

Work, Art, and “Work”

First of all, thank you for re-electing me President . I am proud of you for resisting the siren lure of None of the Above, the blandishments of What Election, and Empty Chair’s cynical campaign promise to provide every member with work. I only wish I could provide every member with work. I not only can’t provide good-paying work to every member, I can’t provide low-paying or even non-paying work to every member. And thereby hangs a column.

What is work? In Sondheim’s Sunday in the Park with George, Franz says “Work is what you do for others, liebchen. Art is what you do for yourself.” None of us, not even your jaded, mercenary President, chose this vocation because we thought it was a surefire way to financial comfort. We do it for ourselves, for Art – for Love, as Morales sings in A Chorus Line. We do it because we are junkies and we need our fix. Many of us would do it for free. That attitude is lousy leverage when it comes to negotiating contracts. And that’s where a Union comes in handy.

AEA’s job is to allow us to do what we do for Love without turning ourselves into floozies. AEA says “No” on behalf of 49,000 Ado Annies. Our job is frequently not to protect actors from unscrupulous producers but to protect actors from themselves. And yet.... And yet actors want to act. There aren't enough decent-paying jobs to go around -- not even close to enough. So how can we/AEA allow actors the freedom to do what they love to do – for basically no money --without undercutting the marketplace?

AEA currently strives to accommodate our members by allowing them to volunteer their services, to work for Creativity, Career or Community even when there is little hope for Cash or (Health) Coverage. We have disparate rules across the country to allow members to work for free or all but free: Showcase Code, 99-Seat Theater, Member’s Project Code, Staged Reading, Bay Area Project Policy, NYMF, Fringe Festival. It is not a level playing field, and as the Council develops a long-range strategic plan, we will be taking a look at whether we should level it.

As actors and as a union, the ultimate power we have is the ability to say “No.” Saying “No” risks losing us the job or the contract, but we won't get more money if we say "Yes" to less money -- or no money. Sometimes we have to say “No” to “work” in order to get real work, work for pay. That little card in your wallet says you are a professional. Professional, according to my dictionary, means “following an occupation as a means of livelihood or for gain.” We may not all be able to secure “a means of livelihood” from acting or stage managing, but I think we all want to do it “for gain.” Your re-elected and newly elected leadership are striving to maximize both the amount of gain from the work and the number of opportunities to do the work. And although we are not being paid for it, we are proud and happy to do this "work."