

ACTORS' UNION

Jumbo Shrimp. Living Dead. Working Holiday. Actors' Union.

Actors' Equity Association seems like another oxymoron. Unions are workers' collectives of widget-stamping cogs on the assembly line of the industrial machine. Actors are artists: flamboyant, narcissistic, involuted artists. Studying a script for a potential role, an actor reads, "Blah, blah,blah,... MY LINE.....Blah, blah, blah,....MY LINE."

And yet Actors' Equity has been representing, defending and protecting stage managers and actors for one hundred years. How did this happen?

Just as disparate individual actors come together to form a unified and mutually-reliant ensemble in a good stage production, so the elected leadership of AEA has formed a highly democratic, responsive, service-oriented union.

The growth of this union from less than 200 actors to almost 50,000 is the story told in these pages. Along the way you will meet dozens of outrageous characters. (What would a collection of actors be without characters?) You will read of policy triumphs and failures. (What would show business be without hits and flops?) You will encounter those who have done extraordinary things for AEA and its members and those who have stood in AEA's way. (What is a stage story without heroes and villains?)

The issues of Equity's first decades are still with us. The actor-managers of the twentieth century's early years have their parallels in the Members' Project Code and today's self-producing actors. Battles with the government for funding and against censorship continue to be fought. A recurrent theme is the conflict between individual rights and protecting the greatest number of members.

AEA members are not blue-collar workers who work with their hands. They are not white-collar workers who work with their heads. They are workers in motley who work with their hands, their legs, their whole bodies, their minds, their hearts, and their souls. They are time-travellers who bring to their performances their past experiences, their present moods and their future hopes.

Far from being the self-centered egotists of popular conception, the actors and stage managers of Actors' Equity Association have worked not just to benefit other denizens of the stage but also to benefit those oppressed by discrimination (through their battle against segregation in the 1950's and in support of marriage equality today), by political witch-hunting (through their principled stand against Red-baiting in the '50's), and by disease (through Equity Fights AIDS, their ground-breaking, spectacularly effective AIDS initiative in the '80's.)

This is not an exhaustively comprehensive concordance of all things Equity. Many important people and events get short shrift or no mention at all. Neither a puff piece nor a scholarly tome, the book attempts to describe a very human organization struggling with business issues, social issues and personal issues. As befitting such an oxymoronic world as show business, this story -- sometimes pretty ugly, sometimes seriously funny -- is of a living institution: an Actors' Union.