

## Conference paper SCRIPT

### SLIDE 1

#### **Unveiling the Neglected Wellbeing of Performing Artists: Through the Gaze of Artist Parents**

The performing arts is a rich tapestry of human expression and offers acute insights into the human experience. However, beneath the surface of captivating narratives and mesmerising performances lies an often overlooked issue—the neglect of the well-being of performing artists, a concern that becomes even more intricate when these artists take on the responsibilities of parenthood. This paper seeks to undertake a thorough examination of the multifaceted challenges faced by performing artist parents, shedding light on the intricate web of issues that arise when artistic commitments intertwine with the demanding responsibilities of parenthood. These difficulties are ones faced by **all** working parents in **any** profession, but today I will discuss the challenges through the lens of my world – the performing arts.

### SLIDE 2

I will focus on five key pieces of research undertaken in the UK to help build my argument. These are two PiPA (parents and careers in performing arts) research papers, one looking at *The impact of caring responsibilities on career progression in Dance, Music, Theatre and Opera (entitled Balancing Act)*, and the other looking specifically at *the experience of working lives and caring duties in classical music (entitled Bittersweet symphony)*. I will discuss the extensive research done by Vincent Dance Company and partners looking at issues around pregnancy, parenthood and the return to work for professional dancers in the UK, as well as analysing One Dance UK's Katie Stevens response to being a parent in the dance industry. Overriding this is the research executed by Equity (the UK's performing arts and entertainment trade union) around mental health and wellbeing in the performing arts sector.

### SLIDE 3

Navigating the realms of parenthood within the performing arts has been a transformative journey for me, a dancer by trade and a mother of two who recently returned from maternity leave. The logistical challenges of parenting are universally daunting, yet the impact on my creative pursuits within the dance sphere has been particularly profound. As a dancer, the intricate connection between my body and artistic expression is undeniable, and the post-maternity transformation adds layers of complexity. My body, once a canvas for uninhibited movement, now carries the imprints of motherhood, making the creative process a delicate navigation of newfound physicality.

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Striving to balance the demands of a full-time return to work with my innate desire for inclusivity in both my professional and family life has been a challenging endeavour. The social gaze can be

unforgiving, casting shadows of judgment upon the perceived prioritisation of work over family. This internal struggle is exacerbated by a lack of structural support within the industry, where funding constraints and rigid job descriptions often hinder the realisation of a harmonious coexistence of my artistic pursuits and family responsibilities. My experience sheds light on the urgent need for a paradigm shift within the performing arts—a shift that acknowledges the intricate dance between creativity and caregiving, fostering an environment where artists are empowered to embrace both their professional passion and parental roles without compromise. This personal experience is what has sparked my desire to delve into the research and findings around this topic, specifically looking at the UK landscape.

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One of the primary challenges faced by performing artist parents is the irregular working hours, a key characteristic of artistic work within the industry. This world's unique demands, including evening performances, weekend rehearsals, and frequent tours, pose significant challenges to achieving a harmonious work-life balance. PiPA's survey, *The impact of caring responsibilities on career progression in Dance, Music, Theatre and Opera*, outlines the discovery that 76% of participants reported regular last-minute changes to schedules, adding an extra layer of complexity to the delicate balance of artistic commitments and parenting responsibilities. The coordination of childcare and family obligations becomes increasingly challenging in the face of such unpredictability. Stevens' too expresses the impact of enforced time off on dancers, leading to a mini baby boom and raising important questions about how the dance sector is evolving to support these new dancing parents. She advocates for a re-evaluation of how the dance sector supports new dancing parents. The Royal Ballet's experience, for example, with four dancers starting families in the past year, underscores the need for comprehensive parental provisions within the dance industry to help the wellbeing of company members.

