

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 29

LAURA COLBY: Hello, this is Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we are talking about COVID. We have spoken about coping mechanisms to address the stress of our work. We've spoken a lot about making lemonade out of lemons, of making the best out of lousy circumstances. We have spoken about recovering from mistakes. We talked about getting through and recovering from the 2008 recession. And I would say that nothing prepared us for the shutdowns our industry faced that began in mid-March 2020, and didn't end really, for those of us here in New York City at least, did not end until 2022.

But actually now that we can look back, we were prepared. We may not have known it, but we were. And we were because of the artists. Because innovation, creativity, and approaching things in a different way, the stuff of the arts itself, that is what the artists brought us during COVID. It was their tenacity, their ability to say, *Hey, let's try this. Let's become a television production company. Even though that's not in our training, let's create dances for the small screen. Even though that's not the frame we typically work in. Let's turn the work itself into scores that can be enacted or embodied at home.*

We talked about force majeure in Episode 21: "When things go wrong". But the 2020 pandemic takes the cake. It didn't just impact the companies we represent at Elsie. It was not only industry-wide, it was the entire globe. It is the force majeure of all force majeure. Needless to say, having your small business completely shut down, turned off, if you will, literally overnight, was a shock of a scale I never could have imagined.

It was Elsie's 25th anniversary. It was a season full of career-highs, including a theatre for young audiences commission and a premiere at the Kennedy Center. We had two companies at the Spoleto Festival. We had a substantial tour of Ragamala's

newest large-scale work on its way to seven or eight commissioning venues. We had incredible momentum for several projects that had been in the pipeline of development for two or three years. It was an exciting time for us.

I absolutely had a moment where I completely fell apart sobbing. All I could think was, at that moment, this is how 25 years of this work is going to end for me and my team. Seriously? So in early April of 2020, once we realized this COVID thing was not going to go away, we held a zoom call inviting all of the Elsie-represented artists and companies across all of the time zones and big oceans. I was in California. Anna was in New York City. Jimena was in Bogota. Our companies were all over the world.

On that call, we talked about the practicality of their cancellations and how we were approaching them - that we were literally negotiating each of them one by one as singular force majeure because that's what they were. Each of the cancellations had different circumstances based on the contract. Some of the venues had paid deposits and wanted all of their money back as per their contract. Some paid a settlement or a kill fee for their cancellations. Some let us keep all the money - but they asked for some kind of something that the company could deliver online, virtually, be that recorded or live, somehow in return.

On that call, we all agreed that existing full-length recordings were not going to be offered up, in lieu of live performance. We weren't just going to send a video and say, *Hey, play this online*. And this was because none of those recordings for our roster artists were built for the small screen. Sure, they were good quality. They were high resolution recordings, yes. But that didn't make them broadcast quality. They were great for presenters to watch to get to know an artist, or a specific work, or to share with theater directors, or faculty or students in educational settings, but they were not made for the general audience.

We talked about rescheduling cancellations beginning in fall of 2020, which of course turned out to be way too early. We shared coping mechanisms as a group. At the end of the meeting, we took a moment to say, *By the way, if you've got something in mind in response to this moment that you think could translate, could actually work for this moment for the small at home screen, for our presenters, for general audiences, let us know. You don't have to tell us now on this call, but let us know if you might be thinking of something. We're all ears. We're game and we're ready to ask our presenters anything*. Much to our surprise, we ended up handling five projects immediately that were of the moment.

We will be speaking with and about Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol in a moment. But I also wanted to talk about other pandemic driven projects that took place for us, again, that were completely unexpected.

We had three Monuments installations confirmed for fall 2020 by Craig Walsh, the Brisbane, Australian-based visual artist. Usually, Craig is on site for seven days to film the portraits and then to install the projections. As he couldn't leave Australia, Craig agreed to hire a local technician, local to the U.S. presenter, giving that local technician detailed instructions, which were basically Craig's actual IP, his intellectual property, in order to implement Craig's process and design. So in order to do that, the local technician had to agree to sign an NDA, a non-disclosure form agreeing not to steal Craig's artistic process. That they were hired to implement his design.

The venues were thrilled with this arrangement as it meant their outdoor installations could go forward, but also, one of their local technicians could actually have some work. It was a gift for everyone. Each of the three venues paid the fees they'd already agreed to. Those venues were Arizona Arts Live in Tucson, Strathmore in Bethesda, Maryland, and Discovery Green in Houston. Each of them were so grateful to have a safe way to convene their audiences outside to take in Craig's stunning installation that is Monuments.

Monica Bill Barnes was meant to premiere *The Running Show* at the American Dance Festival in July of 2020. That premiere didn't happen until two years later in July of '22. However, Monica and her creative partner, and their company members, transformed *The Running Show* into an online virtual experience titled *Keep Moving*. *Keep Moving* offered insight into the stories of 16 dancers from New York City's Hunter College. And what they were doing to preserve their identity as artists and movers during a time when there were no studios or theaters to move in.

Another example of a live performance engagement being transformed into something else for the moment was Rafael Palacios *Black Voices*. Rafael is the artistic director of Sankofa Danzafro, an Afro Colombian company of dancers and drummers based in Medellín, Colombia. The company had a confirmed engagement with Celebrity Series in Boston for January of '21, that wasn't going to happen. With an interpreter, Rafael worked one on one with seven Black Boston community members to tell their personal stories through words and movement. These stories were captured on short dance films that were shown online on December 6th of 2020. All of this was accomplished online between Boston and Medellín, online, virtually. The films were available for viewing for an extended period.

