

## 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 7

LAURA COLBY: Hello, I am Laura Colby, the founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we're going to be speaking about connections. Because in this business, it's all about who you know. So how do you get to know all the people you need to get to know in order for you to do the work that you're going to be doing in this field? Especially if you don't necessarily know anybody.

A lot of people enter this field through internship programs, which can be hugely helpful to get to know the names of who these players are. Depending on who you're interning with, be that a performing arts center or a management company. You'll start hearing names and you need to start paying attention and figuring out who those people are.

We spoke many episodes ago about figuring out who has the authority in the hierarchical system of programming that currently exists. So we've already talked about how you're going to keep track of these people, what's that database of yours, what software are you going to choose to make records of who these folks are and what your conversations were with them as you progress in your time in the field.

So where do you begin? We've talked about conferences and festivals and other convenings. A great place to get a list of who's doing what in the field is by attending a conference, a performing arts booking conference, or perhaps a genre specific convening that's held by one of our many service organizations.

Genre specific service organizations, such as Dance/USA, TYA/USA, that stands for Theatre for Young Audiences, USA. TCG, that's Theater Communications Group, Opera America.

These service organizations hold annual convenings. They're not booking conferences, however. People from all aspects of the field will show up and that inevitably includes presenters and the agent, manager, artist, those roles as we know are actively making the effort of distribution of work.

So yes, you can go to a booking conference, you can get the attendee list from the booking conference, but you can also go to a genre specific service organization convening and also access attendee list.

In the conference episode, we specifically discussed preparing for conferences and pre conference communication. Okay, so outside of convenings, what kind of communication are you maintaining with the people you really want to have these conversations with? You've done your homework, you've done your research, you know that this programmer at this specific theater is a good match for the artist's work you currently are representing or producing. You're making it your business to stay in touch with that person.

You're not going to stalk them because that runaway thing that happens at conferences also happens via just basic communication. You do not want to overwhelm them, especially if you're not doing any business with them. What is polite, I think, considered not stalking would be one email a quarter. Which is one email every three months, and that could be in a newsletter format.

I often suggest to the artists that we represent that first place, they separate the presenters from their ticket buyers or their fan base or their private personal funder base, they speak to presenters in a very specific way. And you're speaking to presenters in a specific way because they have a specific job, you weren't necessarily leading with, "Hey, it's our gala next week, please come to our gala." Instead, You're leading with, "this is what we're working on in the studio right now", or announcing a major grant that is going to fund the next new work and what that timeline is, so perhaps you start talking about a new work one year out before its premiere date. That's totally fine. So you announce the funding, you announce the launch of the creation of this new work, say that's the first quarter of one year, then in the second quarter you get to talk about what you're exploring in that work. Perhaps you've hired a lighting designer, a costume designer, you talk a little bit about that. Third quarter of the year, you actually have some work in progress rehearsal footage that you feel confident enough to share. And then fourth quarter, that's the fourth communication, the premiere is actually happening.

That's just an example of one way you could be in touch with somebody who you're not necessarily doing work with, but you are convinced that they are a match for you aesthetically in terms of their programming. You're not stalking them, you're

just giving them an update every quarter, and they're seeing a progression, and they're seeing consistency in language, and they're seeing visuals as they become ready.

If you want to show some rehearsal photography, maybe there's one little picture that doesn't stuff up their email box that you can put in the email so they can have a visual and see something beautiful, but it's not high res, it's not a whopper email file coming in. It's a regular old email file coming in with a small photo up in the corner and they get a visual of who you are, but then in the email you could say, click here for more work-in-progress rehearsal photos. Or click here to access the work-in-progress trailer we put together and you share maybe 90 seconds or 2 minutes of work in progress footage.

You're not attaching an attachment. You're putting a link into the email. It's up to them to open it or not. And then for those of you who want to get really fancy with analytics, of course, there are all these analytics you can set up so that you can look and see: did that presenter even read my email, did they click on a link? The robot can tell you all of that stuff. You just have to set it up and you just have to have the time to go back in and look up those analytics.

Another way to use your quarterly email, if you don't have a new work to talk about. Maybe you are reading an amazing book that is inspiring you. Perhaps you've gone down a rabbit hole and you're deep into research and you're not sure what it is you're getting at right now, but there's research you're doing. You can talk briefly and interestingly about all of those things, because point of inspiration is something really exciting that presenters and also agent managers want to understand and I think this is a great way for programmers to get to know who you are, your artistic integrity, and what it is that's rocking your world as you continue to stay in contact with them.

