

INTRO

(The following is read by Laura Colby over jazz music composed by Manual Cinema)

Hi, I'm Laura Colby and this is The Middle Woman, a roadmap to managing the performing arts. I'll be sharing personal anecdotes from my 30 years in the field, exploring the nitty gritty and the technicalities of this job. I'll tell you the story of how I got here and what it's taken for me to work in the industry of the performing arts.

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EPIISODE 1

Hi, I'm Laura Colby, and this is the first podcast of The Middlewoman, A Roadmap to Managing the Performing Arts.

So why this podcast? I am the founder and president of Elsie Management. Elsie Management is a small performing arts agency comprised of three arts workers that represents a global roster of touring artists. Our work includes touring shows created by contemporary dance, theater, and circus companies from all over the world, mostly to North America, but also to other continents. We are making this podcast because primarily the roles of the artist manager, or the artist representative, or producer, these are very much hidden roles in our industry, and we wanted to use this podcast as a method of sharing the stories, my stories from my perspective to share with you what this role really is in this very big field of the performing arts. Most especially because the field of the live performing arts will not continue without arts workers that make it possible.

There are so many different kinds of arts workers in the field. But, my motivation here is to continue in the building of this industry to maintain its strength and consistency, and we need arts workers to be able to do that. So for the listeners who might be practicing artists, this will be beneficial so that you have a deeper understanding of what arts administration is, and for the young arts workers out there or the people who are curious about what on earth arts workers are doing, what is that job? Again, I'm here, uh, I'm making this podcast to share what I have learned and what I now know a good 30 years in.

So I hope you'll join me for some investigation and some tales from the field. I've really gotten my feet muddy in 30 years and I have a lot to share and I'm excited to share it with you. I'm going to start by talking a bit about my trajectory and how I got here. I started in the field as a practicing dancer.

My training found me in New York City, and after I graduated from school, I was working as a dancer with a handful of choreographers, as one does in the downtown New York City dance scene. And it turned out that I was good at keeping track of information. Of course, I was incredibly passionate about the field of dance and dance in general because I'd spent a good 15

years training. And the choreographers I was working with clearly needed help. And if that help was for something as simple as finding rehearsal space, consistently, um, or making sure that they knew what the, Most recent and current grant deadlines were I didn't really know what grants were but I knew my choreographers were talking about grants and I started asking a lot of questions and basically the folks I was in the studios with made it clear that they needed help with a lot of this stuff.

Many of those choreographers would have New York seasons, and I would learn just from being a dancer in the studio what was involved with having, with putting on a New York City season, if they were self-producing in a theater, or if they were being presented by a presenting program. And we'll talk about all that language and what all that means in another podcast. And I started learning the skills that were necessary to be able to have those home seasons. Basically company management. So aside from being able to schedule rehearsal times, I was also able to keep track of simple administrative tasks like putting together a press kit. And back then, press kits were actually printed paper with photographs, they would have included, narrative information about the the pieces that were going to be performed, they would have included printed press releases as well as reviews that perhaps you the choreographer, had received.

It was a cataloging, basically, to ensure a certain level of marketing to whomever was going, considering this artist or was going to present this artist. So this was the very fundamental introductory arts administrative-y tasks that I started my work doing. So, push came to shove, and, uh, uh, a lot of the choreographers actually started paying me.

Again, I was in my early twenties. I had not been trained in any formal arts administration program. Um, and it became clear that this was a need. for several of the choreographers I was dancing with, and so I started working for them part-time doing these arts administrative tasks for them and being paid by the hour to do that work.

I also have to point out this was at the advent of home computers, so the first time I put together a database on a computer with floppy disks that, you know, like, that was a skill set I had because it turns out I could type and I could keep track of my floppy disks.

I was in New York, dancing for a handful of choreographers doing a little arts admin work getting paid by the hour and things progressed quite organically with the choreographers. Um, certain programmers decided that they wanted to, say, produce them for a week of shows at the Dance Space Project in, in downtown New York City. And again, we'll talk more in the future about what is the role of the programmer in the field. Um, and they needed help. They decided that they were going to file a grant with the New York State Council for the Arts to support. that season at the Dance Base Project and they needed help with that grant. I had no idea how to write a grant.

One of the choreographers I was working with literally pulled open her filing cabinet and said, "There are my grants, read them, and you will now know how to write a grant". Um, was a hell of a way to learn, but she was absolutely right. Turns out she wrote a killer grant, and I had a filing

cabinet full of all these grants that she had written and been awarded money for. So that's how I learned how to grant, how to write grants was literally, uh, by reviewing grants that had been already written and awarded.

