



The Silent Power of the Arts Publicist

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At the heartbeat of any successful theatre season or festival programme there is often a very hardworking publicist who connects the dots between the production and patrons. An arts publicist is considered by most managements to have some kind of magical aura, or a wand they can wave to grab the attention of journalists. To patrons, the publicist is often unseen. In most cases, the publicist works in the background trying to cast a magical spell to fathom exciting story angles that the media will bite.

Arts publicity is a complex discipline. Each press release that is crafted requires an understanding of the production, a familiarity with the creative team and an even more thorough knowledge of the media. The media have their own agendas, timeframes and competing interests. Successfully placing a story requires a publicist to be superbly networked so that that the intricate web between backstage in a theatre to the backroom of the printing offices can be navigated with ease and confidence.

There is also a certain thrill and excitement to being an arts publicist. There are industry secrets to which the publicist is privy because very often it is the publicist who holds the power to unlock an embargo on a major story. There is also an equal level of adventure to being a theatre publicist because new ways of getting the media to bite have to be constantly innovated.

Even though a newspaper, television or radio station may buy into the first press release the work of the publicist does not stop there. A successful publicist has to be like a scientist who has to constantly uncover different depths and layers to a production in order to continually reach out to newer audiences. There is definitely great rhyme and reason why most successful arts companies recognise the publicists as an important part of their professional teams.

While creative teams work in the rehearsal rooms, the publicist absorbs little bits of exciting information from sitting in on rehearsals. From coordinating a range of photo shoots for print and electronic media, a responsible publicist takes on the power of determining the kind of messaging that will go out about a particular production. By understanding the personalities of artists, designers and directors the astute publicist can find cunning ways to get even the most public-shy artist to open their hearts and souls on the ideal radio or television broadcast.

A theatre publicist is essentially the most important messenger between the production and the audience. He or she is like a factory owner who takes raw information about a production and shapes it into an exciting form. A powerful press release is the capital investment for ensuring that patrons bother to look up to see if the dates and times can correlate with their diaries.

The South African arts sector is incredibly fortunate in that it succeeds significantly to reach out to newer audiences. A talented band of professional arts publicists bring an incredibly high level of skill to the industry. Successful managements know that it can be far more effective to put a skilled and professional publicist in the front row to blow the trumpet for a new production.

At the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, Gilly Hemphill is the publicist, supported by her young assistant Fiona Gordon. These two dynamic women hold so much power that they can leverage editorial possibilities at the drop of a hat. They have an intricately complex web of connections that enable them to place stories in media that range from the high glitz shows such as *Top Billing* on SABC, to serious analytic stories in *Business Day*, to informative articles in the daily diaries of newspapers and sometimes even in the most obscure websites, publications and broadcast media.

Journalists sometimes call them at irregular hours to obtain photographs or extra information just before print or broadcast deadlines. Regardless of the hour, Gilly and Fiona are the midwives who just go about their task of delivering materials from one journalist to the next. In fact, sometimes, they also become the nurturing nurses to whom artists turn to when an artist's ego is bruised after a bad review. The caring publicist is so passionately sensitive to the artist's ego that very often a good publicist tries to heal a bad production review with an inspiring article about the artist's personality.

Whilst the public works between the institution and the media, the smart member of the audience also sometimes tries to weave themselves into a publicist's data-base in order to be on the frontline when trying to get information. But there is another reason why audience members sometimes want access to a publicist. Often when a show is sold out, audience members believe that the publicist might just have a sought after media ticket that has not been collected.

On opening nights at a theatre, a publicist is often the darling of the media. She holds the power to allocate seats. She gets feathers in the cap from management for ensuring a full house. She gets the accolades from the artists for all the exciting pre-publicity. She gets hugs from the theatre director for enticing particular media to cover particular story angles of a show. What most people don't know is that on opening night, it is the publicist who really bites her lip throughout the show hoping that all promises made about the production will be kept.

As the Artistic Director of the National Arts Festival, I constantly marvel at how successfully our publicity duo also rise to the challenge of positioning the National Arts Festival in the public eye. I am in awe of the way in which they embrace the arts community with a passionate understanding. I admire them for the way in which they motivate young artists and work extra hard to publicise the profiles of a new emerging generation of artists. I get blown away by their political and social insights and about how ready they always are to position our vision in the right context.

Living in Grahamstown can often be isolating. I would never be able to perform my job with efficiency if I did not have a network of information that constantly lands on my desk from a broad range of arts publicists across the country. Some of them work from their homes while others disseminate information from their smart offices in public funded arts institutions. These are the folks who excite me about what's hot and what is going to be hotter in the next few months.

When I am stuck at my desk and I need to get information about companies and artists profiles, the theatre publicists are the soul-mates to whom I turn. They are the fairy godmothers who fill my plate with excitement. I call on them to obtain first-hand information when I hear about new developments. I tap on their networks when I need to be connected. I bend their ear when I am in the mood for some juicy gossip.

Putting together a festival programme requires a combination of mathematical scheduling, a handful of understanding about the philosophy of the arts, a pound of knowledge about budgeting, a ton of energy for administration and the stamina to always be optimistic that your programme will sell. As directors we often don't have the stamina to always believe that audiences will come to what we offer. When audiences do line up, we know that it was largely because of the hard work done by an arts publicist in whose vocabulary failure has no place.

The next time you look through the pages of the media and read a story about the arts, give a thought to the hardworking arts publicist who filled in the dots between the theatre, the publication and you. **CF**