

STAGING CLEVELAND

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

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**To Join the Union or Not:
That is the Question**

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A NO-BRAINER FOR SOME

For Marc Moritz, the decision to join the Actors' Equity Association (aka, Equity) union was a no-brainer. He'd been acting since he was six and was three years into his theater studies at Kent State University, when he decided it was time to just go pro.

"I was a major, hardcore, career animal actor," Moritz recalls. "I was not thinking of any other career, and I knew the only way for me to make a true living, have a pension and feel like it's my life was to join the union."

He dropped out of KSU, joined Equity and moved to New York in 1978, and three years later, Moritz was cast in a Stephen Sondheim Broadway musical, *Merrily We Roll Along*. He continued to work professionally in New York until 1984, when he returned to Cleveland to found Giant Portions Improv Troupe. He moved to Chicago in 1992 and worked at a variety of theaters there until 1997, when he went back to New York for several more years. He returned to Cleveland in 2002.

For many years, he worked regularly enough to get full health coverage each year. Equity requires 12 weeks to get a half a year of coverage and 20 weeks of work to earn a full year's worth of coverage.

"Ultimately, I'm going to enjoy my years of life in the theater with a bit of a pension," explains Moritz, now 60. "It's not enough to live on, but it helps actors in my age bracket make clearer professional choices."

A gifted comedian and vocalist as well as a dramatic actor, Moritz has appeared in numerous starring and supporting roles in local theaters, from the Cleveland Play House and Great Lakes Theater to the now-closed Jewish Community Center Theatre and Dobama Theatre. He has directed in several theaters here, including Dobama and Weathervane Theatre in Akron. Throughout his career, he did film and commercial work and has taught and coached actors to balance out his career activities.

A few years ago, Moritz returned to KSU, where he earned his MFA in Theatre. He still works at Northeast Ohio theaters, but has recently recommitted himself to auditioning for roles in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati and other cities with Equity theaters.

"I'm jumping in again in a way that's almost more full force than when I first went to New York," he says. "It's a lot of driving, but I'm energized by it."

TWO MAJOR EQUITY HOUSES

The decision for Derdriu Ring was almost as easy. When she was “fresh off the boat from Ireland,” she jokes, Peter Hackett, then artistic director at the Cleveland Play House, offered her an Equity role. She had been a member of Irish Equity for four years prior to immigrating to Cleveland, but had found that organization much less efficacious for actors than the AEA was for American actors. As a League of Resident Theaters facility, the Play House simply made a phone call to AEA and got her an Equity card.

She then moved to New York, where she acted regularly for five years, including many Equity roles at the Irish Rep Theatre. She returned to Cleveland, but continued to get contracts in Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and New Hampshire.

In addition to the health and pension benefits Equity members receive, Ring prefers the professional approach to rehearsals and performances demanded by Equity stage managers and directors. “I’d love to see more Equity stage managers work at theaters here, because they run a tight ship,” she says. “Equity shows just hold everyone to a higher professional standard, so I prefer everyone to aspire to be part of the union, where actors are well-taken care of.”

Unfortunately, though, Ring finds Cleveland a frustrating place to be an Equity actor. “It’s an awful shame that more actors here aren’t becoming Equity members, because they’re afraid they won’t get work because theaters don’t want to pay Equity actors,” she says.

The main challenge in Cleveland is that there are only two major Equity houses: the Play House and Great Lakes Theater. Dobama recently acquired AEA’s small professional theater designation. Several other theaters such as Beck Center for the Arts, Cleveland Public Theatre and Ensemble Theatre regularly offer Equity contracts, while some theaters offer them occasionally. But it’s still not enough to keep many union actors working full-time year-round.

In 2010, Ring co-founded Mamai Theatre in Cleveland, which offers occasional Equity contracts. She also has a young son and daughter. So for now, she has her hands full in Cleveland, but hopes to return to the stages of New York in the future.

THE FLIP SIDE

However, the flip side is that this region contains a number of non-Equity and community theaters that represent an important asset to the overall ecosystem as training centers. The recent CPAC economic development study of theater says, “These facilities provide fertile training grounds for young actors looking to cut their teeth, as well as a sense of artistic community and camaraderie in many of the smaller communities in Cuyahoga County.”

On the non-Equity side, seasoned actor Robert Hawkes faced a pretty simple decision in his late 20s when he first stepped on a stage. He was a teacher at Hawken School and was invited to act by one of the other teachers. He enjoyed it so much, he contacted Dobama’s founder, Donald Bianchi, who invited him to work props on a show. Soon afterward, he got a bit part; then director Ron Newell gave him a larger role, and he was on his way.

“At that point, if you were Equity, you were working at Great Lakes or the Play House, and that was it,” Hawkes recalls. “So there was a very clear division between the Equity houses downtown and everybody else.” Since then, he has worked at a variety of local theaters including Clague Playhouse, convergence-continuum theater and Ensemble.

That trend shifted in the early '90s, after the Play House eliminated its resident company, sending a number of Equity actors out into the community, where theaters such as Dobama and Ensemble began to hire them.

“There isn’t any test to get in, and there certainly isn’t any test to stay in,” Hawkes adds. “So, it’s not a credential. It’s a relationship between an employer and an employee, just like any other union.”

Now retired, he’s enjoying the freedom to work wherever he wants, doing five or six shows a year. “I feel freer not being constrained by Equity status,” he says, noting the one irony today with the recent status change at his first professional theater. “Except, of course, at Dobama, where it works against me, since the larger roles typically go to Equity actors at an Equity house.”

CHOICES

Acting professionally since 2003, Katrice Headd has remained non-Equity for different reasons, even though her theater training at KSU emphasized joining the union after graduation. As an undergrad, she had even accumulated points toward getting her union card while performing at Porthouse Theatre, the university’s summer theater adjacent to Blossom Music Center.

The reason she chose to remain non-Equity? The same reason many actors encounter: they have a greater availability of roles, if they work in non-Equity houses.

“Working at those theaters gave me the opportunity to learn how to play lead roles,” she explains. “So it balanced itself out because I could still develop my resume and get into gritty character work without having to negotiate contracts.”

Headd has performed lead roles in several plays at Karamu House and Cleveland Public Theatre. She also continued to add points toward earning her union card, especially with roles in *A Civil War Christmas* and more recently *An Octoroon at Dobama*. Still, she wrestles with whether or not it’s worth it to join, while working primarily in Cleveland. She usually has another full-time job and has only had a short period of a few months where she worked solely as an actor. She’s also fully aware that she’s unable to audition for many roles that require Equity membership.

“In the back of my head, I think if I joined Equity, would I be able to sustain myself and do enough shows?” she says. “But one thing I know is that the theaters I’ve been blessed to work with chose me based on my talent, not my union status.”