

## 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 12

Hello, this is Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we are going to be having a look at your elevator pitch. Oh, boy. So when someone asks you, tell me about your work, or what are you working on, if you answer with, oh, it's so complicated. I can't describe it, that is not gonna be helpful to you and your mission to get your work made (and presumably) toured.

So as much as you might wanna say that, I wanna talk about some other ways to approach this moment and to help you be ready we are tasked with sharing experiences that to some could be their very first experience of live performance, or if they're a presenter, it could be a form more contemporary or more experimental than they are accustomed to.

So how do we talk about this work? And normalize it, if you will, and not make it sound like a freak show and not make it sound as complicated as it really is in your brain or in the artist's brain. Or maybe technically it really is truly complicated. But that's not what we wanna lead with when we're talking to our potential buyer.

No matter what, you are gonna need an elevator pitch. You are going to need to be able to describe your work succinctly to whomever you are speaking to be that your grandparent, your UPS person, or that presenter you really wanna have program you.

So I came into this field as a classically trained, modern dancer. I thought I was pretty good at talking about dance when I started representing it, but here's the thing. My UPS guy didn't know who Martha Graham was and even if he did, why would he need to know who Martha Graham was to come see a dance performance I had invited him to? (I have never represented the Graham company). Talking about the deep legacy of American modern dance and all of the dance techniques

that are part of it, is not necessarily helpful when it comes to describing the performance work, unless of course the company or work you're talking about is intrinsically attached to that history.

Through a branding workshop I did way back in the nineties, I learned that it was all about the experience. What's the experience of your work? The instructor of that workshop gave a great example by sharing a season brochure for a super prestigious, multi-genre university programming series. He pointed to the descriptions of the three dance companies that had been programmed in that season. All three of them had narrative language describing their shows as eclectic and physical. The descriptions were virtually indistinguishable. Yikes. That's not helpful. That's not helpful. That was when I pledged to never use the words eclectic or physical when describing my dance companies ever again.

I went back to my job, determined to describe the experience, not as a conservatory trained dancer who could certainly talk dance history and technique, but as a person sitting in the audience, what is the experience? What words succinctly describe your work? What words will define what you are doing with your circus company versus all the other circus companies? And yes, you need to be able to describe your work in less than a minute, in three minutes, in five minutes, and of course, when you are given the opportunity to speak about it in great detail and length.

But how are you going to know how much time you've got? Well, that's where the elevator comes in, right? So you're in the lobby of the hotel and you've just gotten into the elevator with that presenter you are dying to speak to about your show, and they turn to you and they say, so tell me about your show. And then they push the three button. Yeah, the third floor, what on earth are you possibly going to say about your show, knowing they're getting off on the third floor. And that, my friends, is exactly what we're going to be talking about today. First, we're going to talk about describing your practice or your company, and then we'll get into describing specific work.

So describing the experience, the mission here is to use words that describe your work, your company, that will give the listener an understanding of some kind, a picture in their head, if you will, of what it is you are creating. I'm going to be using companies from the Elsie management roster for this exercise for the obvious reason these are companies saturating my brain right now. These are the companies I'm talking about all the time, every day. We're gonna start with Manual Cinema.

Manual Cinema is a collective of artists based in Chicago that create multimedia, contemporary theatrical performances for the stage using a combination of shadow puppetry, actors and silhouette and live music. They tell devised stories through pure visual theater without spoken text. We were drawn to their work by the gorgeous aesthetic of their visuals, but also by the stories they were telling. These stories were most often told through the female lens. With a female protagonist. Seeing their work can be poetic, cathartic, and heartbreaking. All of Manual Cinema's performers are visible to the audience. The visuals from the puppetry and the actors and silhouette are mixed together like a collage and projected onto a large screen hung at the edge of the stage closest to the audience. It's on this screen that the audience can follow the resulting story, and of course they can also watch the stage action as it happens in front of them. Manual Cinema shows are in full-length form between fifty-five and 70 minutes in length with touring companies ranging in size from five to 12 people.

So that description was just over one minute and length. Did it leave you with an image, an idea of what being in a Manual Cinema audience would be like? Or what makes this company different from other touring theater companies?

Let's break down what I managed to say in just over a minute. You know, the company's based in Chicago. It's collective of artists that create multimedia theater for touring. Their genre is devised contemporary theater. Their medium includes puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music all on stage together, not something you see every day, right? They use projection. They make works in full-length forms told through the female lens. They create visual theater without text. Their stories are in full-length form and can be poetic, cathartic, and heartbreaking. They have touring companies as small as five in total and as large as 12.

Not bad. We got all that in in just over a minute. Now, back to the elevator. I'm not going to get through all of that in three floors. So here's what I would say:

Manual Cinema is a multimedia contemporary theater company that makes performances combining shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette, and live music. They tell poetic and heartbreaking stories or visual theater without spoken text.

So that's less than 15 seconds.

