



Working Like a Mother

11 September 2018

On a very cold night at the end of January, I attended an event called **Moms + Moods: Opening the Conversation on Post-Partum Rage**. And I wasn't sure why I was there. Only that someone I knew and liked a lot had organized it and moments after reading her email invitation I immediately bought a ticket before checking if my husband was working that night. I didn't think of myself as someone full of rage. But then I rarely thought of myself in the fifteen months since our son was born.

For the next two hours I sat in my folding chair, surrounded by other mothers and birth workers, and listened to women talk about the ways in which their bodies had failed and triumphed. How judged they felt so much of the time, how confused, how angry. How strong they'd become, but also how invisible. I found myself nodding emphatically at other women's stories, laughing with them about the ridiculous details that now permeated our lives, crying involuntary tears into my tote bag. Every woman there had a vastly different experience of pregnancy, of birth, of feeding, of family, of

work. And every woman there had struggled to ask for help.

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Splitting your focus between work and parenting is never optimal, artist or not; something will always fall through the cracks.

Four months earlier, I'd returned home from working on a production out of town and I said to Robbie, my husband, "I think I have to stop doing this." Our ten month-old son, my mom, and I had lived for six weeks in a small condo on the west coast while I worked on a world premiere. Robbie was opening a show of his own in New York, I was still breastfeeding, my mom had just retired, and we decided it made the most sense for the baby to come with me. The theatre was willing to procure us housing that could accommodate my mom, but it meant the baby and I would share a room. I knew it would be disastrous, but was afraid I had already asked for too much. Once in California, our son slept worse than he had as a newborn; I was up three to four times a night nursing him back to sleep in a chair I'd procured from the props department. I resisted sleep training, as the walls were thin and I didn't want his crying to disturb my mom's sleep; I needed her to be rested enough to take care of the baby while I was in rehearsal. I slept some stray hours here and there in-between feedings on the couch, or lay awake and motionless in the dark bedroom while my son whimpered next to

me in his crib. I drank vats of terrible rehearsal coffee, pushed with the might of an Amazonian she-warrior through the fog of sleeplessness to do rewrites, pumped on our breaks in an empty dressing room, and watched my face grow more haggard by the day. I spent my entire author's fee on a car rental, a crib rental, and my mom's flight. I was to-my-bones exhausted, I was losing money, and I'd split up our family for six weeks. The production was by most accounts a big success, but I couldn't help but feel I'd done everything wrong.

I had worked on two other productions since giving birth. The first was in New York, thankfully, because I was four months post-partum and wracked with anxiety. The rehearsal process had worked out relatively well—Robbie and I were able to cobble together childcare between our two weird schedules and two sitters, I had the support of a predominately female production and artistic team, and I was still making income from my **Tow residency**. But once we got to tech, I struggled to meet the scheduling needs, sometimes packing our son in a \$40 taxi ride to the Upper West Side to sit in the lobby with Robbie or a sitter while I would duck in and out, sometimes taking three trains twice a day to run home to Brooklyn and nurse him. It was my first professional New York production, I felt both terror and guilt at every moment, and I got mastitis our first week of previews. I remember trying to talk to donors while running a fever, ducking into the bathroom every so often to try to massage my red-hot left breast.



Six months. Photo by Rachel Bonds.

The second was on the west coast—a job offer I got hours after giving birth, my back muscles still in spasm. I accepted some days later because it was a big deal for me professionally, even though I had no idea how we would make it work. It all felt far away—the baby would be eight months old by then and we’d have figured it all out, right? But then the rehearsal process lined up exactly with a show Robbie had in New York, none of our parents was able to come, we couldn’t afford to bring a nanny, and because of the extension of one of the theatre’s other plays, my housing would have to be in a hotel for at least a week. I had never been away from our son overnight. I didn’t know how to leave him, but I also didn’t

know how to travel to California with him by myself, live with him in a hotel room, and then hand him off to a strange babysitter we'd never met while I went to rehearsal. Every option felt impossible. I ended up flying out for three days during the second week of rehearsal, pumping both in the public restroom at La Guardia and in the cramped airplane bathroom. I then did the whole trip again to see only two previews, frantically rewriting on the red-eye home and sending in revisions I would never get to see embodied. The show was beautiful in the end, but I felt far away from it, unable to fully leverage or enjoy its success.