So I started writing grants for people and, uh, I also learned how to write a press release. I had no idea what a press release was. I learned how to reach out. to publicists and journalists, uh, to try to get coverage for these New York City home seasons. And this is also where I started learning who the programmers were in New York City, and what theaters they were attached to.

And again, this was when, a period of my life when I was strictly focused on dance, so the Joyce Theater became very important in my work, and dance based project as well. Um, I was, I started the sales part of my job by being able to talk about the work and pursue other performance opportunities for these choreographers.

After about 10 years of doing that, so I was still dancing professionally, and I was also earning a little bit of money by doing this arts administration work, uh, I also learned about an annual booking conference that takes place in New York City every year, and it was called APAP, A P A P, which now stands for the Association of Performing Arts Professionals.

In 1995, I'd gotten to the point where I was really tired of listening to my choreographers complain about the APAP conference because they couldn't have showcases during the conference. These dance showcases were incredibly important ways for them to be able to share their work with the programmers, the buyers, if you will, for the theaters out there. That they would come into town in New York every year. They would attend this big booking conference and they would go to live showcases and performances while they were in town in consideration for their future seasons. The best way to showcase at APAP was to make sure that you were part of the APAP Guide.

The APAP Showcase Guide, which, yes, was a printed book. Um, and if you register for the conference, all of us would get this printed book full of pages and pages and pages of showcases that were being produced in New York City during the conference. This was a critical thing for any artist, the best way to be seen by these programmers at the time.

In order to attend the APAP conference, you have to join APAP. It's a membership organization and only members can attend the conference. So I put together a project for the handful of contemporary choreographers I was dancing and doing administrative work for, as well as for pals, folks I was in class with, folks my same age as me who were leaving their larger companies and stepping out on their own and creating their new, their own new work.

I put together a project. I basically said, I probably still have the letter inviting people, but it said something like, Hey, I'm going to do this thing at APAP. I'm going to buy a booth under my name, which is going to be Elsie Management. And I'm going, I will represent you on the floor of APAP for four days, and I'm also going to produce two showcases. Would you like to do this? And I charged everybody 500 bucks, and the project part was, they got the mailing list, or rather the

attendee list of the conference. I would keep track of who came to the showcase and tell them who came to the showcase. And also, if I had direct conversations about their work, I would make sure that they knew exactly who I had spoken to. So that was the project part.

So I represented 14 contemporary dance companies at APAP in 1995. And yes, I stood in my booth and talked about nothing but contemporary dance for four days and people came to the showcases. And honestly, that's why I'm here 28 years later. And yes, I'm still producing dance showcases at APAP 28 years later, because it works. So that's how I ended up with Elsie Management. My membership into APAP also gave me access to the membership list, and so this entire network of, uh, service organizations serving the field of live performing arts was revealed to me. And we'll have an entire podcast based on what is that network, who are those people, and all the nuts and bolts of that.

But needless to say, I would not be here with my company Elsie management without that seminal experience of having decided to put this project together in 1995.

So, it worked, and some of the artists came to me and asked that I start working for them on a, uh, a more, you know, more than five hours a week, um, and so business picked up for me, and it became clear that there was a need in the field for this new generation of choreographers that did not have representation, and, um, were not yet touring, and that they really wanted to tour their work in the same way they had toured as they were dancers in the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company or the Limón Dance Company. They were transitioning out of their dancer roles and forming their own companies and stepping out, creating their own work, and they needed representation. These were my peers. These are people I knew. These are people I had either danced with or took class with. These were the folks I went downtown to see their shows. It was very organic. It was very natural for me. I was incredibly passionate about their work and could talk to you blue in the face about their work. And it was very exciting for me because, I love dance and I, my mother will tell you I came out of the womb dancing. And that has been my life. So for me to be able to talk about, this genre and this group of young choreographers was really exciting.

So, what is Elsie Management? We are a small performing arts agency. We represent a roster of touring artists in the genres of dance, contemporary theater, new circus, and outdoor spectacle.

I am speaking from my very personal experience in this field, uh, and what my trajectory has been. So I put Elsie together for APAP in 95. I only was representing contemporary dance. If you look at the Elsie Management roster right now, like how did all that happen?

