

## 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 6 PART 1

Hello, my name is Laura Colby and I'm the president and founder of Elsie Management. Right now it's December, we are barreling into the month of January, which is when all of the industry convenings take place in New York City every year. And for those of you have been listening, you know, that I put Elsie Management together back in 1995, specifically to attend the APAP conference.

APAP standing for the Association of Performing Arts Professionals. Well, 28 years later, I am still attending the APAP conference. The APAP conference was long established when a lot of other convenings started to also gather in New York in January, and festivals started being produced. And all of this adds up to one massive convening of professionals in the live performing arts field. And if you want to see what that looks like, the umbrella organization for this huge convening is now called **JAN Arts NYC**, and that is spelled just like you would imagine it, J A N Arts. NYC you can go to **JanArtsNYC.org** and see the group of organizations and festivals and lines of programming that are all happening in January in New York City. It is an incredible meeting of all your people on an annual basis. It is a very exciting time.

So as we barrel into this huge annual convening in New York City, today's episode is about conferences and it will be in two parts this is part one preparation for conferences and part two will be about attending conferences and the follow up thereafter.

Typically when you register for these conferences, registration will open a good three to four, sometimes five months in advance. It is important to register early because often you'll get a discount if you register early. Take advantage of that and grab it. Even if it's \$100, now it's \$100 you have in your pocket that you can spend on something else.

It is important that you pay attention to every single email that is sent to you by these conferences because inevitably there are things that are happening at the conference that they want your input on. So that might be, a panel session that you would like to offer, a professional development session. There's something you want to talk about. You can literally submit a proposal to the convener proposing a panel or a topic of discussion. Not all conferences put invitations out like that, but most of them do.

Professional development is typically always included in all these convenings. Also, there's typically an exhibit hall, which is where those of us who are selling things will have property, if you will, in the shape of booths or a table. So it's an assigned place in an assigned room, typically with a table number, and so you can say to somebody, Yes, I will be at my booth Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday from whatever the hours are. That's where you'll be able to find me. Why is that important? Because these hotels get crowded and you need a place to be able to sit and speak to people. But also if somebody says, Oh my goodness, you've got to go talk to Susie Black in booth number 555. You're going to go find Susie Black and talk to her in booth number 555. And that's the way you can find her. Even if you don't get to talk to her, because maybe she's busy, you can see what she looks like. And later on, when you run into her at the bar, you can say, Oh, hey, you're Susie Black. Mikey John told me I should come talk to you about blah, blah, blah.

Sometimes these convenings offer discounts or scholarships for first time attendees. This is another reason why you need to read every single email from your convener to see if they are offering something like that. Sometimes these convenings offer pitch sessions where it's an organized event. APAP For example, has a pitch session on Friday afternoon, pre-conference, and what happens is I get to apply with companies that I would like to pitch. There are criteria around those pitches. Typically, it has to be a new work that, for example, APAP's criteria. I believe the piece can't have premiered any earlier than one year before the conference. In other words, you can't apply with a piece that's five years old. You have to apply with newer work. As you can imagine, these convenings have to put some kind of criteria around these pitches. Otherwise, they would get 700 applications instead of maybe 70, but they're most likely getting more like 200 applications for 20 spots.

If you are selected to pitch, maybe it's a three minute pitch. Maybe it's a five minute pitch. You are typically permitted to bring in slides or video. All of this stuff goes into your production schedule because yes, you have a production schedule for every conference you go to, because there are steps and preparation that you must do for every single one of these conferences to make them work best for you.

It costs a lot of money to go to these conferences. You don't want to throw that money away. You want to spend it well. So in your advance production schedule, not only reading every single email from that convener is critical, but also taking note of deadlines. Oh gosh, they have a deadline of August 20 for me to submit my pitch applications.

And oh, look at that. If I get the pitch, I have to have my AV file with the slides and the videos ready to be emailed to them on November 1. You need to know all that stuff in advance so you're not panicked and trying to make an AV file two days before the deadline or on the day of the deadline.

