Report from the open space at the Equity 2014 Annual Representative Conference

Facilitated by Terry Victor

All of the Open Space convenors were invited to prepare a short report in whatever form they preferred – from detailed notes to one line conclusion or, if they chose, nothing at all; the point of Open Space is informed conversation on a topic of choice not a report of the event.

This year nine sessions were convened and the conference room buzzed with lively conversations. In addition to those matters reported below, topics included Attracting members to meetings and Actor Musicians.

The reports that follow are in no particular order. They make fascinating reading.

OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT

How do we make members understand that Equity is all of us?
Convened by: Tracey Briggs
with: David Thorpe, Sian Jones, Marie Kelly, Annie Gay, Trevor Gay.

The following comments were made:
When we get members to join by selling the services such as insurance it is then difficult for them to see that Equity is something they get involved in and it doesn’t merely served them.
It often seems like there is a missing link somewhere along the line. People join up, but then seem to think there’s nothing local to go to, or do; that the union is somehow "over there" in Guild House, instead of possibly in their very city or town as well.

The general consensus of opinion was communication is the problem.
Such as members don’t read emails from Equity head office or from their branch. Are emails just going into members’ junk mail?
How many members have actually set up a login on the website and registered with a branch?
When members will spread the word on Facebook and Twitter about things such as the national Monologue Slam, why don’t they think to spread the word about branch meetings with amazing guest speakers, fun Equity events, training events or even encourage others to get involved with campaigning just by signing a petition?
Tracey said “I can see from my own branch after I left the branch committee started to send out less and less newsletters sometimes only telling members about a branch meeting by email two days before. They relied more on Facebook which is not a very good form of communication, if others don’t get involved
with spreading the word, so I believe a lot of times no one came to our branch meetings because they didn’t know they were happening.”

“Even though I was no longer a branch committee member when I took time to put out several messages on Twitter, email Equity acquaintances just in my capacity as a fellow member and also put post on my own Facebook page about meetings then they were well attended.”

“How much easier would it have been if more of my fellow members had been doing the same rather than thinking that Equity is something distant which needs no help from them.”

**Conclusion**

No conclusion was reached other that it is very annoying when active Equity members start getting introduced at networking events as “this is so-and-so from Equity”, when they are first and foremost an actor, stage manager or director and not in any way shape or form employed by Equity.

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**OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT**

**Conditions of work for small scale touring companies in venues like council theatres**

Convened by: Gerri Smith

with: Christina Nelson, Sheri Desbaux, Stephen Beggs, Al Rogan

**The main points of discussion (and conclusions, if any):**

- There seems to be a problem all over the UK in getting theatre staff involved and aware of the importance of filling the theatres no matter what the contractual arrangements are for payment.
- Demands for publicity material are costly and too many companies find the marketing staff have not used the posters or flyers properly.
- Facilities to small scale touring companies are sometimes non existent and too many of the theatre staff couldn't care less.
- Marketing – biggest problem.
- Conclusions were Equity might be able to set up a monitoring programme as these theatres are our places of work and should have some standards.
- Most of the small scale companies although employing other actors besides themselves, are not producers as such and are anxious to get venues to accept their work and therefore don't like to make a fuss.

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**OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT**

**Ideas needed and encouraged for the working party (VCEC)**

Convened by: Mary Lane

**Those who turned up for it:**

Johnny Worthy, Steve McGuire, Cliff Evans, Christie Clifford, Michael Deliso

**The main points of discussion (and conclusions, if any):**

- Younger element work on cruise ships
OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT

**The current casting model – is it working?**
Convened by: Jessica Sherman
with: Tigger Blaize, Sarah Finigan, Steve Fortune, Lubna Kerr, Oliver Lidert, Johnny Worthy

**The main points of discussion (and conclusions, if any):**
- Show reels?
- Casting Directors: are they coming to shows? Are they relying on agents to have pre-selected?
- Casting Directors’ workshops – moneygrab?
- “Top band” of agents.
- General Meetings? Still happening?
- Agent’s relationship and reputation; reactive or proactive?
- Where does the Director lie in relation to the Producer/CD?
- Open Calls? – promo stunts
- Including more “business of drama” in the training.
- Equity’s Job Information Service.
- Union Co-operative Agency; Union can’t run on volunteers; Equity working with Casting Directors.
- If we had this conversation with Casting Directors, would they say we were being failed by the system?!
- Equity to forge relationships with Directors and Producers
- We have to acknowledge that our Union can work differently to other Unions
- Networking

OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT

**Mental Health, Stress & Distress in the Entertainment Industry**
Convened by: Morna Burdon
with: Clark Roberts, Lynda Rooke, Frances Rifkin, Sarah Buckland, Peter Barnes, Norma Dixit, Lachele Carli, Shenagh Govan.

