

INTRO

(The following is read by Laura Colby over jazz music composed by Manual Cinema)

Hi, I'm Laura Colby and this is *The Middle Woman*, a roadmap to managing the performing arts. I'll be sharing personal anecdotes from my 30 years in the field, exploring the nitty gritty and the technicalities of this job. I'll tell you the story of how I got here and what it's taken for me to work in the industry of the performing arts.

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EPIISODE 11

LAURA COLBY: Hello, this is Laura Colby. I'm the founder and president of Elsie Management. Today's episode is titled, *Talk About It*. I want to speak specifically about selling the contemporary performing arts touring shows that are not necessarily considered popular or obvious in terms of what their genres are or what the experience is going to be like for the audience.

I've invited Allen Moon to join me as both of us represent contemporary performance work that cross genres, mixed mediums, or might be led by social justice issues. In our sales work, how do we talk about these pieces, these artists, these touring shows?

Allow me to introduce Allen Moon, Director of Touring and Artist Management of David Lieberman Artists Representatives, a renowned performing arts agency located in Los Angeles.

Hello Allen.

ALLEN MOON: Hello Laura.

LAURA: Great to have you in Brooklyn.

ALLEN: It's great to be in your fabulous office here.

LAURA: So Allen, tell us how you got into this business.

ALLEN: I got my undergraduate degree in theater. And towards the last couple of years, I, focused a lot on physical theater, and even a little bit of dance, more like contact improvisation, and then I moved to LA with my sights set on becoming, a

professional actor and that lifestyle or even path just didn't interest me after I witnessed what everybody had to go through to make that work, if it would work.

So then, I said, I'm gonna get a job and maybe freelance, develop some skills outside of performing, and then I'm gonna make the work, or be a part of making work, that I wanna make. Stuff that I wasn't necessarily gonna have a career out of. So then I started working at a themed entertainment design company. We designed sets essentially for rock concerts, the Olympic ceremonies, theme parks, themed restaurants. I didn't design them. I was the coordinator, I would go to the art supply store and pick up items to create little models.

I eventually kind of moved up into a project manager. But, early on, I also got auditioned to be in a company called Diavolo. And this was at the very early stages of that company. I think they've been around for 30 years now. But I came in within the first five years, before they were touring or anything. But, the design company, they were very generous and they let me go tour while I was still working full time for them. They liked having a working artist in there.

What that job gave me was to understanding producing, essentially. Because I worked up to a project manager, and we were doing all these different shows, and I got to hear about the creative ideas when they were just ideas, and then follow them through, the conceptual development, the design development, and then the actual production itself.

I was with Diavolo for about five years and then the last year I decided to focus only on dancing. I had saved enough money or thought I had saved enough money to take a little bit of a break from the day job sort of thing. And pretty soon thereafter I realized, Ooh, I need another job. So, two years, or three years, earlier, the company I work for now, David Lieberman Artist Representatives, they had taken on Diavolo on their roster. I then met David and, we hit it off and he asked me to come in when I wasn't on tour, when I wasn't rehearsing, to be just an admin assistant. Back in the days of dial up internet, AOL address.

LAURA: Fax machine.

ALLEN: Fax Machine. I had to stuff VHS tapes into envelopes and send them out. And write down, I sent it to this person in that state so we could follow up in two weeks. And then when I, wasn't in the office, I was on the road, when I was on the road, I wasn't in the office, and then after about a year there, I turned 30 and it was kind of time to, hang that up and we had just taken on, Merce Cunningham Dance Company and so I was, well, hey, this looks like a neat opportunity. I mean, we were a really small shop before that. We were in the back room of a shower

door installation business. The office really grew and took leaps and bounds because David just needed someone else to come on as a booker.

LAURA: Up until then, had he been doing it on his own?

ALLEN: Yeah, he had one part time employee. It was a small roster. It was just a few different artist and-

LAURA: So you were really his first hired artist representative.

ALLEN: Yes.

LAURA: That was your intention and the role and... okay

ALLEN: Well, I mean at the beginning, I imagine he had a vision for what he would want me to do in the future but you know, I think he sensed that I have a natural sales ability. So, he brought me on.

