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ON  
PRESENTERS,  
PITCHING,  
& GETTING YOUR WORK OUT THERE

Backgrounder .....	3
How does the presentation world work and what is it all about? .....	3
Understanding and building relationships with presenters .....	3
How do you get your work presented? .....	4
Where to Pitch .....	5
A quick guide to pitching.....	6
Preparatory Questions .....	6
Logistical Questions.....	6
Pitch-Specific Support Materials .....	6
Designing / structuring your pitch.....	7
Rehearsing your pitch .....	8
Follow-up.....	8
Addendum 1: On Agents .....	9
Addendum 2: On setting performance fees.....	9
How much money do you need? .....	9
What is the minimum fee you are willing to accept?.....	10
How much is a presenter willing to pay? .....	10
Other resources:.....	10

## Backgrounder

### How does the presentation world work and what is it all about?

Bear with me here, and spend a quick moment being a complete and utter capitalist.

In many ways, the arts presentation world works like any other industry:

- There is a product (a show)
- This product is sold by the producer to a retailer for a guaranteed fee (in this case called a season or festival presenter or a promoter).
- That retailer then resells the show to its customers (ticket buyers)

There are lots of different ways to get work in front of audiences, including self-presenting and working with hybrid presenters like Fringe Festivals. Working with a presenter is not unproblematic, but it does have the benefit of protecting the producer from the financial risk of box office losses. (The presenter pays the contracted fee, even if it means they lose money.)

### Understanding and building relationships with presenters

What gets presenters out of bed in the morning is a driving desire to provide their community with access to exciting art, and with fulfilling experiences. In order to do this, they are willing to take some risks. You will do well if you can help them mitigate these risks and succeed in their goal.

Risk 1: Bad work: The work is bad / not compelling (their audience loses trust in them)

You can help alleviate fears around this risk by:

- Being in touch from the beginning of the work. Don't wait until you have a final product; let presenters know what you're working on, what your plans are, and how you're going to achieve your goals
- Building a long-term relationship with a presenter, so they see the trajectory of your work
- Seeking presenter co-producers: ask where possible for partnership using a presenter's space and resources to create your work. This builds intimate familiarity and trust
- Invite presenters to see your work-in-progress showings / premiere. They need to see the work to understand the work.

Risk 2: Mass Confusion: The work is not what they thought it was / what they told their audience it was

You can help alleviate fears around this risk by:

- Taking the time to communicate one-on-one with presenters about your work, the way they write about your work, and the marketing of your work
- Don't make any assumptions. Nobody knows your work as well as you do. Maybe they have never seen work like yours before, or are simply mistaken about your target audience or intentions. Maybe it hasn't occurred to them that your improvised sections may sometimes contain content that is difficult for their audiences. You will be by far better off if these discussions happen in advance, as opposed to after-the-fact.

Risk 3: Bankruptcy: Nobody buys tickets, so they lose more money than they can afford to lose, which puts their whole organization in jeopardy. After you have provided them with sufficient publicity

materials, marketing is theoretically the presenter's responsibility. That being said, if they can't sell tickets to your work, they will be reluctant to bring you back.

You can help alleviate fears around this risk by:

- Talking to them about marketing
- Offering what social media and outreach assistance you are able
- Building your own social media following

Risk 4: Flakiness: Sometimes the presenter sells tickets and the artist never shows up, or cancels at the last minute.

You can help alleviate fears around this risk by:

- Replying promptly to inquiries from the presenter
- Being careful and realistic about your own scheduling
- Catching problems well in advance. Eg. You did not receive your final production / remount / tour funding? A key artist is no longer available? Your technical requirements or the duration of the work have changed? Let the presenter know as soon as you can, and preferably before they've completed their marketing materials or begun ticket sales
- Being honest and straightforward. If something goes wrong, let them know quickly and directly. This is much better than obfuscating, and will maintain a higher level of trust.

## How do you get your work presented?

Organized pitches are just part of a complete breakfast. They are not the only way to get noticed, but they really help. Pitches are usually curated in some way. The pitch organizer needs to remain relevant to and trusted by their presenters / buyers year after year. If you've been chosen to pitch it's because you fit the brand, and because the pitch organizer thinks you have a viable product.

Nevertheless, some sample alternatives or supplements to pitching include:

- going for coffee with the presenters you do know, and chatting with them about what they're up to, and about what you're doing
- attending conferences and networking events where you can meet buyers / presenters
- inviting buyers / presenters to your shows and events (always do this!)
- emailing or cold-calling presenters. (For obvious reasons, this is the least effective way.)

