

BACK STAGE

THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY

May 9 - 15, 2003

Price: \$2.95 (NY, NJ, CT, PA)
\$3.25 (Elsewhere)

NYSCA Budget Cut by \$6.6M

By Roger Armbrust

State lawmakers in Albany have slashed the FY2004 budget for the New York State Council on the Arts by 15%, or \$6.6 million for grants.

Legislators also cut NYSCA's administration budget by \$196,000. The funding was contained in the education portion of the budget bill. Gov. George Pataki is expected to approve the cuts because he had recommended

them in his proposed state budget introduced in January.

Richard J. Schwartz, NYSCA's chairman, told *Back Stage* on Tuesday, "We really haven't made any final determinations on how we'll handle the cuts. We're having a council meeting on the 21st of May, and we'll determine then."

Schwartz called the 15% budget

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NEA Plan Miffs Munn

By Roger Armbrust

The National Endowment for the Arts' plan to organize a major private fundraising effort has brought a highly critical reaction from one of New York City's most politically important arts voices: Norma Munn.

Chair of the New York City Arts Coalition, Munn told *Back Stage* on Tuesday, "As a matter of principle,

I'm opposed to government using fundraising in the private sector to supplement an agency budget at the city, state, or federal level. It means they're competing directly with not-for-profits for precisely the same funds; and their clout and ability to publicize their efforts is a lot greater

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Inside Back Stage...

AWARDS GALORE!

Outer Critics & Lortel winners; Drama Desk & Astaire nominees; and more. Coverage begins on Page 2



Antonio Banderas of "Nine" is among this year's nominees.

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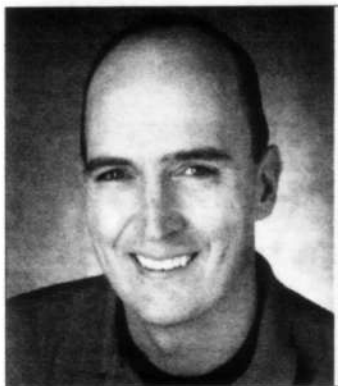
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edition. I got my domain name, gsimprov.com, for \$35, and subsequently renewed it for 10 years at a cost of \$180. It costs \$22.45 per month for hosting for the website and I use Hiway, which I have never had a problem with. Contracts usually run for a year and automatically roll



"I AM OFTEN UPDATING THE CONTENT ON THE SITE, SO DOING IT MYSELF IS A GREAT ADVANTAGE AND SAVINGS."

—GREG SULLIVAN
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
KLAATU IMPROV GROUP

over." Sullivan cautions, "You have to reload your site, so maintain a folder with all the important info, especially your IP number and site password."

The website host also provides him with email. On the home page, he has a "hit counter," which tells how many visits (i.e., "hits") have been made to the page. Sullivan can use this feature to track whether the ads and promotions he does during the year generate more visits to the site. Implementing the initial design took about 15-20 hours. Updating is much simpler. "I am often updating the content on the site, so doing it myself is a great advantage and savings."

In the area of promotion, he adds, "I have never paid to get the site 'noticed' by search engines and it does not seem to have hurt the business." One trick to learn from Sullivan: He makes his site's information paragraphs intentionally long, with many "keywords," such as "improv," "improvisation," "New York City," "beginner," "experienced," "acting," "actor," "class," "classes," "inexpensive," "performance," and "show" included in his text, so search engines can lead people who use these words in their searches right to the site. He's also found that "it's great to have a digital camera. Pictures can be cheaply taken and quickly added. Bottom line, working on a shoestring budget, my first-year costs were about \$500. My subsequent yearly costs are about \$290. An additional cost is that of the DSL connection (mine is \$39.95 per month), and the cost of buying a digital camera." Sullivan's summer teaching semester begins June 4, with Klaatu shows returning Sept. 20. The reservation line is 1-212-501-2905.

FREE AND EASY

That could also be the description for keeping a "blog" (a.k.a. Web log). No, you're not reading a typo. It's a form of Web communication we first heard of from one of our Comedy Top 10 Picks for 2002, comedian Liam McEneaney. His blog is www.kidliam.blogspot.com. There you'll find "The Liam McEneaney Experience." Unlike a website, bloggers are free to offer their writing easily and frequently, because all the HTML code is already laid down. Just go to www.blogger.com, for example, and there's a field to enter whatever text you want by typing, then just hit "publish."

