

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 5

LAURA COLBY: Hello, I'm Laura Colby, the founder and president of Elsie Management, and I'm here today with guest Sandy Garcia, who is the Director of Booking at Pentacle, and we're going to be talking about how to get an agent, or how does an agent find you. Welcome, Sandy.

SANDY GARCIA: Thank you, Laura. Very nice to be here.

LAURA: Could you please tell our listeners how you ended up in this role in the live performing arts?

SANDY: Sure I came into the performing arts, I was interested in theater. I majored in theater at UC Berkeley and did some stage management, production management, that kind of thing. And that was the role that I thought I was going to take.

While I was there, I got a work-study job at the box office at Cal Performances, then went into the production department and worked there for about a year and managed one of their exhibitions that came in through the venue and managed some events there with the production team.

And, discovered that there was a whole performing arts, arts administration, field that I was not privy to. And, really fell in love with that. And so, rather than continuing to stage manage, I went into the arts administration roles, was able to work with White Oak, and run the volunteer programs. My first experience with Baryshnikov on stage.

Yeah, got to see a lot of really amazing dance, and I remember sitting in the audience and seeing Pina Bausch for the first time and just thinking one day, if I could one day work for that company, that would be amazing.

So fast forward, I graduated from Berkeley, got an internship at Mass MoCA, working for the Performing Arts Department there, really wanted to be a presenter, because I was working in the presenting side there with Jonathan Secor.

So went to NYU and got my master's cause, you know, higher education. It's a must for our field. And then I had all of this debt from my school loan and needed a job. And Rena Shagan Associates had a job opening and was really one of the only jobs that I was finding in New York City that paid a livable salary for me to be able to pay my student loans, pay my rent, and continue to work in the arts and work with an agent who was representing Pina Bausch. I stayed with Rena for 10 years. It was amazing and then I ended up at Pentacle.

LAURA: That's incredible. Rena Shagan has served as a mentor to me and many agent managers in the field and I love that you had that moment probably at Zellerbach Hall when you saw Pina Bausch in Berkeley and came full circle. It's incredible. And yes, Rena Shagan represents Pina Bausch. And that's what we're talking about today.

To start this conversation, tell us about Pentacle and what Pentacle is. I will tell our listeners Pentacle is a service organization, but Sandy will tell you about the programs.

SANDY: Yes, so Pentacle is a service organization. It was established, gosh, it's almost nearing its 50 years. So it was born in the 70s, and originally it was put together by a group of choreographers, arts administrators, who realized that within the dance field here in New York, there was a certain limitation of access to mentorship, to funding, to tools.

And so, the idea was coming together as a collective to pool together all of these resources to make them affordable and shared amongst the artists that were a part of Pentacle. And then also to be able to share them out to other choreographers and dancers that wanted to partake. So, that was originally, the ideas and so they had a publicist, a roster, fiscal sponsorship, and a number of different services that were a shared service.

Right now in terms of departments, there are fiscal services that are offered, so whether it's fiscal sponsorship for artists that are not quite ready to become 501c3s

or non-profit entities or that the idea of being one is just way too much to handle, which is the FIA program.

FIA is the Foundation for Independent Artists, which means that if you are a dance company, and you're not a 501c3, so you're not a non-profit organization, you come into the FIA program, and so then when you are programmed, or when you're booked at an engagement, you're paid under Foundation for Independent Artists. And that is how you receive your non-profit status because the Foundation for Independent Artists is a non-profit organization.

There is also some bookkeeping services that are provided for companies that maybe do not have any in-house bookkeeping personnel, and part of the FIA program also helps artists who perhaps, are wanting to tour but don't have the administrative background for general insurance policies, workers compensation, like all of the things that you need to provide to your dancers, if you are touring professionally, Pentacle has a service that is able to cover that back end for the artists.

And then we have an education and outreach department, which puts artists into local schools in New York City, as well as an internship program that's offered to dance companies and students in New York City.

The roster, which is where I'm at, which represents 10 artists nationally. And then the administrative support program, which was evolved into administrative support, which is more so for independently represented artists who maybe have a project or want certain assistance with mentorship or guidance on how to create a technical rider, how to create a marketing packet, a press kit, how to reach out to presenters on their own and learn the ins and outs. So that's the administrative support program.

LAURA: ASP Administrative Support Program, which to me sounds like preparation for touring.

SANDY: Absolutely

LAURA: So, being tour ready.

SANDY: Yes.

LAURA: I'd love to know what that means to you. I know what it means to me. But, yeah, From Pentacle's perspective, what is a tour-ready company?

