

## 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 16

Hello, this is Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management. And today we're going to speak about expectations. Because expectations are huge in this field and it's best to address them as soon as you possibly can. That would be your expectation for your artist, your artist's expectation of you, and what your presenter's expectations are.

In alignment with keeping your eye on your production schedule, you need to keep your eye on expectation. In this way, you can remain honest with yourself and your artist and your presenters. Honest about your capacity. Honest about the market's response to specific work. Honest about what the market will bear in terms of fees. Honest about all of it.

When Manual Cinema first came to us for representation, we immediately fell in love with their gorgeous visual aesthetic. The novelty of the collaboration of the five artists, the poetic, heart wrenching stories they told through a collage of shadow puppetry, live actors, and live music.

And their touring expectations were a whole lot more than we knew we could possibly deliver in terms of bookings for the first two shows they had made. They had self represented themselves through a few home seasons, a handful of domestic tour dates, and two international engagements. They knew what it took. They really wanted representation to pick up the inquiries they were receiving so that they could stay focused on making new shows and also on their design work.

Their expectations were that they were going to have multiple shows out on tour at the same time because there was going to be so much interest in their work. We let them know that we had reservations about the level of fees they were looking for, that we couldn't possibly know what the overall market response was going to be to

their incredibly beautiful, poetic, multimedia collage of live theater with live music, but that we were certainly game to find out. We let them know that there'd be a limited number of venues that would be able to provide the technical requirements they were after, which were very similar what our dance companies require, which is a day-prior load-in to first day of show. And that we were concerned about all the stuff they had to tour with because they have a lot of stuff and because touring with the truck to schlep all of the furniture, the instruments, the overhead projectors, the puppets, and the screens that was going to slow them way down on the road. Also, all that stuff would increase their liability with all that stuff being driven, the amount of risk they were taking and ultimately increase their costs. We specifically asked them if they would consider figuring out a different way, figuring out specifically if they could check everything onto airplanes, while asking the presenter to provide very specific parts of what was needed to put on their stage shows.

After that initial meeting with Manual Cinema, they did come back to us to say that they had indeed figured out a solution to touring without a truck. They had created a way to pack everything up in sturdy boxes that could be checked onto airplanes with the touring company, with the venue providing instrumentation through a backline list detailed in the rider, along with the venue providing tables, the final projector, and the final big screen that the shows are ultimately projected onto. The company would carry on the overhead projectors that are critical for manual cinemas work and that they rely on for all of their shows because these overhead projectors, which aren't being made anymore, they could not survive being checked as luggage. So they'd be carried on like babies, basically.

The company understood our concern about fees, that it would be a big lift to introduce a new company in an already flooded market, especially a contemporary theater company, creating new works via a collaged multimedia method that most people had a hard time imagining without seeing the show live first. They agreed to scale down their expectations in terms of income from tour dates and the number of tours or the amount of tours while we did our best to get their work in front of as many programmers as we could.

Manual Cinema had a key season in New York City in the summer of 2015. It was really a co-production that ultimately garnered them an insane review in the New York Times. It wasn't just a great review and a Critic's Pick, but also the chief theater critic for The Times ordered up a special article on manual cinema to boot. So when it started as a two-week season in June got extended twice and ultimately ended up being a five week season. Because of this, we were able to share Manual Cinema's work with a surprising number of U. S. presenters that summer. The great news was that the market responded with a very positive "YES PLEASE" once they

experienced live theater with live music with Manual Cinema. Our expectations for the company's venue reach increased each season as the company became better known in the market.

Clearly, Manual Cinema was providing an option that our programmers were really interested in. The 2015/2016 season was our very first touring season for Manual Cinema. The company toured two different works, and we contracted, secured, eight touring engagements for them. In the 2019/2020 season, the company had six different works out on the road, sometimes with simultaneous tours of different shows, for a total of 25 engagements.

Before our world shut down due to the global pandemic, in five seasons of booking Manual Cinema, we toured them to just over 90 U.S. venues. They had their Canadian debut and returned to Canada several times. They've been presented in the Under the Radar Festival twice in New York City. They had three different works co-produced at the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival. They were presented at the Santiago a Mil festival in Chile and the Adelaide Festival in Australia. They had international tours to Mexico, Germany, Cairo, the Netherlands, and France. So yes, our initial expectations for Manual Cinema were far exceeded.

Since the pandemic, the engagements have been returning for Manual Cinema. We are not back at our 19/20 season levels for Manual Cinema. Due to all the changes in labor, the company does not have the capacity to have six different touring works out on the road at the same time. In the 24/25 season, the company will be touring three different works while they also create and premiere their first full length stage work, built for touring, post pandemic.

So yes, Manual Cinema's expectation story is a bit of a fairy tale. Yes, we were able to do good work for them. And their work is, hands down, extraordinary. I have not seen another theater company producing multimedia shadow puppet shows with the precision and skill that Manual Cinema does. Their work is also largely visual theater, so there's no language barriers. Their work is also typically for all ages - for any audience that is comfortable sitting in a very dark theater for an hour or more. Their special mix of multimedia with live music is something audiences are clamoring to experience. Their stories are beautiful in a poetic pull-on-your-heartstrings way. All said, Manual Cinema's work resonates right now.