Selling your work to presenters is similar to selling anything else. The more often they see your name, the better the chances that they will think of you when they are programming. The stronger the relationship, the better chance they have of buying your work. The better they know your work, the more likely they will be to take a significant risk in putting your work on their stage.

Keep those relationships alive between productions. Stay in contact!

## Where to Pitch

There are lots of pitches and showcases. LOTS. Maybe too many. In fact, Presenters and Presenter Networks talk a lot about the proliferation of showcases, and about pitch fatigue, wherein presenters are unable to keep up / attend / keep track of all the pitches they are attending. So, apply to pitch where you will find the most relevant presenters.

Make sure you do your research.

- Look for artists whose work is similar to yours. Where do they perform? Who presents their work? How do those presenters find their work? By attending local showcases? International showcases? Which ones?
- Look up presenters and presenter networks. What are they presenting / what have they presented in the past?
- Who are the individuals in charge of curation and programming at these organizations? What can you learn about them, their tastes and interests?

For links to the largest Canadian and American events, please see the following listing: <http://www.madeinbc.org/apply-to-tour/>

## A quick guide to pitching

### Preparatory Questions

- What do you want to get out of this pitch?
- Why did they choose you to pitch / what are they looking for in your work?
- Who is going to be in the room? No, really, who is going to be in the room, specifically, and how do they fit into your world domination master plan?

### Logistical Questions

- Pitch Date, Time, Location, Duration (DO NOT GO OVER TIME)
- Pitch Rehearsal Date, Time Location
- General setup: Seated at Table? Standing at Podium? Standing solo?
- Tech available (AV, lights, etc)
- Be absolutely sure is it pitch only? Is some form of showcase (performance) also possible? Expected?
- Is there a place to leave marketing materials / collateral?

### Pitch-Specific Support Materials

The pitch organizer will likely ask you for support materials, or for information for their standard materials. You should find yourself sufficiently prepared if you have a standard press kit, and a quick file including answers to the following questions:

- Creators / Artists
- Genre
- Size of Cast / number of support staff on the road
- Duration
- Date and Location of Premiere
- Project Description
- Performance Fee
- Contact Information for presenters

## Designing / structuring your pitch

Really, you can do whatever you want and personalize your pitch in many ways. but the following guide provides a standard and hopefully helpful format:

- **Name** (Your name, Position, Company name)
- **Location** (Where do you primarily produce work)
- **General Context:** Who are you? What genre(s) do you work in? What point are you at in your career?
- **Description of the work** (preferably with video support)
  - Presenters will want to understand how this work fits in with previous work of yours they may have seen, the scope and scale, the themes, the dramatic arc (if any) and, more than anything, what the audience experience will be from start to finish in this work.
  - Be clear and concise.
  - Speak to their level of expertise (Are they generalist / multi-disciplinary presenters, or specialist presenters, or a mix of both? They are on the practical side of connecting your work to audiences. How can you describe your work without losing them in jargon or theory?)
  - include get in time and load in requirements, strike time needed, number of artistic and support staff on the road, and the nature and quantity of audience engagement you are able to do in addition presentation of the staged work.
- **What you are hoping to gain:** Do you want a small tour? A big tour? A 3rd stop to add to your 2 existing stops in Nova Scotia in April 2021? Are you really hoping for additional commissioning support? Residency space for 2 weeks to work on some technical questions? Are you wanting to try out new engagement activities related to the work? WHAT DO YOU WANT!?
- **Conclusion:** the only really important point here is: how can they get in touch with you? Are you at booth 318 in the contact room? Are you hanging out in the lobby for the afternoon? Do you have cards available, or a representative they should talk to? Do you have a showing coming up that the presenters are invited to?
- **Thank you and Questions**
  - Generally there will be some time for questions at the end of a pitch. This is often an uncomfortable and semi-useless moment, meant to start conversations that will be finished later. (*Note: at MiBC's pitch Nov 24, 2017, we are nixing the question period after each individual pitch, and instead orchestrating a dedicated time for 1-on-1 conversations with presenters immediately after the pitches.*)
  - Common questions will range from minor clarifications to specific tour cost or tour timing.
  - Have a backup plan. It is normal for no questions to come forward. Everyone is uncomfortable breaking the wall between presenter and audience, and social anxiety often wins the day. So have a couple of extra fun facts you can throw in, or reiterate how excited you are to tour the work in certain contexts, etc.