To give credit where it's due, McEneaney tells us he found out about blogging from his friend, comedian

Adam Felber. The best reason we can see to go on blogging is, of course, that having a blog is free: www.blogger.com puts up the cost of hosting your blog (in exchange, they're allowed to put up banner ads on your blog). If you don't want the ads and you'd like extra services like spell check, there is also a \$5 or \$10 per month plan available. McEneaney, who has appeared on Comedy Central's "Premium Blend," assures readers that writing a blog is both incredibly easy and, yes, it's really free. Many comics and writers are now also becoming bloggers, and so can you.

From having a designed site to doing it yourself, or doing it for free, there are wonderful worlds on the Web to explore. And if you haven't already, make sure you also visit www.backstage.com.

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SELLING YOURSELF ON CD

BY DAVID FINKLE

"I always tell artists I can get them on a store shelf," LML Music founder Lee Lessack reports about the significant but complex subject of CD promotion, "but it's their responsibility to get themselves off the store shelf."

"DO PUBLICITY ON WEBSITES THAT PERTAIN TO THE GENRE OF YOUR MUSIC."

—LEE LESSACK
FOUNDER, LML MUSIC

To some extent, that's the quintessential CD promo message, although many other authorities regularly assessing the field have additional advice for cabaret performers who understand that CDs can sell an artist just as an artist can position himself or herself to sell CDs.

RADIO PLAY IS POSSIBLE

Talk to radio-promo man Len Triola, who's repped cabaret artists for a couple of decades. He'll say, and it's in no way surprising, that pursuing radio play is a solid idea. And he'll point out that across the land, there are at least 250 deejays who play the pertinent music. Cabaret performer Sue Matsuki, who says that "people just have to do the work," proposes checking surveys for those 250 easy listening and jazz standard stations and then contacting the appropriate people at all of them.

Two hundred fifty is an approximate number, of course, but it should nevertheless warm the hearts of nitery watch-

ers who are convinced that Clear Channel has severely limited the market. Not at all, Triola emphasizes. "David Kenney at [WBAI's] 'Everything Old Is New Again,'" Triola begins to list, then adds, "There are Davids all over the country—Ron Della Chiesa at WGBH-FM Boston, 'LRN in Miami.'" He could go on. By the way, Triola usually charges a monthly \$750 rate, but is willing to bargain, or as he puts it, "If I like a record, I go to work for you."

One place he does some of that work is WNYC, where he's chummy with longtime quality-music maven Jonathan Schwartz. Triola regularly recommends discs to



Liam McEneaney, comedian

Schwartz. And for his part, the choosy deejay responds enthusiastically. A representative of the kind of appreciative advocate situated in many markets, Schwartz says he's always "listening and hoping" to add new names to his playlist of singers interpreting the still-expanding Great American Songbook. "I advise anyone who wants

"IF I LIKE A RECORD, I GO TO WORK FOR YOU."

—LEN TRIOLA
CABARET ARTIST REP

to get to me to go through Lenny," Schwartz says, giving the CD plugga a plug.

Like Schwartz, David Kenney is among those bombarded with CDs, which he counts on receiving. He does suggest, though, that entertainers pursuing airplay consider what they're sending out. "My main concern," he explains, "is sometimes they overload their packet. They include all the press releases for all the shows they've ever done—much more information than you need. There should be a letter of introduction with some information, and it should be typed rather than handwritten." He also suggests that material "sent from press agents has more weight. When what is sent is somewhat messy, when things are folded and shoved into an envelope, that gives the impression this is not a professional package. What's most important is content."

Incidentally, Jonathan Schwartz fell in love with Nancy LaMott sometime before she died, brought her on his show, and continues to play her tracks on his weekly shows. How he was introduced to her is a particularly amusing as well as instructive tale, and it goes some way toward underscoring the myriad ways in which well-positioned fans can be reached. "A waiter at [the Midtown Manhattan restaurant] Orso overheard my accountant and lawyer speaking my name," Schwartz relates. "The waiter produced a Johnny Mercer CD Nancy LaMott made and gave it to Larry Brooks and his wife, Marsha, who had occasion to be leaving for my building, the then WQEW. From the first word, 'moon,' on a song I never needed to hear again, 'Moon River,' I heard easily the best singer of her generation."