Yanira Castro's *last audience* is a performance work in which audience collectively enact a score in a defined space together. It was meant to be presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in October of 2020. Needless to say, that live engagement did not happen. But what happened instead is that Yanira created a book for the scores that the MCA printed. And then there were several online events that the MCA hosted in the fall of 2020, whereby at home participants could enact the scores, and they could also intersect with Yanira online. In this way, Yanira's artistic integrity of intentional, collective expression and action was fulfilled.

And now I'm really excited to welcome Sarah Fornace and Kyle Vegter from Manual Cinema into this podcast. These are two of the five artistic directors from Manual Cinema and they're here so we can really dig into the story of the making of Manual Cinema's *Christmas Carol* for the small screen for the pandemic moment. They are going to introduce themselves, and then we'll get into how it all came about and how it all happened.

Welcome, Sarah and Kyle.

KYLE VEGTER: Thanks, yeah, thanks for having us. I'm a big fan of the podcast. My name is Kyle Vegter. I'm one of the co artistic directors of Manual Cinema. Creatively, I'm a composer and sound designer and I'm Elsie's main contact with the company and handle most things to do with money and finance for the company and contract negotiations, stuff like that.

SARAH FORNACE: Hi, I'm Sarah. So thrilled to be here and be a part of it. I am one of the five co artistic directors of Manual Cinema. I creatively work on the visual team. So I do directing and puppeteering and performing in the pieces and choreography and some scripting and storyboarding. I'm also our education director, so I lead workshops, and any other educational activities we have. I also am our casting and contracting manager, so I do the casting searches as well as contracting, um, all of the wonderful artists that we work with.

LAURA: And as we discussed earlier, when the pandemic hit and we had that all Elsie Zoom meeting call with roster artists from across the globe. We declared that we felt very strongly that existing video was not going to be the answer to the moment. You guys have great full-length recordings, but there was a general agreement and consensus that the answer to the moment was not to sell those videos in some way. But that what would very much resonate would be new work, something for the moment, something created for the small screen and the at-home audiences. The way we remember that moment is that a couple of weeks after that zoom meeting, you guys came back to us and said, Hey, we've got this idea to make a virtual but live show of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and to present a

season of these shows in December live from our studios. And then somehow, sell it to audiences everywhere. And thus began our mutual adventure. And Kyle, what I'm remembering you saying is, So, Laura, if we're gonna do this thing, we need \$100,000.

KYLE: Sounds like me.

LAURA: And the first thing on our end was, Okay, \$100,000. We're going to break that down to 20 presenters at \$5,000 each to commission this work. Now, in the past, in general, commissioners can often pay upwards of 25,000, 35,000, 40,000, \$50,000 to help create a new work. In the direness of the moment, \$5,000, somehow felt within reach, and we ultimately ended up raising \$63,000 to create the work, not bad considering the circumstances. And what we relied upon were your relationships, your incredibly strong relationships, because at this point you guys have been touring, I think seven or eight years. And by that time we had a lovely handful of venues that had actually presented you twice already. So they were convinced. They knew the work was outstanding and they were going to have you back and they wanted to keep presenting your work. And that groove that we had dug in the touring world was now going to show up big time. And it did show up big time. I'd love to hear from your side what you remember about that moment and how the five of you as a collective, because you're a collective, cooked this thing up.

KYLE: We had tossed around the idea of doing Christmas Carol for a long time. It had been sort of in the back of our minds, I think we all, like, kind of love the holidays, just generally. And a lot of our work tends to be kind of like spooky and the medium lends itself well to spookiness being, shadow, shadow puppetry. So ghost stories were in our wheelhouse and a lot of the work that we had made up to that point here involves some kind of, Ghostly thing or spooky thing or spooky theme. And so *Christmas Carol* always felt like a no brainer for us. And, the reason we hadn't done it sooner was just that we're always so busy in the fall. Like, as you know, the fall is often a big touring season for us. And up to that point had been super busy for us in a touring way. And so we just never had the time leading up to the holidays to make *A Christmas Carol*, though we definitely wanted to.

I think it was like summer 2020, when we started having conversations about it, but when we were looking at, you know, completely cleared schedule for the fall, like nothing. You know, all the, everything was canceled. Just started throwing around the idea of like, Oh, maybe this is the time that we do *A Christmas Carol*. And I feel like from there it went to like, okay, well, what would that look like? Obviously we're not going to get people in a space together. Well, how many people could we safely get into like our studio? You know, like, could we get a cast

together? Could like the music team be a- what did we call them pod and the visual team be a pod and we could stay far enough away that we could remain two separate pods and that would be safe and we could test every other day. We figured out a way that it felt safe and felt, doable and. Like something that sounded like fun to us. And I think that's when we started the conversation in earnest with you, Laura, about like how to, how to get the money to make something like that.

And then, I mean, I think Laura, you had the great idea about making them micro commissions, like that we would put the ask out for 5,000 as opposed to like 10 or 20 thousand and, it just seemed to me like there was something right about the moment and the ask and the show. And like you said, our existing relationship with presenters. Where it made a lot of sense to a lot of people all at once. And like you said, we were able to raise a fair amount of money very quickly in these small \$5,000 chunks. All these presenters, you know, their seasons were canceled. They had like a little bit of budget that they still had their hands on, but not a ton. And so \$5,000 felt doable and they could tell their, their audiences like, *Hey, this is like a live thing being made for this specific occasion*. The show is partly about the pandemic and takes place in the pandemic. So it felt like we found the right idea at the right time and put it in front of the right people and for the right price.

