

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.

--

EPISODE 18

LAURA COLBY: Hello, this is Laura Colby, founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we're going to be speaking about curating a roster. And I am delighted to have Elsie's vice president, Anna Amadei, with me today to talk about lessons we've learned, pitfalls, things we know now that we didn't know then.

Just to begin, I will point to Elsie's curatorial history and to repeat the fact that I came into the field with the Elsie Management roster originally with only contemporary dance. Let me say that, that's what I knew. That's what I was. I was a practicing contemporary dancer living in New York City. That was the world I knew. Those are the people I was in class with. Those are the people I was going to see their shows. They were typically my generation. A lot of them had just left larger companies like the Limon Dance Company and Bill T. Jones. So that was the world I knew. That was a very organic place for me to start my roster.

And then eventually the Elsie Management roster expanded with what we call culturally specific companies when Dance Brazil came to me and then Noche Flamenca. And needless to say, representing those two companies changed everything for me at Elsie in terms of the phone being answered, at that time, we were making calls. We were not sending 500 emails a day the way we do now. We were actually making phone calls. And both Dance Brazil and Noche Flamenca had history and were established names in the business, whereas none of those contemporary artists I was representing were considered established companies.

We have since expanded to include physical theater, contemporary theater, contemporary circus, and outdoor spectacle. The first big shift that happened for me was giving myself permission to represent companies in an art form, that I hadn't been trained in. I'm a classically trained modern dancer, so that was the

world I was really comfortable in and understood and could speak that language. What did I know about capoeira? What did I know about flamenco? Okay, I'd taken a couple of flamenco classes, but that's not the same thing. I wasn't a practiced expert in flamenco. And so I had to get over myself and recognize, okay, you don't have to actually be able to be in the damn show to represent it. It's okay. You can be enthusiastic and you can have an understanding of what this culture is and the significance to be able to speak about it eloquently. And no matter what, I was still making the argument for dance.

The same thing had to happen in my brain with contemporary circus and contemporary theater, physical theater. And what was so exciting to me about physical theater the first time I saw it was that it's movement based. So again, I was very, very comfortable and I had to allow myself and teach myself to be able to speak about these forms that no, I wasn't necessarily trained and practiced in. I had the enthusiasm and I had the passion and I was able to still talk about these works from a place of artistic integrity and knowledge. That remains today very much part of my current practice as we move forward with the contemporary artists that we're representing now who are bringing us the most amazing collages and amalgamations and collaborations across multiple disciplines and genres. That again, none of us are necessarily trained in, but oh boy, we, we get it, we understand and we are comfortable speaking about it.

ANNA AMADEI: I think that says a lot about the practice of Elsie, I mean, of your practice, Laura, which I learned so much from because it really starts from a place of being humble, looking at the form. Because we know out there, I mean, even if you just open the New York times, you open any kind of publication that has the critic point of view, most of the time, the critics themselves don't have particular training in a specific form, but they are trained to be critical about it. And I felt intimidated when I first joined Elsie and it was already including this other genre that I had never, been familiar with before, because I come from a dance background as well. And when I was working in Italy, I specifically looked for an agency and a production company that would only work for dance and with dance, because that was my realm as well.

I think it just speaks a lot about how we all position ourselves in front of the form that, that we represent. Cause then when we're humble, we can also be very open to ask any sort of questions to our artists and to really, really, really go deep in the understanding of what it means for them to make that piece and to make that form. Because we want to understand the form to be able to talk about it. That's, I think it's the base of the foundation of how we curate the roster because it's really, we want to feel confident and comfortable and we feel really humble about representing forms that we're not necessarily so familiar with.

LAURA: Needless to say, the curation of your roster really defines who you are in the field. So when Elsie entered the field with all of this dance, even though we have way expanded beyond just straight forward modern dance, I still have people who say, Oh, you're representing theater and circus. What? Like how that, when that happened, I was like, Whoa, wow, 20 years ago. So, you have to take care with your curation and what it says about you. And because that is who you are, that is your profile in the industry. So we work really hard to make sure that people know that yes, we do have these other forms beyond just the dance that we came into this world with.