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Some days this work feels harder than it used to. Some days feel like full-on catastrophes. And yes, part of that is because what we do is insane and vulnerable, and requires traveling, and thus will always feel hard in some way. That's a contract I signed with the gig a long time ago. Part of it is because splitting your focus between work and parenting is never optimal, artist or not; something will always fall through the cracks. But another large part of it is that it feels very scary to be a mother in this business. It's scary to have to stretch that author's fee a much longer way. It's scary to ask for what you need when you don't want to be seen as weak or a pain in the ass. It's scary to suddenly be deemed unavailable or distracted. To have your ambition questioned. To suddenly have a whole new set of physical and financial needs, and to feel like your career is at stake if you ask for these needs to be met.

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more diversity and inclusion in and
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hammer out better methods of supporting parent artists.

When I returned home from that sleepless six weeks, feeling gutted, I said, “I think I have to stop doing this.” And Robbie said, “I think you just have to figure out how to work differently.” And he was right. I do. I can’t get back to that writer I was, the way that writer worked, dealt with time, traveled; I am, after all, molecularly different now. But I also think our institutions have to work differently. So many of our processes are archaic, sexist, classist, and, frankly, built for men to succeed and women to disappear. At a time when we desperately need more diversity and inclusion in and behind our productions, we have to hammer out better methods of supporting parent artists. Because it should be hard to be a working mother, yes. But it should not be impossible.



Our son looking out window of artist housing, ten months. Photo by Rachel Bonds.

After talking to playwright, designer, and director colleagues (extra special thanks to Sarah Gancher and the **NYC PAAL Forum panelists**—check out the **video** of the event and the **presentation** that was shared there), I've begun mapping out ways, both practical and conceptual, I think we can change:

The Practical:

1. Housing flexibility. Every mother is the expert on what she needs to work and live effectively out of town, and every family has a

different solution (particularly when it comes to sleep). It should not feel like we're ruining everything by asking for housing that allows for everyone in the family to sleep and eat in a healthy way.

2. Childcare reimbursement. Provide stipends for childcare. For rehearsals, for auditions, for Board and Donor events. Otherwise we're working for free, and I must say: it feels pretty soul-crushing to go to fancy donor events for one's production while one is simultaneously breaking even or losing money on the gig.

3. Making childcare available on the premises. Maybe it's not possible to provide full childcare reimbursement. What about providing some reduced cost babysitting help on the premises? Maybe this means having a teaching artist or two who get hired on a production-by-production basis; maybe it means hiring Broadway Babysitters three times a week when the parent artist knows they will be in rehearsal. **SPACE on Ryder Farm** and the Lilly Awards have crafted a really beautiful, innovative program with their family residency. Perhaps this model could be expanded to work for a five-week rehearsal process.

4. Family-friendly theatres. What if there was always a designated place at the theatre or rehearsal studio where children are welcome? Where they can make noise and be babies, hang out with one of their parents or a sitter, maybe even take a nap? A designated space where our kids could be nearby either while we're working or watching a show, where they can exist in real time and space and not be hidden away as tiny concepts. I think the **community** improves as a whole when children interact with our art, and when artists interact with children.

5. Breastfeeding/Bottle-feeding/Pumping. Babies should be welcome in rehearsal and in tech (especially fourth trimester babies

who eat constantly) if that is what's best for the mother artist.

Always provide a private, clean space to pump, and access to a place to wash pump parts and store milk. Or be cool with a mom pumping in rehearsal if that's what she prefers. I found it nearly impossible to line up my breasts with ten-minute equity breaks. So consider timing breaks around the nursing mom, or just be understanding and flexible if she needs to duck out of the room for twenty minutes. Said as someone who had mastitis three times: it's a health and safety issue.

6. Tech and Preview Scheduling. I raise this more as a red flag, but honestly don't have a great solution. Tech is brutal for everyone, but especially for parents who want to see their children and not spend one billion dollars on childcare. I'd love to be part of a conversation about how to make this more humane, so more mothers like me don't get so exhausted they get sick.