LAURA: And you can't ever underestimate the power of a holiday show. That is often the question I am asked by my artists. What does the market want? And I'm like, oh no, don't, don't, don't do that. Don't make work for the market. But do make a holiday show. Make your "Nutcracker." Please, just not necessarily a nutcracker, but make a holiday show. And so you hit a sweet spot with fulfilling a very serious need at the time because all that was available was canned material. The majority of it was not new because making new work was virtually impossible for all the reasons we know. But more importantly, you made a holiday show. You fed the hungry beast. The venues were very pleased to have something new that they could actually talk about as a new show. It was a title that people knew. And then, of course, there was the fact that it was actually going to be live. Like, really live, people.

KYLE: Definitely.

LAURA: What Manual Cinema did, and this is where you are blessed with a home, you have your own space. You created your pods. You were, if I have this correctly, in three separate rooms, performing separately, masked, except for the narrator, who was not masked, who is the main character in the show. But they were pretty much on stage in their space on their own throughout the performance. But the schedule of shows, there were 22 of them? The schedule of shows, which we carefully timed to make people on the West Coast as happy as we could and make

people on the East Coast as happy, you know, we did our best because this was like the old, bad old days of live television.

This show was actually live. So when it went up at seven o'clock Chicago time, that meant it was going to be eight o'clock in New York, but it was going to be five o'clock in California. And we did our best to move the showtimes and have a variety of showtimes. But when you bought a ticket, which ultimately gave you a link, and you cracked open that link on your phone or your tablet or your home computer, you saw a live performance that was happening in Chicago at that minute. And the company miraculously did that 20 something times.

We didn't know what we were getting into or what we were doing or how we were going to really execute or deliver it, right? But it happened, and we figured it out. We had a little help from our friends at Marquee. Who helped us with the links. All the links were branded. So there was no swapping or forwarding links, like that couldn't happen.

KYLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Different than branded. But yes. Yes. I know you mean there was like a security-

LAURA: It was a security thing.

KYLE: -situation to figure out, yeah.

LAURA: So there were lots of links. So for example, if the show date was December 20, 2020, and Cal Performances in Berkeley, as well as Seattle Theatre Group in Seattle, ArtsEmerson in Boston, had all decided that that was the show date they were going to sell to their audiences, each of them had three very specific links that they gave to their ticket buyers. And Manual Cinema had its own fan base and gave its link out to its ticket buyers. And again, everybody would be watching the same live show on December 20, 2020. It was an astounding feat of technical execution.

Sarah, I'd love for you to talk about how in three separate rooms did you guys deliver a cohesive show? How do you do that?

SARAH: Yeah, I mean, it was very much somewhere between theater and television. Not that I've worked in television, but what like I imagine it is based on like TV and movies about working in television. We weren't like totally in separate separate rooms, but we were in this giant warehouse, which definitely had its own problems. But one of the best parts about it is that we were in this enormous space. Concrete floor is just huge. So we could be, you know, like dozens and dozens of feet from each other.

LaQuis Harkins was the star of our show, she played Aunt Trudy, originated the role, she also did a lot of, like, voicing of other characters in it as well. Julia Miller is one of the artistic directors of Manual Cinema, she's also, on the visual end of things, directs and writes and stars in things and designs, and they were the pod that was, like, largely in charge of Aunt Trudy's world, which is the framing narrative of the story. LaQuis was the only one unmasked. She and Julia were in a pod all the way on one end of the warehouse.

And I think Kyle, you were the one who wrote like the first story treatment of it. And Christmas Carol is set in Christmas 2020. It's set in the pandemic. It was written to be like the moment that we were in. And so the conceit was that she was unboxing this puppet show of her late husband's and moving around her house as she was haunted by these ghosts and this puppet show came to life.

So for both artistic and kind of COVID reasons, we had this giant nine foot by 12 foot screen behind them. And we projected like different rooms in Aunt Trudy's house onto that. So, Julia is like changing the lighting and puppeting all around LaQuis. Meanwhile, Lizzie and I were in a puppeteer zone, podded together, in another section of the giant warehouse room.

And we were doing most of the inside the Christmas Carol story work - the overhead projectors and toy theater. Then, Kyle and Ben were in yet another area of the space, doing the music, but it was all in-ears, so that was like a little bit eerie, because we had to hear it piped in, there wasn't music, like, coming from them, even though we could see them, you know, doing the action of it.

Lizi Breit, was a full time puppeteer with us for many years, puppeteer and designer. She is an amazing artist, an amazing animator and printmaker, who still works with us a ton. And, Ben Kauffman is another one of the artistic directors of Manual Cinema, he works sound design and composing with Kyle, as well as many other things within the company. And then in another room was a control center with Mike Usrey, our, technical director, sound engineer, also, computer genius extraordinaire who worked with Ben on a lot of the technicalities behind, what is the data flow and how do we stream this?

LAURA: So was it Mike who was yelling, "places please" and "go lights and sound and puppets"? I mean, who was on the God mic?

KYLE: The only other person I'd add is just that Shelby was our stage manager. She was queuing the sound design and, video transitions and stuff like that. So she was

our stage manager and she was in yet another corner. It was like a 5500 square foot big open room, like in a warehouse.

