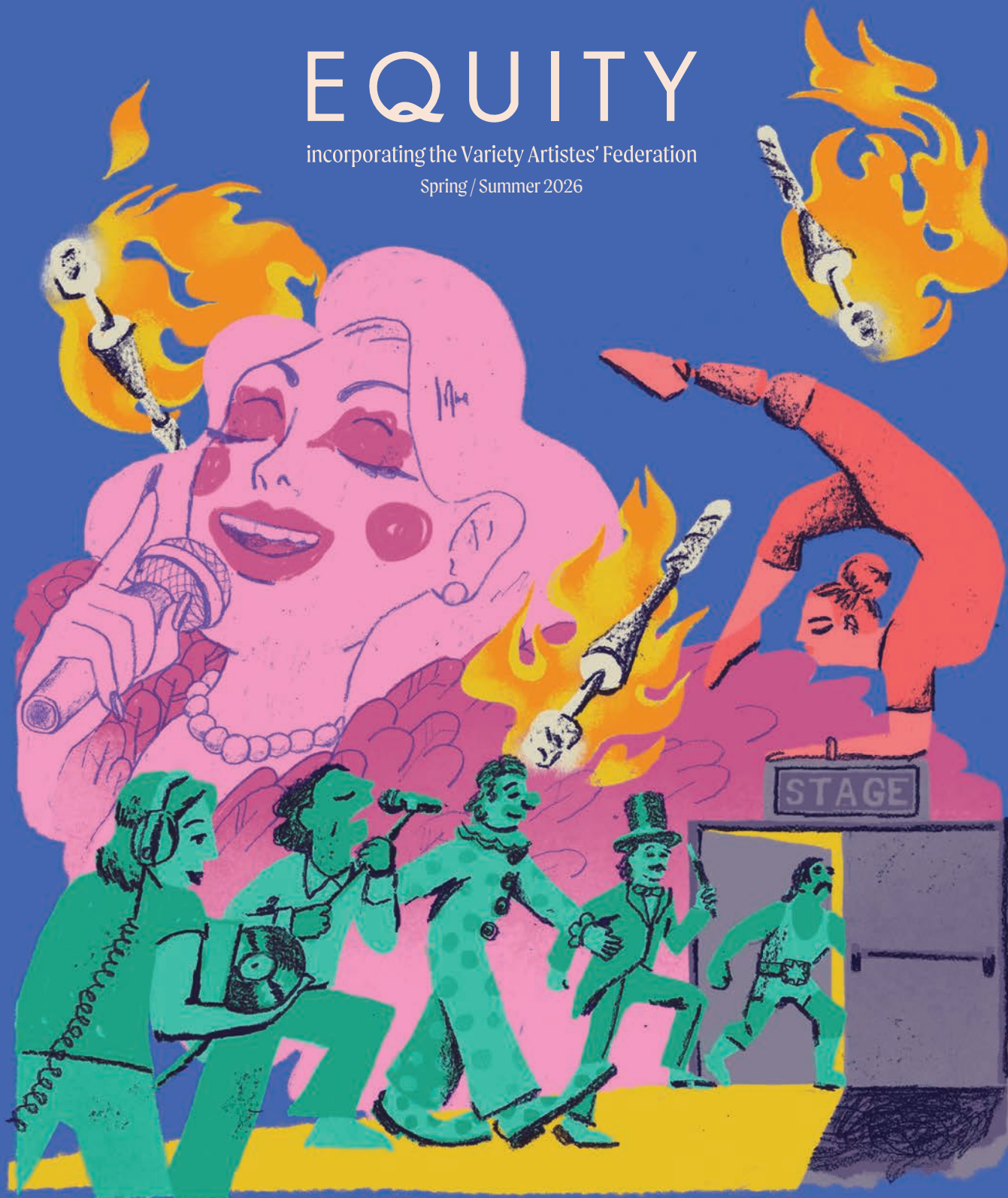


EQUITY

incorporating the Variety Artistes' Federation

Spring / Summer 2026



A CELEBRATION OF

VARIETY MEMBERS

From comedians to drag, circus, entertainers, and so much more, our gigging variety members are redefining what it means to be a performing artist – and organising to change the industry for the better

ALSO INSIDE:

UNIONISING PRIDE – A HISTORY OF VARIETY ORGANISING
HOW THE EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ACT BENEFITS YOU – OUR VISION FOR A NEW BBC



To all artists: good work

To all workers: good art

To all people: Equity



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VIEWS

“Equity has transformed how it organises and fights for entertainers”

Equity General Secretary **Paul W Fleming** reflects on the changes in the union that are leading to big wins for its gigging performers, known as ‘variety’ members.



(Credit - Neil Harrison)

2026 is a year of challenges and opportunities for Equity as a fighting union. Much attention has been rightly given to our Pact negotiations for TV and film, and the unprecedented ‘Yes’ vote for industrial action in the indicative ballot before Christmas.

At the time of writing, we’re preparing to ballot our West End members, asking them to back the union in making a credible threat of industrial action, ensuring that our Stand Up for 17% campaign in 2023 was the start, not the end, of improving terms and conditions. The appeal date for the Spotlight hearing is set for this autumn, marking the next step of our legal fight to protect our members.

One member recently commented, however, that our variety successes had ‘come from nowhere’. Like every other area of our union, variety, circus, entertainers, and nightlife members have huge campaigns this year, with some big wins already chalked up.

Our conference shares a location with the first Pride to achieve a union agreement, Durham – which was followed hot on the heels by Manchester, the UK’s second largest Pride, a few weeks later. Bethnal Green Working Men’s Club (BGWMC) has been as central to local election campaigning in East London as our arts funding tracker has been across the UK. BGWMC should have closed in 2024, but Equity activists have kept it open, and have a plan to secure its long term future.