Also, inside of that production schedule will be your advanced promotional marketing. So what should you do? Printed materials are being frowned upon now for ecological reasons, and we have discovered that snail mail is a beautiful thing. Not many people are using the mail anymore.

At Elsie Management, we work really hard to capture extraordinary visuals from our artists that when people see a photo, they have to stop and look because it's so gorgeous or it's so curious or it's just so strange. Like, what are those people doing and how did they get up that crane 60 feet in the air? Or there's incredible motion, or there's emotion being evoked in that image. Are those puppets? Or are those real people? We love it when we use imagery that provokes questions, or a response, or a reaction.

So we're using those visuals. We print two printed pieces a year. One we refer to as our roster card, which is a simple listing of who is on our roster based on genres. It's an oversized postcard, so it doesn't get lost in the stack of mail. Both sides are saturated in some gorgeous photo. But really, that roster card is meant to just drive the viewer to our website.

Your website is your public face and you really always want to have your website updated. And certainly, in the advance to a booking conference, you want to have your website updated so that when you are writing in advance about your companies or your roster, the presenter, again, if they opened your email and they read it, oh, look at this new person, and they go to your website, they have updated information. So all of this has to do with preparedness in the same way you're touring artists have to be prepared to go out on the road. You have to be prepared to attend a booking conference by having your website and your materials together.

Traditionally, people in my position, managing rosters, would print a very elaborate brochure, like a 12 page brochure, with an artist or two or three on every single page. We never had that kind of budget, so we never did that, so our printing has remained this simple postcard, which again, the idea is to drive the viewer to our website to find out much more information on each of those artists that they see listed. That's been working for us.

If you're going to do a snail mail campaign, when are you going to do it? When does your art need to be made? Who, who is sending that file to the printer? Do you have a printer? What printer? Are you using an out of state printer? They probably require a two week advance. Are you using that printer around the corner the way we get to? That I've been working with for 25 years now. I know they'll get that print job done in three days for us. So, you have to know all those things and put that into your production schedule. If you're going to do a snail mail campaign, you're going to put that into your production budget, advancing into this conference.

Stamps! Don't forget to buy stamps. I don't know the last time you rolled up to a post office and tried to buy more than a roll of stamps, but they don't typically have the inventory. So if you're going to be mailing to over 500 people, you need to advance order your stamps.

And then you have email. How often you email about you attending a conference is a very touchy subject these days because our presenter attendees, as you can imagine, are flooded with emails from the manager agent artist attendee. And often they can get upwards to 500 emails a day. What are all these people saying? They're saying things like, come see me make an appointment in my booth. Come see my artist showcasing. I want you to know I'm representing this cover band, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

The first thing you have to do when you sit with the registration list and you look at your presenter list is to recognize this presenter I will probably never work with because they're a jazz festival and I don't have any jazz on my roster, period. So I have to take them out of my email list. You have to take the programmers, who are not a match to your artist work you are representing now, you need to take them out of your email list that you're going to be emailing in advance of that conference.

This is really important so that these presenters include their email address when they register as opposed to opting completely out of the email. Which is hard for someone who is new in the business, that's why you are going to a booking conference. You're going so that you can get these programmers' emails. And you will see when you get the attendee list that a lot of presenters have declined to

include their email. Now there are other ways, of course, to get people's emails. There's this thing called the Internet. You can probably Google them and find their email address. You also have colleagues that probably have that email address and just might be willing to share it. But if someone's opted out of an email list, it's probably because they are sick to death of getting 500 emails that are wildly inappropriate to them from people they don't want to meet with and work they don't want to see.

So respect here is key. Let's pretend you've got the registration list for the conference and you are making your way through it. And let's pretend there are a hundred presenters coming and after you've done your research and deleted everybody you've needed to delete, and created a new file for the folks who you really want to be in touch with let's pretend that's 30 people. So, okay, you did that with the first attendee list that showed up. Yes, guess what? That conference is going to keep sending you the updated attendee list. And you're going to have to go back in and find the new presenters who just registered. And go through that same process again to figure out: do I have work that's a match for them?

