



Statement from Dan Berkowitz and Jonathan Dorf, Co-Chairs of ALAP, regarding the AEA 99-seat theatre proposal

As playwrights who have had their work produced in small LA theatres – and hope to again in the future! – and as Co-Chairs of The Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights (ALAP), the service and support organization for playwrights in Southern California, we have, of course, been following with interest the discussion and debate which might be called “*Quo Vadis* The 99-Seat Plan?”

While we recognize the changes and proposals recently issued by Actors’ Equity are internal documents requiring a vote among the membership of a single union of which we are not members, the outcome will affect everyone involved in LA theatre. Consequently, we would like to make a few statements and suggestions on behalf of those theatre artists not affiliated with AEA.

A union, like any bureaucracy, is guided by its rules and regulations, and generally hews to a rigid interpretation of its mission. Artists, on the other hand, often have differing needs and goals, and expectations which change over time; thus a one-size-fits-all model rarely serves everyone well. In the theatre, in particular, there exists a wide continuum between “professional” and “amateur” which does not apply to other occupations.

There are, for example, no “amateur” brain surgeons, and anyone who offers to perform such surgery for nothing (or for carfare) is best avoided. However, “amateur” actors – or “professional” actors accepting a modest stipend – are often capable of creating breathtaking performances. Likewise, while it is critical that commercial airline pilots be licensed and their activities strictly regulated for the sake of protecting the traveling public, theatre artists often flourish in an atmosphere more akin to chaos than regimentation.

We steadfastly believe that all artists should be treated with dignity, and not exploited. At the same time, we contend that all artists should have the absolute freedom to create art for whatever rewards and recompense they feel appropriate and acceptable to them as individuals.

For some artists, this will mean working only in fully-unionized venues, regulated by union rules, with pay scales and benefits determined through collective bargaining. For other artists, simply practicing their craft may at times take precedence over monetary considerations. We feel this should be their choice. If an actor wishes to play *King Lear* for less than the cost of a sandwich – because he knows it will probably be his only opportunity to tackle the role – why should an organization tell him he can’t, simply because he’s not getting paid what salaried administrators think is proper?

Actors are not the only artists who get paid little or nothing in LA’s small theatres: playwrights are constantly urged to reduce or even waive their royalties. Sometimes we say yes, sometimes we say no. The key word in the last sentence is “we” – it’s our choice.

We urge all members of the LA theatre community to remember that a wide variety of artists – playwrights, directors, producers, designers, technicians, and many more – are necessary to fully experience theatre. The more theatre which can be created, the greater the chance of true art being achieved.

Money is important, but it's not the only thing, and attempting to turn creating theatre into a purely monetary transaction is misguided. If you are an AEA member, please tell your union that while you appreciate what they do for you, it's important for you to work as an artist, and your union needs to help you by making it easier, not more difficult, to do so: the current proposals will make it more difficult, and thus you will not accept them.

Dan Berkowitz and Jonathan Dorf
Co-Chairs, The Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights