



My Bold Request

by
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with Beth Blickers

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A FEW YEARS BACK I attended a literary agent panel with a room full of playwrights hungry for representation. The take-away essentially was, “Don’t even think about contacting us until you are hot.” I’m sure I wasn’t the only one in the room wondering, how do you get hot if you don’t have an agent/how do you get an agent if you’re not hot? It sounded like more of the school of “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” which I had been attending since I decided to become a playwright and producing artist. So I stopped looking for one, an agent that is, and continued to develop and cultivate myself as an artist/entrepreneur.

But with the arrival of 2013 came the 25th anniversary of Yvette Heyliger dba Twinbiz. This landmark

anniversary did give me pause. I wondered, have I done/am I doing everything I possibly can to advance my career as a playwright *without* an agent? I decided that my anniversary gift to myself would be to make a bold request – an “informational meeting” with a literary agent. About.com defines it this way:

An informational interview is an interview conducted to collect information about a job, career field, industry or company. An informational interview is not a job interview. Rather, it’s an interview with an individual working in a career you would like to learn more about.

Next came the question, to whom would I make this bold request? I decided on literary agent Beth Blickers, because I knew her to be a kindred spirit. Over the years of my involvement in advocating for parity for women playwrights and theatre artists, I had joined the League of Professional Theatre Women, 50/50 in 2020, Women’s Initiative (made

up of members of the Dramatists Guild) and the now defunct Hedghook/Lark advocacy group. I noticed Beth at various meetings and events. The fact that she would take the time to attend these meetings and speak on panels, imparting her wisdom about the issues, the nuts and bolts, the harsh realities and hopeful future, really impressed me. So I asked and she said, yes!

I prepared for the informational meeting, jotting down questions I wanted to cover and points about my own journey as a playwright that I wanted to get her take on. Following is a re-creation of our February 2013 informational meeting.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I find that self-producing artists have the street-cred, but lack the industry recognition that brings about the type of “legitimacy” and respect that we would want. What is your view of artists who produce their own work? Is it helpful to the advancement of their careers?

BETH BLICKERS: I love artists who take things into their own hands and self-produce. It’s perfectly easy to hide the fact that you are doing so, make up a production company name and voila, no one knows who is behind the production. Having something going on is the easiest way to set up the next event in your career. For some artists that will become how they function forever. They’ll never be waiting for a seat at the table because they’ll always want to build their own table. For others it will create the awareness and relationships that allow them to join up at existing tables. Having said that, don’t limit your activities to those you structure for yourself. Apply for fellowships, writers colonies and groups, prizes, new play development programs, ten minute play contests while doing your own thing. The people you are trying to reach will be looking for those organizations on your resume to give that legitimacy you rightly acknowledge everyone is seeking.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I heard that one way to get noticed in the industry is to win awards, so I set out to do that. Yet, I feel kind of like Louis Gossett, Jr. after winning the Academy Award for *An Officer and A Gentleman*, wondering why the offers for roles (in my case offers of productions) weren’t coming in. Can you comment on the value of winning awards?

BETH BLICKERS: This is actually a question I ask myself regularly. The short answer is that no single award for one play matters. Winning a recognizable award for a play on a topic of interest to a wide range of theaters being developed with a hot director gets attention. If no one wants what you are offering, a single award doesn’t mean much.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I have applied to a particular writers group here in New York for more years than I care to admit. I want to belong to a nurturing community of writers and know that membership carries a certain amount of prestige that is helpful in this industry. How critical are writers groups to launching one’s career as a playwright? Are they part of a good strategy for advancement?

BETH BLICKERS: I think these groups are critical although I’m not sure they launch anyone’s career. If there’s any one message I’m trying to impart here it’s that it takes a village to support an artist. I’d be surprised if any artist of renown said a single relationship or prize or production had “made their career.” You have to have a success and then another one and another one. Writers groups serve a huge purpose in terms of emotional support, deadlines, group projects, Xeroxing resources, rehearsal space. New Dramatists, Center Theatre Group, the Goodman Theater, Primary Stages, the Lark, Ars Nova all have writers groups that I consider invaluable.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: On a past panel I attended, a producer said it is all about “relationships” and we should go to see plays at theatres where we envision

our work being done; get to know the people there. She said, “Producers produce writers they know.” I know a lot of people in the industry, but knowing people hasn’t really helped me much. What can I do to step up my game?

BETH BLICKERS: That’s invaluable advice and more folks should heed it. But you also need a play the producer wants to invest in and your friend, the star, wants to act in and that your best friend, the literary manager, is passionately advocating for at her theater. People who say nice things to you, but don’t actually open doors for you may well be your friends, but they aren’t your theater advocates. Let’s amend it to “producers produce writers they know who have buzz in the industry and a play that everyone is talking about.” Let’s add to it they produce a writer who they want to have around their office for a year as they develop, cast, rehearse and produce the play. Is it any wonder that our most often produced playwrights are charismatic, engaging people? Doesn’t surprise me.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: A playwright shared with me that he often sends in unpolished scripts to theatres (something I would never dream of doing). He says he has gotten many productions around the country this way and that theatres need to feel as though they are helping to “develop” the work. What is your view of his strategy?