As you're going, you're taking copious notes. When you find a presenter who's a perfect match for your circus show, for example, you make a note about that. As part of your work in advancing for your conference is identifying those you have work that's a match for, but also the folks you really, really, really want to meet with in person, and ideally have a conversation with.

So here's the thing. They may not want to meet with you, and you just have to respect that. You don't know what their situation is this year. That presenter may have decided this year I'm going to the conference and I'm only talking to the agents and managers and artists that I know I'm booking in my next season or that I have immediate direct work with. Or maybe they've decided they're only coming to the conference for one day.

We have to respect how the presenters are using the conference. We can't assume that they are showing up and they are free to all of us to speak to for the three days they're on the ground. That's just not right. The presenters get to use the conference how they want to use it as well. And if that means declining a meeting with you professionally and nicely, or never responding to your email requests, that's the message they're saying is no, I'm sorry, I don't have room for you right now.

Yes, you would think that someone could take a minute to write a simple email saying I'm sorry, I don't have the time this year to meet with you. Perhaps we could

talk in June or something like that. But people don't have time, and they are not going to respond, and we must respect that.

So here you are, working your way through the conference registration, figuring out your matches, then prioritizing the folks you really want to see and meet in person. So now you're going to start writing emails, and you put that into your production schedule. Okay, I'm going to start writing emails eight weeks before the conference. That's not outrageous. That's totally appropriate.

You figured out that Susie's perfect for your circus. So when you write to Susie, you would say, Susie, I see that you will be attending the Blah Blah Blah conference in Tucson, and I will be there as well. And I see in your program recently that you've presented cirque. I'm very excited about this circus show I'm representing and hope you will take a look at it. Boom! You drop a trailer in there and then maybe you close by saying something very short and sweet like: if this company seems appropriate for you, I would be delighted to have a meeting with you. Are you making booth appointments? If so, I can set up a time to meet with you. And then, of course, you drop your website in. That's it. You don't say much more. You got your name, you got your telephone number, and your website.

You do not attach attachments. I'm going to say that again. You do not attach attachments. These people do not know you. Your email is going to get sucked into a spam box because you put an attachment on it and they don't know you. Or your email is going into a spam box anyway because they don't know you. Or they're going through their emails and they're just boom, boom, boom, hitting the delete keys. And they know better than to even look at an email that has an attachment from someone they don't know. And they hit the delete key.

Don't do that to yourself. Don't attach attachments until they invite you to. It's a very different banana if Susie writes back and she says, Oh my god, I love your circus company, please send me their tech rider. That's a whole other thing. Then, yes, you're attaching the tech rider or dropping a link to the tech rider, whatever works for you. But you don't start with attachments.

So, back to our invitations. Now you've identified some people, you write very simple, brief emails, and maybe you don't have a circus show match for Susie, but maybe for Mike, you want to make sure that Mike knows that you are representing a culturally specific dance company for a Cinco de Mayo festival, for example. Then when you write to Mike, you say that. That way they know that, oh gosh, you've actually bothered to do your homework. They know that you have taken the time to see who they are, where they are, what their programming is. That says a lot about you. You are not emailing them about their jazz festival, when you have no jazz on

your roster. You are not doing that. You are showing professionalism and respect by targeting your messages to those people who you have work for, or you feel you have work for.

You start emailing people, and they don't get back to you, because they won't, because they're very busy people. And you know what? Maybe, yes, they registered eight weeks early for the conference, but they are so not thinking about the conference right now. And maybe they're the kind of presenter that doesn't think about the conference in advance like that. Maybe they're the kind of presenter that just shows up at the conference and wings it.