I do believe that gets us to the third floor with time for me to hand my presenter my card saying: I'd love to tell you more, Let me know when it'd be a good time to speak. What were the key words I said in those 15 seconds as we traveled to the third floor that differentiated Manual Cinema from other contemporary theater

companies out there? Multimedia, contemporary, shadow puppets, and actors in silhouette, live music, poetic and heartbreaking stories, visual theater, no text.

Can you see something? Does it give you an idea of Manual Cinema? When I have to get it down to one sentence, I say: Manual Cinema combines shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music to tell poetic and heartbreaking stories through visual theater.

To me, the three most important things for me to say about Manual Cinema are: shadow puppets, live music, visual theater. What are the three most essential things you must say about your practice, about your company that differentiates it? Is that you are queer women of color telling stories through spoken word about life in the diaspora. Are you a stilt-walking, gigantic puppet company promoting a mission of social justice through outdoor stagings? Perhaps you were making a U.S.-based, movement-led, contemporary circus realized by an all-Black creative team and performed by an all-Black cast of circus and dance artists. And with that, I know I am veering into describing shows, so I'm going to use Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* as an example of describing this show.

If I had two minutes, I would say. Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* is not a literal retelling of Mary Shelley's iconic text. Instead, in the first act, we learned that Shelley lost her daughter Clara soon after birth and of the ghost story bet she won with her writing of *Frankenstein*. In the second act, we are introduced to Dr. Frankenstein as he builds an artificial life. The third act is told through the eyes of the Creature himself. In this way, Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* honors Shelley's writing structure with her chapters told through different eyes, different voices. Each act of Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* employs different mediums to tell the story. In the first, it's all shadow puppetry with five female actors and silhouette. In the second live camera on the performers is used. In the third, the Creature is rendered in the form of a two-foot Bunraku puppet with a live camera on him. The score is performed by four musicians who play a staggering range of instruments, including a self-made percussion wall. In the spirit of invention, Manual Cinema has included mallets that are played by robots in parts of the score. These robots are stationed on light posts with lamps that light up when they're being played. In all Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* is a story of abandonment and the creature's singular desire to be reunited with its maker. Shelley's themes of responsibility and the creation of life are all present in this sixty-seven minute performance.

That's a minute and a half.

Here's shorter: Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* is not a literal retelling of Mary Shelley's iconic text. Instead, in the first act, we learned that Shelley lost her

daughter Clara soon after birth and of the ghost story bet she won while writing "Frankenstein." In the second act, we are introduced to Dr. Frankenstein as he builds the artificial life. The third act is told through the eyes of the Creature, himself. In this way, Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* honors Shelley's writing structure. The score is performed by four musicians who play a staggering range of instruments, including a self-made percussion wall. In all, Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* is a story of abandonment and the creature's singular desire to be reunited with its maker. Shelley's themes of responsibility and the creation of life are all present in this sixty-seven minute performance.

That's under one minute.

Okay, here's the shortest: Love, loss, and creation merge in unexpected ways in this thrilling, classic gothic tale conceived by Manual Cinema. Stories of Mary Shelley, Victor Frankenstein and his creature expose how the forces of family, community, and education shape personhood or destroy it by their absence.

So this last example, which is the introductory copy you'll find online, which is how we describe the show in absolute brief. There's no description of the stuff that Manual Cinema uses to tell its stories. No puppets, no actors in silhouette, nothing about live music that is presumably in a nearby paragraph that's describing Manual Cinema's work.

You may have noticed that the first thing I said about Manuel Cinema's *Frankenstein* was that it was not a literal retelling of Mary Shelley's novel. Because people apparently hear positive statements with more clarity and understanding, then negative statements, I do not usually lead with a negative statement. However, in this case, because we're talking about an iconic text and because there are lots of "Frankenstein" touring shows available out there, I wanna make clear to my listeners straight out of the gate that Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein* is absolutely not another retelling of the book. That it is absolutely inspired by Shelley's book, but this is a wholly different theatrical experience. The other thing I did in my description was to keep saying "Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein*." That is everything to do with the fact that I want to ingrain in the listener the name of the company and the name of the show. Basically, when you're pitching, you cannot say your company's name enough, nor the show name.

A moment about Manual Cinema. When I'm talking to presenters that have never seen the company, I don't lead with the stuff on stage. I lead with the stories. I talk about the stories. So what is the story of Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein*? What is the story of *No Blue Memories*, *the Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*? What is the story of *Ada/Ava*? And I will talk about the poetry in each of those shows 'cause to me, my

experience of Manual Cinema's visual theater is so poetic to me. I will eventually get into the stuff and how, you know, that the stage includes all of these performers, shadow puppets, overhead projectors, green screens, live music, it's all on stage. And then there's this big screen hung far downstage close to the audience where all the cameras are mixed and you get one visual and that's where you really can take in the show and the story they are telling.

I'm not gonna say this is a new form. Multimedia has been going on since the seventies, but in terms of how Manual Cinema is mixing it, none of that magic could be happening on stage without all the kind different kinds of digital science we have now, and all the wiring we have, let alone the internet. So it's new in that sense. There's more cabling on that stage than you could possibly imagine. It is truly a miracle how everything gets mixed and how it all happens.

