

The Actor's Toolbox and To Join or Not to Join?

*A Model Toolbox and a Research Paper on the Advantages and Disadvantages of
Joining the Actors Equity Association*

Laura Aristovulos

University Honors in Theatre: CAS

Advised By: Javier Rivera

Spring 2011

Elements of a Cover Letter:

- ✓ Personalized to the hiring party when name is available
- ✓ Solid Introduction
- ✓ Where you heard about the job
- ✓ Why you want the job
- ✓ Why you are perfect for the job
- ✓ Recent relevant experience
- ✓ A kind yet assertive closing

Example Cover Letter:

Dear Megan Maxwell:

Hello! I saw your post on DC_Theatre this morning and I am very eager to apply for the position of Acting Intern for your upcoming production of *The Magic Paintbrush*. I am currently a Senior Theatre major at American University and in my in my current transitional state the prospect of working with Synetic Theater Company always tempts me to stay in DC after graduation. I saw my first Synetic show, *Romeo and Juliet*, my freshman year and was immediately hooked. I spent last spring in Cuba studying contemporary and afro-cuban dance and learned an amazing amount about using my body as a tool of expression. I have also interned with Broadway Dance Center in NYC and I have taken a variety of dance classes including ballet, jazz and ballroom at American University. While I do not have much experience with puppets, I did do a few puppetry workshops when I visited Prague for a week the spring of my Sophomore year. In addition I love family theatre and I have a lot of experience with it. I just finished performing in a production of *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (a children's musical) at American University. In addition I grew up performing with the *Children's Theatre Company* in NYC and eventually came to intern for them in high school. I have attached my headshot and resume, please let me know any other information I can send your way. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Laura Aristovulos

(718) 288-1920

LauraAristovulos.com

Laura Aristovulos

Hair: Dirty Blonde
Eyes: Green
Height: 5'6"

Cell: 718-288-1920
E-mail: Aristovulos@Gmail.com
Website: LauraAristovulos.com

Theatre

<i>I Never Saw Another Butterfly</i>	Raja*	Katzen Blackbox, AU
* Irene-Ryan Nomination		
<i>The Three Sisters</i>	Olga	Katzen Blackbox, AU
<i>The Wild Party</i>	Nadine	Greenberg Theatre, AU
<i>Tartuffe</i>	Marianne	Greenberg Theatre, AU
<i>The Hundred Dresses</i>	Wanda	Katzen Blackbox, AU
<i>Bye, Bye Birdie</i>	Kim	Harlem Repertory Theatre
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream*</i>	Swing/SM	Synetic Theater, DC
*Teen Production		
<i>See Something/Say Something*</i>	Ensemble	Katzen Blackbox, AU
*Original Senior Capstone		

Film

<i>Chunk</i>	Vanessa	School of Visual Arts
<i>Maximum Occupancy</i>	Taryn	American University
<i>HAZE</i>	Featured Extra	David Burkman

Training

American University:	2007-2011	Washington, DC
<i>Theatre Major:</i> Acting Technique, Scene Study, Voice and Speech, Physical Theatre, Acting for the Camera, Acting Chekhov, Directing, Vocal Training, Ballroom, Jazz, Ballet		
<i>Spanish Language and Area Studies Minor</i>		
Danza Contemporánea:	Spring, 2010	Havana, Cuba
<i>Afro-Cuban Folklore, Contemporary, Salsa</i>		
Professional Performing Arts School:	2003-2007	NYC, NY
<i>Musical Theatre Major</i>		

Special Skills

Latin Ballroom, Jazz Dance, Conversational in Spanish, Splits, Cartwheels, Round-Off, Front Walkover, Conga Drums, Mezzo-Soprano, Mix, Belt.

To Join or Not to Join?

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Joining the Actors Equity Association

Laura Aristovulos

University Honors in Theatre: CAS

Advised By: Javier Rivera

Spring 2011

Ever since it was founded in 1913 Actors Equity Association (AEA, Equity or the Union here on out) has posed provocative questions for the thousands of people who call themselves actors (as well as stage managers). While in today's theatrical world the benefits that AEA provides its members cannot be denied, there is an increasing sense of skepticism as to whether or not new actors, particularly the young, should rush to join the corps. As the number of non-union actors has increased, so has the number of non-union jobs. And while union gigs promise better pay, they also promise fiercer competition and thus a higher chance of the dreaded, "We decided to go in another direction" for the starting actor. This debate marks a significant shift from a time where the biggest dilemma on the mind of most non-union actors was something along the lines of, "I can't get a job until I'm in the Union, but I can't join the Union until I get a job". While there will always be an updated plethora of contradicting advice, this paper will examine the contrasting opinions of theatre professionals Robert Cohen and Brian O'Neil supplemented with up to date information from the official website of the Actors Equity Association to determine the pros and cons of joining the Union for a young professional entering the business.

