

Springtime for Equity

In spring, a young person's thoughts turn to love. Or getting a summer stock job. Not being a particularly young person, my thoughts normally turn to fantasy baseball. This year my thoughts have turned to those even less-young than I, partially due to a couple New Yorker pieces by Roger Angell and Roz Chast and to a conversation about end-of-life choices with my step-mother and my 92-year-old Dad (who actually belongs to a lunch club with his coeval Mr. Angell.)

Preparing for the future and old age in particular is important. I have written before ("Three Requests") about pensions and planning for the future. In the space of a couple weeks, I have met with the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO, a group of a dozen NY members-at-large hoping to encourage union participation and activism, and the board of the Broadway League; and these meetings have prompted me to think about the future of another not-so-young entity: Actors' Equity Association.

What will happen to AEA? Unionism -- as was clear from the AFL-CIO meeting -- is on the decline and under unprecedented attack both from conservative politicians and from employers and business groups. We need to make the case to employers, to future members and to the public at large that we are the good guys, as I did in an address to the IATSE national convention last year (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqAIQf-SZe8>.)

Few industries and few employers are as union-friendly as Broadway and the Broadway League: every employee in a Broadway theater is on a union contract. The profits of a Broadway mega-hit may make these labor costs relatively palatable, but the financial exigencies of the Road and particularly the not-for-profit LORT- and SPT-contract theatres make those employers eager to reduce their labor costs. In the face of employer efforts to hire fewer or cheaper workers, the eternal question at AEA -- More Jobs or More Compensation? -- remains at the forefront of every councillor's conscience.

The dozen grass-roots activists are a good sign. I too want the membership of AEA to participate more in their union. I don't want (and we don't need) 50,000 members to run for Council, but I do want 50,000 members to educate themselves about the business, about the issues, about the candidates and then to vote next month. Around the age of 100, humans like Roger Angell and my dad are pretty frail; but I don't think 100 years puts AEA into our dotage. I think we are in our prime. I am looking to you -- particularly our younger members -- to learn, to participate and to vote and to carry us forward into an ever more vigorous and glorious next 100 years.