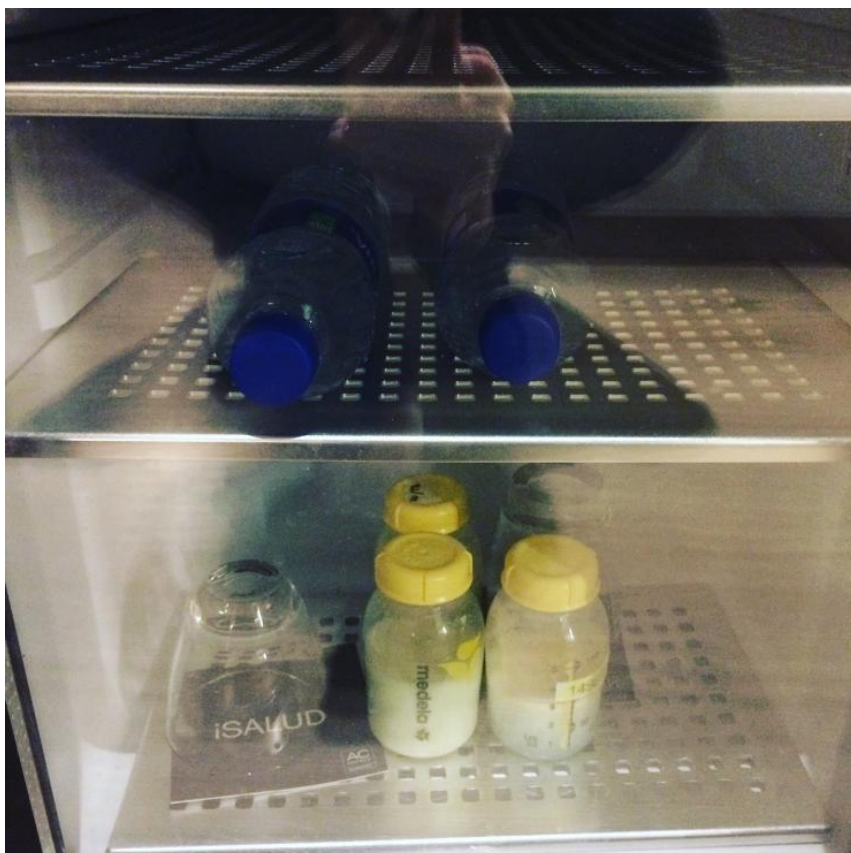
7. Working Parent Ambassadors. Wouldn't it be great if every theatre had a couple of designated, rotating working parent **ambassadors** who could reach out, offer support and advice to parent artists either new to that theatre, or associated artists new to parenting? I know a lot of us already do this information exchange on a small scale. But what if it was codified and supported by our institutions? A mentorship program for working parents.

8. Parent Handbook. When you work out of town, Company Management hands you a packet with maps and information on the grocery store, dry cleaner, gyms, local restaurants. Every theatre should have a **handbook** like this for working parents that includes information on local pediatricians, a list of recommended babysitters, local playgrounds, parks, and libraries. Because I guarantee you the parent traveling with their kid across the country to come to work has nearly drowned in logistics already—it would

feel like a lifeline (and like the theatre was truly prepared to host you as a full human being) if some of these details could be figured out in advance.

9. Equipment. Every theatre hosting artists from out-of-town should own two Pack & Plays, a crib and mattress, two high chairs, two sets of bed rails, an infant car seat, and a toddler car seat. And I realize it may be tough making sure all of these things stay clean and up to code, but *holy god* would it be lifesaving (and money-saving) to not have to carry some of these things on a plane when you're already carrying your kids, every clothing item, toy, and snack they need for the next five or more weeks, and all of your own stuff.

10. Cars. Everyone working in the regions should get a car, but especially parent artists who need to go grocery shopping and drive babies to the doctor. I spent 75 percent of my author's fee on a car rental and I just shouldn't have.



Breastmilk in hotel fridge in Chicago. Photo by Rachel Bonds.

The Conceptual:

1. **The Disappeared.** When I was pregnant, I was shocked by how many colleagues said to me, “Oh, you’re about to disappear.” I still bristle at the word, especially since becoming a mother has only made me a stronger, more vivid version of myself. I am now a superior multi-tasking, time-managing, prepared-for-all-type-of-disaster, human-life-giving, pumping-in-an-airplane-bathroom while opening-two-world-premieres deeply empathetic human. Yes, making time for work is more complicated now. But I’d argue the work itself is better, deeper and more confident. Do not automatically assume that new mothers cannot do the things that they once did. And do not assume she can’t do something because she just had a baby. Let her tell you what she can do.