Today there are three ways to go about joining the Actors Equity Association: Equity Contract, "The Four A's" and the Equity Membership Candidate Program (EMC). The first is the most straightforward; to be offered an Equity contract and sign. When accepting Equity work one may defer becoming a member of AEA for up to 30 days of employment but on the 31st day of Equity employment one must be a member or they will be fired. (*Actors Equity...*).

"The Four A's" refers to the Associated Actors and Artists of America Affiliation. This method holds that if one is a member in good standing of a sister union for at least one year during which they have worked on contract for at least three days, they may apply to join another

sister union. The sister unions include SAG (Screen Actors Guild), AFTRA (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists), AGMA (American Guild of Musical Artists) and GIAA (Guild of Italian-American Actors). (*Actors Equity...*).

Lastly AEA has created the Equity Membership Candidate Program (EMC) to give an opportunity for lesser-experienced professionals to enter the Union. In order to join EMC one has to be offered employment at a participating theatre. There are many participating professional theatres including, but not limited to, many LORT theatres. After securing employment one must apply through Equity to be in the EMC program. After 50 weeks (not necessarily consecutive) of employment with a participating theatre one can apply to be a member of AEA. One can apply for membership up to five years after completing the 50 weeks of Equity employment. (*Actors Equity...*).

These rules change a bit if one is already a member of a sister union (SAG, AFTRA AGMA or GIAA). In that case one can waive their professional status to work with the EMC participating theatre for 25 weeks as an EMC, and then they have to join the union. On the other hand, if one joins a sister union *after* beginning the EMC program they can either join equity after 25 weeks or choose to complete the 50 weeks before joining. (*Actors Equity...*).

While AEA has offered many a dilemma to the working actor, it was created, and continues, to protect performers from being taken advantage of and to give legitimacy to the business. On the official AEA website they break down the benefits of the union as Contract Benefits and Membership Benefits. Contract Benefits include:

Minimum salaries (negotiated rates, overtime, extra pay for additional duties, free housing or per diem on tour); work rules (length of day, breaks, days off, safe and sanitary conditions); health, pension and 401(k) benefits; dispute resolution (including

recourse to impartial and binding arbitration); just cause (penalties for improper dismissal); bonding (guaranteeing payments to the Actors if the producer becomes insolvent or defaults); and Supplemental Workers' Comp insurance, which provides additional compensation over-and-above Workers' Comp if you're injured on the job.

Of course along with these benefits come responsibilities, and fees. (“Benefit Overviews” *Actors Equity...*)

AEA has negotiated with multiple theatrical venues from Broadway theatres to universities hosting special appearances to approve contracts that honor both the performer and the venue.

In addition to these Contract Benefits, being a member of AEA also entitles one to Membership Benefits. One of the most sought after Membership Benefits is access to Equity-only auditions and AEA’s “casting call” and audition hotline. Equity-only auditions, also called Equity Principal Auditions (EPAs) and Equity Chorus Calls (ECCs) give all AEA members an equal opportunity to audition for the selected show. Many equity contracts require producers to have EPAs and ECCs but often the producer will choose to host such auditions even though they are not required by contract. (*Actors Equity...*)

While Equity-only auditions are a huge advantage to joining the Union, there is the possibility of being seen at said auditions even before one joins the Union. On their official website AEA explains that “future members” can attend these auditions but they will be placed on a separate list and be asked to wait until all of the Equity members have been seen. Even after waiting around all day, one is not guaranteed an audition as it comes down to the producer’s discretion as to whether or not to see non-equity performers. While non-members can occasionally take advantage of Equity-only auditions, AEA members are also privileged with

discounts, networking events, and voting privileges on important matters in the Union, among others. (*Actors Equity...*)

As is to be expected, these benefits also come with responsibilities and fees. The biggest responsibility of an AEA member is that they must not take non-equity work unless special written permission has been given. In addition they are not to perform, or even rehearse without a contract, must always give their best performance and follow all prior artistic decisions, making no changes without approval. They must be on time and observe all rules and in the case of a disagreement they must handle it professionally through the deputy or a higher power until it is resolved (ending with the Council). Breaching any of these responsibilities results in disciplinary action, even possible expulsion from the Union. (*Actors Equity...*)