Or maybe they're the kind of presenter that schedules every single minute of their conference. You won't know until you start these conversations with people. But if you're brand new to the field, please recognize that these people are typically in the middle of running a marathon otherwise known as producing their current season while they are programming their next season while they are putting out fires. Oh, my God their boiler just blew up at their theater and the ceiling collapsed. The roof collapsed. That happens. Oh, and their **NEA** grant was due last week. You know, when their gala is next week, okay? This is their life. So on the day your email comes in, yeah, they might just ignore it or delete it. So then you resend it two weeks later. No blame or shame, you just resend it like you never sent it before. You start all over, the good thing is, it's email. You don't actually have to start all over. You can literally take the email and resend it, clean it up so it doesn't look like it's being resent, right? And just resend it. So maybe that day when it rolls into their inbox, their boiler's been fixed, the roof is getting fixed. They're gala sold out. They're in a great mood. They read your email. They see you have a perfect circus for them. They actually bother to look at the trailer, and they're like, Oh my God, it's perfect. And they write you back, and they say, Oh hell yes, I want an appointment with you. Bingo. So that's a great outcome, if somebody responds, and wants to make an appointment with you.

That's fantastic. Don't expect that to happen times 30, in the very first booking conference you go to. This is about making those contacts, developing those contacts, nurturing those contacts, and developing partnerships, and yes, friendships with these presenters. I remember the first couple of conferences I went to, I was so sick and tired of hearing the talking heads that were leading workshops and sessions and professional development talk about presenters and managers that, you know: some of the managers and agents I work with are my best friends and managers and agents saying: this presenter has been my best friend for 20 years. I'm like, you know, I'm not here to make best friends. I'm here to book a show was my catty ass response to that. And of course, 28 years in, guess what? A lot of my presenter partners that I work with are indeed my best friends. And that

is simply a result of being in business together, having worked over and over together, and sometimes actually never having booked a show together. Some of my best friend presenters have actually never booked anything with me. We just get on great for whatever reason, but in their position, they are not able to book any of my companies. It's okay. But as a person, as people, we have connected. And that's great. It's really a thrill to have friends all over the world in this industry, whether or not I'm booking shows with them.

The second printed piece that we create is a card for APAP, which we mail six weeks before the APAP conference. That includes all of our conference activities. That printed piece includes our live dance showcases that take place at New York City Center. It definitely includes the two pitch slots we got for two different artists in APAP's pitch session on Friday. Sometimes we luck out and one of the festivals programs one of our companies. So of course we would include that live public performance and those dates in this flyer. It also includes an update on our roster, and yes, it's saturated in beautiful photography. So again, hopefully when they get this piece in the mail, and it says on the cover, Industry Schedule, January '24, they open it up so they can see everything that Elsie is up to during the conference.

I'm at the point now where I am emailing people for my meetings, and I am using the Calendly software system. There are so many, as always, so many online management systems you can use. I've been using Calendly for my appointments. It's free, unless you have multiple conferences at the same time that you're scheduling. At this point, I just have APAP, so that's great. I use that to make it super easy for my presenters to schedule booth appointments.

Then I also have appointment times that are available outside of the booth appointment hours, and I include those in my emails to them. I am writing very personal emails to my presenters. I am telling them why I would like to make an appointment with them. I tell them about specific artists I want to make sure they know about, that I wanted to talk to them about. I also let them know if we have a new artist on our roster. I also add a link to our showcase. They can see who's showcasing exactly when and where. As I said earlier, if I don't get a response, I will wait two weeks and I will resend it. If I still don't get a response, I will wait two weeks and then I will resend it. And then after that, I don't resend that email. That's it.

Again, we have to respect the fact that people are busy, people prepare for conferences in their own way. And they may just not have the time at all.

So your materials, what should you have on you? Something succinct, something that captures the essence of your work. And so this is a whole 'nother session that



we will have that really goes under the titling of your elevator pitch. But you do need to have your elevator pitch together before you go to the conferences. You need to have your elevator pitch down. to 30 seconds versus 1 minute versus 2 minutes versus 5 minutes versus 10 minutes. And yes, I mean it when I say 30 seconds.

The best way to start your elevator pitch is to locate three words, identify three words that can only be associated with this work, this show, your practice. What are the three words that can describe what you do? And you're not going to say visceral, and you're not going to say eclectic, because all of it's visceral and eclectic. You're not going to say it's physical, because it's all physical, right? The ideal description would be that those words can only be associated with your show.