**Rough Notes/Minutes:**
1. ISOLATION is a MAJOR problem. According to a long term member present, it was this isolation which was actually a major reason that local branches were set up. Important to remember this.
2. People are ISOLATED and ALONE. They need someone sympathetic to speak to. The notion of “just toughen up” MUST be changed.
3. How we treat each other is really important. Less isolated if we are offered kindness and understanding – can be honest about feelings. Tone is really important.

4. People WANT to help but not sure how to at an individual level. Again, kindness, empathy, honesty about own situation can all help.

5. Suggestion to track down local Mental Health agencies, and ask for a speaker to come to the Branch/training /advice about services.


7. Need for BAPAM (British Association for Performing Arts Medicine) to have HIGH PROFILE & be EASILY ACCESSED on Equity website.

8. Ideas put forward:
   - A Network of Interested Parties to be set up on Equity website
   - A caring chatroom for people online (tone again important)
   - Capitalise on experience & skills already existing within Equity members (Example given of workshops on Cognitive & Emotional Approaches)

9. Some people felt they were not experienced enough to lead such sessions, or to help. Again, kindness, openness, willingness to listen can be offered by anyone. Speakers/training as mentioned above. Also, some people in need of support so not able to support others.

10. Attitudes amongst agents/some training establishments was raised eg guest agent scouting for models “I want bones, darling”. Leads to eating disorders – needs to be challenged.

11. Question: Are BECTU /Directors/Designers Organisations working on Mental Health – need to link with other Unions and Theatre Organisations on this. Federation of Entertainment Unions runs skills workshops free to Equity members.

12. Reminder to read and circulate East of Scotland General Branch /Mental Health Working Party Report for more ideas, support and background.

OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT

So, whatever happened to the Online Branch and the Networks?

Convenor: John Carnegie

with: 11 Councillors, Representatives and other members. (No Staff were present.)

The main points of discussion (and conclusions, if any):

Despite the deliberately provocative title (which was designed purely to drum up trade), the session was actually a positive attempt to identify current problems and possible solutions to them.

The problems in the Online Branch
The institution of an Online Branch (OLB) for Equity had been announced at the 2012 ARC but was not yet in operation. There were three basic reasons for this – set out here in order of historical occurrence.

(1): The first two Moderators of the Online Branch Working Party (OLBWP) had resigned. They had been two of the triumvirate who had done most of the preliminary work on how an OLB might operate over the years before the Council had instituted the OLBWP. The third Moderator had unfortunately died. The current Moderator had naturally needed time to "get his feet under the table". This had all contributed in a major way to slowing down progress on the OLB. The sole reason for the resignation of the first Moderator (and the partial reason for the resignation of the second) was the decision of the Council to allow the staff to immediately resort to their disciplinary procedures if they were offended by a posting on a moderated Equity forum (such as the OLB) – rather than the elected Moderator for that forum being given a week to attempt to resolve the problem to the satisfaction of all before such disciplinary procedures were triggered. The Council decision had "poured petrol on the flames" of any potential problem and made the jobs of elected Moderators untenable.

(2): There was a tension in the OLBWP (very evident in the Open Space session) between those who saw the OLB’s primary role as an instrument of democratic decision making and one member who would prefer its foremost facility to be a social media forum that would attract younger members to exchange views and information. In fact, the OLB was always designed (as in physical branches) to provide both opportunities. However, there was a perceived technical problem in regard to the second. Although there was a “Chat Room” facility in which members could exchange general views (prior to a debate) and exchange information and documents/photographs, this could at present only be done by the members uploading material directly from e-mails or from the hard drives of their computers. There was currently no facility to import material directly from other social media sites (such as Facebook and Twitter) directly to the OLB. This made the latter seem already antiquated in terms of current electronic communications and therefore of less interest to younger members. There was an opinion expressed that it would cost very little to institute such a facility.

(3): Although (after three years of development) it had seemed that all glitches had been ironed out in regard to the system of democratic discussion and voting on the OLB and that the latter could at last be inaugurated, a massive technical problem had become evident during the last few weeks. To summarise as simply as possible, this was due to an incompatibility between the system devised by NetXtra for the operation of the Branch and the database of membership details devised by Ciber. [Note: NetXtra is the external company responsible for the development of the Equity Website and the OLB. Ciber is the external company responsible for the development of the membership database.] A “private
“tunnel” had been devised to allow communication through the firewall between the OLB and the database. However, at Easter, the firewall had to be reinforced against new threats from hackers and the tunnel no longer worked.