In addition to responsibilities one must also pay dues to be a member of AEA. As of 2011 the initiation fee is \$1,100 and must be paid within the first two years of joining the Union. If joining through the Four A's clause or as an EMC member a deposit of \$400 towards the initiation fee is required upon joining. In addition one must pay \$118 annually (\$59 semi-annually) and 2.25% of one's income as "working dues". (*Actors Equity..*)

In his book, *Acting Professionally: Raw Facts about Careers in Acting*, Robert Cohen offers cut and dry advice to actors on everything from what to wear to what city to live in, including some advice regarding the unions. Robert Cohen is a very successful member of the theatre community: He has served as actor, writer, director (DFA from Yale) and now serves as a professor in the drama department, which he happened to found, at the University of California, Irvine. That said his opinion, albeit strong, should be given thorough consideration.

When writing his sixth, and latest, edition of *Acting Professionally* (published in 2004) Cohen wrote that, "It would be odd *not* to join the union if you had the chance" (109). He then

goes on to explain that there *are* downsides to joining. The most obvious being that once one joins Equity they can no longer take non-equity work without a special waiver or going behind the Union's "back". Cohen brushes this off as a bad excuse not to join the Union, mocking non-union work as being comprised mostly of classical festivals in the middle of nowhere. In addition to his original, sarcastic, refute, Cohen also points out that if that non-union Shakespeare Festival in the middle of nowhere REALLY wanted someone they would find a way to give that person an Equity contract. Cohen also discredits the financial restraints of initiation fees and dues by saying, "if you are going to be a professional anything, you're going to have to pay your professional anything dues".

To put it plainly, Robert Cohen holds that not joining the Union when given a chance would be a mistake. He explains that unions play an essential role in financial negotiations and that when one is not a member they are putting themselves at risk of being taken advantage of. Cohen also highlights the professional advantages of the Union such as networking and more importantly audition preference. Cohen closes his section on the unions with a unique viewpoint explaining that in a field where so many things are uncertain, a Union card can help the ever insecure actor feel like they are on their way to success and already a part of something big. Finally Cohen asserts that the financial, professional, and emotional benefits of being a member outweigh any inconveniences created when one joins the Union. It is worth noting that a LOT has changed in the world of theatre since the latest edition of *Acting Professionally* was published in 2004. While Cohen keeps a website to update his readers, the last post was in 2005 and only listed technical changes to the laws of the unions and no change of heart as far as joining.

In his book, *Acting as a Business: Strategies for Success* Brian O'Neil offers somewhat more kind and recent (published in 2009) advice to actors entering the business. Brian O'Neil also has a lot of experience in various fields of the acting business. After ten successful years as an agent for both stage and screen O'Neil began to teach performers how to master the business side of their art and thus truly achieve success. In his book, *Acting as a Business*, O'Neil outlines the advantages and disadvantages of joining a union, but comes to a very different conclusion than Cohen.

In his section on the unions O'Neil asserts that one should not join a union until it is necessary. In example, when offered a principle role at a Union theatre, if one were to not go Union at that time they would have to turn down the role completely and thus it would be a step backwards in their career. O'Neil's thesis on the matter centers on how little union affiliations have mattered in his experience. He passes down advice from his professionally experienced roommate, who said:

Neither the casting director, the director, nor the producer of that play care whether you are a member of the union or not. If you are the one they want for the role, you will be hired, then you will be issued a union contract. Then you will join the union. It's as simple as that. (31)

O'Neil holds that his roommate was wise when he gave that advice and that his advice still holds true. O'Neil outlines multiple examples of times where non union actors have been given a job and emphasizes the fact that at the end of the day one's affiliation or lack thereof will not influence whether or not one gets hired.

O'Neil of course acknowledges the benefits of joining the union. Namely being able to participate in Equity auditions and making sure performers are properly paid. He also

acknowledges the ever-frustrating paradox that while one does not need a union affiliation to be taken seriously by agents, representation often looks for significant credits, which are more often than not coupled with a union membership. Regardless, O'Neil concludes that actors should not put so much emphasis on union affiliation and are better off focusing on personal promotion and improving their craft and should only join a union when it becomes necessary to accept an important job and continue working.