LAURA: So, you stopped your dancing job with Diavolo.

ALLEN: Stopped.

LAURA: But, you still continued to dance socially, which would be how you, and I met.

ALLEN: Yes.

LAURA: Because I do believe, if memory serves me correctly, you and I met literally dancing at some conference closing dance party.

ALLEN: I think it was the Western Arts Alliance Conference, WAA. Probably that because that was my first conference.

LAURA: Okay.

ALLEN: I think I was 30.

LAURA: Okay. Yeah, I would have been 40.

ALLEN: Yeah.

LAURA: So, people, you've heard it here. That's how long Allen and I have known each other, which is pretty great. Well, thank you. It's a remarkable story and I think it's always so interesting to understand how our colleagues come to this work. On the arts worker end, on the producer end, how we all land here in these roles.

So David, your boss, has clearly served as your mentor all of these years. And I assume he was critical in the development of your sales process. Did he train you in any way?

ALLEN: David is, well, at least his relationship with me, he's pretty hands off, and I think he leads by example. Without a doubt within this industry, he's certainly my mentor. How can he not be? I've been working there for twenty two years.

In fact, at my first conference, I signed up to have a mentor who is Michael Reed. He had two mentees. So he introduces himself to the person over there and then he says, who are you? I said, I'm Allen Moon, I work at David Lieberman Artists Representative. He says, oh, you don't need a mentor. And then he just turns to the other person and ignored me for the rest of the luncheon.

LAURA:As it goes.

ALLEN: Mm hmm.

LAURA: Well, you and I have both been in this role, this very active role of sales for over 20 years. The two of us have a lot of ongoing, running conversations with presenters we've worked with over the many years. When we're speaking with those people in particular, we're probably speaking in a certain shorthand. There's a comfortability. We know their aesthetic. They know what's on our roster. We know their budget. We've probably been to their venue. We know all the different theaters that they have access to. We know a lot about them.

The field has just been through a huge shift. We have so many presenters new in their positions and you and I are both having very very new conversations where the person we are selling to doesn't necessarily know our roster inside and out hasn't booked the Kronos Quartet five times over 20 years for example. So, how are those conversations for us? How do we shape those conversations for these new programmers in these new positions? I'm curious to know if you have a first question you typically ask and what that first question might be to that programmer.

ALLEN: Well, first I'll say regardless if they're new to that position or they've been in that position for X number of years, the most effective way I think to develop

that relationship and move towards actually, getting the gig, and then the gigs in future years is to listen and understand or try to understand where they're coming from, what they want to do with their program

And then should we begin to speak about an artist, what can they do with that artist? So just even asking them about their overall agenda. If they're new to a program, well, that program's been there and it's not like it's gonna, make a U turn and just have a completely new aesthetic. So they're going to respect that history. And, hopefully I have knowledge of that history so I can build on that conversation as well.

I try to ask them what they want to do with these artists, whether it be in residency, whether they want to expand their new music programming, or if they want to reach into the community a little bit more and then if we're in a booth at these conferences, I'll have to remind myself and I'll turn around and I'll look at the banner, which has pictures of each artist. And, hopefully something pops out and I'd say, okay, you want to work with this specific community, or you want to address this, specific issue. This artist has a program that does this, or this artist has a residency program where we can dive into your community and be there for an extended period of time. Or they have a concert that speaks directly to this issue.

LAURA: So what about the guy who rolls into your booth and sits down to have his meeting with you, again, newish kind of relationship, and says to you, Okay, Alan, I need a string quartet. What's the difference between the Kronos Quartet and Brooklyn Rider.

ALLEN: I think this goes back to things that we've talked about is having kind of a relatively short, crisp notion that you could share with that presenter. So you can frame it so they easily get it and they go, okay, yeah, that's the one I want.

And, we have. a few different ensembles that fit very snugly into the category of contemporary music. So we are challenged when we even take on a new artist, we look at the overall roster and say, are there groups that are too similar? and if they aren't, how do we speak about that difference?

For instance with Kronos, when they started, it was to just radically shatter or reinvent the notion of what a string quartet is. And they have this wildly creative and ambitious agenda of finding composers and music from all over the world and almost in the kind of the way a global music ensemble would approach, seeking out different voices and different styles. And it's this never ending appetite for them to share those musical experiences with their audience. And that's not the other artists on the roster.