SANDY: I guess there are different levels of being tour-ready. And part of our job at Pentacle is working with artists that are maybe not fully tour ready yet, but that we can work with to formalize into what those expectations of what a presenter is going to be requesting of you if you are then booked for a tour.

When we're having initial conversations about whether they are ready to handle something like that, we usually ask about budgets. Do they have a touring budget? Do they have an organizational budget? And have they run that budget? And usually with artists, we'll run budgets together to see what the cost will be then to make a tour sustainable, or as sustainable as it can be.

Have they established certain relationships with presenters within their own region? At Pentacle, we need to ensure that you have done some of the work in building those relationships yourself because when we do work with the artists that are on the roster, I see myself as an intermediary, as somebody that introduces the presenter and the artist and that helps facilitate the conversation, but the artist really needs to be the one that's prepared to have that dialogue also with the presenter because the presenter wants to talk to them. They don't really want to talk to me.

So I'd say that the artists need to be willing and able to dialogue with presenters and funders and understand that It's a business.

LAURA: Sure is.

SANDY: It's not just creating dance and going out on the road. The artists need to have an awareness that they need to be business-minded.

LAURA: Yeah, there are very hard deliverables in our work and one of the biggest challenges that we have is the response time. It's in our representation agreements with our artists that the expectation is that they are going to respond to offers within 72 hours.

I'd like to say that our work, as being that intermediary, as being in the middle, as being the facilitator, we are at our desk basically doing this work all the time. Our days are not sucked up by six and eight hours of rehearsal a day sometimes we get to go visit, but most of the time you and I are sitting at our desk and we're getting our work done. We're answering requests and responses in an expedient manner. So when someone asks for that high res photo, that video, that tech rider, What's the room count? We can answer those questions and within a day is not unreasonable to be able to answer those questions and this is partly one of the

benefits of having representation. Because you're in the studio, you're creating, you don't have time to sit down through your emails and do all of this.

I also like to point to the backyard. So I look at what the artist has been doing in their backyard. So you pointed to their capacity to interact with other presenters. What have they done to date? How much do they know about the field? Is it a hundred-mile radius from their backyard? Okay. That's a good start. That's a great place to start, actually, if you don't have representation.

You're not going to come to us straight out of the gate. You're going to have done some work of locating theaters, figuring out who the programmer is, who has authority. Do they have a budget? Do I have my budget? Can I actually quote a touring fee? When they ask me, am I ready to quote a touring fee?

This is one of the skills you absolutely have to have. If you can't answer those questions, you're not going to get a tour date, so the expansion from that backyard to perhaps regional presence. To perhaps national presence, and then eventually being able to get over big oceans to international festivals, for example, at least for me, that's typically my ambitious trajectory for the artist that I'm representing.

You pointed to the network of presenters. We have talked a little bit previously about how one finds this network of presenters. You and I are at the point where we have found this network of presenters. We have our contacts who we have been doing repeated work with over the years. We have gotten to know their aesthetic. We've gotten to know what is it they're after. What is it they're looking for, for their upcoming season? Do they have an anniversary? Are they focusing on a specific theme this coming year?

And I'd actually love to talk about the curatorial aspect of this. Both of us represent artists that have makers who have generally been underrepresented on the stage. Especially a lot of female work and people of color. And that there has been a huge shift in the curatorial lens. I definitely have felt it this season.

But also, our touring companies that are, led by artists with disabilities and other able-bodied dancers. In the mission and goal of expanding our audiences, what our programmers have been doing, and what we have been facilitating is to get these companies in front of them to say, this is quality work. Consider this work for your programming. We all share in the goal of expansion of these audiences, dance audiences and theater audiences, and the continuity, and the legacy, and the progression of this field we're in. And bringing these emerging artists, or these underrepresented artists, and making room for them on the stage has been such a focus of both of our work right now.

So, when artists come to me and say, How do I get an agent? You know, because I've let them know that I'm not in a position to consider bringing them onto my roster. I recommend to them that they find out who we are. I'm not the only one doing this work. Sandy's doing this work, Rena's doing this work. We have a wonderful group actually of dance managers, dance agents in the field, who are all doing this work.

And I suggest that they find us and that they start to invite us to see their work. And some of us travel. Maybe the companies have money to fly us somewhere to see a live show or to come see a work-in-progress showing that is almost ready to go work. So that's my recommendation. You have to know who we are. We need to see your work. That's usually an advantage. Another method that we find of seeing artists is just by going out and seeing work that we haven't seen and exposing ourselves to work that we don't know, going to showcases or festivals is a great opportunity to do that. What other ways have you found artists?

