

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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EPISODE 3

LAURA COLBY: Hello, this is Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we're going to talk about skills. What kind of skills you need to be an arts manager and the performing arts industry? So, this past Sunday, when I opened my *New York Times*, Because, yes, I still get the paper delivered because I like me some newsprint and to hold the paper in my hands because, like you, I'm on a screen all day.

This past Sunday, if you got the printed newspaper of the *New York Times*, the cover of the Sunday opinion section says, "Ask better questions. Really listen, be vulnerable, make others feel known. The essential skills for being human."

I think that's a great framework. To talk about the essential skills for being a performing arts manager. Because yes, first and foremost, you must be human.

I'm going to pause for a second to say I may sound different this episode because I'm, I'm recording this in Tucson, Arizona and I'm very near an Air Force base and there are lots of jets flying over. So my apologies if you're wondering what that roaring is in the background.

In the first episode, I mentioned that the reason I fell into this work was because I had the capacity to remain organized, and I was able to track very what I consider pretty simple information, like what time is rehearsal on which days of the week, but on the larger scale that translates into a production schedule.

Every working artist has a production schedule. If they're building a work that they eventually want to share and show with the world, there is a production schedule to get to the point where they eventually have a finished work or a work at the point to which they're ready to share it with the public at large. Whether they know it or

not, they're on a production schedule, and in the touring industry, we live and die on production schedules.

I maintain a roster of approximately 20 touring, performing artists and companies. So I'm really living and dying on 21 or 22 production schedules, because there's also Elsie's production schedule that I have to oversee and manage.

Each of my artists may have current work that's available for touring. They may also be in the middle of creating a new work, or maybe it's just a thought in their brain right now. Some of them may be six weeks out to a premiere. So I am always working today on what I am touring today, but I'm also handling engagements that may have just concluded and then I'm also at the same time looking to the future, trying to get more work for my companies. I have to constantly be working two and three years out. So those production schedules all need to be managed and overseen. And part of being organized is the capacity to do that.

So the amazing thing now is that there is software. And when I started this work over 30 years ago. There was not software. And we all had our own methods on paper and pen or pencil to take care of production schedules.

So with software now we have amazing tools that go way beyond an Excel spreadsheet to help us stay organized. As somebody responsible for management, of a production schedule, you need to make a choice and a decision about what is going to work best, what methods, what tools are going to work best for you. For some people, that's just an excel spreadsheet. For other people, they like a software that has more bells and whistles in it, it's prettier, it's got alarms, etc.

So as a manager overseeing production schedules, you need to figure out...What is the best way? What is going to work for you? What software you're going to use? If the thing about the software is it only works if you actually use it, if you really use it and you use the alarms and the warnings and the advanced programs that has set in it to say, Hey, don't forget to do this on Friday.

At Elsie, when I had to eventually choose a CRM, a customer relationship management, which is basically a fancy word for software that takes my Excel, all my, all the data in my excel spreadsheet and makes it look a lot prettier, but also my CRM has the capacity to spit out a contract based on data that I have had stored in the database portion of my CRM.

We started with a massive Excel spreadsheet where I started cataloging presenters and programmers and curators, the buyers if you will, who I needed to stay in contact with from not just the 50 states, but Canada and Mexico and eventually a

global database. Dude, that's a lot of information. And... I need to maintain it. Your database is only as good as your input in it, and it's constant management of that database, but it's incredibly important for me to maintain.

The advantage of having a CRM is that, ideally, I can, for example, pull up one particular theater, like the Joyce Theater, and there should be a record and history of all the contracts that I had with the Joyce Theater. Again, if I'm using the software correctly, it can provide things like that.

CRMs can also generate touring itineraries. So if you have an artist on the road and you have contiguous tour dates, and again, if you're using the software right, there's probably a function in that CRM that you can spit out a touring itinerary with show dates and arrival dates and departure dates. It really depends on how detailed the information was that you entered into it.

Admittedly, there's a big difference between managing one artist and their production schedule and a roster of artists. So depending where you are in your work in the field, you will probably experience what I experienced, which is learning while you went and figuring out the best way for you to maintain and keep your information.

What we learned at Elsie is that we need a calendar function. We needed to see a month with 30 or 31 boxes in it. That was really important to us. And so we always seek out the CRMs that have calendar functions in them because it helps us understand and see the year or the two or three years down the line with holidays and we know that about ourselves that we need that visual.

