When Good Shows Go Bad

"Stranded again!" I well remember Chuck Rule's glorious basso rolling out across the St. James Theatre at the top of "On the Twentieth Century" in 1979. He was bemoaning the abandonment in Chicago by Oscar Jaffe (John Cullum) of a failed pre-Broadway production, leaving the actors with no income and no way to get home.

This was a common plight for actors 100 years ago, and it led to one of the core protections offered to actors and stage managers by AEA: the Equity bond. Actors' Equity requires every "single-unit" (individual rather than seasonal) production to post a bond equivalent to two weeks' contractual salary and benefits for all AEA employees.

The value – both figurative and literal – of the Equity bond was brought home to me in the last couple weeks by the spectacular and mysterious unraveling of the Broadway production of "Rebecca the Musical." For those of you who are devotees neither of the Broadway season nor the death spiral that is the Wyman career, "Rebecca the Musical' was initially scheduled for rehearsal in late January, then September 10th, then October 1st before being terminated September 30th. Each postponement was in response to the loss of a significant investor. Beyond those simple facts, the story is murky, bizarre and the subject of an FBI investigation.

Theater is a precarious way to a make a living. Because this is true for producers and theatre companies as well as actors and stage managers, Equity has frequently ridden to the defense of actors out of town. When the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami was going under in 2006, first-time AEA deputy Matthew Dellapina found the entire cost of his hotel stay had been charged to the credit card he had submitted for incidentals and then came to the theater to find the locks changed and a notice on the door. Thanks to AEA (Matt: "I was awed at the sensitivity of staff; they were true defenders."), the actors were paid out of the bond and the hotel bills were taken care of.

Laura Hodos was in the cast of the final production at the Caldwell Playhouse in Boca Raton in 2010. She saw the theatre staff fighting like mad to keep the theatre afloat; but in the end, the last two weeks of salary were paid out of the bond. Laura says, "Having the bond in place, I never worried that I might be stranded. It's one of the wonderful things about being a member of Equity. It takes some of the 'business' out of show business and allows performers the freedom to concentrate on creating a great show."

I don't know if "Rebecca" is a great show or not, but the show's success in Europe, an impressive cast and a stellar creative team led me to believe that "Rebecca" might just pay the Wyman bills for a year or more. Even if it didn't find its audience, it would be good for four months or so. The loss of those prospective tens of thousands of dollars hit me hard. My union, however, took a bit of the sting out of that blow because thanks to the AEA-required bond, I got a check for two week's contractual salary and one week's rehearsal salary.

In terms of the "Five C's," the union can't restore the Creative loss of Karen Mason playing Mrs. Danvers, the Career loss of Analisa Leaming making her Broadway debut and of Holland Grossman doing her first Equity role, or of the loss of the time with this wonderful Community. (We've really bonded through this debacle.) Thanks to the Equity bond, however, AEA can and did give us a little help with Cash and credit toward health Coverage.

Of course, this all depends on your actually signing an Equity contract and not being like that foolish fellow in my column "The Fall of the Twin Tiers." And, if John Cullum offers you a show, make sure he has Judy Kaye under contract.