

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 9

Hello. This is Laura Colby. I am the founder and president of Elsie Management and today we're gonna have a look at egos.

There is a hierarchy in this field. When we talk about the gatekeepers, Those are the folks providing funding, making curatorial decisions, extending invitations to commission a new work, or present a work.

There's a whole lot of power in those roles. Power can feed the ego. A positive lens on ego, looks at self confidence and self respect, self image. More unhealthy ego can be incredibly selfish, a pleaser, a master manipulator, someone critical and enabling. Here's what the interwebs have to say, is having ego bad? "Yes, your ego can be a great thing, but it can also be damaging depending on your situation and how you're using it. If unchecked and unhealthy ego can make you overly sensitive to failure or overconfident in your abilities, it can drive you to succeed, but it can also harm those you care the most about. An egomaniac is an individual who is perceived as intolerably self centered"

So all of these factors are going to come into play in our field, which is reliant on creativity - and creativity often coming from a very centered place of reflection and inspiration, research, motivation, which can also be very intertwined with the ego. Ego can show up in the damndest ways as we do our work in this field and can be just destructive. My intention here is to talk about ways to cope with ego as it arrives in your work.

Our rule at Elsie of not working with assholes, that's another way of saying we won't work with divas, which is another way of saying we won't work with egomaniacs who have no awareness of anything but themselves. They have no idea

the harm their actions are causing, be that to the Elsie team or the presenting organization.

I will often hear from presenters working with a certain artist. Oh, that was great in terms of the audience experience. Yeah. But the harm to our team from the presenting team all the way through the technical team was very serious. They will make a proclamation to never work with that artist ever again, or take three to five years to just recover before they'll ever reconsider presenting them again.

Repercussions of bad behavior is no joke. You don't want that to be what you leave in your wake. Right? You want a good feeling when your name comes up, when your roster comes up, when your artist comes up, you want the person on the other end to have a smile on their face, not to be grimacing and remembering everything you put their tech team through.

Never piss off the tech team. Just don't do that. That's just a no. The highest compliment you can get after an engagement from a presenter is that their tech team loved you. Now that's not about rolling over and being a doormat. That's not about being a goody two shoes. It's about showing respect for that tech team that's in that theater and looking them in the eyes and bothering to find out what their name is and to use their name. And that goes for not just your technical director, maybe your lighting technician, your stage manager, it goes to your performers too. You need to tell your entire touring company, Oh, by the way, the production director at this venue is so and so. This is who is the lighting engineer. This is who's running sound. They need to have those names so that they can be a human and make that human to human contact.

And again, it's not about kissing ass. It's about showing respect for these people who are making sure that your show gets delivered with the artistic integrity that you intend for it to get.

I once had a company that was on the road that made an offhand comment about, oh, we're not used to having to do single shows. You know, we're used to playing in festivals where they present us for at least four to six engagements. And the local technical director felt like that was an insult. He took that to mean that the company wasn't too excited to be there for that single show.

How do I know that happened? Because the presenter was on site and she overheard the conversation between my touring technical director and the theater's technical director, she overheard it. And in my debrief with her after the engagement, she brought it up and she was cool, but she said, you know how this goes, Laura, don't piss off the tech team. I'm like, absolutely. And she said, I know

this comment was really no big deal, and my guy didn't take it well, and you should know this. And I thanked her, and I reported it back to the company, because that's my job. And the company heard, and basically answered with a, so noted. And that's a good outcome as far as I'm concerned. If something has been learned in this process that won't be repeated. Fantastic.

For those of us who come into this work from, oh gosh, I don't know, highly esteemed conservatories or highly prestigious ivy leagues or highly, you name it, I got a scholarship to blah, blah, blah, you're one of the 1 percent that got into that university, those institutions can have a tendency to blow up your ego. You spend the four years of your college education here, you are the 1 percent that actually got into this program, you know, you were one of 30,000 people we auditioned for this one slot in the 15 people we took into this first year, blah blah blah. You hear that and you think you're special. Understandably. You are special. You have great talents - and that's not going to serve you when you get out after you've graduated and you are auditioning along with Joe Schmo who also went to a different high end conservatory on the other side of the planet, and is actually better than you. So you can't wear your degree on your sleeve. I mean you can, in most cases, that's not what's going to get you the job as a performing artist.

There can be a huge misconception that just because you graduated from fill in the blank, that conservatory, you trained with that teacher, that you were somehow owed a position on stage. Alas, that's not how it works. You will learn quickly that the answer 97 percent of the time is going to be: thank you, no thank you. No. No. No, thank you. We moved in a different direction. We made a different decision. You're not what we're looking for at this time.

It's exhausting. It's great preparation for becoming an agent manager. That's for sure. Because I spent a lot of time hearing, that's not the direction we're moving in this year, Laura. We're looking for something else. It's not all I hear, but I am so accustomed to living and working in that space right now. And yes, my years of going to auditions and not getting jobs certainly prepared me for that. It's a brutal field, whether you're on stage or off stage and the power and the hierarchy and the folks making the decisions, with or without their egos, is hard. It's hard to take and so, how do you function? How do you pick yourself up the next morning and keep going?