SANDY: Oftentimes, I'll have referrals from presenters that I know and that I trust that have said "We've worked with this artist and they're new to the scene, but we think that they have a lot of potential" or they've built relationships with them and I've been introduced to them that way. Also, yeah, just seeing videos, being invited to a performance. It isn't an immediate relationship. For me, it needs to sort of develop and, and it is from that invitation.

There are so few agent and managers right now, there's not an abundance of us, and so if you are interested in finding an agent, I think that the first step, like you said, yes, definitely research and build those relationships with people or agents that you think could be a good match for you, if not now, then down the road. But while you're doing that, I wouldn't say, like, just focus purely on finding that agent. You need to work on doing the work of booking yourself to eventually then go into locating that agent.

I think that the artist itself needs to be the entity that is also, in addition to looking for an agent, you're also looking at presenting organizations that are able to potentially present you. You are looking for mentors and folks in the field that might be able to provide you guidance and like, preparing yourself for when you do get that engagement or when you do get that tour that you have all of those things that we talked about that need to be ready to go when that opportunity happens.

LAURA: Yeah, that's great preparation. Oftentimes companies will come to us with these assets in hand. So they'll come and they'll say, this is what I've been doing for the past 10 years. I have had a couple of tours regionally. These are my

strongest presenter advocates. I remain interested in having you represent my work and so those conversations it all adds up to a yes or no. And oftentimes we just don't have room on our roster. You pointed to the reality that right now, there's only so many of us we're trying to cultivate more of us, which is why Elsie has an intern program. You already heard about Pentacle's intern program. This is also why we're trying to grow more arts workers because representation is vital and key to the distribution of work in our field. And we need more people to learn these skills and to enter the field and to develop this work. Because there's also a whole bunch of us who are going to be leaving at the same time.

SANDY: I also feel like there is an evolution also of dance agents. Where we're not just sitting on the phone, booking, calling presenters, and doing that eight hours a day anymore. We're also having to provide assistance to artists on different administrative type things that in the past had been done within their own organization.

I think it's a great opportunity for folks that maybe are like, well, I wouldn't be interested in being an agent, an agent isn't just being on the phone, booking.

It's a lot of other things. For those folks that are interested in doing a lot of the other things, this could be something really, really rewarding.

LAURA: You and I wouldn't still be doing this if we didn't find it incredibly rewarding.

I'd like to talk about the benefits of representation. Typically, when one approaches an artist manager or agent, someone with a roster for representation, you are approaching them for their expertise in the field, their reputation in the field, and all of the relationships they have. What are all those relationships they have in the field? That's why you're going to that person.

And that person who is considering your work has to consider what the place is of your work with inside of their roster. Sometimes it just doesn't make sense. And that can be a very personal thing.

So, for us, you mentioned you have 10 artists on the Pentacle roster, at this point, we have a little over 20 on the Elsie roster. There's only so much work we can have and handle and distribute and do good work for. It's just disingenuous for me to blow my roster up to 30 or 40 artists.

I couldn't possibly deliver the kind of services that I want to deliver, to that many. And also, I'll just point out that on the Elsie roster, all of our companies do not tour at the same capacity. So some of those artists may not go out every year at all.

They may go out every other year. Some of them tour regularly. Minimum of 10 engagements a year, up to 20. But not most of them. So, that activity, that random activity, scattered activity, across the roster, adds up to my roster working. It's a tricky balance.

SANDY: Yes. You had mentioned reputation, expertise, and relationships and I would say, like, for example, something that I have seen that for some of the artists, is a value is the fact that we are able to be the ones that are in the room negotiating. And so when things get sticky. We're the ones that go in and try to unstick things and some of it I appreciate and I see my role in that, okay, I'm going to go in and I'm going to negotiate for this, or we're going to fix this situation and I see that because I'm coming in under Pentacle, that I am able to move things in a way that the individual artist has not been able to, which is disappointing but I recognize that role because we are available to artists that don't have representation, that might want to have feedback on a contract clause that they're getting stuck on, or clarification on something, of being able to provide them with those tools to negotiate themselves.

LAURA: I think for a lot of us in our roles that we get approached by very eager companies who are convinced that representation is going to solve all their problems, and they're going to be touring like some Broadway show out there. I spend a lot of time addressing expectations and talking down expectations. From my perspective, I see a field that is flooded with quality product and only so much calling for dance on our stages. And it's tough. Competition is real.