Certainly being presented at festivals, programmers go out of their way to get to, such as the Under the Radar Festival in New York, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, and the Edinburgh International Fringe. These were all incredibly strategic ways to get Manual Cinema in front of a lot of programmers, which resulted in more bookings for them, not just in North America, but over the big

oceans. So, yes, a fairy tale, but also exceptional work at the right moment, when it turns out there was indeed a calling, a desire for Manual Cinema's work.

The important thing here, with this story in particular, is that Manual Cinema, the company, expressed their expectations of what we would do for them. We responded in-kind by letting them know that their expectations felt, frankly, beyond what we were comfortable stating we could do. And most especially, we did not want to deal with trucks out on the road. The company came back to us with a solution to touring without a truck. We found a way together that has worked for both of us.

In general, it is our experience that presenters expect what you tell them. So on a very basic level, if you sell them Snow White, your company damn well better show up with Snow White and not Little Red Riding Hood. You'd think that was pretty straightforward, right? Well, apparently there's a lot of sloppiness that goes on out there, and a lot of programmers have been burned when they thought they'd bought a specific program, only to find out it's not available. The best thing you can do as a company manager and artistic director, as representation or producer, is to be honest with your programmer. Let them know that the show everyone signed off on is actually no longer available for whatever reason. But if you're in the role of representation, do yourself a favor. Know for shit sure if that show is going to be available for whatever period, date, or time you're talking about. Do your advance homework so no one's hit with the awful surprise of having to cancel or replace a show.

Presenters are going to expect to get the show they booked. If they saw 12 dancers on a stage and you asked for housing for those 12 dancers, but you show up with eight, you are going to have one very unhappy presenter. In the same vein, if your show featured some kind of theatrical bit that, for whatever reason, got cut out of the show or that you couldn't provide on their tour date, you've got to fess up and tell that presenter, otherwise, if they're expecting that full-on confetti explosion drop to close their show because that happened in the show, they went to see live, but for whatever reason, you couldn't bring that confetti drop to their theater or you forgot to tell them it wasn't coming for their show, again, you're going to have a really unhappy presenter.

It's been my experience, the presenters really appreciate efficiency. They expect that you're going to have all the high-res marketing materials in hand to give them, that you've got a tech rider ready to send them. But what if it's a new work, you ask? Well, then you've got a drafted tech rider with some framework for a day-prior load in, that white marley, the six dozen roses you need delivered for each show, that three octave marimba in the back line.

At Elsie, it's our practice, actually, to not start talking about a show until we know what the general range of fees are going to be, until we have in hand at least the minimum tech requirements laid out in a document that everybody feels okay about us sending out. Not until we have at least a paragraph of descriptive language, even if it's all projected. Otherwise, we can't really do our job. We're wasting our presenters' time by talking about a show that doesn't exist, that we can't follow up with, with some concrete information to give them some sense of confidence as they start dreaming and thinking about what they want to program next season.

As we've discussed in other episodes, presenters, they've got their hands full. They do not want to get a phone call telling them, oh whoops, that fee I quoted you actually didn't include the 10 airfares the company needs to fly to you. And now you're going to call them to ask to pay for those 10 airfares? It's just sloppy. Get it together before you open your mouth about a fee. If you don't know the answer for God's sake, just say that. If you're in the middle of that elevator pitch, and they happen to ask you what the fee is, just say to them, I'm sorry, send it to you tomorrow. You can always say you and the company haven't pulled the math together yet. I'll get back to you tomorrow with a projector touring fee. Was that for a single show or two? How many outreach services? And then go do the math based on what they told you and get them some kind of solid figure they can count on that you are not going to have to backpedal on.

Again, the whole purpose here is to get them to have the confidence to carve out both the money and theater time in their future budget for you, some future theater production schedule for you, for this work that you're talking to them about.

Presenters don't like to be surprised. So when your company is on site, on tour at the venue now, and you neglected to tell the presenter that, oh, the company was actually self driving and didn't need that pickup at the airport that the presenter had arranged and paid for? And actually what you really need is six parking spaces? Again. That's just sloppy, and that kind of tour management logistics should have been covered in the advanced time leading up to the engagement date. You don't want your presenter reserving crew time, paying for ground transportation, booking hotel rooms that don't get used. It's just, oh, that's just a big pet peeve.