Anna has been working for me since 2008, and her addition to Elsie Management goes way beyond just being an incredible operations director and my second in command who gets it all done. She has also, from her position and history and knowledge and her eyes in the field and in the world of the performing arts, she has brought companies to our roster that I wouldn't otherwise have been exposed to or know about. And she didn't do it on her second day at work. Took her a couple of years and I think it would be great to hear, what it was that gave you the impetus to do that.

ANNA: Well, I think it took me, you know, those few years to understand what your aesthetic was. And to get comfortable with that aesthetic and with that voice cause of course I came from a completely different aesthetic and training. And so when I first started working for Elsie and we worked for all of this contemporary New York choreographers, who I'd never heard of, you know, it takes a moment. It takes a moment to just start walking in those shoes. I think it was the second time that I was sent out internationally on the behalf of Elsie. I think it's when I felt that I was representing the roster, and at the same time I felt I was the eye out there for Elsie.

And so when I saw something, or when something came to me from a personal connection, I think the first artist that I brought in was Spellbound Contemporary Ballet, which of course is Italian (and the leading contemporary dance company in Italy). So it was a personal connection, but when I reconnected with them internationally, I saw them under a completely different light, but also a completely different aesthetic and a knowledge of what the field was going to be able to host and accommodate over here. Then, I felt comfortable enough to bring it to you and say, I think we should do this for this and this and this reason. But I think it's the empowerment of just being out there representing a roster and representing an aesthetic and just feeling that at that moment, you are the eye of the management company out there. So I think that that was the turning point.

LAURA: And then, eventually you also brought Union Tanguera, which is a contemporary tango company based in both Buenos Aires and Lyon, France. And you also brought us from Italy, Eventi Verticali, which is one of our outdoor spectacle companies that performs primarily hanging a hundred feet in the air with acrobats over the audience outside. It's something to behold. And most recently, and really it's been seven years now, you brought Sankofa Danza Afro to us, Rafael Palacio's company from Medellín, Colombia.

ANNA: Well, I think then I started getting very enthusiastic about the opportunity of bringing into the roster some of my major passion, I guess. I think when I brought in Union Tanguera I was, when I was, you know, I had my toes dancing tango every other night before having my children, and so I was very deep in the form and I think I was really out there looking for something 'cause there were so many Tango shows. But as you know, every time we would go see a tango show, it would never do it for us. It would never translate into that aesthetic that we wanted to bring on to presenters and on stage. And when I came across Union Tanguera again through a personal connection at a milonga my mind was blown and then I brought it to you and I think your mind was blown as well and we were sold.

LAURA: We were done for, we were definitely done for.

As the founder and president of Elsie, I learned a really critical lesson. In that process of being open to your suggestions, but also you nailed it. When a staff member comes to you and is passionate about something and wants to make something happen. This is also part of running a small business. You need to keep your people happy and all these companies were in perfect alignment with my aesthetic. So Anna had checked that first box, boom, you know, there was no argument to be had there, but more importantly, she was excited about that. And that can be very important to our working relationship. And also certainly each of these companies has contributed to Elsie's profile in the industry in some way, which has been pivotal.

Conversely, I remember I went through a couple years, and this was when you were our Contracts Manager.

ANNA: Yes

LAURA: Where it became clear to me that the rest of the staff at the time was not very interested in bringing in new artists to our company because of how much work it took because the intake of a new artist on a roster admittedly takes a lot of work. Not just updating your website, but all the work. Making sure the fee

structure is actually correct and the artists are actually getting paid. Making sure they really do have that full length video. That they will make a trailer. Making sure they do have their press in order. So that's a that's like the stuff stuff, but then there's also the knowledge. For us, it's incredibly important for us to be able to speak again with clarity and eloquence regarding the companies we represent and why that work. Why should the programmer be programming that work and not booking this other show that's been touring for 20 years. Why should they make a shift and book with this new show that we are bringing into the North American market. So yes, it's a lot of work.