SARAH: Shelby Sparkle was our long time stage manager and full time stage manager before the pandemic. And she, as Kyle said, was video mixing the show, scoring sound design. But my memory in terms of like internal "goes" is that it was a lot like a Manual Cinema show and that we all had the feed. And we were really timing stuff off of the monitors and off of internal queuing. So it works a lot like *Frankenstein*, which also has multiple sites for performers, where things were made.

And then there was also some of the puppetry sequences had some like canned sequences that we puppeted inside of and on top of, and that was often Drew and I, who are married. Drew Dir, another one of the artistic directors, puppet designer and a writer, we just had our first baby, so we were very much podded. And we shot a lot of that puppetry and that allowed us to have a density of puppetry. So there was some pre-recorded things being layered in with the live elements.

LAURA: It's remarkable. So the five artistic directors all performed live with the addition of Shelby and Mike and Lizi and LaQuis. So there were nine of you. Amazing. The wizardry. I know we hate to use that word, but the wizardry behind how you executed it - it's just amazing to me.

So I'd love to talk a little bit about the numbers if we can, and I'm remembering that there were 13 commissioning venues, but there were 33 presenting venues.

I want to talk about the expansion of audiences. So, in terms of audiences, one of the clever things that you guys have always done, which I talked about in past episodes, is after your performances, you always say to the audience, *please sign up for our newsletter. We will send you information about us.* You capture emails. If you go to your website. Anyone who's listening, you too can sign up for Manual Cinema's newsletter.

Well, after you tour the world for seven or eight years, you are collecting emails from all over the world. And one of the things that we discovered in the data you guys collected is that you had people buying tickets from all over the world, from Australia, as south as Peru, I recall, deep into Eastern Europe. And definitely from the UK and that is just a result of having had performances, yes, in Scotland. Yes, in South America. Yes, in Australia and capturing those emails. So you had your hometown fan base in Chicagoland. But then you had your touring fan base that you had been cultivating all these years. And so these people really showed up. And I'm wondering if you remember, first of all, what did you charge per ticket? Because

we were recalling that there was like, if you're a single person, we're going to ask you for X amount. If you're a family, we're going to ask you for this amount, but it was all done on good faith. You know, we didn't know how many people were going to be sitting in our living room.

KYLE: The general, idea that we went with was just an honor system, and just like we would give people different tiers, And suggestions about which tier they should pay based on how many people were watching. If my memory serves, it was like one person was \$15. Two people was like \$25 or \$30. If you were a full family, it was like \$45. And then I think we offered a or you can pay \$60 if you want to support the company, like a higher amount. And we might've even given an option to pay what you wanted to, which-

LAURA: I think you did.

KYLE: In the end, a lot of people ended up doing that and paying even more than we asked. I think it was just like the right idea at the right time. People were looking for something like this, like a lot, a thing that was actually live and not just like Netflix, which we had all been, you know, binging for months by that point.

LAURA: Right.

KYLE: And like everybody had money in their pocket. Like no one had been going out to dinner for months or going to shows or doing anything. And so it seemed like people were very happy to be more generous than they might've been. Because we gave them something that was live and that was original and that was new and, you know, we were trying something different.

SARAH: And I also think part of it is, like, us being a touring company, we often go to a city once, and then maybe we come back after several years. We're not always in Nashville, or always in New York, or always, you know, or even always in Chicago, even though we're based here.

Before the Christmas Carol, on our social media, Julia would often be talking to people saying, *when are you coming back? I saw this show. When are you coming back? When are you coming back?* And this was a show that could go everywhere all at once.

And then when I started touring, I would repeatedly have people come up to me, after the shows and say that they had seen the Christmas Carol in 2020 and how much it meant to them. I remember one of the first gigs I did was going back to Scotland to take over a role in Leonardo at Edinburgh. And a woman came up to me

and said, you know, my family wanted to get together at Christmas and we couldn't be together. So we all watched Manual Cinema's *Christmas Carol* together. And that is, like, one of the few good memories I have, of this time and the pandemic. So that really has meant a lot to me and, and felt very, like, very unique to this production.

KYLE: Yeah, and that reminds me, one other thing we did that was really fun for us and I think fun for people watching and that made it even more live was that, you mentioned a little bit before that after all of our live performances for years, we invite the audience up on stage to like ask questions and get a closer look at how we're doing things. We wanted to have some kind of version of that for this run too. After each performance, we would go around and explain what we were doing and how we did this and how we did that. And then there was a chat for everybody that was watching the show. So people could type in questions or like, even just like talk to each other about stuff in the show, in the chat. And so we had a little Q and A for everyone that was watching that night or that day. It felt like more of a community and we're all in the same place at the same time in this weird way.

SARAH: Yeah like an event. Yeah, I remember the decision to have that chat because I was also watching the puppet slam network and other people who were doing these kind of at specific time like, live online events. And I just remember being in the chat and being so thrilled to you know say like oh like so good to see you haven't seen you since like before this started not that I was seeing them But I was I felt like running into someone at a theater, or it's like one of the times where I'm like, Oh, this is feels like a digital version of something that I am hungering for, like in a theatrical context.

