

To Join or Not to Join? My Rejoinder

At our January Eastern membership meeting, a member asked what to say to young non-members who are trying to figure out whether they should join Actors' Equity as soon as possible or wait a while or just keep working non-Equity. In response, a couple members gave heart-warming testimonials on the value of AEA. We have no official AEA party line, but let me weigh in with my personal response.

Surprisingly, your president does not adjure every young actor to grab his or her Equity card at the first opportunity. My advice is to wait until you're ready: get your training, get experience. Develop those chops, build that resume. Then, when you are ready to compete with the very best, go for it -- and go for it full out, as Jerry Mitchell says. And don't hesitate overlong before jumping in: the lookism and physical demands of the business can make one's 20's some of one's most employable years.

Another argument for sooner rather than later is that a union card offers one the opportunity through Equity Principal Auditions and Equity Chorus Calls to be seen for desirable jobs. A young Michigan grad told me how grateful she was that after a stint at the St. Louis MUNY, she had taken the opportunity to get her Equity card. Because of EPA's and ECC's, she was getting in on auditions for Broadway and touring and LORT jobs for which her classmates, who hadn't had or hadn't availed themselves of the same opportunity, were unable to be seen.

I have heard of people making the argument that they plan to stay non-Equity because if they "go Equity" they will never work or work much less. This line of reasoning is fear-based, and anybody who thinks that way is unlikely to make a career of the Theater. And I very strongly feel that anyone who wants to make a career of the Theatre HAS to be Equity. Why would one not want the opportunity to work at the very highest level of the business? Why would one not want the protection and support of bargained-for working conditions? Why would one not want a defined benefit pension?

And for those who claim they don't need a union because their non-Equity job pays them good money, I say that a non-Equity job that pays good money is an Equity job in waiting. We are committed to Organizing, to creating more work opportunities for the members, and we will move aggressively to bring any theatrical employer with the ability to pay decent salaries into the Equity fold.

And perhaps most importantly, union is solidarity. Our union is 50,000 people supporting one another in a very difficult business, 50,000 people committed to creating the best opportunities for one another to make a Life in the Theater. Why on earth would an actor or stage manager wish to give their energy and talents to an enterprise that vitiates, undermines or militates against the success and efforts of their fellow workers? Theater is Family. Union is Family. Why would one hurt one's family members?

So what I say to young people considering whether or when to go Equity is this: if you are determined to have a career in the Theater, you NEED to be Equity. First get your training and get some experience, but do it as quickly as you can; and as soon as you feel ready to compete with the pros, do whatever you can to GET THAT CARD! I will be proud to sign it.