Chloe Hillyar, founder of The Pregnant Dancer, adds a valuable perspective in Steven's research, revealing that 27 out of 50 dance artists she interviewed have children, and 18 out of 23 who didn't have a family, expressed a desire to have one. This emphasises the widespread desire for parenthood within the dance community, highlighting the urgency of implementing robust parental provisions. Notably, smaller companies and freelancers face significant challenges due to limited infrastructure, and in certain regions like Northern Ireland and Ireland, the absence of full-time dance companies exacerbates the struggle, with maternity leave being a luxury few can afford. Extending the discussion to encompass the broader performing arts sector reveals a landscape constrained by financial limitations. Funding for the Arts in the UK has been scarce, exemplified by Arts Council England experiencing a significant 30% budget cut in 2010. While commendable efforts and advocacy over the past 14 years have led to some restoration of this budget, we remain distant from the financial levels seen in 2010. Consequently, the challenge of investing in innovative proposals with regards to generating an infrastructure conducive to parenthood is a luxury that many cannot see happening for some time.

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But we are not to feel defeated, for investment in this area is needed for an array of alarming reasons. Key findings from PiPA's survey on career progression, emphasises the significant impact of caring responsibilities on progression in the performing arts. It sheds light on the challenging financial landscape faced by parents and carers in the performing arts. The report discloses that in the UK the median earnings for individuals with caring responsibilities amount to £20,000 annually, reflecting a 13% deficit compared to their counterparts without such obligations, who earn around £23,000. Particularly striking is the financial plight of freelance parents and carers, whose median earnings plummet to £15,000—significantly below the UK Living Wage of £17,550. Alarmingly, over a third of participants find their performing arts earnings inadequate to cover expected expenses, and nearly twice as many struggle to meet unexpected financial demands. The report outlines the stark reality that basic needs are less likely to be fulfilled through performing arts earnings for parents and carers. Consequently, a substantial portion of artists seek supplementary employment outside the performing arts, with more than half of participants engaged in other fields to bolster their income. This multifaceted struggle highlights the pressing need for initiatives to address the financial vulnerabilities experienced by parents and carers within the performing arts sector. Stevens' and Vincent Dance Theatre's insights into the dance sector echoes these financial challenges, especially for freelancers and those working in smaller companies, and the impact it has on wellbeing.

#### SLIDE 7

The research conducted by Vincent Dance Theatre, in collaboration with Dance UK and Creative & Cultural Skills, looks at the intricate challenges surrounding pregnancy, parenthood, and the return to work for professional dancers in the UK. These challenges encompass the complexities of safe working conditions during pregnancy, the intricate process of returning to dance after maternity leave, and the uphill battle of maintaining a demanding career while navigating the responsibilities of parenthood, often involving long hours and frequent work away from home, none of which is conducive to maintaining good mental health.

Initiated by Charlotte Vincent, the Artistic Director of Vincent Dance Theatre, this research project emerged as a response to the company's specific need for solutions in working with practitioners in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, including those contemplating or already navigating parenthood. The lack of dance-specific advice and information became evident during their quest for guidance on safe studio practices, supporting parents returning to work, and providing appropriate assistance for parents working away from home and on tour. This highlights how perhaps these areas of need are being overlooked in our industry.

Vincent's research employed two separate questionnaires—one tailored for choreographers and dance managers as employers and another for dancers and dance practitioners. By gathering insights into the experiences of those working in the dance sector, the project aimed to identify trends, extract examples of good practices, and stimulate a discourse within the dance community. The response from a diverse range of individual practitioners, choreographers, and companies, including prominent names such as Candoco Dance Company, Random Dance, Northern Ballet and the Royal Ballet, begins to paint a hopeful and positive picture. We are beginning to see the commendable efforts made by dance artists, companies, and choreographers in creatively addressing the challenges posed by pregnancy and parenthood.

This sector specific analysis is pertinent to dance, and the zoned approach allowed for specific suggestion for reform, the same can be said for PiPA's focused research into specifically classical music artists.