You stay true to your artistic voice and you find a way. If your goal is to be programmed on a certain stage within 10 years and you still haven't made it by those 10 years, you probably need to take a good look in the mirror and realize that, okay, the work I'm making for whatever reason is not the right work for this programming right now. And maybe I need to think about another way to work in

this field. Maybe having a touring company is not going to work for me in this field. Maybe what I need to do is sell myself as a choreographer. How do I do that? I'm going to start with the dance departments. So many dance departments. And set pieces on student dancers. And then maybe I will be able to get my pieces set on repertory companies. So many repertory companies looking for new work. Okay, so I'm going to do that. Maybe what I'm going to do is go back to school and get my master's degree and go get a job teaching at a university. And I'm going to train young dancers and I'm going to set dances on them. There are other opportunities and options in this world.

We have an artist right now who is touring with live music, which is always an incredible thing to have live music on the road with our dance and theater companies. And two of her musicians won Grammys, which is fantastic. But when she came to me with their expectations that because they got these Grammys, fees were going to be higher, bookings were going to be easier, etc, etc. It's like, no, that's great. The Grammy's great. But frankly, it doesn't translate into more money. What it translates into is Great information I can give to the presenter who can now do more in terms of selling tickets for their engagement. This is particularly tricky when the engagement is already confirmed and done. So I can't go back and ask for more money just because one musician or two musicians were awarded Grammys. That's not how this works.

It can be a very, sensitive topic to talk about what is your place in this industry. Knowing your place. What is your place? For the touring artist, there is what I consider your backyard, your region, your hometown. Then there's the national touring market. And then there's the global touring market. And I have expressed that it's my ambition for my roster to have all of my artists on the global stage, because I believe very firmly that their work, their artistic voice, the integrity of the work they are creating is of such high quality, it is deserved of the global stage. And when I say the global stage, I mean it can drop into a festival in Hong Kong, it can drop in to the Edinburgh International Festival, it can be in Avignon or Adelaide, it could be presented at Spoleto. The world stage, the global stage, the programmers that are presenting work from across the globe. So that's my ambition.

Where is ego in all of this? You're not going to hear me say she's the best at what she does. You will hear me say she's at the top of her game. She is a singular voice. Experiencing her on stage is a singular opportunity, is an event, this is a story you know, told through a completely different lens, reflective of today. That's not me running around saying they're the best. That's talking about why this work, now.

All of the artists we represent are a-mazing. My bar starts really high. They're all extraordinary performers. Breathtakingly extraordinary performers. That's a given. And then there is the work they are all creating, which is singular in vision. It is typically told through lenses we don't always get to look through. It is sharing a new perspective. It is providing an experience you have not had before. It may be the retelling of a story you know so well, but oh my gosh, you have never seen it like this. That's the singular experience.

So what do you do when you run into that moment when your presenter's ego is what shows up in the room and makes a decision about a situation in technical terms, when your presenter does something like cancel without cause, strictly because they made a personal decision that was clearly, at least from your perspective, ego driven. What do you do? You're not going to win this one. It's lost. The presenter has canceled an engagement because they got annoyed. What do you do?

Exhibit humility in your actions somehow. Show respect. Listen actively. Acknowledge their perspective. That's hard work when you're pissed. It's hard work when you are mortified, your artist is in a meltdown, the money, oh my god, the money, the years of getting to this engagement and it's thrown out the window. Boom. Because of somebody's ego. How do you collect yourself and move on?

You have to recognize when these things are out of your control and you've done everything you can. You have listened, you have acknowledged their perspective, you have carefully gathered the facts, you don't know if they've read the facts that you shared with them, but they are sticking to their decision. You are functioning at the whim of their personal decision. And this is especially hard in a field where often the people with the power, the gatekeepers, are not necessarily supervised. They have all the power and they can do whatever the hell they want. And that's really hard.

So you move on. You collect yourself. You tell your artist, yep, this was a really great engagement until it wasn't and now it's over and now we're going to focus our energy on something else, and we're going to make a shift and look away and move on because we did everything we could, we got down on our knees, we apologized. We did everything we could and we kept our corner clean. We did not shame or blame. We did not swear. We did not raise our voice. We did not throw the phone across the room. We may have done all of that when the phone was properly put down on the receiver but we kept our corner clean and we pick up our ego and we move on to the next engagement is what we do and we plow forward.

When you find yourself in difficult circumstances, you have to check your own ego. Am I having a reaction here? Is this reaction because of my ego? Am I reacting on behalf of the artist's ego? Where's the power? What is driving this decision? You know what? I'm going to go home and have dinner and go to sleep and I'm not going to think about this until tomorrow, you know, or I'm going to write this email, but I'm not going to send it and I'll get up tomorrow and I'll reopen it and start with fresh eyes. And maybe when I get in tomorrow, I realized, oh boy, that was all about your ego right there.