LAURA: And just so the listener understands, yes, we had our commissioning venues. But everybody paid to present the show. Our presenters paid Manual Cinema a fee to present the show. We established, a single, a minimum threshold of \$2,500 for the first show. And then \$500 for each additional show. And just as we did with the commission, because not everybody could come up with \$5,000, which is how we ended up with that strange \$63,000, you know, we didn't turn any money away because we had some commissioners, I think one commissioner came in at \$1,500. That's fine. We weren't going to say, no, we're not going to take your money, you know? So in the same way we would negotiate with the venues to present the show, but at a minimum, it was \$2,500 for that first show.

We did give a small little discount to the commissioning venues. They got the first show for 1,500. That was the one wee little concession or perk, if you will, that we gave our commissioning venues and that felt appropriate. But, we knew that the liveness was so key and we called it a "live stream" because there was so much

saturation of stuff online. We wanted to differentiate what it was that made this so special and it was a live stream. We're in actual live performance happening in Chicago at that moment.

Kyle, do you remember what kind of income Manual Cinema saw from the so called tour dates, but also, from the tickets that you sold? The direct sales of Manual Cinema had, because again, if you didn't have a performing arts center in your life, if you weren't on ArtsEmerson's mailing list, for example, but you knew Manual Cinema, you were on Manual Cinema's mailing list, you could have accessed a ticket through Manual Cinema. Or, conversely, if you were on an ArtsEmerson's list, but not Manual Cinema, and ArtsEmerson sent you an email about this thing they were doing, that was a way for you to get a ticket.

KYLE: About the different streams thing for a minute because I do remember spending a lot of time on that and it being very complicated to figure out but I do think we like struck a good balance and the deal was you could always buy a ticket to any show through our website and we had the tiered ticket pricing that I talked about and then like you said presenters would pay us a fee to be able to sell tickets through their website.

So you could, any given show, you might be able to buy a ticket through Arts Emerson, you might be able to buy a ticket through CalPerformances that night. But you could always buy a ticket through our website. And then in addition, you could buy a ticket through MarqueeTV who had their own subscriber base and people going to their website. And we just agreed on a minimum ticket price. And then you could charge whatever you wanted above that.

LAURA: And that was that \$15. That was that- that \$15 minimum threshold. Yeah.

KYLE: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And in terms of numbers that we brought in, we had about \$63,000 in ticket sales and that's from just people buying tickets through our website and people buying tickets through our MarqueeTV. And then We had \$66,000 in commissions. And \$75,000 in performance fees, fees that presenters would pay to have access to the stream.

LAURA: So that is phenomenal. And of course, for Elsie, our representation work for Manual Cinema, listeners know that I work on a 20 percent commission. So we of course, with every sale that came through Elsie for Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol. Elsie got its 20%. Manual Cinema got its 80%. So the numbers you heard there, the \$75,000 from the so-called touring engagements. It was money manual cinema never would have had had they not made this work right there's that and it also for us this translated into hundreds of contracts for us people.

So, practically speaking, one of the first things we did is we created a two-page contract, because our regular touring contract is some 14 pages and then there's the tech rider which is another 14 pages. It's a very different scenario when nobody is physically showing up at your venue. We could eliminate 10, 12 pages of our regular touring contract, which is all about liability and insurance. I'm like, why are we talking about insurance? Nobody's going anywhere. No one's going to set fire to this theater. We got to eliminate so much stuff. And we made it a super simple agreement. You are buying a link to a live feed. That's it, people. So, on these dates and times, you're gonna pay us by this date. This is how you're paying us. This is the show we're gonna deliver for you. It was the smartest damn thing we did on our end to be able to execute those engagements and those contracts so that we could handle the numbers that we dealt with.

But when you consider that both parties, Elsie and Manual Cinema, were at zero. I mean, you guys literally came off tour on March 14, 2020, came out of the woods of Canada and it was over, over. We had 61 cancellations. And I will look up how many were Manual Cinema, but it was a lot of them. But for the simple fact that from zero, from nothing, from this desert of no live performance anywhere, no how, in December of 2020, to have been able to pull this off - it is really a testimony to accessing a level of creativity, not just as nerdy arts workers, but also as super nerdy performers, and being able to be like, *yeah, we can do this. Let's put on a show, damn it.* We're going to do this in our massive warehouse in our pods and we're going to link it all up and sync it all up and we're going to deliver a live feed that if you know it exists, you can see this thing happening all over the world in screens located all over the world.

So I know for us, Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol was part of the reason why we are still literally in business today, and we're so grateful for the creation of this work, and the experience we had doing something that we had no idea we could do, and you guys for bringing us this project, and saying, *we're not quite sure how this is going to work, but let's figure it out.* And I remember like every week we figured out something new. It had huge impact on us. I'd love to hear how this changed the environment, if you will, for the not just the five of you, but the other four people who were directly involved in the creation of the project and delivery of the project.

KYLE: I would just echo what you just said, Laura, about like, how important it was for us and how much we depended on Elsie in that moment. Executing 50 contracts or something crazy like that. Like, we couldn't have done that on our own.

So, I do remember as a time where, you, me and Jimena specifically, we're just like in constant communication, like 24 hours for like four months. We somehow pulled

off this crazy thing. But I mean, speaking like as a performer and as one of the artistic directors that made the thing, uh, and Ben and I performed in it too. It was really emotional, just to be in a room doing the thing that you've been doing, you know, nonstop for the past seven or eight years. And then all of a sudden you couldn't do it. Like, I remember that being kind of traumatic for me personally, but also for the company. I mean, we're at the point where. Every single day was planned out years in advance just to execute, just to get the number of shows that we had on the road on the road. We had built this really complicated, big machine and for that machine to just stop one day was wild. And so to get a little shred of that back, you know, six, seven months later, I think was really powerful. Yeah, it just brought us all together or as together as we humanly possibly could be in that time, to do the thing, you know, to do the thing that we knew how to do.