I heard that complaint and I basically put the brakes on bringing in new companies. I think I did that for two or three years. I just, or I think it was at least two years. And then we added something new to our company. And I was at the booking conferences and my conversations with the presenters were so different simply because we had something new on our roster. And I realized, oh, okay, this is important because it may be that when I sit down with Joe at the booking conference and he's been looking at my same roster for 3, 4, 5, 7 years and he's frankly never going to book any of those companies. The conversation is just not going to go anywhere, but then maybe Union Tanguera was the perfect answer to something he had wanted to for all those years. So I learned that lesson. We learned that lesson collectively, but also that's not to say that we're constantly looking to bring on new companies because we're not, but when we have an opportunity and we see that we will have and can have the capacity to add new companies new to us. That's what I what I mean when I'm saying new companies new to us onto our roster, making that space and time knowing that we feel very confident that there's a place for this work in the market whether they're brand new to the market or 20 years in the market or 30 years in the market, we know that we have the capacity now to represent this company, we will go for it. And we also know the presenters are delighted to hear that news and it sparks a conversation, which is great because you want your conversations with your presenters to be active.

ANNA: It's a very thin line and a very, balanced game, if you will, to keep the sparkle in bringing in new projects, and at the same time, standing next, behind and in front of the artist that you've been representing for many years and they might not be making new work every year. So it's a very thin line. When you talk about the amount of work of bringing into the roster a new artist or a new company, new to us, it is also about the amount of time that it takes to develop a relationship with this company. Cause eventually, it really comes down to, the level of trust, the easy conversations, the-

LAURA: work ethic,

ANNA: confidence,

LAURA: time,

ANNA: the work ethic, there's so many things that go around the actual personal relationship that we have with our companies and artists. And sometimes it's all it takes, to make even the booking process a successful one or a not so pleasant and successful one. Cause every time you bring somebody new from one of your trips to Australia.

LAURA: We love the Aussies.

ANNA: But I might not have met this person, I might not have seen this company. It might take me two years to actually see the company live sometimes, which doesn't affect my booking capacity because I can watch all of the videos and listen to Laura and learn my pitch. That's not the point. But the point is it might take me two years to actually get to know the people or see their faces, it's very different.

LAURA: Right. And take two years to get to know that this person takes five days to answer emails. And this person actually likes to work by text. Oh my God, shoot me, but okay, this person likes to work by text. You know, these are all work culture. You don't know so much about the company manager, the artistic director, about their work culture until you start working with them. You don't know that they never work when they're on airplanes. You all of a sudden discover, okay, this artist is on an airplane every other day and now I understand that they-

ANNA: The artist might have to understand that when, you know, Laura is off, Laura is off. And when Anna is not working because she's not at the office, she's out of the office. And, you know, it depends on the relationship that gets created.

There are like certain artists that have as a point person, Laura, because she brought them into the roster. Certain artists that have as a point person, me, by default, maybe because I brought them into the roster, but also because of language barriers or simply like just easiness of the relationship. And I just think at this point, we know that to communicate with some people, we just go, by default to Laura and to communicate with some other artists. We go by default to me. It's the easiness of the relationship that makes the process successful.

LAURA: Some of the lessons we've learned in this process of curation, one of the most is that when we do bring an artist new to us onto the roster for their representation agreement, we require a two-year first term for that representation

agreement. All of our artists are on annual contracts that basically run July 1 to June 30 that automatically renew on April 30 unless one of us cancels before that date. But that first representation agreement is a two year term and we do that because we learn the hard way that first of all it may take us two, three, four years to get that first booking for you. That's painful, but that's the reality. And after all of that onboarding.

ANNA: And heavy lifting.

LAURA: Yes, all of that intake and all of the hard work of onboarding a new artist to our roster and all the learning we do whenever we go out of our way to see shows and pick through the tech rider, it's really tough when someone cancels after one year because, quote, you haven't gotten me any bookings. And one year just ain't enough time, and as I've said in other episodes, we never make promises regarding bookings because we can't, because it's such a random, subjective situation. We can't possibly guarantee you bookings. And our representation agreement says as much.

ANNA: It's random because of all of the variables that are involved. You know, there's just no control. I mean, like, we can just do our work and practice as best as we can, at the top of our game, but there's just too many factors that go beyond our control. We can't promise bookings.

LAURA: No, we cannot make people book your show. And ultimately it's the programmer's decision. Our job is to make sure they know what the artist is making, what's available. What size is it? What price is it? Is it a one day load in or a same day load in? You know, all that, that's our job.