What is the right thing to do in this situation? How can I step around my ego to find a solution, a remedy, a compromise that ultimately serves the artist? How can I put my crushed arts worker ego aside to find a solution? What can I do here? And sometimes the answer is walking away. Sometimes the answer is saying, thank you. No, thank you. We're going to pass. We have thought of everything we can possibly do, whatever this has to do with, if it's because they're not going to provide the white marley and the artist has decided, I really can't do the show without the white marley. And the presenter is absolutely not providing that white marley, even though it was in the tech writer that you gave them six months ago. Okay. We're walking away. And that decision was come to not based on anybody's ego, but based on the artistic integrity of this show, this particular show just cannot be performed on a black floor, period, because it is such a compromise on the artistic integrity. That's a different decision than reacting to something the presenter said or the technical team said, reacting, and all of a sudden your reactions, which are fed by your ego, are driving you to say not good things on the phone. You're typing an email that you really should not send. Hopefully you didn't send it.

This is the part where stopping, learning how to stop and take a deep breath because, reactions are there for a reason. You have an emotional response. The skill here is learning when to pause to give yourself 24 hours and come back to it the next day.

There's a lot to learn in this field. We have an internship program, and we have been blessed with interns who come to us from all over the planet, actually. Most typically from arts administration programs in undergraduate and graduate degree programs, but also we get a lot of performers, dancers, theater makers, musicians who are interested in understanding, "more about this business" so that they understand what it is that it takes to get that show up on that stage and what the role of the artist manager is in that big picture.

So it's great to be enthusiastic. It's another thing to think that you got this. You know, I know how to do that. I remember, there was a person who worked for me

for two years. I was their first job straight out of college. And, they worked for me for two years and went off and left and went into the film world. And when I ran into them about ten or fifteen years later, they apologized. They were like, I'm so sorry. I came in and I was like, I know all the answers. I'm going to turn this Elsie management thing around and show Laura how this is done. And they were full of apologies. And it was so funny because I did not remember their presence like that.

At the time I think I was 40 and they were 20 something. So they were 20 years younger. So yes, they had a completely different lens on the world than I did. And. They knew some software bells and whistles that I didn't know about and that was great and it was a great asset for me to have that young voice on my staff in the room at the time. But I think about that when our interns come in now. I'm in my 60s, my employees are in their 40s, and our interns are in their 20s. And again, we so welcome the enthusiasm. We so welcome the knowledge of other things that we just don't know about. And that's great. That's why this podcast is happening. Because this was Jimena Alviar's idea. And we have a wonderful intern at this time, Madison Doyle, who took the idea and ran with it. And she's literally producing a podcast as her internship at Elsie Management. How fantastic is that?

So again, there's one thing to be enthusiastic, there's another thing to come in to the field, to a job, with the attitude of, I got this. There's a big difference of an I got this attitude versus a I can do attitude. It's a subtle thing, but it makes a big difference because you don't necessarily have this, is what I'm getting at, and it may be that you have to really slow down and it's not gonna come as quickly as you think it's gonna come and you're not gonna know everything overnight and part of the whole reason of putting this podcast together is to provide some insight into the work that the artist manager does in this field in order to get shows on the road and onto stages all over the world. So listening is a huge asset and learning and absorbing and allowing for the time and space. For all of that, all of those lessons and learnings to be in the room and for you to absorb them is a huge skill.

When it gets to the point where the ego becomes destructive, that habitual thing, the repercussions thing, the harm, when you see that, when you start to smell it, when you see that happening, that's when this is another gotta come to Jesus moment here. You have to call it and we had an artist that I referenced in the past, that was behaving very badly out on the road and actually in the advance up to engagements and it was destructive to us and it damaged our reputation and it also was damaging their reputation and they were not able to hear that and take our constructive criticism, asking them, Hey, Hey, please don't do that anymore. You need to do this instead as part of the advance the engagement. They were basically sabotaging everything. These moments are critical for you to be able to collect

yourself and make a strategic decision to not continue working for this artist who is self destructing for whatever reason and move on.

All of us have our own pain threshold. My pain threshold has come down a lot now that I'm in my 60s, but when I was in my 40s, my pain threshold was pretty high and that had everything to do with my naivety and I didn't have 20 years in my pocket doing this kind of work. This goes back to the no assholes policy. It's like, oh no, we have no tolerance for that anymore. No. No, I'm not going to ask my staff to put up with that bullshit and I'm certainly not going to risk my reputation of representation of an artist who's out in the world self destructing. No. It's a hard enough field as it is. Work with good people. Work for good people. And humility will get you everywhere.

Fostering empathy, acknowledging different perspectives. There are so many ways for you to counter the ego, if you will, but you should not lay down and be a doormat. No one needs to do that. And the most important thing is to be honest to yourself and to your artists and to your presenters.

You know what I'm gonna say. I'm gonna say go see a live show folks there is some kind of live performance happening around you in the next five days and you could enter into that room and have a magical experience you never anticipated. Go do it until next time

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)