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Their report on *the experience of working lives and caring duties in classical music* serves as a pivotal source of insight from another focused area. One crucial aspect highlighted in the report revolves around the issue of gendered pay disparities, specifically affecting self-employed women juggling professional commitments with caring responsibilities, unfortunately a common theme across all areas in performing arts. The report meticulously unravels the intricate web of challenges faced by these women, emphasising how existing pay structures effect inequalities and hinder the advancement of individuals with caregiving responsibilities.

A closer examination of these findings reveals that the classical music sector is grappling with outdated work and caregiving structures, contributing significantly to the persistence of gendered pay gaps. The report calls for universal reform within the industry, urging stakeholders to reassess and reconfigure traditional models that inherently disadvantage women attempting to balance their artistic careers with familial duties. This nuanced perspective challenges the classical music sector to confront its ingrained practices and actively pursue reasonable solutions that empower all artists, irrespective of their gender or caregiving responsibilities.

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Stevens' insightful research within the dance sector serves as a lens through which to further dissect and comprehend the nuanced interplay of gender dynamics and employment structures in the industry. Her findings echo and complement the broader narrative, shedding light on the compelling need for a comprehensive examination of how caregiving responsibilities intersect with gender roles within the intricate fabric of the dance profession specifically.

Her research reveals a stark reality: over 8 out of 10 women with caring responsibilities find themselves navigating the professional landscape through part-time or freelance engagements. This statistical revelation stands as a poignant testament to the gendered disparities deeply entrenched within the dance sector. The commonness of part-time and freelance work among women with caregiving responsibilities not only illuminates the challenges they face in securing full-time, stable positions, but also highlights the intricate interplay between gender expectations and employment opportunities.

Vincent's research also shows the widespread acceptance that female dancers will not be able to seamlessly balance family life with a thriving dance career. The prevailing apprehension among companies about working with parents, particularly those with young children, further exacerbates the isolation felt by dance artists who wish to integrate family life with their professional pursuits. The issue not only highlights the struggle of individual dancers but also resonates with the broader discourse on mature artists and the industry's tendency to sideline performers, especially women, as

they reach their mid-thirties. None of this is carving a path for artists who are able to maintain a standard of wellbeing that is conducive to a balanced and grounded mind-set.

The intersection of caring responsibilities and gender dynamics in the performing arts in general, demands a full examination. Stevens', Vincent's and PiPA's research adds a crucial layer to the understanding of these complexities, emphasising the need to dismantle existing barriers. These reports can help guide the path for other art-forms, present solutions that all areas can use with respect to parents working in the performing arts.

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All the points and research covered so far are specific to the artist parent, but my final source from Equity is one looking outwardly to all performing artists, irrespective of their family status. Mental health challenges are enormous in this industry, particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Equity's review, encompassing over 100 academic studies, provides a comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape within the industry and this is key to analyse as this industry combined with parenthood is a recipe for poor mental health if the support mechanisms are not readily available.

Equity's review unveils a stark reality—individuals in the performing arts are twice as likely to experience depression compared to the general population. Contributory factors such as job insecurity, low pay, and the impact of remaining Covid restrictions intensify the mental health challenges faced by those in the performing arts. The unique nature of performing arts work, characterised by antisocial hours and disruptions to sleep, naturally contribute to anxiety and depression. Add a family on top of this and you can see how parents in this industry are finding it increasingly hard to thrive.

Equity's proactive response to the mental health challenges faced by performing artists takes the form of a mental health charter. This charter includes key demands such as improved pay, work-life balance, workplace safeguards, and government investment in mental health services. This proactive approach is what our industry in the UK needs to see. If this charter can be implemented then we would begin to see a more innovative and inclusive sector that looks after its own, irrespective of if they are a parent or career.

