



## ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION'S CORNERSTONE: PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

For Actors' Equity Association, representing the 49,000 actors and stage managers of the American professional theater, professional integrity is a cornerstone in the Union's nearly 100-year history. This founding principle of the Union fundamentally informs the collective voice of Equity professionals nationwide so they can be heard in an atmosphere of respect and dignity, without fear of repercussion at work. This same guiding belief is the catalyst for Equity's continued growth and success in the American Theater.

Professional integrity and respect in the workplace was the impetus in 1913 for the formation of Actors' Equity Association. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the labor movement was emerging as a powerful and influential force in America, exploitation and intimidation of actors was the norm. Actors were often forced to provide their own costumes, rehearse without pay or guarantee of payment, and were oftentimes left stranded on the road when a show suddenly closed.

Through the determination and foresight of a handful of actors, Equity was formed. Wages for rehearsals and performances were negotiated, work rules agreed to, and bonds were required in advance of a production to protect salaries in case of a default on the part of the producer. As actors' exercise of collective power improved their material security, these theater professionals were better able to advance their artistic points of view and assume their rightful place as artists, interpreters, and creators.

Today's challenges have unique, modern twists, but still go to the core issues of respect, dignity, fairness, and acknowledgment of what Equity members contribute to the American theater. In the rapidly changing world of new media, there is a need to protect an actor's image (intellectual property) against expropriation, unrestricted use, and piracy. As theatrical producers more and more leverage new media to promote shows, it's increasingly necessary to add parameters on how and where an actor's image may be used and secure fair compensation for the actors' participation in these new opportunities as an acknowledgement of their contributions to the success of the theatrical productions, and a license for the very right to use their images.

And while new media is the newest challenge to professional integrity, an old issue has reawakened to take on new dimensions. The renewed incursion of non-union productions into what have traditionally been secure Equity jurisdictions and venues, in both for-profit and not-for-profit theater, is a challenge for the Union. The realities of today's economic and political situation make it lucrative for a producer to use non-union performers as a way to cut costs and boost profits. The proliferation of non-union touring productions and regional theaters amount to an attack on professional integrity,

the Union's jurisdiction, and have initiated a serious erosion of industry standards for wages, benefits and work rules.

On a personal level for actors, professional integrity is demonstrated in the pride in and passion for the work they have chosen as their life's work. The adage "the show must go on" personifies an exceptional work ethic which has its roots in that famous aphorism and is dramatically renewed each time an Equity member steps into an acting class, a rehearsal hall, or upon the stage.

For the members of Actors' Equity Association, professional integrity is not a few lines in a script to be memorized and recited. Nor is it a costume that is donned for a few hours, later tossed aside until the next performance. It is not the years of continuing study and rigorous physical preparation. It is all of these commitments, and more, forged in a spirit of theater artistry. Professional integrity is a pride in the work and craft that defines a crucial essence in the daily lives of actors, and all working people, who deserve dignity and respect for the work that they do and the contributions they make to industry, to the communities in which they live and work, and to the American culture.