



Artwork by children of the RE-EMERGING project members.



A choreography of parenting

Anita Clark, Director of The Work Room in Glasgow, Scotland, frames the voices of parent-artists as they launch a new resource. Born of a new project, RE-EMERGING, it is offered for others, like them, contemplating or navigating the complexities of resuming their practice alongside the care and raising of children.

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All photos: Anita Clark

“The ending was abrupt; letting go of the dancer’s body; strange, sometimes hard, but also liberating opening up opportunities in other areas.

The present was at first still one foot in both spaces, a balancing act loving both, always missing the other, a tension of opposites...tricky as both always feel to me to ask for 100% of my attention and devotion.

The future is that everything changes my boys are growing and new windows of space open up for me to come back to dance stronger from the initiation of motherhood.”

Sara Gordon – movement director, choreographer, yoga teacher & mother to two.

Last year, The Work Room embarked on a new project, RE-EMERGING, developed as part of Creative Scotland’s Radical Care action research project which is working with organisations to try out new approaches to supporting those with caring responsibilities. It recognises that many people experience barriers to working or progressing in the arts, screen and creative industries as a result of their caring commitments.

The Work Room is an artist-led organisation, committed to supporting a sustainable environment for independent dance artists. We are based in Glasgow with members across Scotland. We have a long-established practice of recognising parenting

as an equalities issue in dance and the performing arts, so we were keen to be involved. We initiated a programme of peer support for artist-parents at the stage of ‘re-emerging’ into their working practice as freelance dance artists, after taking time away to care for children. The funding from Creative Scotland enabled us to work with a group of freelance dance artists to support paid-time for them to participate.

In September 2022, The RE-EMERGING group came together live for the first time. Previously, the eight independent dance artists from across Scotland, met on-line over nine months. Six are mothers; two are fathers; some are in same sex partnerships; some are solo-mothers; some are adoptive parents; some have babies or toddlers while others have children in school. All are making shifts in how to approach their work as dance artists alongside caring responsibilities. This coming together brought with it a network, a place to ask questions and sense of peer support. As often-migratory people, it was also a nest for the gathering of experiences that reflected journeys of (un) support, (un)employment and (un)knowing.

On Monday 5 June 2023, we hosted a gathering at Glasgow Women’s Library, to open up and share the process of the group and launch, a choreography of parenting, a resource pack collaboratively created through the process.

Here I intersperse dance/researcher and mother



to two, Laura Bradshaw's introductory speech with extracts from the resource illustrating her points. They come from a section giving voice to all the parents (sometimes addressing their children directly) on the changes and realizations, positive and negative, parenthood has brought into their artistic, working lives.

Laura begins:

"Our parenting, arts practices and living dynamics all hold different joys and challenges and are unique to each of us.

Our on-line meetings were often made up of different constellations: three people, five people, all of us. Zooming in from sports day, from bed, from a hotel room, from a walk with the baby or on mute because the children are playing or watching TV in the same room. There have been little faces popping up in our zoom squares, interrupting the conversation, allowing us all to see each other's reason for being in the group. Our parenting fluidly seeping into our working space. We've danced together, empathised with each other, got angry together and found action and softness together.

We've been thinking about how our different needs, and those of our families, are part of the reality of our lives as parents and how those needs might be made visible in the different contexts that we work in instead of hidden away at home so we can get on with business as usual, we want to reimagine business as usual."

From the new bodily experience of birth to returning to old ways in new times, the group express a wondrous, challenging new reality:

Embodiment has always been the core of my practice, and it takes time. And compassion, listening and self-care. Birth and the first year made this practice impossible for me to sustain. My body becoming a machine, denied rest, functionalised, painful, ignored. The mind-body connection at the heart of my practice completely irrelevant, with mind and body both shot to pieces...

Nina Enemark – dance artist & mother to one

I'm headed to the airport in a short while...
Have to go where the work takes me.
Thank God for WhatsApp, the small comfort of the bedtime video call. My ten minutes before you get distracted and go play elsewhere. You're always just in the moment.
I envy you for that because I miss you all the time. And sometimes I don't because the gig is fun and the people are great.
To be honest the distraction is a comfort.

Is that a new word? Well done baby!
I hear you dressed yourself on your own the other morning, wow!
Missed that too. Your Tatko told me all about it. See you soon.

Daidí

Rob Heaslip – Choreographer, dance artist & Daidí to one

Swollen and waiting and dancing to move him downwards.
Thinking then that childcare costs would be my only return-to-work battle.
Assuming that I could handle it all.
Instant, overwhelming love and forgetting everything that came before.
Heart wide open.
Exhaustion. Like walking on water, like my bones hurt.
Body is no longer mine. Aching and recovering and keeping someone else alive.
All these years of working with communities and yet I don't seem to have one of my own.
Painting the entire city with my footsteps and him wrapped in tight. Dancing replaced by walking and feeding and changing and cleaning.
The guilt for feeling like I need a break. Not knowing what to do with the breaks.
Real artists would be attempting to create...but I'm frozen or focused on our little universe. So I begin to film us, our bodies as one, glimpses of our duet...