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As Equity highlights, change and reform is the path we now need to embrace, and personally always one for positive proactivity we need to address how we can instigate change. Embarking on a journey to address the intricate challenges faced by parents and caregivers in the performing arts, I have organised a symposium, the Creative Parent Symposium, scheduled for May 24. This event is supported by PiPA and funded by my local council and institution. It aims to serve as a pivotal platform for kick-starting essential conversations and catalysing tangible actions within the industry, with a commitment to prioritising the well-being of parents and caregivers. The event has garnered the

participation of key stakeholders, including representatives from One Dance UK, Equity, and local government authorities. By bringing together these influential voices, my intention is to lay the foundation for collaborative efforts that go beyond organisational boundaries, working towards a more supportive and inclusive environment for parent and caregiver artists. This symposium marks an initial stride toward effecting positive change, with the ultimate goal of translating discussions into actionable initiatives that address the specific needs of this vital group within our industry in the UK. I feel I can generate change due to the examples that have already effectively been put into place or discussed in my research to date.

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Positive steps are being made to improve the situation for parents and carers in performance. Dance Mama, PiPA, and The Pregnant Dancer, among others, are all making waves to help drive the conversation forward and encourage companies to allow space for parents, carers, and their children to feel supported when returning to work. These initiatives aim to foster a culture of understanding and support within the performing arts industry.

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Professor Angela Pickard, Dance Lead and Researcher for PiPA's forthcoming study about dance parents, emphasises the need for a large-scale cultural change. Her insights into the necessity of improving setups for small to mid-scale companies within the dance sector highlight the complexities faced by artists in various organisational structures. The recent example of Vincent Dance Theatre incorporating a budget line specifically for childcare and parental support in a successful Arts Council England funding application provides a promising model for other companies to follow.

#### SLIDE 14

Comprehensive family-friendly policies emerge as a necessity within the performing arts industry to support artist parents effectively. This involves proposals for adequate maternity and paternity leave, flexible scheduling options, and childcare provisions for auditions and rehearsals. Addressing these aspects is crucial in creating an environment where artist parents can navigate their professional commitments while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities.

Vincent's research tackles the sensitive intersection between employee and employer dynamics, it emphasises the need for immediate action by choreographers and companies to foster a more family-friendly environment. Recommendations include compliance with statutory requirements, the implementation of written maternity and paternity policies, maintaining up-to-date information about support and legislation, and promoting flexible working models. Furthermore, the research suggests that long-term strategies should focus on valuing performers over the years and challenging the norms that force dancers, particularly women, to exit the stage prematurely due to parenthood.

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A key suggestion throughout that resonates and has the capability to reform, is establishing equal parental support structures. As outlined by PiPA's research, the implementation of Shared Parental Leave would be a transformative initiative with the potential to reshape the landscape of caregiving

responsibilities, creating a more equal distribution of duties between parents. Beyond the immediate advantages accrued by individual families, the ripple effects of such structural changes filter throughout the industry, creating a cultural shift towards inclusivity and support. By embracing Shared Parental Leave policies, performing arts organisations will not only acknowledge the diverse needs of their workforce but also actively contribute to dismantling traditional gender norms and stereotypes associated with parenting roles. This paradigm shift signifies a departure from conventional expectations, promoting an industry ethos that values and accommodates the professional ambitions of artist parents while recognising and respecting their crucial roles within their families. The holistic benefits of these support structures extend far beyond the realm of personal experiences, acting as catalysts for a broader transformation toward a more family-friendly, compassionate, and progressive artistic landscape.

Creating a cultural shift within the performing arts industry is not a simple task but is essential for encouraging long-term change. This involves a re-evaluation of established norms and practices to prioritise the well-being of artist parents.

#### SLIDE 16

The neglected well-being of performing artist parents in the UK demands immediate attention and concentrated efforts for change. This paper, through a thorough examination of relevant current research, highlights the urgency of comprehensive support systems and cultural transformation within the performing arts industry in the UK. The proposed solutions, ranging from family-friendly policies to shared parental support structures, aim to catalyse positive change. Recognising the moral imperative of supporting artist parents is not enough; actionable steps toward a more inclusive, sustainable, and artist-friendly future must be taken by all stakeholders within the performing arts in the UK. The transformative journey is a collective one, and this paper invites the entire industry to join hands in shaping a future where artist parents thrive alongside their artistic pursuits.

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