

ZEN

BACKGROUND

On 14 and 15 March I had the great pleasure of meeting representatives from fifteen Aussie companies, as one of a group of international presenters from the US, Japan, Korea, and Brazil that included Masami Miyashita, Luiza Monteiro, Hisami Shimoyama, and Kim Woo Ok. It was a very useful couple of days, the result of a partnership between Come Out, Young People and the Arts Australia and the Australia Council's Audience and Marketing Development Division.

While some of the companies had considerable experience selling tours, most seemed to have little with large-scale and/or international touring. As Director of Youth and Family Programs at the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, I tend to be the point person when companies try to pitch their work, so I thought it might be helpful to offer a few general comments and suggestions. Then Lowdown Editor Tony Mack charmed me into putting these thoughts into an article. Which is why we're all here...

These suggestions are offered in the spirit of helpfulness and are by no means definitive. Since my training is in directing and lighting design, I'm a largely self-taught (and a tad idiosyncratic) administrator, so two US colleagues (both terrific programmers) – Mary Rose Lloyd of the New Victory Theater in New York and Heather Spicuzza of the Ordway Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota – graciously read this and offered comments.

Some of this is general, some specific to what I encountered in Australia, some based on the system in the US, which is more through agents, but the same construct is applicable to artists selling their work.

Let's start with what the Adelaide meetings were about – artists/representatives meeting presenters.

FIRST OF ALL, IT'S LIKE SPEED DATING

Well, not really.

But the analogy is not chosen lightly, because in the first meeting of a presenter and an artist or agent there's always a certain amount of scoping out – each party is sizing up the other to see if there's common ground. Make sure your first impression is a good one (though you don't necessarily have to wear your best frock). As with speed dating, part of the trick is getting to know something about the other party, quickly. One of the best ways to do that is to ask questions. One of the worst ways is to do all the talking.

LATER ON, IT'S LIKE REGULAR DATING

In the best of all worlds, the relationship between a presenter and an agent/theater should not be just about the one gig, but be on-going. I often say to agents, 'if not this season, maybe in the future', and it's not insincere – you never know when circumstances may change, or when a show may be correct. And the field of professional theater for young audiences – even internationally – is really pretty small. We need to get to know each other.

THEN AGAIN, IT'S NOT AT ALL LIKE DATING

Booking decisions are not usually made based on how much we like each other. Liking is not the issue – finding a connection between the work and the venue is.

That being said, more often than not a presenter will want to work with the artist/agent who's more professional, more efficient, more business-like, and easier to get along with. It's hard enough to do our jobs without adding difficult people into the mix.

SELLING SHOWS TAKES A DIFFERENT SKILL-SET THAN CREATING THEM

Not everyone can do it. New skills will often have to be cultivated and grown. Charm and grace and artistic enthusiasm are wonderful, but buying/selling is more angular, needing organization, salesmanship, glibness with numbers, routing, and the ability to cold-hard analyze a transaction.

AND THE ART OF SELLING SHOWS

The Kennedy Center's Kim Peter Kovac offers some tips on selling shows to international producers and presenters.

THE ART PART VERSUS THE BUSINESS PART

Good artists, of course, care deeply and personally about what they do, and a good agent (or representative of a company doing the selling) sincerely believes in the work that they're selling.

That aside, it can be very helpful to work within a persona that's externally enthusiastic and internally dispassionate, because buying and selling shows is just business. What this means is:

- Don't take anything personally.
- Just because someone doesn't book your show doesn't mean they don't like it. There are any number of reasons why a show doesn't work – wrong time of year, too expensive, wrong demographic (we need a middle school show, and yours is for 5 year olds).
- Don't consider it a violation of artistic integrity if your show is put in a demographic box. Putting together a season is difficult, and many programmers must look at demographics as part of an overall jigsaw puzzle.
- Just because someone can't afford your price does not mean you're not worth the price you're asking. And a presenter may know you're worth the price you're asking, and still ask if you can shave just a little bit off (we've all done this many times).
- When negotiating with agents with whom there's a rapport, I'll often cut to the chase and say, 'Look, it's your job to get as good a deal as possible for your show/client as possible, and it's my job to get your show/client as close to my budget as possible. But if we work together, we'll find a middle ground that makes us both happy.'