One critical skill is the ability to keep up with technology. And that may sound so obvious, but many of us get married to our software, and we decline to do updates, or it goes unsupported, and when it goes unsupported, we didn't stop using it, we kept using it, and now it's dead, and now we have to replace it overnight. Like you don't want to get stuck in a corner where you're ultimately ending up having an emergency when you should have done this when you weren't having an emergency to make another decision so that you can keep your work steady.

One keeping up with technology examples I have is when the cloud showed up. You have to know originally when the cloud showed up in my little circle of arts manager friends. The answer was, Oh, no. Oh, hell no. I, you know, I'm not, I'm not going to put my data up in some thing because, to us, our hard drives were real. They were tangible things. We could actually put our hands on and touch and move from room to room. Like it was a thing, right? So this concept of having all your data and

information up in the cloud was, was unimaginable for one, but it just seemed wrong. And there was a sense that there wasn't going to be security.

So now we know better. Most of us have not had security issues with our cloud-based hardware these days, but I will bring up when Hurricane Sandy came and that was a 14 15 real wall of water that came over and up into Brooklyn. At the time our offices were in Dumbo and we were two blocks from the East River and that wall of water came up and flooded the first and second floors of our building.

Thank goodness Elsie was on the third floor. So our hard drive stayed dry and we were fine. However, the building was closed for two weeks because oh, the building had been flooded and they had to do all of the cleanup and remediation before they would let any of us in the building. So this was hard. This was October for us, which is the height of the booking season. And we had, we were in the throes of busy, busy, busy time. And we could not get to our database. Now, yes, we could send emails. Okay, whoop dee doo. We could send emails. We couldn't access our information. We couldn't get to our files where our notes were. We couldn't do so much in those two weeks, and it was horrible. Anyway. I point to that because that was actually at the same time, the cloud was becoming relevant and we realized when we all got back to the office, we were like, Oh, well, if we actually had moved our entire hard drive up into the cloud, we could have just continued working without any interruption.

Needless to say, if that happens to us today, well, we're fine now because actually all of our stuff is now in the cloud and we have all of that backup in place. So keeping up with technology is absolutely critical. The pace of this work can be very fast and this is where time management comes in.

A huge skill is being efficient with your time, which is all about time management. That doesn't mean being rushed. It just means using your time well and effectively. We work really hard to work from a place of no surprises. We don't want our artists to be surprised when they get out on the road. We don't want our presenters to be surprised when the artist shows up.

We work really hard in advance so that we are not setting up our artists to have epic fails on the road. We do so much advanced work with the very specific intention of them having smooth engagements once they arrive at the theater they're touring to. And same for the presenter. So that advancement of those engagements is all tied into time management, is all tied into the production schedule.

So if we're looking at an engagement that's one year out, or six months out, or four months out, two months out, six weeks out, we have very specific tasks that we need to execute along that time frame, along that production schedule, which is why we are married to our calendars and we have to keep an eye on how far out are we from that date. Wait a minute, were the visas filed? The visas need to be filed no later than six months for that engagement. You know, we have to have all of those deadlines in sight and noted in our calendars because you miss something like that, and then everything goes into a tailspin, and suddenly, oh boy, there are a lot of surprises. But inevitably those surprises have come about because someone just wasn't on the calendar.

Communication is a critical skill in this field. This is a people-to-people industry. You will be speaking to other humans and in your capacity as a human one must lead with kindness at all times, and never assume anything. And also, it's an incredibly small field. So that person who you're on the phone with right now, who you consider the receptionist, and you're about to say something not very kind to that person, who you think is, quote, just the receptionist. That receptionist is going to be programming at The Kennedy Center, like in five years. So don't do that. Just don't do that. Just lead with kindness at all times. Know that that person you're speaking to today, you will be working with that person, probably for the next 20 or 30 years in the field. So don't burn bridges. Don't say unkind things that you don't have to say. Take a moment to pause. Take a nice deep breath and just don't say it. Just be kind. Be kind at all times.

I was asked by Jimena Alviar, Elsie's contract manager, to say something about language. Both Jimena and Anna Amadei, my vice president, were not born in the United States. They speak great English, and their first language is not English.

