

## GETTING THE WORD OUT

By Fiona Kirk, Stage Directions Magazine, January 2004

Sometimes getting a critic in to review your theatre company's show can be more difficult than mounting the show itself. But a little long-term planning combined with a smart approach can attract to the attention that your production deserves.

Washington, D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company is one of the most respected and successful companies in the US, having brought playwrights like Nicky Silver and Keith Redin to national attention. Currently, Woolly Mammoth is building a new 265-seat theatre space, scheduled to open November 2004. But in November 1978, when Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and co-founder Roger Brady first came up with the idea of bring a small theatre company devoted to new works and a cutting-edge approach to the D.C. area, the company and its players were virtually unknown.

Shalwitz credits Linda Reinisch, the company's managing director, for the first seven years, with getting the word out. The team arranged annual meetings with reporters from the major press outlets. "We'd pick up the phone and say, 'Hey, let's sit down – I want to tell you what's happening at the theater,'" recalls Shalwitz. "And in the course of those meetings we'd end up brainstorming, 'You'd give them ideas or they'd come up with an idea for an article.'"

Developing a good relationship with a reporter or producer is the key to garnering publicity. Shalwitz's philosophy is the key to garnering publicity. Shalwitz's philosophy is that you cannot be afraid of what the press will say about you. "You have to be willing to talk, willing to tell your opinions and ideas and hopes and aspirations for the theatre and they'll make of it what they will." Reporters now call Shalwitz to find out his thoughts on what's happening in the arts scene or a new piece of arts legislation – all part of developing a healthy give-and-take with the press.

When you do contact someone on a newspaper, magazine or at a local television station, don't let your enthusiasm get the better of you. "Don't bug them," warns Woolly Mammoth's director of communications Michael Kyrioglou. "Make your hits wisely. Everybody thinks their story's important, but you have to think about the bigger picture. You need to make sure not to hammer too much at someone."

Be sure to study the media in your area and make sure your press releases are sent to a specific person, not just the generic "editor." Use company websites to get familiar with local newspaper outlets, including the staff and writing style. When you do send out a press release, make sure it is clear yet expressive and follow up with an email or phone call. But be aware of deadlines. If you call a newspaper reporter at 4 p.m., he or she may be under pressure to get the day's edition wrapped up. If you're not sure, ask when's the best time to call – they'll appreciate your consideration.

"It's all about studying the media, reading the newspapers, paying attention to the sections and the bylines," says Cynthia Kirk, arts publicist for Oregon theatre powerhouse Portland center stage. "It's an ongoing educational process." Kirk also recommends keeping a database of media contacts and updating it regularly.

Michael Sommers, the theatre writer for New Jersey's *Star-Ledger*, suggests giving critics lots of lead time. "People will call up and say, 'Hey, we've got a show opening next week and we want a feature and a review and we'll send you two tickets,'" says Sommers, who covers the New York theatre scene, from off-off-Broadway to Broadway. Theatre companies should let the press know a month or two in advance what's coming up, so that features and reviews can be planned out. Also, find out how the reporter or reviewer prefers to get information. If you send something via email, don't send it as an attachment unless you get prior approval. Fear of computer viruses may mean that your well-worded, thought-provoking press release gets deleted before it's even opened. And consider the critic's quirks. Sommers, for example, hates getting prior reviews of shows that are in the process of being remounted. "That makes me crazy and I immediately throw it in the garbage because I don't want to be influenced," he says.

When coming up with ideas to pitch as feature stories, think outside the box. The more offbeat, the better, according to Kirk. For example, if your season includes Jason Miller's basketball-themed play *That Championship Season*, contact a columnist from the sports section of the paper. Many times columnists get tired of covering the same thing over and over; if you give them a fresh, new angle, they may go for it. Kirk will pitch a costume story to the fashion editor of the local paper if she thinks it might be of interest. She also stays in close contact with the crew, designers, and stage manager of each production to try to tease out stories that might otherwise escape notice.

Once your company is up and running and has consistent coverage in the local media, it may be time to consider hiring a full- or part-time communications or public relations director. At a certain point, theatre companies cross a threshold where they have to spend money to make money. "Public relations, where you're working to get free coverage, is time and dollars well spent if it's well-thought-out and your campaigns have a clear message," says Shalwitz. "It's a very competitive media environment and it's always changing; it takes dollars to cut through." He recommends raising money from grants or other sources to pay for specific marketing or public relations efforts.

Finally, treat every journalist with respect. "Green" reporters mature and move up through the ranks. If you forge a good relationship at the beginning of someone's career, you may reap the benefits as the journalist's career progresses. And if your production gets a bad review, don't fret. "Negative reviews or 'no's' to story ideas should not be taken personally," says Kirk. "A positive review or a 'yes' may be just around the corner."