

Deputize Yourself

There is an infamous moment during the first three days of rehearsal when a cast elects the Equity deputy. The election process tends to follow one of a few classic paradigms. After the jokes about electing whatever cast member is absent, the cast turns to the guy or gal who is known to have served (frequently repeatedly) as deputy or said guy/gal volunteers for duty. Absent a recidivist deputy candidate, the choice usually devolves upon some newbie who is assured that “being deputy is a great way to learn the contract.” Or a long uncomfortable silence ensues, finally broken by some poor soul offering herself/himself up in some sort of martyred self-sacrifice.

So what is this suicide mission, this hideous burden of being deputy that causes members to sit on their hands and stare at the floor? The deputy is the go-between, the liaison between a cast and our union, our eyes and ears in the field. Frequently it is a sinecure, a do-nothing job on a show that is all smooth-sailing. Some contracts require the deputy to file a report of the rehearsal hours so that the appropriate AEA business representative can see if overtime is due. (I always cribbed mine from the stage manager’s records; don’t tell anyone.) Sometimes there is a question about the schedule or working conditions, and if the stage manager is unable to resolve it satisfactorily, the deputy calls the union and speaks to the business representative – and the business rep handles it. Sometimes the smoothly-sailing show hits rough water or even an iceberg; that’s when you want a deputy with good listening and consensus-building skills, a diplomat and a leader. If you are a leader (and I think all actors are natural leaders),

volunteer to be deputy; when the lifeboats are lowered, you want the best person in charge – why not yourself?

Being a deputy benefits not only yourself and your show, but the union. We have three primary ways of communicating with our members: Equity News, the website and stage managers and/or deputies. Deputies (and stage managers) bring timely information to working members who may not read Equity News or visit the website. Conversely, the problems a deputy encounters and the questions a deputy raises serve as a key source of real-world information for Council and Staff, and they are filed away for the next time proposals are developed for contract negotiations.

In New York, the local deputies gather once a month during the Eastern Regional Board meeting to air grievances and exchange information. A deputy brings up an issue and another deputy thinks, “Oh, yeah, we have that problem too.” Or “I didn’t realize we were supposed to do that (or not do that.)” Another deputy might offer a solution to that same problem that they achieved with their management. Ideally, it educates and raises the consciousness of not only Staff and Council, but also one’s fellow deputies. It can be a beneficial and useful process of cross-pollenization.

What limits the effectiveness and usefulness of these meetings is the level of participation. We realize that actors, particularly working actors, lead busy lives, and we are in the process of trying to discover the best time of the week to hold these deputy meetings. And these meetings are currently only held for deputies in the NY metropolitan area. Perhaps we can establish a Deputies’ Forum on the “members only” section of our website or on Facebook.

Remember my one-note-samba about communication? I want to hear from you, and I (and Council and Staff) particularly want to hear from you if you are a deputy. The better and more current our information and the higher our level of participation, the stronger we will be at the negotiating table. Please do your part: volunteer to be a deputy and, if you do, be an active deputy. Your president and your fellow members thank you.