Things we know for us that are important to us is that we are faithful to our aesthetic and we are faithful to our mission. And for us, the aesthetic I'm going to say is movement, physical, body-led. I always say that every single one of our artists is very singular in their voice. These are not knock off "B" quality shows of something everybody else has seen. These are singular artists making work that only they can make. in their language with their genres, with their multimedia, whatever their mix is, that's what rocks our world. And when we see it, we know it. There's that thing also.

ANNA: Yes. And I would say that I think because of all of our dance background, our movement background, even when we represent a theater company or a puppet company, the main characteristic is also the visual impact, cause we have so many shows that are theater and there's storytelling, but there have no words. But

for us it's so important because it's like the visual experience that translates into that really personal and emotional experience right away.

LAURA: If it's not the body leading, then it's the story that's leading. And what is it? How is that story being told? And what is the message of that story? Where's the poetry? And even if it isn't a straight up story,

ANNA: In the message

LAURA: If it's a message, even if it's not didactic, what is happening? What is the experience? What is the experience?

Part of staying faithful to our aesthetic and mission, where we've been tripped up, is when presenters bring us shows. And we get that phone call and they're like, *Ah, Laura, you gotta pick this up. I'm gonna book this show, but I can't work with this company. They have no manager. I need you to work with this company.* Now Anna and I know, that is a hard no now. Now we know better. Because when our presenters call us and say, we think you should look at this company in consideration for your roster, we pay attention, of course we pay attention.

ANNA: But also because there are so many people that know Laura and her aesthetic and they really know what it would be a great fit for an artist.

LAURA: But when they call and they're like, *I'm going to book this show. I need you because they don't have a manager.* Ladies and gentlemen, that is a trap, okay? Now we know.

ANNA: Red flag all around.

LAURA: Anna and I have a list of all of the kind of couplings like that that happened to us, the marriages that were made for us, if you will that unfortunately did not go as well as they we really wanted them or expected them to go so we have examples of matches with shows that came from non-tax treaty countries so we said yes to the programmer who said *you really need to pick this company up They're a perfect match for you.* We looked at the video we agreed But then this is the part about finding things out about people turned out that the person in charge for that company had not complied with their obligation to pay US taxes ever, and they had toured this country ten times. And they were not willing to comply. In the middle of the act of representing them and fulfilling, let's just say it was a big tour.

And we learned our lesson and Anna and I just sat there one day and we threw our hands up in the air and we were like, we're out. We completed our commitment and we declined to renew that agreement and we never looked back. And that was that.

We've had two very enthusiastic post-Edinburgh Fringe experiences. There will be another episode regarding these international platforms or showcases and the Edinburgh Fringe is a great place to go shopping for work if you are a programmer or someone looking to put together a roster. And when you're on the ground in Edinburgh, the benefit is that you are surrounded by presenters and you hear them say, *Oh, yes, I'm booking that show for sure.* And then your best friend presenter turns to you and says, *Laura, I'm booking that show. You're picking it up. Right?* And you're like, well, of course I am because you know, this happened to me twice. The aesthetic was perfect. In one case the tour never happened. The tour never got off the ground for a million reasons, even though I had three programmers, three presenters who were for shit sure gonna book that show.

For the other one, the tour did happen, but it was miserable. It was really hard. It was so much hard work for me and the entire Elsie team. And again, this had to do with Anna's first point. We didn't know these people. And the people behind that specific theater company never answered our emails, never got us concrete information. It was just a headache from the start to the very end. Our presenters loved that show and that show frankly is the kind of show that could tour in the North American market every year. But again, we had such a horrible experience. We declined to renew and we looked away and we moved on.

ANNA: So, you know, you didn't know somebody, you never met them in person. It was just a relationship over emails, mostly because of the time difference. And it just makes things really, really hard if you haven't been the person actually meeting them at their show and getting enthusiastic about it, but it comes from a wave of enthusiasm from other people.

And then there is a time where a funder-

LAURA: It was one of our regional service organization partners that had a specific funding for work from South America.