Then there are times when a presenter might ask for something additional from the artist, when the artist gets on site. In some situations, the presenter has no intention of paying that artist more for that one more master class, that 30 minutes with meet and greet with their biggest patron, that publicity stunt the marketing department wants the whole company to do on Main Street at 9AM tomorrow, for that extra student show, that they're booking the day the company is supposed to

be leaving. So when anything that translates into what is considered a contractual item, that means more income. And yes, alas, there are presenters who are going to take advantage of that moment when you, the artist's representation, might not necessarily physically be on site. This is the part where you have to train your company, your artist, to learn how to simply say no, we can't do that. Or we'd love to, I'll get in touch with my representation, my manager, my producer, about what the fee will be for that additional service. And then, you and your representation need to work out, first of all, if you can fit this extra thing into the engagement schedule, and if you can fit it into the engagement schedule, how much more needs to be charged. And, oh, that extra student show on the day you're supposed to depart? Sure, you can do that for another \$4,000, plus all the airfare change fees, because you're going to have to change your flights. Or, okay, the presenters decided he's going to keep you for a whole extra day on the ground and they're going to book you an entire extra night at a hotel. Okay, but all of these things must be negotiated.

Presenters expect that your touring company is going to be a bunch of adults who behave well and don't trash talk their program, don't trash talk their tech crew, and certainly don't trash the hotel they're putting you all up in. With so much bad behavior happening out there, why not have your companies be the ones that say hello to everyone, learn the tech crew's names, say thank you and don't leave a mess in their wake.

It's been our experience that when our touring companies know that we have their back for them, when things don't go right on their tour dates, they can relax and do a better job of getting the show on. Ultimately, we all want the same thing, right? We want audiences to experience an amazing show that somehow these touring artists have managed to put on in a theater they don't know, inside of a very tight production schedule, far from home. If we all do our jobs in advance, the touring company will have a far better time of it and the audiences will get to enjoy something they might otherwise never have seen.

If it's not clear to you what a presenter might be looking for in an engagement you are negotiating, ask the presenter directly. Maybe they thought your artist would be overjoyed to teach kindergarten to third graders when it turns out that your artist doesn't actually teach children of any age. That they only teach graduate students who have BFAs in music. Uh oh! The best way to address these kinds of expectations is to ask them directly.

So what are your expectations? If you have decided to bring on a certain dance company to your roster, because you are convinced that they will have 20 weeks of touring for them, well, you damn well better tell them that, because maybe that

company isn't prepared to tour 20 weeks out of the year. Maybe they don't have that capacity.

Don't assume all work will tour. Sometimes you may find yourself not actually able to tour a company because you've been touring the same work for that company for the past five years and now you're at the point where you really, really need a new work from that artist or company but the work they've been making is not tourable for what could be a variety of reasons. Maybe it's because the artist has decided it's a work that won't tour or it's a work that requires a three-day load-in tech time before the first show. If that's the case, there's only a couple of venues in the world we work in that can support a three-day load-in. Maybe the tour budget is so huge, it's way beyond the scale of what the venues you work with can pay.

At Elsie, our basic expectation when we consider artists for our roster, we ask the very, very simple first question: is there a place in the field as we know it for this work? Or can we make a place in the field for this work? With Manual Cinema, we were pretty sure there was, but as they had literally been making work for just four years and had been touring for barely two, we knew there was going to be a period of finding out how the market responded to their work. Our passion and enthusiasm for their work, their aesthetics specifically, certainly led the way for us as we made the effort and put Manuel Cinema's work in front of programmers.

Our next expectation is knowing for sure that a specific show is going to be available for the next two to four years, and that the company is going to be able to hang in there with us while we do our best to get the work out into a flooded market.

We also need to know that the company is going to be around no matter what the age of the company. If they're brand new or 10 or 20 or 30 years old in the field, if they can't confidently say to us, they're going to be operating in five years, why would we take on the heavy lift of adding them to our roster and starting all of that promotion?

Then there are all the other basic expectations that you are going to hire a professional to shoot a better video, and you're going to hire an editor to do a professional editing job. You're going to hire a photographer to get the best possible high res photos that don't look like everybody else's photos, that only can be your photos. You're going to keep your website up to date, that you're going to have a company manager that oversees your calendar, all of your calendars, so that when we ask you: are you available for May of 2026, you can answer in 48 hours.

The biggest expectation we hear from artists that's particularly painful is when they tell us they expect touring income to pay their bills, or they've been counting on the touring income next season to pay their mortgage. The touring industry is a fickle, totally random, and completely subjective process. You cannot count on it for income. You just cannot. I can't make a programmer book your show. No-one can guarantee you bookings. And if they do, run away.

You and your team must find a way to stay afloat financially without a column in your annual budget for touring income. Without a line item in your annual budget for touring income. There are other means of income for you: teaching, choreographing for someone else, designing for hire, and yes, having a steady full time job that might not have anything to do with the arts.

So, expectations. It is so important to dream, to project, but I hope this episode will help you find a way to not let expectations bite you in your butt.

So you know what I'm going to say, it's so time to go see a show out there, people. And hey, any of you students who are listening, if you are a high school or college student, but certainly a college university student, you probably have a presenting program on your campus, and those tickets for you are probably 10 or 15 dollars, or they might even be free. I can't encourage all of you students out there enough to take agency, go find out where all those discounted or free tickets are for you, to go see shows, because once your college time is up, hey baby, you're going to be paying full freight for those tickets. So take advantage of seeing as much live work as you can. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)