



## Dancing for two

By Jo Pollitt, 2008

The performing career of a dance artist is complex and challenging and generally comes with a limited life span. The decision to take time to throw (or grow) a baby into the mix during this period is one that has an enormous impact on the continuity and complexity of the dance. With a child (or children), life as an independent dance artist becomes a time pressured puzzle and managing to fit the pieces together becomes the overarching score for the dance – the mother dance! Below, a number of high profile Australian Dance artists currently participating in the SCOPE program, ponder the choice and outcomes, practicalities and impossibilities of ‘dancing for two’.

The physical feat and performance of labour and birth itself, is as dramatic an opening night as you are ever going to get. Commencing with, in my case, a ‘23 hour call’ and ending with a newborn, it continues into a creative development period without end. The late nights with a baby are at times like a never ending tech run. The side stage is the darkened corridor to the baby’s room, and the soundtrack of easy talk and stretching is replaced with unsettled baby cries and a sleep deprived mother. Dancing is great training for motherhood. Late nights, long hours, niggling problems, bursts of energy, anticipation, nerves, accolades, post show blues, lots of waiting and then sometimes the blur of days into nights into days. Like dance, parenting is also too hard a pursuit to take on if you are not madly in love with the vocation.

No doubt the impact of becoming a mother is enormous for all, but the degree to which it affects individual careers varies greatly. The stories of the SCOPE dance artist/mums are very different. Most of us continue to simultaneously swing a leg and rock the baby to varying degrees, with one expectant mum, Tracey Carrodus currently on maternity leave from Sydney Dance Company, planning to put to use the three degrees in Business and Marketing she has acquired by studying externally during her ‘18 years of a wonderful career’ so far.

For those of us living the ‘mother dance’ we are part of what appears to be a baby boom amongst Australian practicing dance artists (or possibly I’m just at the age to notice it!) I am fascinated by the challenge of ‘having it all and by dancers who continue to work through pregnancy, stiff necks, backstage breast-feeds, sleep deprivation and beyond! Although as Nalina Wait warns ‘Don’t expect to have any down time... that’s what I sacrifice for ‘having it all’. Her tip to ‘breed only with an independently wealthy, house-husband’, is excellent advice if you can find such a partner!

With full support from the Australian Ballet, Lindy Wills says of motherhood ‘I don’t feel it has impacted on my career in anyway’. Her husband is currently at home (or ‘on tour’) with their son for a year, which is great for all of them and vital so ‘I don’t get withdrawals’. Lindy didn’t have a fast action plan to go back to work but was fully supervised by the ballet’s medical team ‘on every step of my return’. Lucinda Dunn also plans to return to the stage with the Australian Ballet. Currently in the late stages of pregnancy she says, ‘having put my career first for many years, I’m now enjoying dancing in the studio without the pressure of peak performance. I plan to return to the stage after giving birth, and hope this new chapter in my life brings enrichment on stage too.’ According to most dancers this ‘enrichment’ post birth is real and manifests in different ways. You become smarter about the way you use your physicality, more grounded, braver, less self conscious, notice more physical shifts and possibilities, experience more depth, range, maturity and complexity, laugh more, sweat the small stuff less and enjoy a new found appreciation of dancing, rehearsing, performing and teaching. Time also becomes a commodity like never before.



The reality for most contemporary dance artists is project work, with little long term stability and an erratic income. Having a baby in this context is largely undefined and unsupported. If you're not working, you're planning the next work, writing applications and maintaining a physical practice. As Nalina puts it 'I feel that this vocation is unsustainable now, in a way that never really mattered too much before. I think this has less to do with being a parent and more to do with the severe lack of funding that exists in this country. After all, there are a lot of working mothers out there, and it is a job (almost like any other), but now I crave routine and a real income for my working hours.'

The biggest logistical challenges of the mother dance seem to be time management and childcare. Lisa Wilson laughs at how company production schedules at Expressions are covered with the pick-up and drop-off arrangements of childcare. Her answer to the time juggle is 'day-care, day-care, day-care'. But even that is a challenge because the ebb and flow of project work does not match the centres demand of consistent enrolment. In order to take one three-month contract she juggled two day-care centres and a nanny and remembers the nightmare of dealing with her sick child, rushing directly from a performance to sleep in the hospital. The juggle of parenting and working affects many women, but for dancers the option of taking a 'sick day' on opening night is not usually an option. The feeling that the 'show must go on' is inbuilt in us all.

As a new mother I remember the shocked moment of realisation when my first child was four months old, that no one was going to magically appear to be on call while I continued my project work. With a baby on board, my time for thinking, dancing and working, had been cut by about 90 per cent. I didn't go down the route of childcare centres, but the idea of not dancing did not cross my mind. Most of the last five years have been impossible but they have happened, and (with the help of family, friends, the occasional nanny, and tonnes of 'after hours' work), I have made work and danced in Perth, Hobart, Berlin and Sydney, with babies in various stages of development. However the truth is that a lot of the time, I am a suburban mum, seriously lacking in domestic skills, but suburban nonetheless. although my first born son Luca is now five, the ongoing emotional rollercoaster and new social circles of school bring a whole new weight to the parenting game. Hilariously, 'So you think you can dance' has suddenly legitimised my 'work' in the pre-primary parent playground.

Making it all work for me means prioritising, surrounding myself with others who have a like minded work ethic, living with pressure and a bit of guilt, multi-tasking, endless drama when you least expect it, getting used to making a plan b or c or z, projecting calm onto an unsettled infant while battling 24hr funding deadlines, making key creative decisions with Thomas the Tank Engine playing in the background, ridiculous 'after hours' in the studio, writing articles in a portable home office (set up in various libraries) in 45 minute time blocks and scheduling meetings at home in hopeful sleep times.

The days of red wine discussions over conceptual lighting issues till 3.00am are over for now, but the new found joy and luxury of a warm up is magic if you can find the time. There are also times when it all falls apart with no back up plan. Nalina speaks for us all when she says sometimes you cope, sometimes you don't. The sensation however of a baby waking up and kicking in utero during an introspective opening night warm up brings the full awareness and wonder as Andrew Morrish put it to me of 'dancing for two', and for me, going home after a performance to nurse or check in on your sleeping child continues the dance.

*A huge thanks to all the SCOPE mums for their interest and support, and special thanks to those who found a tiny pocket of time to share their thoughts. Salute. A note to those Dad dance artists negotiating the parenthood pressures - a big cheers to you, get in touch so we can feature you in the future!*