SANDY: Yeah.

LAURA: And people's personal curatorial vision is real. I'm curious to know how you frame the scene out there for the folks who come to you and think, you're gonna get them all the work in the world. What do you tell them?

SANDY: I mean it's tough and we have very frank and honest conversations about what the situation is. It's not to say that because you're going to have representation like you say. It's not a guarantee that your work is going to get booked everywhere. That's why I think for us, the relationship that we try to build with our artists is one of a partnership and a collaboration. We're working together for these bookings. It's not, Sandy's gonna do everything. In some instances, we're trying to figure it out together. Because it's not a guarantee.

LAURA: Yeah, I'm so glad you brought up working together. Again, the part about being in the middle. We are representing a roster of artists that we are sharing with the people who are in curatorial positions to see if they will program them.

And, ultimately, it's the artist that's going to show up at that theater. It's not us. So, I think I'm hearing that for both of us, it's very important that that artist actually have some kind of relationship with that presenter. In the bad old days of the field, an agent would never share presenter name contact information with an artist.

I think both of us are working from a place of trust our representation agreements stand by us. Yeah, and I am more than happy for our artists to talk to the presenter. I want them to have those conversations about the work about the art. What I say is you can talk about anything but date and fee.

SANDY: Yes, don't talk numbers.

LAURA: Don't talk numbers and please don't talk dates, because you don't know what dates I'm talking about. Yeah. But otherwise, please talk about everything else.

SANDY: Most definitely.

LAURA: And those relationships between the artist and the presenter is so key. Now, not everybody works like us.

SANDY: Right.

LAURA: And we have colleagues who would be horrified. So, but for us, we share in that priority.

SANDY: Yeah, our key is trust and mutual respect because those are the two things that with all of the artists that we work with we need to ensure that that is established, and because if we have both of those things, then we can collaborate and partner

LAURA: Yeah

SANDY: If I don't respect the artist and the artist does not respect me or my staff in the work that we're doing for them, we do not work together.

LAURA: That trust is huge, especially in those moments when things go south.

SANDY: Yeah.

LAURA: And you and I have to get on the phone and negotiate out of a force majeure or some kind of cancellation and that trust is what enables us to do our work with integrity.

SANDY: Yeah.

LAURA: And not to burn bridges.

SANDY: Right.

LAURA: We are unfortunately often in the business of delivering not good news.

SANDY: Right.

LAURA: And that, you know, shit happens. Yeah. And you have to deliver that news and you have to just hope the person on the other end of the phone is going to be human and recognize that these things are out of our control.

SANDY: Well, and also just to share that with that trust and mutual respect, when you enter into that relationship and you both then agree to a booking with a presenting organization.

It's not just the artist's reputation on the line. It's also the agent's reputation on the line. And so for me, again, like why it's important for me that when the artists go out on the road, they have all of the assets and are prepared to a certain level that I feel comfortable. It's because, if the logistics go awry, yes, the artist looks bad. I look bad.

LAURA: Yep.

SANDY: If I'm a lousy agent manager, my poor artists also are reflected in that. And so everyone needs to be operating in the highest quality because we are responsible for each other. And not only responsible for each other, we're also responsible for the rest of the roster as well. Which is why for me, it's important when a lot of the artists that I work with know each other and respect each other. They also need to respect each other's work. If there's one artist that's talking badly about another artist, you are all in this shared space together and should be supporting each other.

LAURA: Yeah, it goes both ways.

SANDY: Absolutely.

LAURA: Our rule is no assholes. We will not work for assholes anymore. Those days are over. That took a while to learn. I think it took about 20 years, but that's our rule now because I don't need my staff to be treated badly.

SANDY: Life's too short.

LAURA: And it is both ways. Your point about our reputation out on the road, because every single engagement we have is attached to our personal and our organizational reputation. There may come a day, this has happened to me when an artist is damaging your reputation. Their behavior on the road is unprofessional, inappropriate, pick your word. And we at Elsie had to have that moment where we're like, okay, this has become untenable. We can no longer represent this artist because of their behavior on the road.

I think the skill to recognize when things are just irreparable is incredibly important. And even though you might have been having quite a ride with that artist and really doing well for them, and maybe they built your reputation for ten years, but all of a sudden things are going south, and things are not going well for you, it's a real look in the mirror moment. It is a huge relief to know that you are not going to be managing disasters created out on the road because that's exhausting and time-consuming and I can spend my time doing better work for the companies that have a professional demeanor.