The Networks

The other reason for the resignation of the second Moderator of the OLBWP was the restructuring of Equity's democratic structures being put in place without the promised Networks being in place at the same time to underpin its workings. However, although this situation was explained, none of those present at the Open Space session discussed the Networks further and all discussion focussed on the OLB.

Solutions to the problems of the Online Branch

No formal voting took place during the session. However, the following courses of action became evident in regard to the three problems set out above:

(1): In order to make the job of Moderators feasible, the Council should revisit the matter of what staff should do in the first instance of their perception of a possible offence on a moderated online Equity forum.

(2): The OLBWP should investigate the cost and feasibility of enabling material to be imported directly onto the Branch from other social media, although the OLB as presently constituted does contain the ability for Facebook page links to be directly imported. If such a development seemed affordable and practical, the Council should be approached by the OLBWP for funding. In the long term, the Council would probably have to make provision for “future proofing” of both the Equity Website and the OLB so that both remain fit for purpose.

(3): However, a far greater priority than this previous point is to solve the technical problem currently stopping the OLB from being inaugurated. As neither members of the OLBWP nor the Equity staff had the technical knowledge to identify where the fault lay, its solution therefore lay in ongoing discussions between NetXtra and Ciber. If this proved impossible, the Council should be asked to reconsider their relationship with one or both of these external technology companies.

Incidental points made during the session

(a): It was claimed that the problem with the membership database compatibility issue stemmed from the fact that BECS (the British Equity Collecting Society) had set up its own new database and Equity had gone along with that one. Some of the database is shared between Equity and BECS and causes problems. Perhaps we would not have gone along with the linkage with BECS if we had been able to foresee such problems. Skype could only be used to
allow members to be involved in meetings from a distance if used on an independent laptop and not through Equity's own technology. There would be an enormous cost involved in renovating Equity's database. [Note: Investigation since the Open Space session reveals that BECS did not set up its own database. Instead it uses the old Equity database that Equity ceased to use around four years ago. BECS has now decided that it will use a similar database to Equity and is commissioning it now. In any case, none of this has any impact on the development of the OLB.]

(b): The current cost of setting up an OLB would have been avoided if an existing free (but advertisement based) system such as Yahoo Groups had been used rather than setting up a new system as part of Equity's website. However, some people did not using the likes of Yahoo/Google Groups and MSN because of perceived privacy problems. It was claimed that Ning did not have such problems and could be self-contained and mobile-phone-accessible.

(c): A perceived problem with systems such as the OLB currently being developed was that its communications came via e-mail and some members had a dread of having too many e-mails infesting their Inboxes. However, it was pointed out that opting for Daily or Weekly Digests of e-mails from the OLB – plus the judicious use of the Delete button - could solve any such problem. In addition, only the postings that were part of a democratic debate of a motion would go to every OLB member. Only by entering the Chat Room could threads from the latter be accessed.

(d): Two lessons to be learned were that the employment of external technology companies should have gone out to tender (possibly with different facilities - such as social media, video conferencing, etc – going to different companies) and that it is vital to get the specifications right before proceeding with them. Otherwise, such companies are likely to provide existing “off the shelf” systems that are not appropriate. Some people thought that there might be a problem in getting multiple companies to communicate with each other (as appeared to be the case with NetXtra and Ciber). Others discounted such a problem. [Note: Investigation since the Open Space session reveals that the contracts for both the Equity database and the Equity website were in fact put out to tender.]

(e): It was asked if it would be possible to remove the membership details necessary for the OLB from the control of Ciber but still have them secure. Nobody knew the answer but some thought this would be desirable if possible.

(f): Although the majority of those present were advocates of “future proofing” of the Equity website and the OLB, a minority felt that – though this was desirable – it would not be achievable and that there would have to continuous ongoing redevelopment of these facilities as conditions changed.
OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT
Low Pay/No Pay and the Benefits Trap
Convened by: Anna Hills
with: this was a fluid, well-attended session with an unrecorded number of members coming and going throughout.

Main Points of Discussion:

The main concern expressed was that, while Equity's Low Pay/No Pay Campaign is absolutely laudable and essential, its effect might be to cause even more problems for members in at least the short to medium term.