Outside of a newsletter, if you're trying to get through to a programmer, a once a month email is not stalking. The problem is when you send emails and you get belligerent and you get an attitude and that attitude starts showing up in the emails. I mean, you just are not going to write emails and say, how come you're not getting back to me? Or this is the same message I sent to you two weeks ago.

Blame and shame? Yeah, that doesn't work. Staying respectful of somebody's workload and the reality that they probably already have their next one or two seasons pretty much sketched out. You're writing to someone who doesn't know you, who you don't have a relationship with. They don't know this artist. They're very busy. So how do you get that message across? And how do you keep pursuing this connection without killing it and without stalking them and without them

running away before they've ever even met you? Care, thoughtfulness, and respect. Keep leading with that and recognize that you may never hear back from any of these people. It's just the reality.

So how else do you get those connections to come through? One way is go to the theater. Go to their actual theater. Maybe you're not doing business with that theater, but again, you are convinced that there is a match there for your artist. You need to go visit that theater if you can. If you look at your home base and if you actually have a car or if you can rent one, it is totally worth it for you to draw a 400 mile radius or whatever your driving mileage threshold is, you know, maybe you only want to drive 100 miles or maybe you are willing to drive up to 400 miles, whatever that is, look at the map. How far can you go? There are theaters everywhere. Find those theaters, because you, by now, you have probably created the targeted presenter list of those presenters you feel most confident are the right matches for your work. Go to your map, see who's within three or four hundred miles, figure out when would be the best time for you to visit in terms of weather and their season and all of that, and make a field trip.

I would suggest you make a field trip to venues where you have initiated a connection. So you did connect with somebody. They may not remember you, but it happened and you took copious notes, you had a conversation with them at the APAP conference, and now it's spring, and you're ready to take a field trip, and they happen to be in your backyard within 400 miles, and you're going to drive out and visit them.

So you're going to drop a very friendly email to Joe in advance. Maybe you get into contact with him initially six weeks out and you don't hear back from him. Then you get back in touch with him four weeks out and no shame or blame. You still haven't heard from him, so two weeks out you say, Joe, I'm planning to come, I sure would love to see you, have you've got ten minutes on, you know, blah, blah, blah. Who knows, maybe Joe will say, I would love to meet you for that cup of coffee at three o'clock. So great, now you have a cup of coffee date at three o'clock, that's at least thirty minutes. And this is where you now have an opportunity to be in person. This is where you show up with all of your integrity and the artistic integrity of your artists. This is where you get to deepen your connection with Joe and have face to face time.

So how are you going to use that? You're going to approach this conversation with openness. You have done your research, so you know he's at the tail end of his season. You're gonna ask him my gosh, you're at the tail end of your season. You've got two more shows. How's your year been? How's next year looking? What

are you excited about, Joe? What are you interested in? And then eventually you can ask is there anything in particular you are looking for for future seasons?

Let's go back to the conferences where you eyeballed Susan in that beautiful red sweater, but you never got to actually talk to her, but you know it's Susan in that red sweater. And you know that she's a good match for your artist. So you've sent her an email saying, Susan, I never got to talk to you at APAP, but boy, that red sweater that you wore on Friday, just never left my mind. So incredible. Just wanted to say hello and let you know that I'm here and this is what I do. Link, link, link. Maybe you've managed to keep in touch with Susan every quarter now. You don't always have to reference the red sweater, but I betcha she wrote back when you made that comment about observing her in that great red sweater. So you have had some kind of connection with her. That was the beginning. So now perhaps she's getting to know you a little bit more. She's getting to know who the artists are that you represent because your website is up to date. You are keeping her informed of upcoming performances.

This is something that Elsie does every month, actually. Our newsletter is an invitation to presenters to see our companies performing for the next five months. The first week of every month, they get an email saying here in chronological order are where the Elsie companies are performing for the next five months because if they are serious about getting to know work they will go out of their way to travel and go see work and they need to have those dates as early as six months out. Certainly five and four months out because they are living and dying on their production schedule at their theater. There are very important things that they absolutely must remain in their theater for and be present for, including certain engagements, galas, there's that NEA deadline (the National Endowment for the Arts). Their production schedule is as complicated as yours. And so again, leading with respect and care and thoughtfulness, you are letting them know not two weeks before your show date, but five months or four months before your show date that they could actually come see this brand new work or an existing touring work live.