ANNA: Yes and a colleague of ours placed a call because she was in the panel committee that awarded this two grants to these companies from two different countries in South America. And they were looking for agents and managers that would organize a tour and spend this funding that the companies were awarded. Which was a once in a lifetime-

LAURA: Award

ANNA: award, but also occasion and an opportunity for these artists and for this company. So this was like really big deal. So we felt obviously flattered that we receive a phone call from a colleague and say, *Hey, this, you know, these two people, we could just got awarded. We really think that would be a great match for you.* And they were, I mean, the works were extraordinary. They were really, really interesting work, but we only had eight months. I mean, the call literally came in, in March and the tours had to be in the following season. So they had to start touring from September of the same year we, we knew it was suicidal and we knew we couldn't possibly deliver and spend all that money, but we also thought maybe presenters are shopping through this list and they will look at this work because of the funding. So we said yes, because we were also very excited about the work that we saw and the opportunity of working with this funding organization. So we, jumped on this boat and it sailed for one of the companies, for the other one, we weren't able to make a tour, we really needed a tour because not even the funding alone could pay for the freight that it was involved. It was really heavy lifting and it took a lot of hours and it was not worth it in terms of income. And I don't think it developed any new relationships because eventually we actually booked those three dates with the, with very close presenters partners that we had worked with in the past. So we didn't open new doors. So live and learn meaning that, you know, we're glad we did it, but at the same time we could have not done it and we would have been exactly the same.

LAURA: Yeah.

ANNA: Yeah.

LAURA: A real classic perspective on curation of a roster is to look at the money. And we know a lot of our colleagues are pretty ruthless about this, and they will run through their roster list, and if a company is not a moneymaker, bleh, that relationship is over. Our situation, our balance of the artists, somehow we have managed to have a balance so that some of our artists may have 10 to 20 dates a year, others may have none, or they may get one or two.

And we have such commitment to those artists, we're going to stand by them and continue representing them. Even though their reach of presenters may be small, we are standing by them because we are fiercely committed to their aesthetic and their artistic integrity.

We do have to take in consideration the workload, because if and when an artist gets to the point where they're unmanageable, Because that does happen,

unfortunately. Maybe they're behaving, I know we've talked about this before, maybe they're behaving terribly on the road, or maybe it's as something as simple as you have to ask them 15 times to sign a contract.

And of course, we have permission to sign our contracts on their behalf. But they have to say yes. When we sit down and have our annual review and, and acknowledge, Oh, we did pretty well for this artist this past year, or we, got them nothing. We also talk about what was the experience like?

And we've had situations where something as simple as signing a contract and having to chase somebody for so long to get a yes on a contract is agonizing and takes its toll on me and the staff. And we have to make these internal decisions to again, not renew, not move forward with representation.

ANNA: Because, time and work at the end of the day it doesn't all come down to money, but it does come down to money because we are a small business. And we have to support ourselves. Time is money. So we do have to look at that when we look at the balance of the roster.

And when we look at money, we also want to consider the aspect of when, let's say we go see a show and we get really excited about the show, we walk out of a theater. We're like, *Oh my God, this was mind blowing. And we need to represent these people.* Which is usually me. And then Laura, Laura looks at me and she's like, but I see 25 people on stage and I see a set and I see like a, how are we? So when we say that we look at money, we really have to also figure out how does this fit into the market? How is the market going to be able to afford it? And therefore, are we actually going to be able to place it and to make money out of it eventually?

LAURA: Are we the right match?

ANNA: Are we the right match too, yeah.

LAURA: Are we the right match for that artist? Because sometimes you are not going to be the right match for that artist.

The other thing we have to keep an eye on is the, there's a term in our industry, someone may ask you, who's your biggest earner? You know, so we know who our biggest earners are. We have to keep an eye on them because they might cancel their representation agreement when it comes time to renew.

ANNA: Or they might just decide to stop making work and go live a different life. I mean, life happens. And so we have learned, I think, the hard way to-

LAURA: be ready.

ANNA: Be ready. And not place all of the earning on one or two companies on the roster.

LAURA: If you are a small roster like ours, and you have to be so careful with that. As a dear colleague once said, your artist is going to fuck you. Sorry, there's no other way to put it right and meaning they're gonna do something horrible, they're gonna walk out on you. They're gonna cancel your representation They're gonna wake up a morning and decide you are the devil incarnate and it is over even though you have had a great and really beautiful relationship for the last 12 years. We know it's coming. And again, totally out of our control, completely random.