2. **Time and Space.** At the very same time, allow mothers to take the time they need with their kids without making assumptions about their ambition. After I gave a speech at the Ars Nova gala when I was two months post-partum, citing it as the first time I’d ever been away from my kid, a female colleague said to me disdainfully, “Did you really not leave the house for *two months!*?” And I stood there stunned and stammering, feeling like I had somehow failed as a feminist by not leaping back into the world as soon as I could walk again.

3. **Visibility.** I really appreciated Kirsten Greenidge’s comment in **American Theatre’s profile of Ilana Brownstein**: “Children are real facts.” We need to talk about our kids and our needs more openly. We need to normalize motherhood. We need more women behind and in our productions. We need women in decision-making positions. I challenge every theatre to examine how many mothers

they've hired for their next season—and if the answer is little to none, to determine why that is. Is it because you unconsciously decided these women weren't up to the task? Or because you deemed their family situation too “complicated” to figure out?



Robbie and son, five months, in the lobby of the McGinn Cazale. Photo by Lisa McNulty.

A few final thoughts:

- None of the thoughts I've shared here are meant to indict any particular place or group of people I've worked with over the past two years. The staff members of these theatres are all people I've come to know and care a lot about. This is about addressing a systemic problem.
- I realize that if you're reading this, and you are a person who makes or approves budgets, your eyes are exploding with cartoon dollar signs and steam is coming out of your ears. I

know a good many of these suggestions require a good deal of money, and money theatres often don't have. But I also think we need to take a good, hard look at how we traditionally make production budgets, and start thinking about where we can find more funds or move funds around to make some of this happen. There are new **grants!** I volunteer myself to write fundraising letters for any theatre where I've worked or hope to work. I'm serious.

- I realize there are some institutions working hard to make a lot of these things happen already. **Ars Nova**, **The Tank**, **Playwrights Horizons**, **SPACE on Ryder Farm**, **WP Theater** to name a few. I recommend keeping up with **PAAL**, **nominating your institution/organization for a PAAL Award** if you feel you've publicly demonstrated family-friendly practices, and checking out **Devon Berkshire's piece on this topic**.
- I realize I'm writing this as a straight, middle-class, white, cisgender woman whose child does not have special needs, and that this piece does not address so many other important perspectives on working parenthood. But I'd really like to keep writing about these things for future essays, so if you identify as a parent, let's talk.

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After the event ended that night in January, I milled around for a bit, eating clementines next to other women, sipping wine from a plastic cup, enjoying the strange sensation of being alone but not lonely. Feeling buoyed by a group.

I didn't know why I had come. Only that I had a lot in me I didn't know what to do with. Sadness. Rage. Pride. Joy. Fear. And here was this group of women I didn't know, who had brought with them some of the same things. We sat alone but together, shared some of that dark stuff in us, and felt the fantastic release of being known. It

is very much what I feel when watching a play.

I walked back to the subway, my hands warm from where I had been, thinking of what one of the panelists had said. “Ask for help,” she said. “Ask for help. Ask for help.”

So I’m asking.

Comments 12

The article is just the start of the conversation—we want to know what you think about this subject, too! HowlRound is a space for knowledge-sharing, and we welcome spirited, thoughtful, and on-topic dialogue. Find our full [comments policy here](#)

DAMON RUNNALS

4 years ago



Rachel, thanks for writing this. I'm sharing it in [Minnesotaplaylist.com](#)'s weekly newsletter that we send out. My wife and I had our second child in 2016 (our girls are two years apart) and it nearly tanked our theatre company that we had spend 13 years building. While our company is not our full time job (a labor of love) it seemed like we just weren't going to be able to continue. However, we came to the same realization as your husband did for you. We needed to figure out how to "work differently", and that as an artistic couple we would need to set new expectations for ourselves. Thanks for this piece. I'll be bringing it up in the upcoming MN Theatre Alliance annual conference.