USING THE INTERNET

To be sure, the kind of serendipity Schwartz recalls can never be counted on, but what can be counted on is the luck people make for themselves by having their CDs available wherever they can and in whatever circumstance. Jeanne MacDonald has sold her CDs through www.CDBaby.com for some time now and is grateful for the check that comes after each copy is sold. (She can also add the buyer's name to her mailing list.) But she notes, "Getting business through them hasn't come out of that. So much of the time the CDs you sell are through word of mouth and people hearing you. I have still found no avenue for selling to unknown audiences."

Sue Matsuki, on the other hand, insists that the cross-referencing policy the CDBaby.com folks have really, really helps. "I've gotten found on CDBaby," she boasts. Anyone looking up, for instance, Rosemary Clooney or Peggy Lee will be referred to Matsuki. When they visit her, they can also listen to CD cuts. The aural preview, Matsuki comments, is no longer an option at Amazon.com, where, she also points out, too few sales

can leave the artist not making enough to cover the e-merchant's annual charges. Happy at CDBaby.com, Matsuki rounds up quotes to slap on her CDs and then features those words of praise in her CDBaby.com file, which, by no accident, also includes a link to her www.suematsuki.com website. Matsuki also says there's no underestimating the value of good cover art, making sure a CD reflects what the artist does on stage, and, if the budget can handle it, giving away to the right people anywhere from 300 to 500 CDs from a 1,500-CD pressing.

YOU'VE GOT TO PUSH IT

To supplement CD radio play and Internet activity, Lee Lessack is full of additional practical notions. "There are several other methods of making that CD earn its cost," he says. "Number one, regularly hire a publicist who will get you reviews—at *Billboard* and the *Los Angeles Times*. That works. Do publicity on websites that pertain to the genre of your music—like *Playbill* online [www.playbill.com] and *Theatermania* [www.theatermania.com]. Try to coordinate promotions that are reasonable to what you can expect in sales as an unknown artist in a genre that is not so popular." Sue Matsuki stresses that visiting individual stores is a must and that CDs should only be placed in areas where the artist is known.

Asked what most helps rivet attention in CD promotion, Jim Caruso, who both performs and tub-thumps performers, jokingly recommends "prayer." More seriously, he acknowledges that it's a hard row to hoe because "there aren't that many clubs to pitch to." He also advises going to record stores "to get to know the buyer—the shmoozing element." He adds, "It is doable. If you keep on it, it's worth it. We know the stuff sells if it's in there." He mentions that "you have to push CDs like you push your shows" and that eventually that double push feeds back and forth. "The schlepping continues," he concludes. Along these lines, Lisa Dawn Popa, who operates the distribution company Cabaret Connection, has been quoted as encouraging artists to "promote yourself to hotel staffs and concierges of more than one hotel if you are working out of town." It's not a bad tactic for any performer to get that CD listed in the catalogue of available product Popa regularly updates and sends to 4,000 contacts worldwide something like eight times a year.

Jamie deRoy, another cabaret veteran who represents herself and also does legwork on behalf of others, declares that "to get [your CD] in major stores across country, you absolutely have to get with a distributor, and most of them don't want to take independent labels." When, however, an artist does get CDs in stores, it's a strong notion, deRoy says, to do signings. "I've offered to do signings," she states. "That's a great thing if you can get it." David Kenney remarks, "I see more and more release parties, which I think is good."

But he returns, as so many scene observers do, to one of the CD promo basics when he says, "Do what other artists do. Go to the clubs and try to sell your CD through performances." Triola phrases it just as succinctly by saying, "Not only get the CD out, but get work." Jeanne MacDonald works, Sue Matsuki works, most savvy artists do. Matsuki reports she recently sold 25 CDs after performing before an audience of 115, but allowed as how that was unusual. Whatever the numbers, the performances promote the CD, and in their turn, the CDs

"I SEE MORE AND MORE RELEASE PARTIES, WHICH I THINK IS GOOD."

—DAVID KENNEY
WBAI RADIO

"I ADVISE ANYONE WHO WANTS TO GET TO ME TO GO THROUGH LENNY TRIOLA."

—JONATHAN SCHWARTZ
WNYC RADIO