CashCowasaurus vs. CatchMeasaurus

A well-known theater website just posted that, as announced by the Broadway producers last May, my most recent Broadway show Catch Me If You Can will go out on a national tour this fall. Immediately, Facebook and my e-mail inbox burst into flame. How come? The tour is not going out on a full Production contract or one of the Tiers. It isn't even going out on SETA (Short Engagement Touring Agreement.) It is going out non-Equity.

Most of the Facebook comments were quick to locate the problem: it's that blasted union, letting decent-paying jobs slip through their careless fingers. It galls me that this wonderful piece of Broadway entertainment, this show that I have been so proud to be part of during its four-year development and all-too-short six-month Broadway run is going out non-Equity. It galls me just as much that my fellow union members think AEA is to blame.

The Road has changed, and AEA is working hard to save Equity jobs. As I laid out in my "Touring 101" and "Touring 102" (available on the AEA website), touring is now a very difficult environment in which to make money -- whether you are a producer, a presenter, or an actor. Government funding has been slashed or eliminated, donors have pulled back and subscription lists have shrunk -- so the local presenters are refusing to pay the guarantees necessary to mount and run an Equity show, even on the lowest SETA. If a producer needs $280K to $300K per week to run his show and only three or four cities will guarantee more than $230K, the producer (who may have already lost most of the investors' money during the Broadway run) will take the sure money -- exceedingly modest but sure -- of licensing the show rather than taking the risk of losing yet more of the investors' money.

As I explained, the union's approach has morphed from last century's "If you want professional actors, you have to pay full production salaries." (which I wholeheartedly supported then) to our current stance of "If you can prove you're getting low guarantees, we'll share the risk/reward with you by taking lower salaries in exchange for a back-end participation." (which I just as wholeheartedly support now.) This change in strategy has enabled AEA to maintain and even increase our share of the touring market. As you may recall, our share of the one-week touring market had slipped to about 60% as recently as 2003. Currently, almost every show playing engagements of one week or longer is on an Equity contract.

AEA has a staff of hard-nosed, experienced, creative negotiators who cajole, threaten, shame, plead with and generally browbeat producers into making the most favorable deal possible for the members. Sometimes, however, the two sides just can't make the numbers work.

If a show is a smash hit like Wicked or Jersey Boys, the money is there and it all works. The producers of the Tony-winning Broadway hit Billy Elliott not unreasonably thought they had a similarly rainmaking cash cow and sent out not one but two national tours on a full Production contract with an Equity company of 52(!) and many trucks worth of scenery and costumes. To break even, they needed to make a ton of money. They didn't. The two tours were consolidated, and the four major sit-down cities were divvied up. One tour closed in Canada; and the other tour, faced with upcoming shorter engagements (and consequently many more expensive moves), planned to close and license the tour to a non-Equity producer. Our staff was able to convince the producer to reduce the number of trucks and reconfigure the show more in line with its reduced financial expectations and thus keep it on an Equity contract, albeit a SETA as opposed to full Production.

For saving the resulting 48 Equity jobs — more jobs than the average touring show and jobs paying far more than the average Equity job -- the union received nothing but grief for having "allowed" the B.E. producers to reduce the actors' salaries This goes to the heart of my beef with complaints about AEA's strategy with road shows: AEA doesn't allow producers to reduce member salaries, AEA allows producers not to eliminate member jobs. Would you rather have 80 jobs at $2000 a week or 400 jobs at $1000 a week?

We all -- actors, directors, designers, producers, presenters -- want touring shows to be duplicates of the Broadway show: a thrilling and moving entertainment with a spectacular set, extravagant costumes, a huge orchestra and a top-notch cast. On the road, however, cost soar because the set has to be disassembled, transported and reassembled (sometimes once a week) and the cast and those orchestra and crew members traveling with the show have to be paid per diem for their housing and meals. Those are the two big cost-factors on the road: the size of the touring complement and the number of trucks.

Many of our Production Contract bargaining partners, used to the more expansive and forgiving environment of Broadway, have difficulty saying "No.": "OK, you can have an ensemble of 16;" "OK, you can have an orchestra of 22;" "OK, you can have three turntables." Their non-Equity-producing brethren, who are used to operating with thinner profit margins, have no problem saying "No.": "No, you can only have 8 in the ensemble:" "No, you can only have 16 in the orchestra;" "No, the set has to fit into four trucks."

My best friend (who is ten inches shorter and 80 pounds lighter than I) has a running gag about how he the proto-mammal is going to steal the eggs of me — the lumbering dinosaur — and I am going to go extinct. That may be the situation on the road. Whether or not the CashCowasaurus goes extinct, it no longer rules the earth.

The road is different than it was. We need to talk and work with not only our traditional bargaining partners, but also traditionally non-Equity producers and our sister unions to help a configure a road that works for all of us.We need to be alert, fast-moving, and adaptable in order to not only survive but thrive. Thanks to a flexible, determined and creative staff and leadership, AEA is doing just that.