The general perception was that the first effect the campaign will have will be to decrease the number of No Pay jobs on offer, and many of these jobs will then become Low Pay jobs. Employers will think they are doing the right thing by trying to move in the right direction, and at least paying performers something for their work, even if it is still not a living wage. While everyone agreed that it is undoubtedly wrong not to pay people for their work, the No Pay scenario at least has the advantage of being straightforward for people on any kind of benefit: you don't earn anything, and therefore you don't need to tell the benefits office anything. The problems come when you are doing work for Low Pay.

Different group members had different experiences in their dealings with their benefit provider(s). (Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit are administered locally, pension and disability benefits nationally). Some people were or had been in the position of having to declare each week how much they had earned the previous week, and, as they were earning variable small amounts, and some weeks nothing at all, and as each variable weekly amount was regarded as necessitating a new claim, and as each claim took anywhere from two weeks to three months to process, it is not hard to see the total confusion that could quickly arise!

While Equity could perhaps lobby for a more flexible benefits system, able to respond more quickly to changes in earnings, it was felt that, given the government's track record on large IT projects, Equity's chances of success were probably not good!

In conclusion, everyone supported the Low Pay/No Pay campaign, but the concern was that there would be an interim period, which could last for years, in which the situation would get worse for those Low Pay earners who needed to have their earnings supplemented by benefits in order to survive, and it was hoped that Equity could perhaps look at ways of helping members get through this period.
OPEN SPACE SESSION REPORT

What Can We Do to Encourage More Members to Get Involved in Our Branches?

Convened by: Pete Keal [PK]

With (PK: Don’t think I’ve got everybody and hope I haven’t got anyone’s name wrong, but I have listed the following): Andrew Macbean, Daniel Page and Jennifer Thorne (all West and South West London General Branch), Chris Dale (Merseyside Variety Branch), Sue McCormick (North Lancashire and Cumbria General Branch), Paula Southern (Home Counties West General Branch, Nigel Howells (Devon and Cornwall General Branch), Louisa Jane Bawden (Isle of Man General Branch), Pete Keal (Yorkshire Ridings General Branch).

PK: Having never initiated an ARC Open Space Session before, several different conversations were often going on at once, which I found difficult to keep up with. Wasn’t sure whether I should have tried to “chair” the session as one meeting, or to just have gone with the flow ... I ended up doing the latter. As a result, I won’t have a note of everything but am sharing below what I do have and can make some sense of.

Some of the Points Discussed:

- West and South West London General Branch had worked hard to increase attendance at meetings and after the Open Space Session Andrew Macbean e-mailed me the following suggestions, which had been covered in some of the discussions:
  1. Communication is an important key to building branch registrants. EG regular communication from the branch as opposed to Equity, a Branch as opposed to an Equity newsletter, support from the membership department in contacting members who aren’t registered, e mail as well as postal contact.
  2. A good committee - an engaged committee is vital. Need for clear aims and ambitions for whatever period they are elected.
  3. Clear communication and support from central and regional organisers - need for a booklet explaining that branches exist and what they do for cast visits, dep packs, student visits etc.
  4. Financial support for new or struggling branches to help engagement initiatives, for example paying travel for a high profile speaker, running a casting workshop.
  5. Branches have to be clear on what they are offering, I think it would be really useful to have more shared information between branches. Let’s use each others ideas where possible.”

- W & SW London Branch had compiled a spreadsheet of attendees at meetings and sensa newsletters by e-mail from a Branch Officer’s e-mail address instead of a do-not-reply@Equity e-mail address.

- Importance of hosting meetings and making those attending feel welcome was stressed.

- It would be useful for activists and members from different branches to get together to share experience and ideas. Sharing Newsletters and Minutes of Meetings between different branches was also suggested.

- Specific meetings for student members were suggested; student members needed to be communicated to at their home addresses rather than their college addresses; putting notices about Equity Branches on College Noticeboards suggested.

- Training sessions, speakers, Rehearsed Readings, Variety fund raising events and parties all suggested as ways to reach and involve members.

- Specifically on Training workshops, one branch talked about charging approx £20 per day to participants; Devon and Cornwall Branch had charged £55 for a workshop with a high profile leader - leader’s fee was £500.
- Isle of Man General Branch has set up a separate web site - Isle of Man Actors http://www.iomactors.com/index.htm.
- Planning ahead and publicising meetings and events well in advance was advocated.
- Sending out a welcome e-mail with information about the Branch to new members is important.
- W & SW London Branch talked about targeting people to become more actively involved and co-opting people onto the Branch Committee. They currently had a committee of 10 members who shared the work of running the Branch.
- Last word - W & SW London Branch said they only had 40 members attend their last Branch Meeting and this was their “worst attendance for some time”. The author’s jaw dropped on hearing this!