LAURA: And Sarah, you had given birth when?

SARAH: Yeah, I had given birth in May 2020 and in some ways, I feel like the last time I had any track of like linear time was probably before that was probably March 2020. Since then it's just been a miasma. I was like 30 odd weeks pregnant with him when I was doing my last *Frankenstein* show in the Arctic Circle in Canada, mid March before everything shut down. I was really looking forward to the touring season.

I was actually like, great. I'm having him in May, I'll have some time in the summer when Chicago's really beautiful with the baby, and then he's gonna be my tour baby. We're going to the Netherlands. We're going to use those cute cribs in the Netherlands. We're going to do this. We're going to do that. And of course that all evaporated. And I remember we were doing a lot of for higher, like bits and pieces of gigs, but I feel like the *Christmas Carol* was like, all of a sudden, like very grounding, very like, yes, let's like write a story and like figure out furniture and like make a bunch of paper puppets really fast.

Even though it's like a very, like, funny thing to do with one's time, it, felt the most, true to real life, or it felt like this is the thing I know and love to do with, these people, I'm really grateful to do it. But there was also, I remember, like, a little bit of high anxiety, especially about getting each other sick.

I had my small baby, and my dad, who's susceptible to secondary infections. I know other people also had people in their household or themselves had complicated risk factors. So I remember there was a lot of, *should we do this, how can we do this safely?* Going off of whatever information we could find off the CDC's website. Also I was postpartum. So I have the very fragmented, intense memories, of making it.

KYLE: I'm glad you brought that up because, yeah, I also remember just really seriously weighing the downsides. What if someone gets really sick? And that would be because of us, you know what I mean, that'd be on the company if that happened because we tried to do this thing and weighing like, *is it worth it to risk that and how much risk is okay* and just like constant check ins with the people that we're working with of like, does this feel comfortable to you? Is there a way we can make it more comfortable for you? Is this amount of risk? Okay. And how do we get people to and from? The studio, you know, like some people didn't have cars and like, or taking public transit felt like too much of a risk for all of us. There was a lot of just like logistics that, you know, years later, that feels very normal now, or like we kind of solve those problems once we started touring again and all that, but this was the beginning of that, I think. And for us, and yeah, there was a lot of, discussion and figuring all that stuff out. Yeah. Figuring out how to do the show in a way that felt safe for everybody. And felt safe for the company and like acceptable level of risk.

LAURA: We did some, archival diving and there were also some other COVID engagements that you guys actually did in 2020. I found the information about the City Theatre Company in Pittsburgh that was going to present *Frankenstein*. And changed it to an outdoor drive-in engagement. Remember drive-in engagements, people? That was a thing. People created drive in engagements. And were you able to confirm, Kyle, if you guys actually did 17 shows?

KYLE: Yeah, that sounds right. We were on the ground for three weeks.

LAURA: And there were three musicians, right? Three Manual Cinema musicians and Mike?

KYLE: Four musicians, Mike, our sound engineer, technical director. I was there for the beginning and the end. I think as representative of the company, making sure everyone was safe, making sure we got everything there and the show up and that everything looked, I was kind of like the artistic director there to make sure that everything worked.

LAURA: Considering in October of '20. I mean, you guys had to make a decision, we're going to get on airplanes because I don't think you drove.

KYLE: Oh, we drove. We definitely drove. I remember driving the van. I remember driving the van.

LAURA: Oh, right, because you had to bring the percussion wall and the instrumentation.

KYLE: So the percussion was there. They provided the percussion instruments. We drove for safety just cause we didn't think it was safe to fly everyone. Um, and it's not that far. It's like a seven hour drive. Like I think pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, we would have flown because it'd be so much easier, but, yeah, for safety. We drove and, yeah, four musicians. Yeah. Those six of us total, I think.

LAURA: Amazing. Was going to just going to say you made a company decision about safety and you felt okay about getting into a car together, but to your point, as a small employer employing these people, these are all small business questions that we have to ask ourselves in these moments. And you might've had a performer who was going to be like, I'm not getting into a van for six hours. You found the people who were game to do it and you went to Pittsburgh and you had amazingly 17 performances of *Frankenstein* where they projected your archival footage and the company performed live. And it was a drive-thru engagement.

KYLE: Yeah, it was wild.

SARAH: We, we did have some last minute recasting for that one. Cause we were requiring a lot of testing, a lot of PCR testing, which luckily was free, in Chicago, one of our musicians who was contracting was supposed to go on the gig, like at the final test before getting in the van, tested positive, and then we recast-

KYLE: Recast, right. I totally.

LAURA: I remember that.

KYLE: That was so stressful. I think I blanked it out of my mind, but that definitely happened. We were making those decisions with the performers, you know, like it was like, we were walking into a conversation with like, *this is what feels safe to us. Like what feels safe to you guys.*

LAURA: Right.

KYLE: It was definitely a collaboration with them in terms of figuring out what felt safe, but yeah, definitely. I remember researching. Like, does our workers comp, would that cover someone if someone got sick when they were touring with us? And the answer was no, there was all this stuff that I had never had to think about as a small business owner. This level of responsibility that we, we always have, for sure, but it was just to a different level.