Is this easy? No. Do I want folk to like the shows we produce at the Kennedy Center? Of course. Do they always? Of course not. Do my close friends in the biz at other performing arts centers want to book our touring shows? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Does this bother me? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Why don't they? Any of a number of reasons: too expensive, possibly; for the wrong age range; too mainstream; not right for their market. Does this affect our friendship and collegial relationship? Not in the least, because...

THERE'S NO ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE

Apples and oranges. We call it art because it's not quantifiable. It's terrific in our field that presenters, producers, artists have different aesthetics, different tastes in what they think is good (or appropriate). We need to embrace the notion of eclecticism and differing taste – otherwise, we'll become like television, and that would be scary.

YES, IT'S BUSINESS, BUT IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT THE MONEY

Retail companies often pitch products as 'loss leaders' – mark an item way down (even below the price they pay) in order to get the customer in the store.

There can be value in thinking of a certain booking as a loss leader – if it's a particularly prestigious venue or large festival, it may be worth going under your normal price for the exposure or prestige factor. It's not only about the dollars, but about the whole – what's the professional value of all aspects of the booking.

As one example, the Kennedy Center has a program called the Millennium Stage, which, at 6pm on 365 days a year, presents a free performance on a stage in one of the big public areas. How do we afford it? By paying scaled down fees. Why do artists, many well known, agree? Because the visibility they get is worth, to them, more than money – a) a performance at a large and visible institution and b) their performance is videotaped and stored on the Center's website, a terrific piece of PR/marketing you can view at <http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/millennium/>.

Touring shows can lead to visibility, important notice from the media, and experience for company members.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

The more you know about the presenters you're pitching, the better off you'll be. This includes knowing some things about the price structure in a given market, and what artists comparable to you are quoting.

SHORT PITCH AND LONG PITCH – SOFT SELL AND HARD SELL

Read your audience (the presenter). It's probably better to start with a short pitch, see how it's being received, then add detail if necessary. With a lot of presenters, it's typically better to start with a soft sell, rather than a hard sell. Be careful of just bulldozing through a prepared speech – make sure it's being heard.

WE LIVE IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

What works in one country doesn't always work in another, even one that speaks the same language.

In the USA, for example (and in Canada to an extent) bookings for school audiences by and large have to tie directly to the curriculum, and there are school districts that have rules about profanity, adult situations, and so on (luckily not all). Some European companies talk about the 'North American version' – a little more G-rated.

Productions that are heavily text-based very often do not work in a country that doesn't speak the language spoken on stage. Are there options? Could the show be done in the host country's language? Could surtitles be used? I once saw a dynamite one-person 'Richard III' done in Danish with French surtitles, so I was able to NOT understand it in not one but two languages. Luckily, the actor was terrific and the play is fairly well known and I had a swell time.

Which leads to...

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

You may be asked to make some changes in your ideal circumstance, or finesse a cultural translation of your show in order to get a booking. Is it worth it? Depends on what's being asked, and only you can decide. Do you really need that much tech time? That many rental lights? Can you change some of the adult language or situations a bit?

Here's a couple of other examples:

The first year the Kennedy Center toured for young audiences, we had a five hour load-in (put-in, take-in, bump-in – every country has a different name). When planning the next season, our agent at the time, Kids Entertainment of Toronto, said that we had two choices: 1) leave the load-in at five hours, or 2) cut back to three hours, and increase our bookings by some 50%.

After a bit of somewhat indulgent internal soul-searching about the sanctity of what we'd created and how we couldn't possibly compromise, we figured out a way to do the load-in more efficiently in order to keep the show's integrity but work within the venue's restrictions. And we've never looked back.