The addition of theater and circus and outdoor spectacle, this all happened on a very kind of organic, natural progression. It happened because I saw work that blew my mind. Um, I, I traveled and I saw, I was introduced to artists I'd never met before, um, and that's how the roster has progressed into what it is today.

So a couple of, of, of key moments where things shifted for me. So there I am with those. with my, now I'm, now I'm working at Elsie. I was representing, let's say, eight contemporary dance companies, primarily all from New York City. When the executive director of DanceBrazil, that was Patty Bryan, came to me and asked me if I would please represent DanceBrazil.

Well, again, I had only been working for everybody and being paid by the hour for the work I was doing. DanceBrazil was an established company. It had a name in the field. It had been touring in the field for at least 15 years. Programmers knew this company. So, Patty, she wasn't going to pay me by the hour. She was going to pay me a commission, which is the classic way a booking agent gets paid. And hello, that's the first time you've heard me say booking agent, because I, yes, I do the job of a booking agent, but I, you will never hear me when people ask me what I do, I never answer by saying I'm a booking agent. I say I'm an artist representative, or I say I maintain a roster of artists, and I provide them with artist representation, and I also do the work of a booking agent. Absolutely.

So Patty wanted to pay me on a percentage, and that's what we did. And this was what was, why DanceBrazil was such a game changer for me, was because, first of all, what the hell did I know about Capoeira and culturally specific work from Brazil, not much, but I, I, I was enthusiastic based on her, uh, request and also what I knew about the company and what I'd seen about what I'd seen of the company, spectacular company with live music. I had never represented a dance company with live music. So this was a big change for me.

So I went for it, and all of a sudden, people who wouldn't talk to me before were now talking to me. When I say people again, I'm sorry, I mean the programmers. So now I was able to make phone calls to programmers who would actually have a conversation with me about dance. Now, it was very clearly about DanceBrazil. They knew that name. They wanted to talk to me about DanceBrazil. But I was also able to talk about other companies that I was representing. And I, I caught on to that very, very early, that there were probably going to be artists on my roster that no one knew, but I could eventually get around to introducing them to these programmers who were reaching out to me for other companies.

After DanceBrazil, another culturally specific company that came to Elsie that was another game changer was Noche Flamenca. And we ended up representing Noche Flamenca for some 14 years. And again, representing these culturally specific companies that had a stack of reviews, that had been touring for 10 or 15 years. That was a huge game changer for my roster and, and for my trajectory in the field because it kicked open doors and I was able to work with people I'd never worked with before.

Basically, our dance roster now is a, has such a broad range of work from highly experimental and conceptual work that is not meant for the proscenium stage to large shows that are absolutely meant for the proscenium stage with 12 dancers and five musicians. It is a staggering range of dance, um, that I, you know, so in love with all of it.

I found Contemporary Theater because I went to see the National Theater of the United States of America, otherwise known as the NTUSA. I went to see them at PS122, and they blew my mind, and I'd never seen theatre like that before. Um, And I ran backstage and gave them my card and said, "Oh my God, you're amazing. Do you have representation? I, you know, I want, I want to represent you. What can we do together?" And that was, that was a big change for me in the field.

Same thing happened with New Circus because of business trips that I took to Montreal. I suddenly was introduced to what we now call New Circus or Contemporary Circus. Yes, Cirque, but not Cirque de Soleil shows. Think smaller-scale circuses built for the proscenium stage, not with animals, you know, not, not Ringling Brothers, but choreographed with a theme. That's new circus. And so now I have new circus on my roster.

Outdoor Spectacle came about, um, in at the turn of the century, actually in 2000, I was invited by the Australian Council on the Arts to go to Melbourne, Australia for one of their convenings. And Australia at the time, uh, had, had made a very devoted, dedicated effort, uh, to export their artists. And in order to do that, they weren't any idiots. They knew better. They knew they had to get US-based agents to represent Australian-based work to get it over the big ocean. They did this with Europe. They did this with Asia. And so they invited me to come down to Australia. And when I was down there, I saw work that was made for the outdoors on basically, massive pieces of equipment, or self-made, self-devised equipment. So at the time, this was called open-air work. And now we call it outdoor, well, we call it, at Elsie, we call it outdoor spectacle.

And that's where I was introduced to the company that is now called SWAY, which are the folks who perform on 15-foot fiberglass sway poles, only outside, but again, these aren't, this isn't a seven-minute circus act. This is a choreographed, thematic, set-to-music piece. It's a 20-minute work and yes, it's for the great outdoors.