And my mission here is not to confuse the presenter. The most important part to me about the experience of Manual Cinema is the story and what you walk away with from that story. And yeah, sure, let's talk about the puppets, because the puppetry technique is astounding. I mean, basically those puppeteers are choreographed to the second in order to be able to make that shadow puppet over there and then change a costume and put a wig on step into silhouette, it's amazing. I have to start with the story first.

I wanna talk about adjectives. If you poke around our website, you will see that we don't typically use a lot of complimentary adjectives to describe the work of our companies. Things like they are the best, they're the most prestigious, blah, blah, blah. I will say: Emmy Award-winning Manual Cinema because, well, yes, they've won an Emmy. I will say the acclaimed, if an artist has some 10 years of touring and has garnered that kind of attention. I just don't think that saying your dancers are the best in the world is helpful in terms of selling your company. All a presenter has to do is go online and have a look at your videos to decide that for themselves.

Let's go back to the elevator. The best thing you can do to prepare for that one minute pitch in the elevator is to practice talking about your company, about your work, about your show. And the best people to practice on are the folks who might not have a clue what it is you do. Or maybe they have an idea, but they've never been to see your show. Or maybe they saw your show and they were so confused by it, they didn't know how to talk to you about it or what to say about it.

No matter what, if you are able to distill what you believe the experience is down to essentially three things and/or build these narrative descriptions based on, you could start with seven sentences and work your way backwards so you can get it down to one sentence. And if you could get that language in front of your nearest

and dearest and most trusted who have seen your work, been in the studio with you. That's a great place to start.

So that presenter who got off on the third floor. They actually kept your card and set up a time to speak with you further about your company. Your meeting is going to be on the phone. This is the part where you need to have your basic marketing materials in place, and I'm including it in this session about elevator pitches because what good is your elevator pitch if you don't have your basic marketing materials in place?

This is high-res photos, preferably organized in some kind of URL link that you can easily copy and paste into an email for quick viewing. Video trailers, longer video excerpts, and full-length videos, files or links that you can readily email. We do not put full-length recordings online for obvious reasons. We host them online, so I can just send a link very quickly when the presenter wants to see the full-length show. You will see trailers and longer excerpts, and that's it on our website or on our YouTube or Vimeo channel. Recent press, including pull quotes, Those are the short press quotes, and then links to the full piece of press that that quote came from, because presenters are gonna wanna read a full review, and they're also gonna wanna be able to confirm that that pull quote actually came from the paper you said it came from. Narrative description of the show, which you have because that's what you got your pitch from, right? And a narrative description of the company.

I'll say a thing about photos. Don't put any photos on your website that you don't have in high resolution. This is because presenters are gonna fall in love with a certain picture they saw online. In fact, they decided it has to be on the cover of their season brochure. It turns out that great photo was taken on the very first iPhone and doesn't exist in high-res. Whoops. Like, don't do that. I know that photo's really good, but you know what? Restage it and get it shot on a high-res camera and do it right.

Your website should be very clear about where you are located. Who your artistic and administrative leadership is, what year you were established. What shows are currently available for touring and what size touring companies those are, your touring history.

Other things you are going to want to have on the ready during your phone call, your tech rider. We don't post our tech riders on our website because we consider that information to be proprietary. Your range in touring fees. I say range because you are going to have to be able to quote a touring fee for a so-called backyard engagement somewhere within say, a 400 mile driving radius or whatever your driving threshold is. Versus a touring fee in which you have to fly, so you have

added all the cost of those flights for the whole company into the fee you quote. Yes, there are venues that will pay plus flights, but that's rare in the states. The majority of our presenters just want to pay a fee plus housing. They do not want to be bothered for anything else. They don't want you coming back for reimbursement on your flights and ground and per diem and things like that. You wanna build that all into your budget.

When I'm on a programming phone call with a presenter, I will ask them if they are actually at their computer, and if they are, can they open this page? It's usually my website, and if they can't find it, I'll send them the link via email right then and there, or I will have sent them the links I want them to have like 30 minutes before our phone call or the day before our phone call to say, perhaps we will have the opportunity to look at some of these links together. So that way they already have them in their inbox. That way you can have a great conversation about something that you are both looking at. That could be a clip of the video that shows the mallet robots in Manual Cinema's *Frankenstein*, or it's a photo of those still walking gigantic puppet creatures, or it's page five of the tech rider that really does say, I need a day prior load-in, and that white marley. Computers, they can be amazing. You have to just put 'em to work people, and you have to have all your stuff together and have it hosted and posted correctly.

I hope this has been helpful in getting your elevator pitch in place. Practice, practice practice, get comfortable with that language. Again, the mission here with your elevator pitch is to leave them with a picture, or an idea, or a sensibility in their brain that helps them define your dance, your theater, your circus company. Helps define you different from the all the other product that is out in the marketplace. That's your mission here.

And the other mission is for you to go see a show, go see a show, go see a live show, buy a ticket, or don't buy a ticket because it's free. And then my god, give the artist at least five bucks. You could do that, right? Because there is an artist out there that cannot wait to have you in their audience.

Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)