

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 2

Hello, my name is Laura Colby. I am the president and founder of Elsie Management, and this is part two of the conference episode.

So now you are at the conference, you have done your advanced research, and you have some key people in mind you'd really like to meet in person. You've probably emailed them several times, and you can recognize their names. Well, that's great because everyone is going to have badges on at the conference. It may be that you can eyeball Susan's badge, but wait, how do you actually start these conversations?

I have to say one of the best ways to approach these conferences is to just go in that spirit, of course, you want to book a show, but ultimately you want to meet people and you want to connect with people in this field, regardless of their current role and position in this field. Because as I have said in earlier episodes, you do not know where that person is going to be in four years, in 10 years, in 20 years. When you're still in the field. If you are leading with kindness and an open heart and open eyes, and this is about human to human connection, that is going to serve you in your duration in this industry and field.

I have done mentoring for a lot of the conferences for first time or new attendees. And one of the pieces of advice I always give them is don't lead with your piece. Don't lead with your show. Don't lead with your roster. Don't lead with I'm selling this or even I'm representing this. You've got to lead with you. Who are you?

Talk about anything else but your job. Ask them about that gorgeous sweater they have on. Talk to them about those shoes. Good Lord. What kinds of shoes are those? Just connect on a human to human level. And even better, talk about the panel you just saw together. This is also why you go to conferences, to be seated next to people you do not know, because that's the opportunity for you to turn to

that person and say, Hi Sam. You know their name is Sam because they have a badge on. Hi Sam, I see you're from Carmel, California. Oh my God, what a gorgeous place on this planet that is. How incredible. How long have you lived there? And then you and Sam will have a conversation. That will be human to human and then eventually Sam is going to say to you. Hey, what do you do? Why are you here? That will happen. And if it doesn't happen, it's still okay. You, after a couple of minutes of conversation, you can also say, so Sam, what are you do in Carmel? This is my advice. It's worked for me. It works for others. And it's not leading with what you're selling.

One of the most refreshing attitudes that I thought was brilliant was an Arts Midwest conference I went to. There was a local dance repertory company. It wasn't the company's first time attending. It was the in-house representations first time attending and she was very clever. She didn't lead with sales. This is how she approached meeting people. She would walk up to folks and say, Hi Dave, I'm Eileen from Salt Lake City, and I've never been to this conference before. And I've made it my daily mission to meet five people I don't know.

Well, that was just pure genius. She was a total delight. And again, she didn't lead with the repertory dance company she was representing. She made it about herself. She made it a human thing. And that was brilliant. And she was able to meet people in a way that wasn't threatening, that didn't corner them, that didn't make them run. It was human to human. How beautiful. And yes, it's totally appropriate to exchange cards in an instant like that. And then maybe you find out that Dave is actually, uh, the programmer for a dance series within 500 miles. What a perfect match for her, right? That's another method of approaching people and not sending them running.

Let's talk about you. What is your presence and your demeanor going to mean so that you don't make people run away? Because this is the thing. They will never forget that you made them run away. What makes people run away? You approaching them with your 7 o'clock showcase. That's what makes people run away. So. Don't make people run away. It's just like being out in the world. When we're approached by people proselytizing or selling things, you're just going to turn your back on those people.

Why is it any different for you in a sales position at a conference? Why would anybody want to talk to you if the first thing you do is talk about sales? You have to keep that in mind. Yes, you're at a booking conference. That doesn't mean that every presenter has to listen to you. It just means you happen to be convening with them under the same roof, and perhaps there might be an opportunity for you to

learn more about them, them to learn more about you, but not because you led with your 7 o'clock showcase.

So how do you promote your 7 o'clock showcase? Well, in advance of the conference, you had that information prominently displayed on your website, hopefully on your homepage, where you probably also posted your booth number. And in all of your advanced communications via emails, as part of your signature at the end of an email, you could have had a simple line saying, I'll be attending the APAP conference and I'll be showcasing on Friday night at seven o'clock. And you would have included that little tag at the bottom of all your emails for the last two months. And you probably also created a card that you snail mailed and on that card that had your booth number and any specific activities you had going on during conference, you included your seven o'clock showcase.

Now there's no harm in passing out a card promoting your seven o'clock showcase on site at the conference. But again, you don't want to be that person that makes people run away. So you do that distribution when there's a clear opportunity to do that. And that can happen quite naturally in conversations when that person seated next to you says to you, So what are you doing here? And eventually in the course of that conversation with that person, you can whip out your card and say, if you're going to showcases, I have one on Friday night at 7 o'clock.

So, how do you stay organized when you're in the middle of this conference, which is full of exhibit hours, professional development, opening and closing sessions or keynotes or plenaries, networking events, pitch sessions? How do you stay organized? This goes back to the episode that we talked about skills and being organized. Pick your method and stick to it. If that's a spiral bound notebook in which you handwrite notes, so be it. If you're like me and you're going to take all your notes, yes, with your thumbs, on your iPhone, in the notepad, fine.