Both of them have served in the capacity as contract manager. And both of them, therefore, have had to read a lot of legal language in our contracts and tech riders. And when English is not your first language it is so important to know that you may run into things that perhaps you don't understand. And being able to ask the question and say, I don't understand this, can you explain this to me? It's hugely important. So if you are handling a language that is not your first language, or even if you, even if it is your first language, and you don't understand, the capacity to ask somebody else, Can you help me with this? I don't understand this. This is so important.

We will be spending much more time talking about negotiation, but in this people-to-people job, which requires you to communicate well, that ability to listen is so important. And right behind that ability to listen is the ability to actually not respond, not react. Because inevitably someone's going to say something that

upsets you or is not what you wanted to hear or is patently false or enrages you and developing the capacity to take a breath and not respond and to be able to say, Hmm, you know, I'm going to have to think about that. Can I get back to you tomorrow? I didn't know how to do that in my thirties, I don't think I knew how to do that in my forties. I think I finally learned how to do that in my fifties. So hopefully you can practice in social circumstances or, hey, next time you are communicating with someone and they say something that upsets you, instead of responding, take a pause and perhaps you will find a way to back out, if you will, and maybe that's to say, oh, you know what, I don't actually want to buy this right now, I'll come back another day.

If I could rewind and this all over again, I do wish that I had taken some kind of course in managing a small business because I ended up becoming a small business just because I put this little project together that turned into a very serious business with me being an employer and hiring employees and having to maintain a small business, which was not something I ever took a class in. And if I had this all over to do again, I, I would definitely do that. And presumably, in that class, you would learn about managing a budget. Because managing money is a huge part of this job.

And again, it's all about keeping track of it. So what system are you going to use to keep track of that budget? Is it a project budget? Is it an annual budget? There's a big difference between a project budget to create a work, for example, and an annual budget. So the artists' literal annual budget, everything they do in their capacity as an artist, income, and expenses, that annual budget versus a project budget.

Why is this so important? Because for grants, you have to be able to answer the question, How much does it cost to make this piece? Or how much does this project cost? That's not the same thing as an annual budget. And then they're also going to ask you: what is this artist's annual budget?

We will spend more time on budgeting, and quite specifically, touring fees and what goes into a touring budget. But the critical question about answering that question, how much is this going to cost? What is your worth? You need to know your worth as an artist. As a manager, you need to work with that artist to define what their worth is. And I usually ask the question, well, how much do you think you should be paid? And it's really hard when you're thinking about a project, when you ask that question to an artist, because these projects they're most likely not just, you know, a 10-day project it's probably more like a 10-month project. And so, it's a very big question. If they can't answer that question, the next question is, so how,

how long do you think it's going to take you to make this work? And then maybe they'll come back and say, I think it's going to take me six weeks to make this 20-minute work. It's going to be five hours in the studio every day, Monday to Friday, for six weeks. And so now you can start building your budget. Okay, how many dancers? What are they getting paid? And now you can start to be able to answer the question, how much is this project?

If possible, it is important to be able to know how to tailor your budgets to specific circumstances. So again, this gets back to how are you keeping track of that budget, where is it saved, so you can pull it up, so when the presenter says, Well, actually, I can provide X, Y, and Z to you. How does that change the number you quoted me? So, maybe you've quoted them 25,000 plus housing. You're going to pay for all your airfares out of that 25,000 because you built them into the 25,000. But they come back to you and say, Well, we can, we actually have coupons or something. You know, or Deltas our underwriter. So, we've, we've got a deal with Delta and we're going to pay for your 10 airfares. Well, where did you put that budget so you can look it up and pull the airfares out and now what kind of fee are you able to quote to your programmer? So again you have carefully saved that budget somewhere so you can look that detail up so you can give them an answer.

And if you can't do it on the spot because you communicate so well, you can say to them, Oh, I can't answer that question right now, but let me go sharpen my pencil. I'll have the number for you tomorrow. And that goes for any situation you find yourself stuck in. It's so important for you to be able to say, I, I don't know the answer to that question right now. Or, oh wow, I have no idea. Um, give me 24 hours and I'll be back to you tomorrow. Do that. Don't lie. Don't bullshit. Just get back to them tomorrow.

Professionalism all gets down to typos. It also gets down to, um, having names right, uh, remembering things. So, when we email, we always start with a salutation, and we always name the person's name. When we receive emails that do not say, Dear Laura, or Dear Anna, or Dear Jimena, we treat them like spam. I mean, I'm sorry. especially when we get the Dear Sir emails. I'm like, I'm sorry. Someone's seriously not paying attention. They don't really want to talk to me. They don't mean it. They don't mean it. So, professionalism is embodied by everything you do, from the voicemail you leave, the email you send, the meeting you have in person, and if you are leading with sloppiness, what does that say about your work ethic? If you are leading with care and respect and research and you have clarity and you are able to answer questions, what does that say about your work ethic and what will it be like to work with you?

