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by Josh Gershick

A PLAYWRIGHT'S BRIEF GUIDE TO WORKING WITH A PUBLICIST (AND WHY YOU SHOULD)

Here is what every playwright wants: full houses, great notices, standing ovations. (Even if they claim principally to be interested in world peace.) But how often have I heard a self-producing playwright complain that, in the end, the audience “just didn’t turn out.”

Granted, that writer’s got to start with a good story; it’s got to be on the page. Then a crack team must be assembled, from actors to designers. But one player critical – even vital – to a production’s success is often overlooked: a good publicist.

“I can’t tell you how many playwrights have said to me, ‘Why have you gotten all this press?’” said DG member Wendy Graf, whose plays include *All American Girl* (StageScene LA’s Outstanding Solo Production, 2015) and *No Word in Guyanese for Me* (winner of the 2012 GLAAD Award for Outstanding Los Angeles Theater). “Finding a good publicist is important on the micro and the macro level. The micro is: you want to promote your show. The macro is: you develop a relationship with

Wendy Graf



this person, with the press and with the larger community.”

Graf has self-produced, co-produced, and been produced by others. Her go-to publicist is always Lucy Pollak, one of the Southland’s leading performing arts publicists.

“Self-producing writers will say, ‘It’s not in the budget,’” said Graf. “But getting a good publicist is as important as getting a good director and good actors. A good publicist knows you, understands your work and knows what you’re getting at. She has a relationship with every play. In the last five years I’ve been working with Lucy, she’s exposed me to so many reporters, and I get reviewed in the context of my whole body of work – it’s ‘a Wendy Graf play’ – not just one play.”

“Collaboration is key,” said Pollak. “When a playwright is my client, I work closely with that writer. My job is to represent the essence of the play and understand what it’s about. I read and re-read the play. I attend the first table read. I want to hear the play read aloud, in the actors’ voices. I like to get behind it, beneath it. I want to understand the play in my gut, to illuminate it.”

Pollak has followed a Graf play all the way from early draft, through developmental readings to production.

“I trust her and respect her judgment,” said Graf. “When she says, ‘Listen, see this show,’ reviewers listen. She’s a colleague, a friend and a trusted and discerning eye. She always figures out the heart of the play and knows how to promote it.”

Good promotion of a play starts with a smart press release, said Pollak.

“The press release is the calling card of

the production. It’s got to be intriguing. It’s helpful to have materials from the playwright to use as a springboard—and I always discuss the play in-depth with the playwright—but I write my own press release. I have my own specific style. I would never expect the playwright to do my work for me. On the other hand, I would never send out anything that wasn’t approved by the playwright.”

It’s never too early to start pitching a play.

“Lead time is a publicist’s best friend,” said Pollak. “I like a minimum of four-six weeks in advance of opening. A longer lead-time for pitching is even better: Some publications want material months in advance. (Lead time for *Los Angeles* magazine, for instance, is three months.) Special invitations to press go out two weeks in advance. There are lots of shows and events in LA: I want my invitation to get there first,” she said.

A single blurb and 100 “likes” on your Facebook page will not fill the house.

“There’s research that suggests it takes nine impressions before a person buys a ticket,” said Pollak. “Publicity plays only one part. A [potential] ticket buyer may read a review, see a blog-post, pick up a postcard. But the bottom line is, once you get people into the theatre, it’s word-of-mouth. That’s why it’s important to front-load the show: Get those reviewers, bloggers, concierges into the seats that first week to generate that word-of-mouth, to get that momentum.”

What if my production is a one-man operation?

“There’s a prejudice [among some reviewers] toward self-producing playwrights, where the playwright is the actor, the writer, the producer, the designer,” said Pollak. “The assumption [of reviewers] is, ‘Oh, that’s a vanity production.’ Don’t have your name all over the production. Create a company name.”

Promotion begins long before the curtain rises and continues through closing night. Don’t be shy.

“The best thing a playwright can do is to be available to promote the play. If I set up an interview, be there,” said Pollak. “Promoting a show, it’s everybody working together.”

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