All we can do is do the best we can right now and keep an eye on the balance and see what else is out there. We do not steal clients from our colleagues. That is not something we do. If somebody has representation-

ANNA: Somebody approaches us and they have a representation with our colleagues. we go straight to our colleagues and say: *I had an interesting conversation with one of your artists.*

LAURA: With your artist, yeah. So, we're not out there poaching. And we are very close with our fellow agent managers, and we all know each other very well. When certain emails come into our inboxes asking for representation, first thing we'll do is pick up the phone and call their current representation to make sure that they know.

I referenced an annual roster review. And that for us in our cycle because of the way our representation agreement is structured typically starts happening in March, but definitely happens in April. But also this is something we talk about all year, especially when an incident occurs and something just like so egregious that the three of us sit down and we're like, you know what? No, this can't happen again. This is it. This is the straw that broke the camel's back. We are not going to continue with representation with this artist. Because again, the work, it became untenable.

ANNA: Work relationships are relationships, and so, and they are human relationships. Yes, sometimes we do have a very great relationship with an artist that then starts making work that we don't necessarily stand behind of.

And we just have to add that conversation and say, we love you, but we, we're not so married to your work anymore. And then sometimes we are really married to the work and we just have to, you know, Swallow-

LAURA: Well, we're really married to the work, but maybe the, maybe the artist has decided they don't want to work with us anymore. And that's a big lesson. If the artist doesn't want you more than you want them, there's an imbalance there and that's not going to work.

ANNA: It's like a marriage.

LAURA: It is just like a marriage. And I remember I was having a bad day with an artist client, and I was on the phone with one of our dance presenters who knew me very, very well, and he said to me, *Laura, why would you want to stay in a bad marriage? They want out. This is over.* And I was so appreciative of that. And you know, that was his 30 years in the field speaking. He'd seen this happen a million times over.

Now it is a hard lesson to learn the first time when the artist comes to you and is clearly unhappy, there's nothing you're going to be able to do to fix that. You just need to humble yourself and and, *Say thank you. I hear you. We will not be renewing this representation agreement. It's over.*

There is also the reality of market fatigue that can happen. And that also might be the perfect opportunity for you to acknowledge that you can't do anymore for this artist in the field, and that perhaps a change in representation might be the perfect thing right now, or, having a company be self-represented might be a perfect thing right now.

So the ending of these relationships aren't necessarily doom and gloom. It could be just the thing that artist needed. Maybe they're about to step into a 10 year span where they're just making work on themselves or something. You know, we don't, we don't know. And that's all part of the artistic trajectory that we can't necessarily know. Because, staying ready to tour in this field, if you've been listening to this podcast? Being capable of touring in this field. Oh my god the work involved. It's a lot of work. You got to have the administration and the chops and the wherewithal and the attitude and the grace to be able to to stay in this touring world. It ain't the holy grail. And it ain't perfect, god, but it can be incredibly gratifying to share your work with other audiences and yes to provide basic things like employment to artists. That's great. We love that. But really this is about artistic exchange. This is about that electric moment in the audience for the audience member to see something they might never have been able to see before. But really, the amount of

work getting those artists on that stage That's not in their backyard is monumental. So all to say that it may come in a company's time that they're done. They don't want to tour anymore. *We're done. We're just gonna do home seasons.* I get that.

ANNA: Yeah

LAURA: So for us, the curation of our roster, as you've heard, has been intrinsically linked to our aesthetic and our passion for a very particular kind of work. That may not be what your model is. That's fine. But I hope some of these examples of what we've learned along the way will be helpful to you as you are doing your curation.

A reminder that your curation is who you are in the field. That is your profile in the field. That's who you are. And it speaks to how you show up in the field and where you show up in the field.

So thank you for joining us. You know what I'm going to say, go see a live show. I'm getting a little nervous that no one's written to us to let us know about what live show they've gone to. Come on, you guys. I know you're seeing shows. Please, someone, someone drop me a line and let me know what happened to you in that theater the other night. I'd love to hear from you. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)