So then when I would maybe move to Brooklyn Rider, since you mentioned them, I see them being able to occupy many different spaces. They could have their feet firmly planted in contemporary music and deliver an all Philip Glass program. And then they can have a program that's much more classically oriented, they're facile and can kind of move through different styles. So that's one way that I can differentiate them.

And we work with the Bang on a Can All-Stars, which are led by three different composers. And so that is a composer-driven organization. It's important to speak about with that with the presenter, but you know, the presenter isn't probably going to speak that way to their audience, but I think it's important to make sure the presenter knows how they can at least frame it to their audience.

LAURA: Is there a specific artist on your roster that you can use as an example in a conversation with a presenter who specifically does want an extended residency with community engagement? Because I'd love to hear how you would talk about the actual work that the artist would be doing.

ALLEN: One artist that I'm having conversations with presenters is a Los Angeles-based vocal ensemble, Choir Tonality led by the founder and artistic director, Alexander Lloyd Blake. And everything they do, every piece of music that they sing, every message that they put out is tied to not just issues of social justice, but equity and inclusion and making the world a better place and making sure all voices are heard and making sure that people are comfortable communicating the hard issues. That group doesn't shy away from any of those hard issues, they want to solve the problems or address the problems.

A month from now, they're going to head down to Texas and the concert is called, "You Are Not Alone." It addresses wellness and issues of suicide. And how to come together as a community and talk about these things and they do that within the concert and I think the residency work is, at least in this instance, a distilled, showing of what the concert is, they'll have 10 pieces of music on the program. They'll make sure that there's a sign language interpreter. They will have supertitles in English and in Spanish, or another language that may be more a second language that's maybe more dominant than Spanish, but they will be bilingual. They will have the audience participate in some of the songs and I think we're going into a hospital. I think we're working with city workers and a local choir and bringing them into a couple of songs on the program.

LAURA: So what I'm hearing is a very ambitious engagement residency that is utilizing the talents of this incredible director and everything they're bringing to this

community, and you're getting out into the community, and you're engaging with the local choir, in the eventual performance that takes place, but the work is happening on the ground.

ALLEN: There's one aspect of it that I personally find pretty fulfilling and really interesting to me when the presenter says, well, what do you do? And, you know, sometimes I can create a sample schedule of what we can do, and I can give that to the presenter, but in terms of this ensemble, well, they're new to touring. So, we're kind of creating it as we go along. So, this presenter was one of the first, and said, well, you know, we're going to have to get there. This is going to take a few conversations. And she brought in a community engagement person. And then I brought Alex in. And again, we sat there and listened, and I kind of prompted with, well, who are the people you have, the groups, the organizations that you have connections with? Because, That's where we want to start. It's too hard to like go out and find a group you want to know the lowest hanging fruit that you can pick to have these collaborations because it takes a lot of work for the presenter to do this community engagement. It's a lot of work a lot of time and so you want to go with the people who will answer the email who will commit to participate

LAURA: has the energy.

ALLEN: Yes!

LAURA: Has the energy, the people, the money, all of it.

ALLEN: And then they'll say, Oh, we work with this group they work with this group. And then hopefully the artist, and Alex is a very intelligent and, and extremely professional artist. And he will respond, well, we can do this with them. Here's what we'll do. I think for that one, instead of bringing the whole group out, the first part of the week is just with four singers: soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and then Alex and an accompanist. And so that's really about financial, you know, keeping the expenses low. So, they'll go out there and do one, two, maybe three activities during the first part of the week and then the rest of the ensemble will come and then we'll start rehearsing with the local choir.

We're very clear with the presenter that these are artists, they're not professional therapists. But they're there to give the artistic viewpoint. And that, I think, is the real value that we have as an industry, is to bring very intelligent, creative makers who naturally have different viewpoints. And you have to make that very clear at the beginning and make sure that the expectations are not the university professor. Well, we're going to have a guest lecturer in here. They're going to come and talk about how to achieve mental wellness through singing. That's not really what

they're going to do. They're there to incite a conversation. And so you really need to make sure that there's a moderator of sorts throughout that entire process.