Natalia Barua – dance artist, choreographer & mother to one

Scenes from a long-form improvisation.
A testimonial of motherhood and the arts.
Working title – 'Let's dance'
(Scene 2)
This is your beginner's call! I need to be on stage in 5 minutes.
My daughter is crying, she is in her pram and doesn't want to be. Her face is red, and tear stained. A flicker of the trauma of her birth. Another single mother artist offers to walk her while I perform. With her solidarity and kindness my quiet tears release.
I put on lipstick and carry my shoes to the stage.
Lights up.
Take one deep breath and sing the opening note.
You are my sunshine.
Jude Williams – artist, performer, celebrant & mother to one

Laura continues:
"What is the choreography of parenting? The rhythm of our lives that are intertwined with our families. >>

What do we need? What do you need? What do others who we are working with or for us need? How is our parenting a strength rather than a deficit? How can we build an arts ecology where we share the load, practice patience and develop trust and lean into the power of the collective.”

Robbie Synge, self-producing artist, performer and father to two expounds on this theme:

Mainly, I want to be a better dad.

I attempt to be present and cherish the moments with my kids, while my head wrestles with our future. I try to encourage them to follow their passions, while I endlessly struggle to pursue my own.

I perform security while precarity lurks.

I hold their little bodies and feel mine cracking.

Ultimately, sustaining work is at odds with the wellbeing of my family and me. It’s a tension I constantly try to reconcile.

I seek systemic changes: artist jobs or at least a chance of security, and, like others, trust with accountability. I long for those with clout to speak up. I long for acknowledgement of the years of freelancers’ efforts to keep going.

Nina:

The endless question though: when will I finish this work? Slivers of time stolen here and there to make being an artist possible. Sustaining my practice seems feasible on paper but in reality, it’s what gets squeezed out of the diary; caring for you and staying on top of my sensible (=reliable, not freelance) part-time job automatically take priority

Jude:

(Scene 4)

You are having a really hard time saying goodbye at the nursery this morning. I am having a really hard time telling you I need to go to work. It is not more important than you. But there is rent to pay – which is still barely possible after nursery fees.

Natalia:

Months hurtle by whilst juggling the never-ending load. And I thought maternity leave was hard.

Moving from care work at home to caring at work, caring about all of the people and their experience in the world.

The way parents are ignored and yet all he wants is my full attention.

Needing a place to explode.

So hard to stay engaged with my practice but entirely worse to let it go.

Realising that dance has been my therapy in a multitude of ways.

Still unsure how this is going to be sustainable.



As time goes on the narratives shift into, as Laura puts it “...no settled form...adjusting, adapting, always” and a re-acquaintance with self, forms for artistic expression and the interweaving of parenting and art:

Oxana Banshikova – Bharatanatyam dancer, teacher, choreographer and mother to two tells a story of “a dancer who was scared to have kids in case I could not dance any longer (who) at 35, decided I was too old to dance anyway and it was time to be a perfect mum instead.” Birth trauma and breastfeeding difficulties put paid to this perfection and brought her very down on herself. However “...as my son grew older, my confidence was restored and I could become more independent again and able to create and be involved in interesting and meaningful projects realizing that the whole parenthood experience gave me so many ideas and inspiration. I also learned to be super-efficient too.”

Nina echoes this:

“That first year and a pandemic later, more opportunities to nurture my practice, to connect, to (re-)find my community. You are more independent



Photo: Anita Clark

now, my love, and there is a bit more time. Now the threads of being mother, artist, human being, all start to weave together more clearly. My practice is part of my parenting, and you are woven into everything I do.

Oxana concludes her tale:

“Creating a dance project around previous positive and negative parenthood experiences and fears around childbirth and recovery helped me face my motherhood journey the second time round in a more relaxed and accepting way. I gave myself more time and accepted flaws. It’s not easy but I feel stronger than ever, and ready to dance and create, as long as I am physically able to.”

The resource pack – a choreography of parenting is an offering for others; for organisations and those who employ parent-artists, as well as for other dance artists who are or are becoming parents.

It tries to recognise that families come in different ways, shapes and sizes, and our hope that it might offer some companionship to ease any sense of disconnect or uncertainty and provide support when

at work or returning to work. And the group lived what they had learned in the making of it, modelling what they would like to see more of in the rest of the working world.

Laura explains:

“We put some of this into practice when co-designing the resource pack. Things happened. Illness, work responsibilities, overwhelm, caring responsibilities, busy, intertwined lives. So, we took up the slack, took on different roles, and contributed in the different ways that we could, with Anita reminding us that the important thing about our group has been collectively holding the responsibility to flex to people’s circumstances.”

All the RE-EMERGING artists’ stories end in joy or determination.

Robbie:

So, it might be easier to exit in a frustrated fog of exhaustion, not resilient enough, largely unnoticed. The ‘industry’ does not care for me one bit. But dance, and my children, have defined me and held me. This is why I hold them. And why I have not left yet.

and **Jude:**

Whatever you do – do it with your whole heart. Sitting in the dark my heart bursts as you spring onto the stage with your skipping solo. Your joy and daring remind me of my own. My little wild (one). Jewel Mathieson had it right – we have come to be danced. We have. With all of it. And we will.

In each other, the RE-EMERGING group found appreciation of each other, and a vision of a better future encapsulated in **Natalia’s** final words: Finding a new community within the work that I do.

Knowing that the next time we happen to be together that we’ll understand each other that bit better and will lend a hand or an ear or a cup of something warm and hold one another’s children to let the other one dance.

Wondering if the world we work in could do the same.

Info

The RE-EMERGING group members are: Laura Bradshaw; Jude Williams; Natalia Barua; Nina Enemark; Oxana Banskikova; Rob Heaslip; Robbie Synge and Sara Gordon.

A copy of the pack can be requested by emailing hello@theworkroom.org.uk and a digital copy can be accessed through www.theworkroom.org.uk