SARAH: I remember even when the vaccinations came out, we were like, requesting and contracts that performers be up-to-date on their vaccinations and also get their flu shots. And that's like a level of like health detail that we had never engaged with, you know in our performers.

LAURA: It's a fine line, and you know, again, when you are the small business and you have that level of responsibility and commitment, and you have to make decisions about that. And the listeners just heard the story of how we lost an engagement because the only performer who knew the role declined to be vaccinated. And they were coming from Italy and they were not going to be allowed in the country because that was a mandate by the U.S. That you couldn't enter the country without proof of vaccine. So we lost that engagement. That was rough.

KYLE: Wow.

LAURA: Yeah. It was in that little window before Omicron came and ruined everything.

Manual Cinema's *Christmas Carol* went on from this first season in 2020 with these 20 something live streamed performances and in December of '21, the decision was to sell a recording of the show, not to do the live performances again. In that year, we had a handful of venues that most of them had presented the company. with a live stream in December of '20 that brought the show back now in a recorded form and they could make up their own show times and we packaged, we created package deals for duration of time. But again, we kept that minimum threshold of \$2,500 for that first show. And then we would negotiate based on what the duration of their engagement was.

But then '22 rolls around and you guys, look what you did. You made an actual stage show out of this thing you had created in pods. And now you can all be in a room together. You can have live audiences. So I'd love for you to talk about what that was like, to be able to have that Writers Theater season. For the *Christmas Carol* stage show in December of '22.

KYLE: Yeah, totally. So Writers Theatre is, is a great regional theatre here in Chicago. It's in the north suburbs a town called Glencoe. And we had been in talks with them for at least a year before. About remaking an older show of ours called *Mementos Mori*, and we were working on it. It was going to premiere in April 2020. Isn't that cute? And yeah, so, so we had this contract with them to remake this show and do a six week run of our new version of *Memento Mori* at Writers Theatre, and obviously that went away, and so Writers ended up being one of the

commissioners and the presenters of the 2020 online version of *Christmas Carol*, so they were involved in it in that way.

And then for the next two years, we basically just went back and forth with them because they had, they had already paid us the majority of the fee for the six-week run of *Momentus Mori* in April, 2020. I mean lucky for us. They didn't want to ask for that fee back, but there was a like, okay. Like we paid you this large chunk of money, you know, you owe us a show basically. And so there was a lot of back and forth with them. They were super flexible about it and super great to work with on it, but a lot of back and forth with them about like, okay, when do we do it? And we were going to try and do it in 2021. And then Omicron happened and we're like, Oh, it's safer to just like wait longer. And so we just kind of kept putting it off.

Our plan was to do this new version of *Momentus Mori* in 2020 at Writers Theatre and then to start touring it again, with Elsie. And I think by the time 2022 rolled around and we were getting into like actual dates with writers on when we could do it, it just kind of didn't make sense to us anymore. And we were much more excited about trying to create a stage version of *Christmas Carol* as something that could, that, you know, it could be our holiday show. It could be our, like our, the moneymaker, that we could kind of count on each year to bring in a certain amount of revenue for the company. We just thought had more legs. It had a longer life for the company than a remake of *Mementos Mori*. And so we just pitched it to Writers like hey, this is a thought we've had, you know You said you obviously saw the 2020 version and your audience saw the 2020 version and is familiar with it, like would you be interested in a live staged version and they were into it. Then we, went to work adapting it and, you know, figuring out the staging and the band and tweaking the story and tweaking the script and recasting Aunt Trudy. Yeah, we did a six-week run in 2022.

SARAH: It did require kind of a significant rewrite because like, more than site specific, I would say our work is medium-specific. So the original version was very much written to be experienced, like on your laptop or on your TV. And there were even relationships in the story, like Aunt Trudy and her niece, that's kind of mediated say through a chat function and things that just didn't make sense in the live show and we were also really influenced by Writer's space. We essentially transformed it from something designed to be viewed on your screen to something specifically designed for this theater, because they have this very beautiful intimate, thrust stage, deep thrust with audience on three quarters. And then a flat proscenium stage behind it.

So that's, that really influenced the way that we're in Aunt Trudy's living room that influenced even the puppetry, like there was a lot more shadow in the version for

online and this we started doing more toy theater because it doesn't have the projection distances and things and allows us to make Uncle Joe, her, late husband's puppet stage like much more physical and present and in the middle of the audience. So it was definitely the space of the internet and the space of Writers demanded different things of the show and the story.

LAURA: And now this year, it's moving into the Studebaker, right? In December?

KYLE: Yeah, yeah, so we did a three week run in 2022 at Writers. And then they brought it back again in 2023. We did a much longer run, like a six week run.

SARAH: I think so, yeah.

KYLE: And then this year they, they have a new artistic director. And I think just wanted to kind of do something new, for their audience around the holidays. We have this show. We think audiences will love it. Um, where can we do it? And so we started just asking around and, through trying to find a venue, maybe in New York, as you know, Laura, to try and bring the show there, which we still would love to do. And we ended up, talking to the Studebaker Theater here in Chicago, here in downtown Chicago. It's in the Fine Arts Building. It's a beautiful theater that's been recently renovated and that we did *Frankenstein* in as part of the International Puppet Festival in 2023.