LAURA: It's not a TED talk. It's an, it's an actual experience with the living artist.

ALLEN: And hopefully the artist is going to learn out of that process as well. I do like it when you put them in a room with scientists or psychologists or something so they can get something out of that process as well.

LAURA: That's one of the really enjoyable parts of the work we do is what we learn from these engagements that are not just show up, sound check, perform. These residency engagements. So, Alex, when he gets on the other side of this Texas engagement, what's going to have shifted inside of his brain, and how is that going to feed the next residency, and how the two of you then design the next residency from the learnings that you are going to take from this Texas engagement.

This is all part of the trajectory. This is why these works are not books on bookshelves. This is why these are living, performing arts works, and that is a huge differential that, I don't know about you, but that's why I do the work I do. Because they are living, and they are going to change, and the artist is going to make other choices in that trajectory.

Both of us represent circus companies, and when you say circus to most people, they think either of the old school Ringling Brothers, Barnum Bailey, or they're thinking of Cirque du Soleil. They're not necessarily thinking of the contemporary circus that Allen and I and other of our colleagues are touring now. It's the contemporary circus that I wanted to address today.

We are touring circus that is made for the proscenium stage in the U.S. and North America. And the remarkable company you represent, Circa, is movement-based. When people ask me about what is it with Circa? and I'm like, well, they're fantastic, let's just start there, but it's a movement-based circus as opposed to an equipment based or an animal based and the shows are built for the proscenium stage, and their scale can be from 8 to 28 people. And Yaron, the artistic director, has made work with recorded music, but also has done these large scale epic shows with orchestras, and I mean, it's astounding work. But the majority of the people on this planet have not seen the likes of Circa. So, I know this is hard, but try to rewind. When you first started working for Circa and the field had not seen Circa so much, not on the level it does now, how did you go about describing a circus show that is not what we all grew up with?

ALLEN: Well, I actually don't have to go back because there's still plenty of presenters out there. Plenty of intelligent, talented presenters who have very strong programs. They'll get on the phone with me and I'd say, can we, can we talk about Circa? And they'll say, Well, you know, we don't really do cirque. And I have to say, or even if they say, Yeah, I want to talk about it because we want to develop our cirque. And I, I say, Well, let's, you know. Pardon me, but I want to have a language adjustment there: this is not "cirque." That has a very specific meaning to people, and that's big Cirque du Soleil. And that's, if you're going to talk about it in that way, And, or your marketing people are going to talk about it that way, that box office person who's going to field a call potentially, if they're going to speak about it that way, you're just going to have disappointed audiences.

So, we're going to call this contemporary circus, okay, we can call it circus, but for now, we're going to frame it this way, and like I said, there's plenty of people who still haven't put a contemporary circus ensemble on their season. We're working to change that, you and I and others.

LAURA: Very slowly, we're getting there.

ALLEN: I think we're doing pretty good. I mean, it's like creating a space for a new medium.

LAURA: Yes. Yes.

ALLEN: The brochure you get in the mail from your local presenter, it's not totally divided up the way it used to be, dance, theater, music, so, but even if it were, we're not going to have the category that says circus necessarily.

With Circa, what I've observed is that, Yaron Lifschitz, the Artistic Director and CEO of Circa.

LAURA: Which is based in Brisbane, Australia.

ALLEN: Brisbane, Australia. He's artistically, very ambitious and is making opera, making works in cathedrals. There's so much. And to me, circus is the language, not the destination. So he may create an opera. He may create the equivalent of a contemporary dance. He may create a piece of theater. The language is the circus element. And you could categorize it and define it however you want. It's just a circus language.

LAURA: And certainly the video says it all. Because they have gorgeous footage and You can see through the video very clearly his articulation, his aesthetic, his style. You can see the circus.