Maybe you've been clever enough to get that software on your phone that is going to keep track of all your presenters for the next 30 years. Then you can type your notes directly into that software. Just stick to a system. Maybe you're just going to handwrite on the back of people's business cards. Fine! If that works for you, great. But you need a system, you need to know what it's going to be, and you need to be able to access it quickly.

I literally will take notes on my phone while I'm talking to people. But I can do that. I have figured that out with my thumbs. If you can't take notes while you're talking to somebody, once you're done with that conversation, you're gonna have to take a second, step aside, if your method is pen on paper, pull out that spiral bound notebook, write the note down then, because you know what? It's gonna be out of

your brain in 30 minutes, or tomorrow morning. It's just going to be out of your brain. Write it down while you can. And if all you got was Susan Red Sweater Carmel, write that down. Because that's enough information for you to go back into the registration and find who the hell was that Susan from Carmel, California. You need to take those kinds of notes to help you navigate what this conference is.

The APAP conference, in particular, is the largest convening of its kind. Upwards of three to five thousand people can attend every January. Yup, that's a lot of people. Once you lay your day out and get your pace, if you will, through the conference, you need to build in rest and stop times and quiet times for you, especially in this post COVID time when a lot of us are no longer accustomed to being with people.

If you are a particularly introverted person, you are going to want to build in quiet time for you. If you're staying in the hotel, that's super easy, you can just build in. 15 to 30 minute pauses in your day where you go back to your room and lay down on your bed and be quiet for 20 or 30 minutes and then return to the hullabaloo downstairs after you've collected yourself and you've had a bottle of juice with a backup gigantic bottle of water. Just keep drinking, hydrate, hydrate, hydrate, rest, rest, rest, and take copious notes.

If you've had too much of anything? Go back to your room. Just go back to your room. Give yourself permission to not participate any farther. It's okay. You don't want to be out in the world and be miserable. Because you don't want to lead with misery, and you don't want to be out in the world that way. You want to be out in the world, convening with your people, feeling good, feeling good about yourself and your work, being open to ideas and conversations that you might not know are going to happen.

And on that note, if you're busy leading with your sales, you're going to miss a lot. So, when you go to those professional development sessions, Participate, really participate, pay attention, go to a session you think has nothing to do with you. Go to that session and be surprised. It's a great way to expand your horizons.

In terms of participating in sessions. First place, you always must introduce yourself, if I want to say something, I will say, Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management, we're located in Brooklyn. One of our dance companies, blah, blah, blah, blah, I don't name the dance company unless I have to. Or I say, one of our culturally specific dance companies that practices in Bharatanatyam. I don't name my dance company because it's not an opportunity for me to name my dance company because it is not a sales opportunity. It's an opportunity to participate in a professional development moment. But for whatever reason, it's important that I'm talking about a culturally specific company like Ragamala that

uses Bharatanatyam dance, but it's not my sales moment. I'm not selling Ragamala dance. I'm making a comment about a culturally specific dance company that I happen to represent that tours with live music and I have something to contribute to this panel session, which let's pretend had everything to do with touring theater and dance with live music.

So yes, I had something pertinent to say, the point being that when you stand up and you start talking about your roster at a professional development session. No, you're leading with sales. Look what you did. You just lost the whole room. No one's listening. No one wants to listen because you're using the moment to sell your roster. Don't do that. Lead with participation coming from a point of information and true participation.

After the conference, then what? You just went to this massive party, took your notes, you collected business cards, you gave out your roster card, people showed up at your showcases. You have a whole lot of information to download now. That booth appointment that was made for your circus company, she came, you had your chat, she wants all the information. She wants a tech writer, she wants touring history, she wants head count, she wants fees for one show versus fees for three shows.

Okay, so you've got some follow up to do. So get it done. So this is the hard part, because you probably also already have a full time job, like I do, and you're taking care of engagements that are happening right now, or you're in the middle of tours that are happening right now, but you've got to get this follow up done. So here's the thing, you're not going to get all the follow up done in one fell swoop. You have to prioritize. The folks that asked for specific things like tech writers and fees, you have got to prioritize them and get that information out to them yesterday because guess what? There are 50 other companies they asked the same information about. So you are in competition with me because I also had a circus company that she loved and I'm sending her those fees quotes and the tech rider right now.

The folks who ask for things, you get it to them immediately. And then you prioritize everybody else. If you had lovely conversations with 20 to 30 people, and you just want to write to say, Hi there, Megan, it was so lovely to meet you at the opening plenary, that so and so spoke at. I'm wishing you best of luck with that season, whatever it was you, the two of you talked about, um, and it was great to meet you and, you know, you sign off, boom, boom, boom, that's it.

Those kinds of emails can wait. So in the course of your conversations, if somebody said, please send me the tech rider, those are your emails that you must prioritize. When you sit down, finally post-conference and have a minute to catch your breath

and review the conversations that happened, you prioritize based on the folks that asked for actual, immediate, tangible things, such as tech riders, available tour dates, fees, stage playing space, any advanced tech. Those are the emails you have to prioritize and answer right away.