And in some instances, it's worth it for you to offer them money. If it's possible for the artist to kick in 500 dollars to fly a certain presenter in because they're serious about getting to know this person's work, it is totally worth it. Presenters get invitations like that all the time. They don't necessarily take them up because they can't, because again, the date is just impossible and they can't travel on those dates or around those dates, but if you're approaching them some four or five months out, you might have an opportunity because it's enough advance time. Perhaps their schedule isn't jam packed, but also perhaps the date you're asking

them to travel isn't their gala date or the most important engagement of their season.

If you do have the resources and capacity, supported invitations can be key to deepening your connection with this programmer, but also, of course, with the artist and the work they're doing.

So why are these connections so important? Because it's all about who you know. And as your time in the field progresses, and your reputation is established and built and your aesthetic and the reputation of your artist is established. And you continue to build on all of this. Roles will change. Joe will leave that theater, Susan will leave that theater, but they'll go to other theaters.

Maybe because they've changed theaters, they have a different budget or they literally have the right stage space now to present your company. Because maybe Susan's last theater it was totally the wrong stage space. She loves the artist. She loves the work, but she doesn't have the right space. But now in her new gig, she does. And because you have politely with respect and care and thoughtfulness stayed in touch with her all these years, now you're the first person on her mind. Here she is at her new gig and she's like, Oh my God, I can finally book that company. Bingo.

I mentioned earlier in the conference episode that this is a long game. Longevity in the field definitely has its benefits. Here I am in Elsie's 28th year and I have an established reputation. People know what my aesthetic is. There is a trust there. The trust thing is huge. So, how does that happen? The trust that happens through the experience of bookings and having those engagements. What was it like securing that booking with you getting through the contracting process? Getting through the actual live engagement and post engagement. What was that experience working with you like? What was it like for the presenter with the artist? Was it so wonderful that the presenters like, Oh, we have to have this company back. That's a huge win. That's amazing. Having a company back can mean in four or five years. It doesn't mean tomorrow. On the rare occasion, it can literally be the next season, but that is very unusual.

Typically when a presenter says to me, Oh, we are definitely going to have this company back, Laura. It means somewhere between at the earliest two years, two more seasons. Or, typically more like four years or five years. Yeah, it's a long time. That's why this is the long game. And building that trust and having the patience, coupled with care, thoughtfulness, and respect the whole time, will continue to establish your reputation as somebody solid, that the presenters like to work with and want to work with. Right? Because ultimately, that's what you want.

There was a certain dance presenter in Louisiana that I had become pals with first. We started palling around, becoming friends before we ever had a booking. We had maybe two bookings under our belts together when we had an engagement that went south with a tap company. The presenter didn't have a tap floor. The company had one and so what we worked out was the presenter would rent the company's tap floor that the company freighted down to Louisiana. After the engagement, the company manager contacted me to let me know the tap floor had been damaged badly, very specifically in the strike and freighting process.

So when the show was over, the tap floor was struck, it was taken apart and it was presumably packaged up and put back onto the truck and freighted back to the tap company's home. What happened was the freight company treated the floor very badly. Somebody managed to take photographs of the tap floor scattered all over the back of the truck in the stage space, on the wings of the stage. There was furniture on top of it, it wasn't treated with care. So the tap floor got damaged. And now the company was looking to file an insurance claim because their tap floor was damaged.

So I was the one who had to call my dear friend presenter and say, Uh oh, and she had no idea any of this happened. She was in the position of renting a theater. She's a presenter that doesn't have real estate. She rents a theater when she presents any of her dance companies. So, she wasn't backstage watching this floor not get handled well. She looked at the photographs and she saw what had happened and acknowledged what had happened. And I had to work with her so that the company could file their insurance claim against the freight company the damage. So not a pleasant situation at all, both of us completely caught off guard, but here's the part where the trust is built.

Neither of us behaved badly. Neither of us pointed fingers. Neither of us shamed and blamed. It was just something that happened that was totally beyond our control. She had no connection with that freight company. There was nothing personal here. It's just something bad happened. I point to that example because, you know, it's not like we laughed our way through it, but we can talk about it today without wincing. There was nothing to forgive. It was just a bad situation. But the best part was, not only did our professional relationship stay intact, but our friendship stayed intact. Because it is pointless to point fingers when the job here is just get to the facts. And get the damn insurance claim filed was really very simple.

You're not in this industry to make a mess and burn bridges and you don't want to be the person who's throwing gas on the fire, right? Like, yeah, no. This work can be so loaded with landmines. We don't need to add any more landmines. Burning bridges, causing drama, throwing gas on the fire. Not helpful. No one needs it.