## Rehearsing your pitch

- Always rehearse your pitch! This is a short, very specific performance. You will probably find yourself frustrated with an unrehearsed pitch.

## Follow-up

- Stay after the pitch if at all possible, and chat with the presenters. If the pitch is part of a larger event, be available and present later at the event.
- Ask the pitch organizers for a contact list
- Send INDIVIDUALIZED emails to the presenters you are particularly interested in, thanking them for their pitch attendance, linking to your web presence, and information and video for the work.
- Include some reference to their own festival / season / programming trends and needs, and how your work fits within this framework
- include in that follow-up any possible invitations to see the work or work in progress live
- Never send an impersonal mass email to presenters at any time.

**If you follow all of the advice above, you will definitely book all the shows!** Wait, actually, no. Sometimes things just don't work out. Again, this is like advertising anything else. You are better off being in front of these presenters than not. Hopefully if no bookings come out of this one pitch, it will at least continue a conversation that leads to bookings at some mythical future time.



## Addendum 1: On Agents

Agents act as an intermediary between artists / producers and presenters. Their job is to facilitate sales. They generally represent a roster of artists / companies who have a diverse but related set of offerings.

Agents make their living by either charging a retainer or flat monthly fee to their artists, or by taking a percentage of sales. They work on a for-profit basis. Generally they work very hard at building a strong brand and relationships of trust with presenters, and at being seen consistently at major events related to their markets. For instance, an agent might strive to be the go-to person for Theatre for Young Audiences, serving presenters in rural / regional Canada. As such they would have a roster of a handful of the best TYA producers they can find, and they would attend all the major provincial and American presenter contact events / showcases, and the TYA-specific contact events, in an effort to sell those shows.

Even successful agents have to work very hard to make a living, so they need to be very selective about the artists they work with, ensuring that they have a mixture of the right work at the right phases of development, and that this work will help them maintain presenter trust.

If you are generating significant bookings, to the point where you can't administer the presenter interest you are receiving on your own, you may be a good candidate for an agent.

## Addendum 2: On setting performance fees

There are two separate but equal factors in the fee-setting equation:

- How much money do you need / what is the minimum fee you are willing to accept?
- How much is the presenter willing to pay?

### How much money do you need?

To answer this question, you will need to generate a budget. Generally in Canada, the presenter assumes that creation and production of your work have been taken care of by grants, donors, or a commissioning partner, so your performance fee will not generally retroactively cover general creation or production costs.

The performance fee should, however, cover the costs you will incur to put an existing work on their stage. This will include performer / technician fees and per diems, transportation, accommodations, and perhaps a portion of production remount costs. Hopefully touring grants will cover some of these costs as well, which will make the performance fee more reasonable / feasible for a presenter.

Some of these fees (especially artist and technician fees) may be weekly fees, and therefore might be divided over multiple performances in a tour.

There is no way to know a reasonable fee without doing an actual budget, and playing with the variables. Generally I use the Canada Council touring grant budget template for this purpose.

### What is the minimum fee you are willing to accept?

Sometimes an artist is willing to take a loss on a particular performance or set of performances, thereby covering expenses out of pocket / through a donor / through a grant. This is an individual choice which must be made with the risks and benefits known clearly in advance.

### How much is a presenter willing to pay?

Presenters are often willing to lose money on certain performances that particularly meet their mission (contemporary dance or theatre), making up the difference through grants or other hot-ticket, pop performances. That being said, different presenters have different capacities to cover a loss, or to gain revenue at all from performances.

Are you an artist who generally sells out 700-seat halls at \$30 / ticket? Maybe a 150 seat theatre won't be able to pay the same fee that you are used to, because they can't possibly sell as many tickets per showing.

Are you an emerging artist in a less marketable artform? Maybe you shouldn't assume that they will sell out their 700 seat house.

In general, a presenter will want to see you succeed on your tour, but will want to minimize their own expenses. Where possible, I recommend having genuine and open conversations with presenters as you are starting out, so that you understand as much as possible about where you are both coming from. I also recommend being in touch with trusted colleagues and sharing performance fee thoughts and information. This should help you understand what is generally accepted as a normal range within the market.

### Other resources:

The CanDance Network has a series of videos and tools related to many of these topics.

<http://www.candance.ca/artist-resources.html>