SANDY: So, Balance of the roster. Over the years working with Pentacle, I think that, there's been a growth of dancers or dance makers that are incorporating street dance into their performance work. We have at Ephrat Asherie Dance, Raphael Xavier, RUBBERBAND, and Staycee Pearl's recent work, which has a lot of club influence into it. And VersaStyle Dance Company who we recently started working with. So that's five Artists.

LAURA: Half your roster.

SANDY: Half my roster. Very often the presenting world thinks, Oh, street dance. It's the same thing. It's repetitive. Well, you know what? Ballet is repetitive. So for me in wanting to show that street dance is a varied vocabulary with very different styles and types. And you go into these different dance companies and they're each incorporating it and using it in different ways. And so by showing that yes, I can have a roster of 10, and 5 of them are in this aesthetic, and none of them are going to be the same thing. And so that, for me, was very important, in being able to illustrate that this form can be used by these different artists in such a different way. And so when somebody comes and says, I've seen that before, it's like, no,

you haven't. Because you haven't seen it the way this artist does it, which is very different to the way this other artist does it. All of these ways that these artists are using it is important and should be valuable to all of us.

LAURA: It's a beautiful testimony to the range of creativity and the broad lens that forms can have. And so to not pigeonhole street dance as one form, it's so critical.

I wanted to talk about the benefit of being on a roster. I'm going to say one of the main benefits of being on a roster is that we show up where we're supposed to be. We've talked about the booking conferences on this podcast earlier. We often get to travel to festivals. And this is also where the programmers and presenters are, so we are constantly nurturing these relationships. And yes, obviously, there's a huge benefit to that.

And to Sandy's point earlier, there's no reason why a company that wants to get on the road can't do the same thing. Dance companies, theater companies can register for the booking conferences and go on their own. You can go self-represented. You too can show up at festivals. We recognize all of that takes a lot of money. But also so does touring. So just getting on a roster doesn't mean the end of expenses. If anything.

I'm sure you look at a budget and you see all the things that aren't being paid for or included in that budget.

SANDY: We would host, " Are You Tour Ready" workshops. And basically, I would give an introduction to the way the touring cycle works, when you look for presenters, when artists might be looking for agents and managers, when the conference cycle happens, the contracting process or the booking process for artists and the expectations from presenters and then also, the feather on the cap was the introduction of the budget.

And usually, when we would do that, people would be like, Oh, oh, no, I don't want to, I don't want to do that. I don't want to tour. It's like, yeah, because these are the expenses that you're going to have to start thinking about. And you're going to have to be prepared for if and when you do end up getting that engagement.

Are you able to make ends meet with that? More chances than not, you're not going to be able to. So where is your money going to come from to help supplement that?

LAURA: Yes, because your touring fees are not going to cover all of your expenses and I think it is so important to say that out loud because especially today in the last two years with the incredible price increases across the board for just

everything. The reality is that people in our position, the work that Sandy and I are doing, we can't possibly get you the fees that are going to cover your true expenses and we know what those true expenses are and it's this is a really hard moment for us and we're having conversation the field is discussing. We have high hopes for solutions. We're working on it, but the reality is right now, the fees are falling short and. And for our presenters, the fees are very painful for them because they've had the same labor increases as well. They're feeling the pinch as well. So we're in a tight spot, but we will find a way.

SANDY: Well, and I think it's also an interesting idea for dance makers and artists to think about how they do want to exist within their roles. The idea that you go to school, you become a choreographer, you create your company, and then you go out on tour. That isn't the only formula to be a successful dance maker or to have a career as a successful dance maker or have a successful dance company.

I wish that there was more education within the university systems when teaching choreographers or dancers, what the various business models are because that is what you are going to be doing. You're going to be running your business. Touring is business. If you have a dance company, that is your business. Whether your business goes out on the road or whether your business opens a school and has local engagement, whether your business is about getting commissions to create works on other dance companies, there isn't a one way is the right way. And that the only way that you've succeeded is by touring nationally or internationally. There's so many different ways to be a dancemaker.

LAURA: I love that.

Thank you, listeners. I hope this has been somewhat helpful in answering the question, how do I get an agent? Maybe now isn't the time for you to get that agent, but maybe in five years, it will be. I'm going to say thank you, Sandy Garcia.

SANDY: Well, thank you, Laura Colby.

LAURA: It was wonderful to have you here and you know what I'm gonna say, which is go see a show, go see a live show, drop me a line, let me know what you thought. I can't wait to hear from you. Until next time!

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)