like to keep the conversation alive!

There is no doubt that Fathers in the dance industry also encounter some of these obstacles, but it seems we should truly consider that the female physiology is obviously very different to a male physiology and demands additional and alternative support to fulfil its potential as women’s success can be thwarted by the demands of pregnancy and parenting.

If there were more platforms and structured programmes, financial support and physical training pro- grammes to help women back on to their career path after pregnancy, then I'm sure this would encourage women and mothers to continue engagement in the industry and in turn create more potential leaders and support a more equal gender balance of choreographic voices.

It may be too late for the majority of my generation of dancers, but if there were more conversations and acknowledgement by the industry, that has benefited from women's talent over the years, maybe there could be a firmer infrastructure and support system for female dancers and leaders to access, throughout their journey of motherhood, allowing more women to continue their careers and re-enter the industry after having children.

I guess it begs the question, do we really have to suffer for our art? And is this an outdated and old-fashioned quote that we could discard and move on from? Could the industry be more accommodating and understanding of the toll of motherhood and support women to nurture themselves and their children, physically emotionally and mentally allowing them to still be part of the industry that they feel passionate about? I’m sure these nurturing skills would bleed in to their work and intern benefit all involved in the industry.

If you got this far, thank you for listening and hope that this sparks some interesting conversations and further opportunities for mothers in the industry...

Warm wishes

Belinda Lee Chapman

**Opportunities and resources for mothers and parents:**

<https://www.onedanceuk.org/job/mother-dance-artists/>

[https://motherswhomake.org](https://motherswhomake.org/) [http://www.pipacampaign.com](http://www.pipacampaign.com/)

**Further reading:
Dancer and mother: can we be both?**<https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-profession-> als-blog/2012/may/31/dance-arts-motherhood-having-children-rights
**Are you a dancer and a mother?**<https://www.danceinforma.com/2015/10/04/who-you-a-dancer-and-a-mother/> **Dancers in a new role: Mother**<https://www.danceinforma.com/2017/08/03/dancers-in-a-new-role-mother/>