Keep your corner clean, do your job, working from a place from no surprises so that you've given everything to the presenter they've asked for when they asked for it. They've done the same. The artist has shown up with the show that was booked and it went beautifully and after the engagement you followed up with the presenter to just check in and see how everything went. Hopefully, the artist wrote a thank you note or some kind of message to the presenter letting them know that they deeply appreciated the engagement and the experience with their audiences.

From this positive engagement base starts the trust. So when things go south, because they're gonna go south, and you don't run away, this presenter starts to learn about your integrity because apparently in this field a lot of people run away when things go south and hide, and that doesn't do any of us any good.

Just like in real life, when you discover things about people, in the damndest ways, in the most unexpected moments, that will happen to you in this field. You may have an engagement that's going along just fine, you think you're working with a presenter in a very good way, and then all of a sudden something happens which is going to put a stop to this engagement and the presenter behaves in a completely unexpected way that you are not ready for.

You will discover things about people that is going to be very disappointing. And you are also going to discover things about people that are going to be a huge relief. You find out this person has a modicum of sanity in the middle of a complete disaster. This person can't handle disaster at all. And I'm the one in this relationship who's going to have to be the one with my feet on the ground, sticking to the facts, coming up with solutions, finding immediate ways to mitigate the situation. You have to keep your wits about you in the middle of all the chaos when it shows up.

Someone asked me, could you start a business in this industry without any connections? Well I did. When I started doing this work, I didn't work for anybody else. I just made it up as I went based on what I learned from my artists and from my colleagues in the field. I had no connections. I didn't know any of the presenters. I didn't have a database. I had no introductions. Except for the introductions my artists gave me, and that was critical and crucial to my success when I entered this field.

I'm going to use an example of Sean Curran. I initially saw Sean Curran perform with the Bill T. Jones, Arnie Zane Dance Company at BAM in BAM's very first Next Wave season. I didn't know Bill and Arnie's company and there I was at the BAM Opera House seeing this company for the first time but also seeing Sean Curran perform for the first time and I had a total wow moment because he was just



electric and amazing and I'd never seen anybody move like that and it blew my mind.

Let's just say that Sean Curran, when he's on stage, he's one of those performers you cannot look away. He's gotcha! So that was my experience of seeing him dance, and that was also the experience all these presenters had when he performed on their stage, on the road, on the tour dates, with the Bill T. Jones Arnie Zane Dance Company.

So fast forward 10 years, and Sean turned out to be one of the artists that I represented the very first year I attended APAP. He had left Bill and Arnie's company probably two or three years earlier. He'd been out making work, primarily a lot of solos, but he was ready to launch a company. He was making group works So he actually showcased with me that very first APAP. And he came to me after that APAP and said, that was a great experience. Can I hire you to do some other work? So Sean was one of the very first artists I got to work for as he founded his company, had those home New York seasons that I helped him produce, working with the presenters at the theaters at the time that he was performing in New York City, which include Dance Space Project at St. Mark's Church. It also included my very first booking at the Joyce Theater for Sean Curran.

But it was Sean who was my connection because I could pick up the phone and ask for Martin Wechsler on behalf of Sean Curran and Martin would take my phone call. Because Martin, who was the programmer at the Joyce at the time, loved Sean Curran, knew Sean Curran from years of seeing him perform, was very interested in supporting his brand new dance company, and actually ended up doing that. He programmed Sean Curran Company at the Joyce Theater. So yes you can get into this business without quote, any connections, but what are the connections your artists have?

Sean is all love and light and his years on the road, he made so many friends and left an indelible imprint on so many programmers. That was a huge asset for me. I was able to use that, because it existed and it was great and ultimately his connections eventually turned into my connections. That progression was critical to the success of me establishing Elsie and my roster in an already overcrowded market and field and breaking through because of Sean's reputation, but also because of the other artists I ended up working for.

For those of you who do have companies. and are out on the field, or you, the dancers who are listening, who may be out on the road for the next five or ten years performing with a variety of companies, and maybe in the back of your head, you really want to have your own company. You now have access to theaters and

presenters through touring. Get to know their names. Don't just show up and do your job. Pay attention. Who are these people who brought the company you're dancing for into their theater? Who are they? Was that a proscenium stage? Was it a thrust stage? Did it have a cement floor or was it a sprung wood floor? Would it be perfect for your work in the future? Did they have a black box with 200 seats that would be perfect for that solo you're going to make? Just pay attention. Write it down. Get the software where you can track these people and start saving them and start developing those connections yourself so that when you decide you're going to do this thing, you've got some connections to begin with.