Often we can be the set up person in these conversations with presenters, in our initial pitch, if you will, in that first two minute conversation that we're talking about an artist new to a presenter. And then if the presenter comes back and says, you know what, I'm really interested in that project and that artist, tell me more. And if at that point, let's just say the information is beyond our pay grade, or it becomes clear to us that the presenter really needs to have an artistic conversation with the artist. This is where I know both of us practice this, we will set up a conversation between the artist and the presenter. So the presenter can hear directly from the artist. And they can spend a good 20 or 30 minutes talking deeper about the artistic integrity, the aesthetic, what the artist can do in the community, if that's something that they do. I think that's worked for both of us.

Allen: When it comes to the presenter speaking to the artist, of course, as the gig's done and they're into planning it, of course, speak to them, definitely speak to them, but I do like to, you know, quote, qualify them, to a certain extent, because I don't want the artist to be out there pitching their work, that's my job. However, you know, if I feel like there's certainly something rooted here and we just need to have a deeper conversation. You and I have talked about selling work and talking about work, which is two very, very different things. There's certain things that intersect about those two approaches, but it's definitely not the same.

And just. two days ago, I had a zoom with a team. There was three people on the presenting side, the programming manager, executive director, and the community engagement person. And then I brought in Christopher Roundtree, the artistic director and founder of Wild Up, a new music ensemble based in Los Angeles. And he talked about a composer that Wild Up has focused a lot of their time and energy on, Julius Eastman. And he talked about it in such inspiring, thrilling, exciting, complex ways. And it was cool because, you know, we're on Zoom. And so I'm watching the faces of the presenters and I was so impressed and entertained and just kind of transfixed on, on what he was saying. if I were a betting person and I'm not, that's going to become a pretty profound engagement. I'm hoping.

LAURA: And can I ask where you are in that sales process? Is this a confirmed engagement? Do you consider this engagement confirmed?

ALLEN: No, because after that moment, it grew.

LAURA: So it shifted. It changed.

ALLEN: Yeah. Yeah.

LAURA: But you're on the path to getting to the terms.

ALLEN: This is another kind of speaking about building something together. We wanted to do a concert that, maybe two concerts, one concert, performing, they have 16 musicians, and they perform "Feminine," by Julius Eastman. But then we also wanted to have maybe, the night before doing other pieces of Julius Eastman and involving local musicians. And the presenter and I, for, you know, over the past six months have been going, okay, we're going to do this. We're going to do this. And when it came time to, okay, what is this going to be? She said, I need to bring in other people on my team to talk about this. And I said, well, I need to bring in Chris too, because if we're going to build this and we're going to build it. And then we realized that there's so much more to explore here.

At one point I just said, I'm so excited to have this conversation because next week when I go to New York and deal with the APAP conference, the Association of Performing Arts Professionals Conference, and ISPA, the International Society for the Performing Arts, but specifically APAP. I'm just going to have these brief sales moments. And here I get to kind of luxuriate and listen to these really cool ideas and my job is to speak about it and get it out in the world.

LAURA: Well, I think it's so much of our job to distill what the real essence - that artistic integrity - what is that aesthetic line, to distill it down to a sound bite so that we can do our job in those compressed time moments, but a what a joy to be able to, like you said, have the luxury of time to sit with an artist and hear them really talk about their work. And, most of the presenters don't have that time.

ALLEN: I think they were very grateful that they could stop their day and get their head out of the spreadsheet and kind of plan in that way. You could see it on their faces. It was really neat.

I had another conversation just yesterday, again, with a presenter and an artist. Choreographer Donald Byrd, who's the Artistic Director of Spectrum Dance Theater, and this idea, he was given some money to develop this work, and it had a seed development, it had a two-week residency, and then it's had some different residencies, and now we're revisiting to the kind of lead commissioner of this work. Okay, what's the next phase? What do we want to do? And they were talking about, okay, we could come here and do this. And then the question becomes, or do we do this element of the residency elsewhere rather than this city? And I said, actually, no. And this goes to your point of distilling something or focusing on what to do

with an idea. To the presenter, I said, your career has been a presenter, a producer, an artist manager, you've worked in Lort theaters, you've worked in presenting institutions, you're this hybrid, and that knowledge might help us focus on the destination that the work needs to go to. Not the artistic destination, but what platform. LORT theaters, presenting institutions. So for me, I just kind of watched them creatively speak and then kind of gave a little direction to the idea.