So that's what our roster looks like today. And yes, this, this trajectory of additions of genres and different companies, uh, if you had told me this is what Elsie was going to look like now. If you told me that thirty, well, twenty-eight years ago, I, I wouldn't, I wouldn't have understood what on earth you were talking about.

For me, it's always been about bodies in space. And, because fundamentally, that's what dance is. It's bodies in space. And so is circus, and so is outdoor spectacle. But the contemporary theater, because I now represent lots of puppets. I've got so many puppets in my life, and they are fantastic, and the stories that are being told through puppetry are, can be so poignant and cathartic, and, and what I love is, and it's equivalent to the best dance I've seen, is that it leaves each viewer with their own opportunity to walk away with their version of what they experienced.

Because often, in these pieces of contemporary theater, there is no text. Most of it is purely visual theater, or, or it's physical theater. And so each of us has our own experience in, in the experience of sharing these stories.

So my job at Elsie Management is to keep the roster of Elsie Management relevant. And I wouldn't be able to do that without my incredible staff. Anna Amadei has been working with me for 15 unbelievable years and Jimena Alviar has been with me 8 years and we maintain an internship program thanks to Meghan Dunne who worked for me and insisted that we start an intern program, and I have to thank Meghan Dunne for that.

Um, it's very important to have 20-something-year-old people in your, in your offices folks, for anyone who's over 50 who's listening. But Anna Amadei is my vice president. Jimena Alviar is my contracts manager, and I would not have the roster I have today without the input of these two amazing women. Um, they're, they are not American born, and they have brought to Elsie Management a global perspective from their own lives. They've made me brave, and they've made me have the confidence to represent work that I wouldn't otherwise have looked at or considered. And that has been such a thrill and has opened up a whole world to me.

So, as a team, we're a hell of a team, we are particularly excited to be able to represent so many female voices on our roster. It is really important to us that the work also speaks to the young girls and young women out there. Uh, because women's, the female artistic voice has been so underrepresented and dismissed and overlooked. So we take great pride in that part of our roster. And great pride in being able to share those works with broader audiences across the world.

And let me pause for a second to, to talk about this field, because this is a gigantic field. And again, we'll dig more into what this field is of the live performing arts through future podcasts.

I'm in a very particular little corner of this field, little niche market, um, that's otherwise known as the so-called concert world. Or back in the day, it was known as a concert world, primarily because we were playing concert theaters.

And so when dance started touring, it too went into the same theaters that the symphonies and orchestras were touring into. And also was getting presented by the programmers at those theaters. If you were to add up the performances out there on a singular night in the United States, and, and then categorize them by genre, music is going to take up, 80 percent I'm going to say. This is highly unscientific data I'm giving you. And dance is probably going to be 5 percent of that. So, and contemporary theater, you know, I mean we're talking, we are, the, the, the roster of artists that I represent are such a small niche part of this gigantic field that is the industry of the performing arts.

You may find that your home and your place in, in this industry, is with rock and roll or stand-up comedians or cover bands. That may be your thing. Great. This is my thing. So I, again, I'm speaking to you from my experience, handling the kind of work that I have been handling for the last 28 years. And that's a direct result of what throws me out of bed in the morning and what rocks my world and the aesthetic that I love, to be in a theater with and to absorb and experience. Now, not that I don't love rock and roll, don't get me wrong, but these forms are

typically incredibly underrepresented, um, so that's very important to me to be representing work that might not otherwise get seen out there in this really saturated huge field.

The point of relevancy also is about this podcast. Because the world without the performing arts, the live performing arts, just, I can't, you know, we all had a taste of that during COVID. We know what that means. We know we don't want that. We know we want performing artists to continue to tour.

We are now actually in a moment of recovery in the post-pandemic time because all performances in general had to stop and the audiences have in many parts of the country been slow to return.

But those of us who are doing this work, we are so focused and hell-bent on doing this work. And again, we need you. We need the future arts worker to ensure. The continuity of this incredible legacy of touring live performing artists throughout not just the U.S. and North America, but the entire globe. So I hope you'll stay with me because we're going to really dig deep and I'm going to do all that I can to share the learnings that we have collected via Elsie Management.

So up next. Who's who? Who is who? Who are these people? What are their jobs? Oh my god. And hey, how do, how do you get an agent? Or rather, how does the agent pick you? And then yeah, we're going to dig deep into the money. Let's talk about that money. So I have one more thought before we sign off. Please go see a live show and hey, until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)