We're doing a two week run, at the Studebaker Theatre this holiday season, and kind of adopting the show a little bit to fit in a more traditional proscenium space, whereas Writers was a very specific thrust space that we definitely used. So there's a little bit of adaptation that we're doing this year. The intention is that it will be a more long term home for the show. So at least the next three years, it would be at least at Studebaker. And then we may even try to build another version of the show that could go to New York or London.

LAURA: It's amazing. So the thing that started as a live stream into people's living room is now a stage show, which is brilliant. And will inevitably live on. It's a beautiful, beautiful show. We had, of course, the absolute inverse happen with the Kennedy Center commission of *Leonardo, A Wonderful Show About a Terrible Monster*, which was meant to premiere in October of '20, which of course did not happen. I remember the day when David Kilpatrick just called cause we were talking about maybe doing a similar, Oh, they'll perform it live in Chicago and it will be live streamed. But he called and he said, you know what, can you just make us a film, just make us a film. And they were true to the original spirit of the engagement. They paid the same fee they would have paid, had the company come and done that three week season in October of '20. And you guys made a film. And

the film was presented by the Kennedy Center on their website. We also went out to their educational partners. It was an amazing thing that happened. We actually had a film, and because we had declared from the start that existing archival footage was not going to cut it, now we had a film that you guys had actually made for the screen, quite specifically. So we were very happy to sell this piece in particular, and we were able to license with the author, Mo Willems, and his publicist, for the rights to do that. So we did all that, and we actually had presenters presenting *Leonardo* virtually as a film. And now *Leonardo* is a stage show.

So it's incredible to me that with one company, we have these two examples that all of them are ass-backwards and only came about because of the pandemic. They're great examples of what can happen with content. And again, the ingenuity, the innovation and the vision to just be able to sit and think, well, what if we do blah, blah, blah, and see what happens here. So, *Leonardo* is very much out on the road, especially this season, and will be next season.

Is there anything in particular else that you guys would like to share with other people about this moment in time that delivered such an impossible circumstance for all of us in the field?

KYLE: Prior to the pandemic, we had spent the seven or so years before that, like building this giant touring machine where we had like five shows on the road at any given time. We had four full time staff and the five of us were full time and, you know, the pandemic over the two years of the pandemic where touring wasn't really a thing. Like we just kind of slowly had to disassemble that machine and it was, you know, heartbreaking at times and really difficult and really stressful, but I do think it forced us to think about what was sustainable and that what we were trying to do before the pandemic just was not sustainable for the five of us or our staff.

I think it wasn't all bad, like, there was a silver lining. We had to rethink we're not going to rebuild that exact machine. Like, maybe the machine is a little smaller this time and a little more agile. And, maybe we tour two shows at a time as opposed to five. And, it forced us to make some changes that I think were really good for, the company and really good for just the five of us. I'm sure there are, that happened for a lot of people in a lot of different ways too. You had a bunch of time on your hands to kind of reevaluate and think about what was important and reprioritize. I feel like we definitely did that as a company.

SARAH: Yeah. And I, I feel like before the pandemic, it was just like, my life was traveling all over the world and meeting all sorts of interesting people and getting to perform with a wonderful group of people every day. And I definitely now feel

like I like, don't take it for granted. Like every time I get to perform *Frankenstein*, with an incredible group of people and every time I get to be in front of an audience and now that we get to do puppet time again, I get to like talk to people and like put puppets and like things in their hands right after they experience the story of Mary Shelley and the story of the show, it is fleeting, is a fleeting thing. So I really try to be like oh, I'm like treasuring this 'cause who knows?

LAURA: Who knows? I mean, and Sarah, you got your tour baby. I was with you in Berkeley, California, when *Frankenstein* finally took the stage at Cal Performances in Berkeley in October of '21. Again, in that little wee window before Omicron came in and wrecked everything. And now you've got two tour babies. And I was with you when *Frankenstein* went to Tucson, Arizona.

SARAH: I was talking to Kyle about this last week on tour, I started touring with Artemis, my daughter, my second born, when she was like six weeks barely, maybe she had had her six weeks appointment and then I took her out on the road for two and a half or three months and now looking back at it from a year I was like that's that was nuts. It really did feel like a do over. I did get to tour with her. I get to do the show and still be around my newborn and take her to the high desert and take her to the ocean. So even though it seems really surreal and I'm like, wow, past Sarah, you really did it.

LAURA: Those dates were so significant because I remember how emotional it was to be in Berkeley in October of '21 with *Frankenstein* and also, frankly, it was still emotional to be in Tucson with *Frankenstein* in October of '23 like that was still very emotional.

SARAH: Berkeley was the first time I got on an airplane and the first time I left my son. That was before I was pregnant with my daughter. It was 18 months out from May 2020. It was a really special show.

LAURA: Well, the theme of us not taking things for granted is certainly looming and it's ever present in our work here at Elsie every day. I mean, we just feel so blessed and so blessed to be able to continue to work with you too. And I want to say thank you so much for joining me and making this recording.

SARAH: It's so thrilling to get to be on the podcast.

KYLE: Thanks for having us. Thanks for doing the podcast.

LAURA: And thanks for the music, Manual Cinema, cause that's a, that's a Kyle Vector and Ben Kauffman score people right there.

KYLE: That's awesome. Yeah. I'm so glad that worked out.

LAURA: Fantastic. Well, thanks you guys. And listeners, you know what I'm going to say, Go see a show. Find it. Go see it. And please drop me a line and let me know what it was like for you.

You know where to find me. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)