LAURA: Which is great because this goes back to the first comment you made about Oh listening because you listened and also you'd done your homework and you knew all that information about that presenter and our presenters are ultimately our partners in this trajectory.

ALLEN: As managers or as agents, we have clients which are our artists as well, but so are our presenters. I mean, I represent them as well and that's the partnership. I think that's a successful manager or an agent, being able to represent to a certain extent the interest of the presenter to the artist when they're crafting their programs.

LAURA: That's the part about being in the middle.

ALLEN: Mm hmm. Ah the middle woman.

LAURA: There you go!

Allen talk about your experience as the producer and presenter behind Santa Ana sites and what you learned In your experience of producing Santa Ana Sites.

ALLEN: Okay, Santa Ana Sites was this, well in my estimation a charming, beautiful little presenting series that I started and developed in my hometown of Santa Ana, and it took works and artists and just put them in non traditional spaces.

We were in bars, we were in a racquetball court, we were in warehouses, we were in my loft numerous times, my friend's loft, abandoned storefronts. And, it was very near and dear to me. It's done. It finished in 2019. It ran out of money. I learned a lot out of it, and I learned actually, one of the things that I wanted to get out of it was, presenter's viewpoint, you know, and, there's so many details that I had to deal with that I, you know, didn't really think about always when I'm out, you know, trying to book a show, and it gave me some empathy for their role.

You know, I would have to go out and find a venue and then I booked, you know, people planned seasons 18 months in advance. I planned my concerts three months in advance, sometimes even less than that, and used my relationships with my

fellow agents. And when there was an artist on the road who had a hole in the tour, maybe they'd call me up.

And it was a very DIY organization. And I remember, Mike Daisey came once and his monologue was fantastic, but it's a little depressing now. It was called the "Trump card" and it was about two months before the election. You know, that election. And he called it, said, this guy's going to win. And I wrote back to him afterwards and there was a lot of, I mean, it's a desk, it's a microphone. It shouldn't be too much. I have to haul 80 chairs up 40 stairs where I live. And I wrote back to him and I said, Hey, thanks a bunch. You know, I'm just like the little presenting organization that could. And, thanks for just being flexible with it. And he commented back. He's like, it doesn't matter if you're big or you're small. You know going down the line vertically from top to bottom. It's all the same, the same boxes need to be checked if you're kind of presenting or producing an event. And he said you did all that. It was kind of one of the more proud moments of that series but I just I learned all the details and how much curating or picking the artist, we'll say, is like such a tiny fraction of what a presenter would do. I had a presenter one time, tell me, Allen, I get to think about, curating when I'm washing my hair in the morning. Because they come into work and just put out fires.

LAURA: Are there any pitfalls in the sales process that you'd like to talk about that you don't do anymore? Or that you, or that you actively aren't repeating? Anything you've learned?

ALLEN: I think sometimes I fall into a pitfall of, you know, I look at the roster and I maybe give too much information or give too many projects to a certain, I can do this, I can do this, I can do this. Now there are some presenters that I have very extended relationships where I often will have anywhere from zero to four projects on their season in one year. And I can go with them and kind of go down the menu. Usually that takes many years for me to get to that point. So I do have to be conscious of how many projects I'm going to introduce to them?

LAURA: That's the old Greek menu. Like, you don't want to give them a Greek menu.

ALLEN: No. And like, even within each artist, we're talking internally. Sometimes the artist will say, well, here's seven different programs we can do next year. And we're like, that's going to confuse people. We're just going to make sure they present this ensemble. And you get A or B. C. Maybe C.

LAURA: Maybe.

ALLEN: Three is good. Three's good.

LAURA: What do you wish you'd known when you first entered this field, Allen, that you know now?

ALLEN: I wish I danced more. I wish I made more music. I wish I had more practical experience of making it outside of my theater and physical theater movement.

LAURA: Yeah, that's a short life.

ALLEN: Yeah.

LAURA: Thanks for listening. And you know what I'm gonna say. Go see a show. Buy a ticket for something live. Go see something live. Let it wash over you. Drop me a line. Let me know what it was like, what happened to you, what didn't happen to you, what you thought it was gonna be, what your experience was. I want to hear from you.

Until next time!

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)