

The
Book

**An Actor's Guide
to Chicago**

Fourth Edition

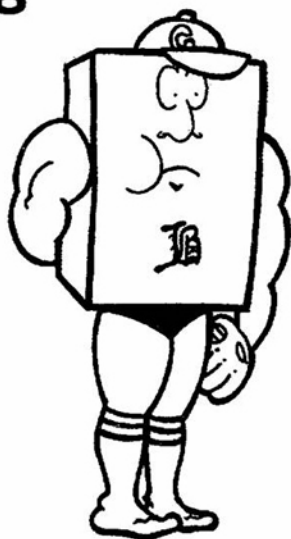
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Developing a Pitch

Why 'tis a boisterous
and a cruel style,

A style for challengers;
why, she defies me,

Like Turk to Christian.



By Karin McKie

You see them from afar. They look pleasant, so you sidle up. You introduce yourself. They are cordial, yet distracted, fielding attention from a myriad of other suitors. You scramble to make yourself more attractive, and think of more clever things to say. After a few smart yet fumbled sentences from you, they politely excuse themselves, and you frantically offer a firm handshake while breathlessly asking for their phone number. They reluctantly oblige, and you retreat to the corner of the room, your sweaty hands folding the prized seven digits into your most important pocket.

Are you meeting a potential date at a party? Possibly. Is this perhaps an office mixer schmooze opportunity for you to move to another department? Close. Are you a theatre publicist attempting to wield your powers on an opening night? Indeed. Pitching to the media can be as complex and unnerving as a blind date. But, unlike love, pitching your client and their show can be a calculated success. If you do your homework.

So what are your assignments? Just like you were reminded ad nauseum in school, never underestimate the powers of reading, writing, and 'rithmetic.

Knowing what you are talking about when pitching a show to the media, whether print, electronic (TV and radio), or the newest flavor, ether (i.e. Internet outlets), is crucial. A theatre publicist must be involved in the production of a show from the get-go. This especially includes season selection—the artistic mission and vision questions that are explored during this process always impact a show's eventual coverage. Why is a company doing this play? Is it the 100th anniversary of the playwrights' birth? Does the show cover a topic that's hot in the news? Is this a mid-west/American/world premiere? The marketing "cart" shouldn't precede the artistic "horse," yet these two functions are inextricably linked. And the artistic side should continually feed marketing efforts for a production—will the playwright be in town for interviews? Are World War II veterans coming to see this World War II show? Is the lead reprising the same role she did ten years ago? All of this vital information makes your play unique, interesting, and newsworthy enough to get some column inches. Make it a point to engage in continuing dialogue with the director, the playwright, the dramaturg, the designers, the actors and everyone involved to find ways of selling this show.

The theatre is a writing business. The commodity here is language: well-crafted words that convey a time, a place, a relationship, an experience that is human. As a theatre publicist, you are charged with relating the poignancy of a play (a work that is usually years of painstaking process for the author) in simple, concise news releases (and fact sheets, PSA's, etc.).

The hard part is done—the play, that is—and publicists need simply relay the journalistic basics of who, what, where, when and why (see above) in an easily digestible and thought-provoking way. This is not as difficult as it may seem. Always check your facts, and get the basics of what dates and times, what theatre, which address, and the like from the producers. Too many cooks do spoil the soup, but have a few pairs of eyes check the details for accuracy. As mentioned previously, chat with the director and author about their vision and reason for working on the piece and relate that vital information in a few paragraphs. This is your pitch to get features for the production as well as interest for critics to come review the play.

Avoid superlatives like "the greatest story ever told" or "the funniest comedy in the history of the world." That is for critics and the audience to decide. You can state the facts in a creative way, such as "Jefferson or Tony Award winning" or "adapted from the New York Times Bestseller List book." These types of "sound bites" promote the credibility of the show without being too demonstrative. Getting a feature or a review has a lot to do with the "sex appeal" of the show—discerning

what is “hot” and “cool” about your production and communicating that succinctly will get you visibility in this theatre-heavy market.

The written harbingers of the show need to be sent a bare minimum of six weeks in advance (earlier if possible to accommodate long-lead publications, such as monthly magazines). In addition to your excellent written pieces, don’t forget other media tools that a publicist often coordinates, such as the ever-important production photos (sent in advance of opening), videos, audio tapes of original show music (if applicable), and the like.

And then there’s math. As a publicist, you can only accomplish what your budget (and your wild creativity) will allow. Often with smaller ensembles, monetary constraints can seem insurmountable. True, to a point. But phone calls and e-mails are still relatively free, so research your contact information thoroughly and use it wisely. The Internet is emerging as a fabulous tool for such exploits as finding theatrical associations who offer free or low-cost media lists, libraries that offer funding and grants resources, and even “yellow pages” for good old names and phone numbers.

Remember that theatre artists and their minions (you included) should engage in a symbiotic relationship (not parasitic, as some would posit) with the media. Make their job easier by providing them with clear basic information, sprinkled with some “sex appeal” (see above). Be pleasant and concise when phoning them, including the courteous intro of “Are you on deadline now? Do you have a minute?” The press are indeed people, and I guarantee that if you remember that their dog Sparky had puppies, and you take a moment to ask about their progress, you will be “in like Flynn” when pitching your product. This is like any relationship, so understand their needs (don’t pitch a Greek play to someone who historically shuns classics—again, read as much as you can so you know these types of things) and make it pleasant for them to spend a few minutes with you. Never demand media attention—this will assuredly get you nowhere. Instead, be a choreographer that skillfully matches personalities and temperaments with ideas and interests. And, as in love, keep trying. With persistence and an ability to think on the fly, wonderful things can happen.