BETH BLICKERS: I challenge his story. How unfinished were the plays? Was he previously produced? Was it after the economy collapsed? Theaters are understaffed, underfunded and awash in plays they love that need development help. Will they add you to that list? Sure! If they think you are a fabulous person who their board will love and you have a terrifically exciting play that will resonate for their audience. Are they randomly plucking out unfinished plays and out of their kind hearts, giving them a home? No. Are they more likely to do it for a writer with whom

they have invested in the past? Yes. Besides, who decides a play is finished? Plays are never finished. Alas.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: What is your view of writers directing their own work, even if they’re good at it? Is it a hindrance in terms of advancement as a playwright in this business?

BETH BLICKERS: I’m not a huge fan of writers directing their own work. I think there is a point late in your career when it’s fine. More than fine. Athol Fugard can direct his own work. Having an outside voice, an advocate, even a dissenting opinion in the room is vital to the creation of art. Would a great novelist shun working with an editor? I doubt it. Do directors have their own voices and visions? Of course! I hope so! It’s about finding someone with whom your vision overlaps and then getting into the room and throwing everyone’s vision into the pot and choosing the best ideas to serve the play. If you don’t have the experience of working with directors how can you say a director’s voice wouldn’t have made your play better? And by the way, directors have friends who they bring to see your play. And those friends just might be the producers, literary managers and agents with whom you are already trying to make a relationship. Established directors are a great conduit to the next steps of your career.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: What is your view of playwrights self-publishing their work? Is it helpful to the advancement or is self-publishing still considered “vanity” and therefore not legitimate?

BETH BLICKERS: Amazon has destroyed the perception of a vanity press when writers started making six figures. This goes back to self-producing. Get out there, get your work out there, and use the support systems available to you. There is a day when Dramatists Play Service will give you a huge advance and you’ll be delighted. Until that time, say “yes” more than “no.”

YVETTE HEYLIGER: My husband has been pushing me to write a screenplay for a long time. He says that if I sell one script, I could write and produce all the plays I want. What is your view of this?

BETH BLICKERS: It's a thousand times harder to make a movie than get a play produced. If you are willing to work twice as hard as you do now to carve a life in Hollywood, move to LA this instant. To think film is the ticket to theater success is folly. Read some reviews of plays by very successful TV writers. Personally the most heroic writers I know are working in Hollywood in the theater. They don't sleep and I'm not sure they shower much, but a writer keeping one foot in both worlds successfully is a joy to watch.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I am back on stage again, as an actor in my first one-woman show. Do playwrights who perform their own work make an attractive package to agents?

BETH BLICKERS: I represent David Cale and I've been watching him on stage since I was 24 years old and every second is precious to me. The fact that theaters only have to buy one plane ticket and spend money on one hotel room is, to me, secondary to the fact that he's magically unique and I'm honored to live in his theatrical presence. No one has walked away from Chris Durang, Jessica Dickey or Taylor Mac because they are multi-talented.

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I have met some important people in the industry, but have been shy to ask for favors or to ask them to take a look at my work. What would be your advice?

BETH BLICKERS: Every time you don't jump into an opportunity, 500 other writers will. Why aren't you just as worthy as they are?

YVETTE HEYLIGER: I once attended a panel of

literary agents who basically discouraged writers from approaching them until they were "hot." What is your view?

BETH BLICKERS: I hear on a nearly daily basis from theaters that are hungry for work by women and writers of color. It's Tuesday evening at 9:00 pm as I type this and I've heard it twice this week already from major regional theaters. I suspect I'll hear it again tomorrow. Take what makes you unique and use it to sell yourself. Have a vision of what you bring to the theater that no one else does and make your voice heard. Work hard, play nice, stay open, defend yourself without being defensive, make friends, take risks, see and read as much as you can, write with a mission, join groups, form groups, leave groups that aren't serving you, have coffee dates, ask tough questions of yourself and others, find your theatrical family. Be the most interesting human being you can be. I firmly believe that makes for the most interesting artists and art. And at the end of the day, isn't that the goal for us all?

And my informational meeting ended thus.

During this anniversary year of dba Twinbiz, I have been implementing Beth's suggestions into my strategy for advancement as a playwright without an agent. In a recent example, a new play of mine was selected for a reading—but I was barred from directing it. There was a director whom I had heard a lot about and whose work I knew to be well-respected, so I asked her. The respect was mutual, so she accepted. After talking with her and observing her during rehearsal I was pleased with what I heard and saw. I remembered Beth's advice and afterwards told the director that she was welcome to direct any play of mine she wished, and asked if I could send her some synopses. She said yes. And just like that, I felt a door swing open... 