There will always be Robert Cohen(s) and Brian O'Neil(s) offering strong, contrasting opinions on whether or not to join the Union. As the Actors Equity Association continues to grow and change it is essential that one is constantly researching what is going on with the unions and does a thorough and personal analysis when faced with the opportunity to join.

Author's Personal Decision:

At this point in my career it is in my best interest to get as much experience as possible wherever I can get it. In addition it is also a personal goal of mine to work with Synetic in Washington, DC: a non-equity theatre that I have been told (by company members) hesitates before trying to hire an equity member. And Synetic is not alone: there is a plethora of non-union theatres that either can't hire Equity members or simply prefer to hire non-union artists to accommodate their budgets. Therefore I am not going to intentionally seek out jobs that will fast forward me to an Equity membership, nor will I be immediately applying to be an Equity Membership Candidate. That said, if I am offered a principal role under Equity contract, I am not going to turn it down as the credit would substantially increase my potential for future employment. That is of course contingent on being paid enough to be able to afford the initiation fee. As I gaze into my hypothetical crystal ball I see that I might also have the opportunity to

join AEA after being a member of SAG, as I hope to pay the bills with commercial work. That said, if I get my SAG card before joining AEA I will re-evaluate after a year of membership and do a personal assessment as to whether or not it is of greater importance for me to be able to take non-equity work or go to Equity-Only auditions. All of these predictions are of course contingent upon further research at the time of the decision as the Actors Equity Association is an ever-changing entity.

Works Cited

Actor's Equity- Representing American Actors and Stage Managers in the Theatre. Actors

Equity Association, 2011. Web. 28 Mar 2011. <http://www.actorsequity.org/>.

Cohen, Robert. *Acting Professionally: Raw Facts about Careers in Acting*. 6th. NYC, NY: McGraw Hill, 2004. Print.

Cohen, Robert. "Updates." *Acting Professionally*. McGraw Hill, 01 Jan 2005. Web. 25 Mar 2011. <http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/00725625/information_center_view0/updates.html>

O'Neil, Brian. *Acting as a Business: Strategies for Success*. 4th. NYC, NY: Vintage Books, 2009. Print.

Process Reflection

This Honors Capstone was one of the most practical assignments I have completed for my career in my four years at American University. I can only hope that others will use it as a guide so that they can feel as prepared as I do upon graduating. Of course this assignment would be pointless if I had not received the training and education to foster my artistry. That said I would not be able to promote my art without the tools I have created. In addition the paper on AEA gives me (and those who read it) an educated point of view on an important aspect of the business.

In this reflection I want to give the readers a sense of the steps I had to take to compile this toolbox. First, I read many books on the business of acting and took the course at American University. The first tool I tackled was headshots. I did thorough research on photographers I NYC as well as in DC. I researched their websites, and after narrowing the possibilities down made appointments for either in-person or phone interviews. I ended up working with Jordan Matter and he was amazing! I chose a New York photographer because even though the prices are a bit more expensive, I know that New York is my ultimate goal market and thus I would need the headshots to compete.

After much fuss and many a second...and third...and thirty fifth opinion I decided on a commercial and theatrical shot. Obviously not all of my many opinions agreed and thus it came down to me making a gut decision about the pictures. That said, I ordered a DVD with high quality files of all of the images of the shoot so that if in the future I decide to try a different picture I have the file. I then ordered retouching through *Reproductions* (the top NYC and LA printing company) for my commercial shot (I decided it wasn't necessary for the theatrical shot). Once the retouching was done I ordered 100 prints of each shot through *Reproductions*.

Approved the proof and then put the order through. *Reproductions* does offer business cards and postcards but their prices are quite high and so I went to *OverNightPrints.com* where I designed and ordered the cards in this toolbox.

The website seen in this toolbox is not a finished product, but it is a darn good substitute. I could not afford to pay for a web designer so what I did was set up a *Tumblr* account (FREE!) and then I bought my name as a domain (LauraAristovulos.com) from *GoDaddy.com* for \$12 for the year. I'd say it was well worth it because it makes my website look much more professional and when I do have the money to hire a web designer I can use the same domain and just forward it to a more professional site.

As stated in my paper on equity my research should only be used as a stepping stool for future students. Every performer is different and in a constantly changing market it is essential that one does their own additional up to date research. The same goes for this toolbox. 10 years ago color headshots were frowned upon but now one looks unprofessional with a black and white headshot. So I know that this toolbox can serve as a helpful start but please supplement with current information ☺