BETHANY LYNN COREY 4 years ago

Thank you for these thoughts! As someone looking towards becoming a mother in the next few years having married recently I have been shocked how many collaborators (mostly female) have remarked “just do me a favor and don’t get pregnant” with a laugh while handing me a contract. I have no intention of abandoning my work once I do become a mother but know, from friends and colleagues and my own intuition, that things will change. It is reassuring to read your experience, know it will be hard, but also that it is possible and have some concrete things to think about for my own future and as someone who works with parent-artists.

CATHERINE CASTELLANI 4 years ago



So yes to all this... Mine is now 12. In one way, it's much easier--she can make her own dinner! On the other hand, she is a PERSON, not cargo, and I really can't take advantage of things like SPACE's Family Residency right now. Imagine yourself at 13--did you want to go Hang Out With Mom and Her Nerdy Theater Friends? Uh, no. Oh, and I've spawned a dancer: she's got tech of her own.

But what I really want to talk about is The Disappeared. I got downright *hazed* by a few people (guys) very shortly after I gave birth. The way we think of work and parenthood in this society/system is profoundly broken for mothers, fathers, and children. It's not something any one of us can fix, but working together, yes we can.

RACHEL BONDS 4 years ago



Totally. And I know my perspective will change as my kid gets older...there are always problems, the problems just change. The core issue is societal, and it is broken. I hope not beyond repair, though sometimes it feels that way. I suppose as artists we are often pioneers for the culture, so maybe we can be pioneers in this realm too. Thanks for your comment.

HEATHER A. BEASLEY 4 years ago



Adding on to the list of family-friendly theatres: the Boulder Ensemble Theatre Company where I work ([betc.org](https://www.betc.org)) runs an annual Generations residency competition for parent playwrights, where we provide a childcare stipend for the residency week to be used as the winner sees fit, in addition to cash prize, travel, and lodging. Some parents have used the stipend to support care back home, while others have used it to bring out their families/partners to help for that week. We're still growing as a company, and as you point out it's very tough to afford some of the adaptations you suggest, especially throughout a full-length rehearsal and production process. We'll keep trying as we grow.

But that is, in part, because we need to be advocating for larger societal support frameworks for parents, well beyond expecting individual theatres to cover the costs. It's a both/and situation. When working theatre parents tell their stories onstage, they draw attention to the United States' lack of family supports (paid leave, affordable childcare, etc) and grow audiences that will also work toward these important changes. Thanks for your essay.

RACHEL BONDS 4 years ago



These are SUCH great points. It is a both/and. At its core, the issue is societal. We don't take care of mothers (or fathers). I do think if we heal and support mothers, we heal society. But this is a long, long road. Thanks for sharing info about your company! Great to know about you.

MARLEY GIGGEY 4 years ago

Thank you for writing and sharing! I remember feeling like I had finally figured out this whole working parent artist thing when my son was about 9 months old only to sit in a booth calling a show and starting to feel my second bout of mastitis setting in and a fever start to spread. It's a constant learning process for both parent and theatre and as long as both are willing to keep learning and working there's plenty to be hopeful for! Your suggestions for companies are really fantastic and such a great roadmap to express the most basic needs parents have.

RACHEL BONDS 4 years ago

Thank you for this!

ELLA 4 years ago

Thank you for writing this. I also had a baby this year and did regional theater with him when he was 5 months old. So many of your suggestions would've helped me immensely. I remember asking if it would be alright for the babysitter to bring my son to the theater during tech so I could nurse him in my dressing room when I wasn't needed onstage, and being told that no minors were allowed backstage, but I was welcome to nurse him in the public lobby. I asked Company Management for a list of

babysitters with infant experience and was given a list of mostly high school students with zero babysitting experience. Only one bedroom housing was available, and I spent 2 months sleeping on a sleeper sofa while my baby slept in the bedroom, as we don't co-sleep well. The crib was totally inadequate and I had to buy a new mattress myself at Target. It was just... insane and I felt the theater was completely unequipped to assist me in any helpful way. For the entire run of our show; which I loved and am so glad I did and I found myself again and it was so creatively fulfilling; I would wake up with the baby at 5:30am, stay with him until 7 when the sitter came, do a play at night and come immediately home after to sleep. My husband came down when he could, but he also works full time and I was pretty much on my own. It's funny, as women, we feel a need to suck it up, be tough, and not ask for help as if that is somehow a measure of our love for our child or our toughness or our value as women and mothers and artists. I did need help in those months. I survived, I believe I was good in this play, I did my job, I loved my baby and played with him and kept him nourished and safe, but I needed a hell of a lot more help than I got. It's good to remember we're not alone. Thank you again for this.