Because in the course of these engagements, What happens is, you are typically spending at least a year with this programmer, off and on, and once this programmer has sent you an invitation and an actual offer, once you have agreed to terms, which are the dates and the fees and the program, once you start working on all the outreach activities, assuming there are outreach activities like masterclasses or lecture demonstrations or conversations with the public, you are in constant communication with this presenter.

What kind of experience is that presenter having with you? Are you leading with sloppiness? Are you forgetting things? Did you not send the tech rider when they asked you to send it? Did you not send the high-res photos within 48 hours of when they asked for it? Did you not get back to them to confirm the marketing copy they sent you that needs to be confirmed?

If you're being sloppy, if you're being negligent, if you are not answering emails, Why would they ever want to work with you again? It's just like you going shopping. You're not going to go back into that store where you were treated badly, right? So because you're going to be doing business with these people for the next 10, 20, maybe 30 or 40 years, again, how are you presenting yourself?

What is it like to interact with you? Be honest with yourself. A dear colleague, her agency was approaching, I think it was its 40th anniversary, a lot to celebrate there, and she wanted to take a pause to find out what the status of her agency was out in the field, and she and her two partners I went out basically on a listening tour, if you will, and had very honest, transparent conversations with presenters, asking questions about what is your experience working with us?

Where does our agency fit into the ecosystem of all the agents out there? Why do you like to work with us? What is it about us you don't like about working with us? Talk to us about our roster. They learned so much about themselves. And they were able, with the honest feedback they got from their colleagues, they were able to make adjustments in their look, their tone, their mission, their values.

I mean, they didn't have to do a gigantic overhaul. The feedback they received was critical to their understanding of their placement in the field. So what a gift, right?

So your presentation, what it is like to interact with you, that is who you are. And that is ultimately the business that you are, even if you are a singular person, no staff, what is it like to interact with you? What kind of service are you going to give your presenter, but also to your artist, so that your artist stays with you and wants to continue working with you, and that presenter wants to have that artist back, but

also that presenter wants to keep working with you maybe when you move on to a different artist or when you expand your roster to include other artists.

We're in the field of the performing arts. We are surrounded by creativity. And there is no reason why your management skills shouldn't embrace and possess the same kind of creativity that your artists are working in, that same space. Creativity is what gives you the capacity to remain facile. And, makes it possible for you to shift and make changes, um, reprioritize.

There isn't a day that doesn't go by in my work as an arts manager that is a completely different day than the day I thought it was going to be when I sat down at my desk. So part of my training as a dancer all those years prepared me for that and makes it uh, possible for me to literally turn on a dime and reprioritize on a daily and weekly, and monthly basis.

And Anna and Jimena and I work as a team doing that all the time. We are constantly being thrown curveballs. And what, what is it about your practice as an artist? Or an arts manager that's going to make it possible for you to stay facile and to change not just with keeping up with technology, but also make a change when an artist makes a major decision. You know, I'm, I'm never dancing on the floor anymore. I've become an aerialist. You know, are you going to be ready to go, literally go flying with that aerialist after spending 10 years on the ground with them? What is it about your practice that will make it possible for you to stay relevant in the field while the field changes, while your artists change, while the circumstances of presenting change?

Regarding skills, we talked about maintaining a production schedule, how to stay organized through your data or your CRM, why keeping up with technology is so important, how budgeting is a necessary tool and skill, and especially having the capacity to make adjustments in that budget.

Basic time management, and how that points directly back to that production schedule. Maintaining kindness in this very small field. Cause everybody's gonna get to know you. How basic communication can serve you. Developing the capacity to ask questions when you don't know the answer. And developing the ability to not react or answer when appropriate.

How you show up is how your professionalism shows up. And always allowing for creativity to be an integral part of your administrative, your management, your producing practice. Okay, so now you know what I'm gonna say. Go see a show, will ya? Go see a live show, and then I want to hear all about it. In the next episode, I

will be speaking with arts worker Michelle Grove Herzog about her work in the field. I can't wait to share that with you. Thank you, and until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)