Other preparation we do is to make sure we have our fees all up to date. We have to understand our fees. Are they flying fees, meaning are the airfares wrapped into the fee? Are they driving fees, meaning the company is going to drive to engagements within 400 miles, for example? Are they routed fees, meaning I've got a Tuesday at City A and a Thursday in City B, so that's a different fee than a run out fee, which is just going to Venue A and then back home again. So all of those fee structures, we have to understand.

I also have to be able to answer the question, How many people are on the road? How many are performers? How many are staff? I have to be able to quote, well for this touring show, it's 8 dancers and 3 staff crew. For that touring show, it's 5 puppeteers, 4 musicians, and 3 staff crew for a total touring company of 12 people. I have to know all that stuff. So, yes, I actually have a lot of it in my brain, but also we have a file where we store all that and now we can pull that file up on any of our devices. Now I can look up those things. It's literally on my cell phone. So when someone asks me a fee, and if they need an answer immediately, and I can't stall them. I have to give them a fee right then and there, I can look it up. So in your preparedness for the conference, you should know the touring size and the fees for each of your shows.

The other kinds of questions that presenters ask are what kind of theater? So you need to know if a show must have a proscenium stage or will it fit on a thrust stage? Will it work in a black box?

When I ask the question of a presenter, what size is your theater? It's actually two questions. The question is really, what size is your stage? What size is the playing space on your stage, and then the second question is how many seats are in your theater? You cannot assume that just because they have 2,000 seats, that they have a 30 by 40 foot, which we consider the minimum stage space for most of our dance companies, with wings and a backstage crossover, you can't assume that their playing space is 30 by 40 feet.

They may have a 30 by 40 foot stage and only 200 seats. So the math doesn't necessarily work for them, for your fee that you're quoting them, because they can only sell 200 seats. We affectionately refer to those big rooms, like a 2,000 seater, we refer to those as big barns. You know, they got a massive proscenium with a 60 foot opening and they've got 2,000 seats. I only have a couple of shows that will,

quote, fit into that space. Most of my shows fit into a 30 by 40 foot space, proscenium stage, with somewhere between 600 to 1,800 seats. That's a better fit for the majority of my work. But I know that because I know my pieces, and I know what kinds of theaters they've toured to.

That's the other thing presenters are going to want to know. Where have you toured to before? What kind of spaces has this show been in? And this is tricky business when you have a brand new artist who's an emerging artist and you haven't toured yet. And so you are honest. You do not lie. You are honest and you say, well, the company has not actually been on the road. We have performed in our backyard and the space that we perform in a lot in our hometown is blah, blah, blah, with so many seats.

Some presenters may ask you, how many tickets have you sold? How many tickets do you typically sell? It is also good to know, especially if you have a brand new artist, how many tickets they typically sell at their last hometown season. But, again, you don't have to have that stuff memorized, but you should have it written down somewhere.

In terms of cost, many conferences are attached to a membership organization. For example, APAP conference, you must become a member of the organization that is APAP. So there's a membership fee. And then there's conference registration on top of that. Some conferences, there's no membership required. You just pay the registration fee and go.

For agent managers, there's often an additional fee to buy that booth space. So yes, this money adds up. And you need to know your budget before you decide to register to make sure that you can afford not only the three days at that conference, but also the travel to get to that city, that hotel.

Most of the convenings have reserved a discounted hotel room block near the conference site. And that can be a great advantage to you, especially for room rates. For example, in New York, that could be as high as \$400 a night. The conference registrants who attend APAP can stay at the Hilton, and I think that nightly rate this year, in '24, is \$240 a night. So, that can be a huge help for you.

You have to think about, how am I going to get all this stuff I'm going to put in my booth to this location? You can advance ship using UPS Ground or FedEx Ground, but if you didn't build that into your production schedule, you may be shipping overnight, or maybe you have to carry it all on the airplane with you, which can be really hard if you're a single person doing this work, traveling with all those boxes.

In the Elsie booth, we have our big banners that are full of photography. But we often have stand up posters that we have pasted onto foam core. And those posters just allow us an additional visual. We usually have one or two screens where visuals are always running. We also have our roster cards. We buy those very simple display stands, and we have our cards stacked in those display stands.

Sometimes, if the artists have printed them, we have artists-specific cards that we will give out when someone talks to us about a specific artist. But we keep our tables pretty clean. We also always have chocolates singularly wrapped, and typically little clementines, because people are desperate for real food in the middle of a conference, especially in January in New York City. I mean, clementines are really wonderful, because they don't get you covered in juice, and they make for a very quick peel, and a very quick eat on the conference floor.

These conferences are a great framework to start that long game, to start making and building and nurturing those connections. And again, leading with yourself.

Thank you for your time and go see a live show there's so many incredible performances on right now, all over the world, everywhere, maybe in your library or a little coffee house or that tiny little jazz club or the gigantic performing arts center around the corner from you. until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)