We've been asked several times by conservative venues if we'd cut the murder in 'Tom Sawyer'. Sorry, no, since it's an essential plot point.

Good presenters won't ask you to compromise the essential nature of the show, but there may be some sticky wickets that have to be negotiated. If one is efficient, clever, and resourceful, the touring version will capture the spirit of the home-theater original – can't often be the same, but it can be equal in quality (or better).

EVERYONE NEEDS TO WIN

A successful transaction is when both parties are happy. Though it's become an overused cliché, think 'win-win'.

Kim Peter Kovac has worked in the theater for young audiences biz for twenty-two years. At the Kennedy Center, he gets to play with commissioning, producing, touring, and presenting, and in his spare time is President of ASSITEJ/USA, and a member of the Executive Committee of ASSITEJ International.

WHAT SHOULD BE OBVIOUS, BUT ISN'T ALWAYS

- Bring your business cards. How can someone book your show if they can't contact you?
- If there's a translator, take pauses so they can translate.
- Cold-calling is not necessarily the best idea. If you send material, and then follow up with a phone call, you're more liable to get a positive response.
- Have good marketing materials – pictures, descriptions, visuals, etc.
- Remember that we really have to see the work. Live is best, video/DVD next best.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

- It's always good to follow up on an initial meeting, even as simple as an email saying nice meeting you, hope we can work together sometime in the future.
- It's always good to keep communication active, and to respond. We're all busy so there's a point at which non-response is the same as a negative response. This goes for presenters and artists/agents alike.

IT'S MUCH HARDER TO SELL TO SOMEONE YOU'VE JUST TRASHED

The mind, she boggles. The following, sadly, are true examples from booking conferences in the USA. Why would someone trying to sell me a show say that:

- I'm stupid and/or tasteless to have not booked them in the past.
- The kinds of shows I program are too xxx (pick an adjective/adverb), and if I book their show, which is more yyy (pick an opposite adjective/adverb), it would make my season more artistic and meaningful and sell more tickets.
- My desire to want to see a video of a performance indicates I have no imagination.
- That they know what will work for my audience better than I do.

All the above being said, I appreciate an artist or agent trying to help me understand how his/her show will work within my theater's structure. You know the subtleties of your show best, and a lot of it is about how it might connect to my season, perhaps through an 'entry point', because...

A SEASON OR FESTIVAL IS A BLEND OF MANY THINGS

I'd guess that many, if not most, programmers think of themselves as artists as much as administrators. Putting together a season or festival is not easy under the best of conditions, as the ideal blend so often gets bushwhacked by scheduling or financial concerns. And you have to learn how to dance within a reactive circumstance in a proactive way. Meaning, that booking is reactive because you have to pick from what's available. But good programmers are proactive because they make artistic leaps, put combinations together in unconventional ways, figure out how to be proactive in a way that an artistic director of a regional theater can be.

RESEARCH

There doesn't seem to be a lot of resources out there. One oft-read book is 'Booking & Tour Management for the Performing Arts' by Rena Shagan, available on Amazon.com. Was very helpful to our team when we started touring.

If you're interested in exploring touring in the USA, the two major booking conferences are both in January. You can find out more about the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, or APAP, at <www.artspresenters.org>, and International Performing Arts for Youth, or IPAY, which is specifically geared to performances for children and young people, is at <www.ipayweb.org>.

IN CLOSING

- Keep it up. Our children and young people need to see good performances, and I saw much terrific energy, creativity, and commitment in Oz.
- Touring can be difficult, and can be highly fulfilling. Often both at the same time.
- Decide why you want to tour, and keep remembering what the big picture is – it's easy to get lost in the minutia.
- When in doubt about how far to take your show, don't forget that kids are far smarter than many gatekeepers (parents, teachers, school administrators) think.
- Raising the bar is a good thing, as is doing things in a new way. Do good work. Do more good work.

Ultimately, it's all about that magic connection between the performer and the audience. The show itself. All the above is just some hints about how to get that magic to a new audience.