Connections. Like any friendship, you don't want to blow it. You wouldn't abuse your friendship, right? You're not going to abuse or use in a bad way, your connections. I have rarely asked for what would be considered favors from the programmers I've been working with for over 20 years now, but I will mention an example of what I consider asking a favor and again, I did not do this until a good 20 years into my work.

We received a request for evidence when we went to renew Anna's work visa. For anybody who files a visa, an RFE, a request for evidence is just agonizing. It's basically what the USCIS reading officer is saying is, you didn't give me enough proof and I need more proof. So here at Elsie, we work from the perspective of kill them with paperwork. You want proof? Okay, we're going to give you some proof now. Sit back. It was a rather politically charged time and we were pretty freaked out because we had never received an RFE for her work visa renewals. And we were scared. That moment, I called in every favor I had in order to get letters supporting Anna's visa application.

These people knew me. I had relationships with them. But sometimes I hadn't necessarily had a booking with them, or maybe I'd only had one booking with them. But it was critical for us to get this visa. And we had letters from the Joyce Theater, from Lincoln Center, from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, from the Kennedy Center, from what are considered our most prestigious performing arts centers. And I think we had, uh, 20 of them. I remember I spread the letters out on the floor and I took a picture, to send to Anna so she could see them and I just said, wow, there's 20 years, there's 20 years of trust and relationship and connections and I felt so blessed that those people had shown up in that way and I'm so grateful for those relationships.

I would not suggest that you use your new connections to do things like ask for other presenter emails. Like, that's not going to go over very well. Now, maybe 10 or 15 years down the line, you've established a relationship with this programmer, and perhaps you're having a very specific conversation about a very specific

company, and they bring up the fact that this company should be presented, Oh, at the Avignon Dance Festival. And that's your opportunity to say, You know what, Susie? I don't know that programmer at all. I don't have their email, so I can't even send them a cold email. And you know how the French are. I'm never going to find their email. And this is where, 10, 15 years in, you can say to Susie: Would you mind making an introduction for this company that both you and I feel would be an amazing company to get to the Avignon Festival? And inevitably, because of the trust that's been built in that relationship, the presenter is going to say yes.

Sometimes the relationship is over. That happens. And that can happen because somebody retires. It can also happen because they changed jobs, but this time, the new job they took, there's no way you've got work for that theater. You just don't have it.

Or maybe something went bad, or maybe that thing that went south was irreparable and caused deep harm and you have to look in the mirror and make a decision. Is it worth it for me? Should I maintain this relationship? If someone treats you like a doormat, the answer is no. If you are working with a presenter who has asked you to hold dates and, route a tour around their dates and then never comes through and actually never books the show and that's happened to you two or three times with this presenter, oh honey, it is time to move on. Do not engage. It doesn't matter how charming and wonderful they are and what beautiful things they tell you, do not engage, smile and move on and give your attention to a programmer who's actually going to program your artists.

Sometimes you just have to recognize that it's over and even though maybe this is a venue that you do work with every single season or even every other season, that's great. It's kind of a go to venue of yours, you've got a range of work that goes in and out every year. You know, if it gets to the point where all you're going to be doing is fighting and miserable and have somebody tell you you're crazy and out of your mind the whole time, you gotta move on. You have to know when it's over.

This always gets back to keeping your corner clean. Keep your corner clean. Do your job well with care and thoughtfulness and respect. Don't hide. It's not going to go away. Whatever the thing is, it's not going to go away. You need to be honest with your colleagues and up front. As soon as you smell something that's not right, you need to address it and hopefully they will show up with integrity, and they will be humans, and they won't shame and blame you, but if they don't, you will take note, and you have to make a personal decision, because you just discovered something about this presenter that maybe you didn't know, that under stress, they like to scream and swear, or blame everything on you. You know, I don't need to

work with people that do that to me. No, thank you. So, these will be personal decisions you ultimately make.

I can tell you this much, though. Every time I am faced with a moment of, Oh my God, I can't stop working with this presenter. And I do stop working with that presenter because the harm is not worth it. It's worked out okay. I found a new programmer over here. I found something else over there. It's okay. You will do better work working with people who show up the way you are going to show up with integrity.

Thank you for listening. You know what I'm going to say, there are shows out there. There are artists out there who are just waiting for you to show up and be a part of their audience and have that incredible experience with them of sharing their work with you. So please go see a live show. Let me know what you saw. I'd love to know what you thought. What happened to you? What was your experience? Good or bad? I want to hear it all. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)