RACHEL BONDS

4 years ago



Thank you! You're so not alone. It's totally insane what we do, and I am a very proud and independent lady, and it's really hard to ask for help. I felt like I narrowly survived so many of my working experiences, even though they meant SO much to me, even though I desperately needed them and wanted them. But I want to help make change so we don't just narrowly survive these experiences. It's not healthy for the parent OR for the work. Thanks again.

RACHEL SPENCER HEWITT

4 years ago



Love these points, Rachel! So many were covered at the PAAL forums in terms of what we've already created - I'm so excited you could join us and to see these questions asked and thrilled we can let others know that many of these assets are already in play across the country - here's where they live!

The Practical:

1. Housing flexibility: This is one of the main pathways of accessibility for parents that we are recommending in our Best Practices Handbook for Institutions that will be released in beta this winter as we mentioned at the forum!

<http://bit.ly/bestPpaal>

2. Childcare reimbursement: yay for the grants shout out!!PAAL is providing the first childcare grants for individuals and institutions this year - applications are now open: **<https://paaltheatre.com/gra...>**

3. Making childcare available on the premises: totally agree! This is a main piece included in our Handbook of Best Practices for theatre institutions - both providing childcare for audience members attending the show as well as the artists and employees working at the theatre. We think that it's a really cost-effective practice.

4. Family-friendly theatres: That is coming with the PAAL awards - we are creating a database of family-friendly theatres around the country who are recognized by PAAL so that it takes the guess-work out of it for parents seeking work and making the desire to support parents more intentional for theatres: [**bit.ly/PAALaward**](https://bit.ly/PAALaward)

5. Breastfeeding/Bottle-feeding/Pumping: The PAAL handbook features the federal and local laws that make lactation rooms and adequate accommodations a necessity as well as theatres who have made this a reality! Here's our first step in making that process visible: [**http://bit.ly/boobpumpPAAL**](http://bit.ly/boobpumpPAAL)

6. Tech and Preview Scheduling: The handbook we mentioned for theatres features recommendations and interviews of companies that have restructured the rehearsal process for scheduling that is more effective for work-life balance for all people, including releasing schedules far in advance and making effective use of daytime hours, particularly 10-2, for parents with children in school.

7. Working Parent Ambassadors: These exist as PAAL reps exist all over the country and are working parents that help other parents build community, navigate work

opportunities and transitions, and serve as local and national voices for parent needs. PAAL also has ambassadors to institutions who are equipped to train institutions on how to implement parent supportive practices. Here's the list of reps around the country:

<https://paaltheatre.com/rep...>

8. Parent Handbook: We have already begun creating these! We have a national handbook for institutions coming out on how to support parent artists as well as handbooks that are discipline-specific, the first to be completed is the handbook for actors and stage managers created in collaboration with Actors' Equity. Our books for directors are under way. Here's the link to the press release for the national handbook: **<http://bit.ly/bestPpaal>** - Here's the link to the article introducing the actor/SM handbook:

<http://bit.ly/pregnancyhand...>

9. Equipment: The PAAL Handbook of Best Practices is featuring a guidepage/checklist for company management on recommendations for items to have on hand, how to check the expiration, and what the liability items are to check. We include #10 - cars - as an item that is useful to provide to parents.

Hope that helps!! Looking forward to connecting with you more and making sure these solutions are accessible to empower all parents!

RACHEL BONDS

4 years ago



Thank you Rachel! Thank you for sharing this, and thank you for your guidance.

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CATHERINE
TRIESCHMANN

Parenting and Playwriting

18 September 2011

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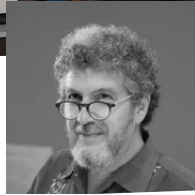
Radical Inclusion of Parent Artists

5 December 2018

Lydia Milman Schmidt, founder of the advocacy group Parents in Chicago Theatre, looks at the progressive

daydreaming.

policies Rivendell
Theatre
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Essay

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Carlyle
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4 June 2018

Todd London
celebrates
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Brown, who recently won the William Inge Theater Festival's award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theater.

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