It is super important that you be able to speak about your work succinctly and to deliver what its essence is and why your work, your practice, your show is singular. What is it? What is it about your theater show that is not everybody else's theater show? What is it about this dance performance that is not all these other dances that have already been made and seen 15 times over? What is it? What defines you? So hopefully you can say that verbally because yes, you have memorized this information. Yes, you are able to deliver that 30 second pitch on a dime. This is a critical skill.

But also you have a very simple printed piece of material. And it's not going to be a tiny card that everybody's going to lose, but it's also not going to be so big it doesn't fit into a bag. It will be some kind of printed piece, because yes, people still rely on printed materials. And that printed material will have a stunning image, it will have your name very clearly, your telephone, your website, of course, the artist, the title, and maybe one great quote, or three words that describes what on earth this is. So that it speaks in shorthand in the same way you can speak in shorthand when someone asks you, tell me about your show, or tell me about that circus piece, or tell me about that theater piece.

You should have a business card on you. And again, if we were in Australia, the Australians are eschewing all printed materials, so they're doing everything digitally. It's really frowned upon to exchange business cards. However, there are many other cultures and countries still exchanging business cards, and I can promise you in the United States we are still exchanging business cards, and we are still printing things. So have your business card on you the best place to keep them is inside of your little badge because your badge comes yesterday horribly in a plastic sleeve. We are trying to eliminate those plastic sleeves. But today I'm pretty sure my 2024 APAP badge is still going to be inside a plastic sleeve. Well that's great because I can stick my business cards in there and it's super easy for me to

pull one out. But in my bag I've got my APAP printed flyer that's, yes, got my roster, list, date, time, location, everything on it, my pitch sessions, all of that.

If you are renting a booth at your booth. It would behoove you to have a screen so you can show visuals. And this is why we exhibit at APAP. Because our screen has beautiful visuals running all the time. And I can't tell you how many times we have caught a presenter's eye something incredibly beautiful, amazing, spectacular on that screen and they are like: What is that? Tell me about that. And I get to then enter into a dialogue about those acrobats hanging off of a 60 foot crane, over masses of people watching below, those folks up on the sway poles, or that exquisitely designed dance production. So, yes, in your booth, have a screen, have visuals running, it could prompt a conversation.

You have space in your booth to hang banners. Obviously, your name, or your agency name, or your artist name, that's key so they know they're in the right place. Again, we use visuals to engage people with our dance, theater, circus and outdoor spectacle companies, our puppet companies. When you stroll by the Elsie booth, you will capture in one look the forms and genres and mediums that our artists work in and practice in. And when you walk by the next booth and you will see it is nothing but touring Broadway shows or what we would consider commercial shows. So each booth, when you step out of it and look into it, you should get an idea of, oh, okay, that's what this person is doing.

This brings me to the idea of artists using conferences to find an agent. We established an internal rule at Elsie that we do not take any other artist materials, because artists will come to our booth with the materials to say, Here's who we are, we want you to consider us. And we're just like, no, this is not the time, this is not the place. There is a tab on our website that talks about consideration for representation, but during the APAP conference is not the best time for us.

However, It could be a perfectly good time for one of my peers or actually that's when they like to meet other artists. But this is a personal thing and frankly you need to ask the agent manager you are hoping to approach. Could I speak to you at this time about representation or the possibility of representation? But please do ask.

I hope this episode has given you an idea of how I approach a conference and the suggestions and advice that I would give a first time attendee. And also I will just add that it is the accumulation and the progressive attendance of conferencing year after year after year that definitely built Elsie Management and built the database I have now. In my CRM, those venues, they may have changed staff, but I have those venues in my database, and I have what we call our targeted venues. I still

have plenty of venues I have not worked with that I'm trying to introduce work to that are still my goals and my ambition to get bookings at. I will often, in the emails that I write, I will say, you know, we've never actually worked together and I'm wondering now if perhaps this company wouldn't be the right match for your future programming. This is the time for me to say this is a long game: this is a long game.

We've concluded part one of the conference episode. You can listen right away to part two or come back at your own leisure.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)