These wins are the outward signs of an inward transformation in how Equity organises and fights for entertainers. In 2022, our variety branches covered only small corners of the UK, and more variety branch secretaries were over the age of 90 than under the age of 40. I’m proud to have a union enhanced by the experience of working members well past

‘usual’ retirement age, but when most of our members are under 40, and the plurality in their late 20s, it was not a sign of health.

After our big reorganisation in 2022, up stepped the networks: Circus, Comedians, Drag, Puppeteers, Storytellers, Wrestlers, and now: DJs and the London Nightlife Network. They’ve been the crucible of how we make change happen, from getting parliamentarians debating wrestlers’ conditions, to almost 100% membership in Britain’s Big Tops.

We’ve more staff too: from a central variety organiser, to a 50% increase in industrial staff in our nations and regions, we’re managing more claims, more queries and meeting more members than ever before. Disproportionately these have been variety artistes.

Our 2025 insurance packages have built membership, but our branches, as ever, have built activism. We wouldn’t be debating a ‘Pay The Act’ campaign at conference, or have won at Manchester Pride without them. Whether it’s variety officers organising showcases, or branches pounding Canal Street to build our membership, they’re the foundation of each variety success.

Equity is the union for variety, circus, entertainers, nightlife, and every performing artist. For three years we’ve rebuilt the structure to help us win: and now, we are.



Ebony Silk (Credit - V's Anchor Studio)

VIEWS

“I want to get more variety performers involved in the union”

Burlesque performer **Ebony Silk** was an Equity member for 12 years, before plucking up the courage to attend a local branch meeting two years ago. Now, she's been elected to the Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee – and wants fellow variety performers to join the movement too.

I began performing burlesque in a very strange way, 17 years ago. At the time, there weren't really schools for people to learn the craft, so a lot of us came from stripping backgrounds. I started off in lap dancing clubs, then when one of my friends set up an events company, I moved into burlesque as it was something I'd always wanted to do.

The word 'burlesque' comes from the Italian 'burla', which means 'joke', and I would define it as parody – it's taking people out of the normal world and into a fantasy land. It's such a broad spectrum of performance where anything goes, and that's why I love it – it gives people the opportunity to play around with ideas and fantasies.

I'm based in the North East of England, but I travel everywhere and anywhere to perform my acts. The burlesque scene in the UK is very vibrant, but it's also struggling due to the same cost of living crisis that everyone else in the entertainment industry is suffering from. People just don't have the disposable income anymore, which makes it really hard to get ticket sales.

That's one of the reasons why, after 12 years of being an Equity member, I decided to go along to my local North East Branch meeting a couple of years ago. I want variety performers to work in nice, safe environments with fair pay. And respect.

I was petrified because I thought everyone at the branch would be from the theatre and think "What the hell is this stripper doing here?" But it was so welcoming and lovely, and listening to people discussing different issues, I realised we encounter the same kind of rubbish across the industry.

From there, I understood that the union is a tool for us to change things in the industry and the floodgates opened. I went to more branch meetings, then to a meeting for the

whole North East, Yorkshire & Humberside region last year. When I was encouraged to run for the Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee (VCEC), which represents members across the union working in these very varied fields, I put myself forward thinking nothing of it. Then all of a sudden I was elected!

The VCEC has been working on all sorts, from surveys of London nightlife performers (see page 12) and those working in pantomime, to organising performers after the collapse of the company behind Manchester Pride last year (see page 8).

I'm also the variety officer for my branch committee and I want to start doing workshops where we can share knowledge and skills across the region.

To me, 'variety' refers to the non-mainstream creative art forms that aren't valued as much as they should be. But part of my manifesto has always been to get more variety performers involved in the union because, especially in my branch, it's so actor heavy. And Equity can help variety performers build better working practices.

So please go to your branch meetings! There's power in numbers, and knowledge.

To find out how to get involved in a branch or network, see [Getting Involved](#) on pages 40-45.

VIEWS

“It’s our job as trade unionists to ensure elected politicians listen to and act on our demands”



Equity President **Lynda Rooke** on how her local branch fought off a 100% arts funding cut – and how you can do the same too.

When it comes to arts funding in the UK, it feels like we don't usually have something to celebrate. But in January this year, Equity's Bristol & West of England branch, working alongside local arts and community groups, scored a big win.

We stopped Bristol City Council from imposing a 100% cut to their arts funding. In fact, the council decided that for the next three years there should be no cut to arts funding at all.

So Equity members in Bristol could let out a huge sigh of relief (and perhaps raise a glass or two!). But this U-turn from the council was hard won, following months of campaigning by the branch: demonstrations, Equity members opposing the cuts in response to a council consultation, media appearances, and my own questions in-person at a council meeting.

From sheer persistence – just as we had stopped the sale of the council-owned film studio Bottle Yard in July last year – our campaigning had worked. The leader of the council said their decision not to go ahead with the cuts was due to the feedback they'd received "from consultations, community discussions, and many meetings with residents on what matters to people most".

Of course, Bristol is not the only place where arts funding has been under attack: new Equity research, used to lobby candidates in the recent local elections, has revealed that across Britain, council spending on the arts has plummeted 55% since 2010. That's £1.19bn to just £539m in 2024-25.

The arts have become far too easy a target, with local councils pitting them against social care and other needs. But this isn't an either/or situation. In Bristol, latest figures in a report estimate the economic impact of culture in the city to be £892.9m. Which is quite staggering, given the council's cultural budget stands at a mere £635,000.

The report also found that organisations funded by Bristol City Council generate a direct economic impact of £41.5m, and for every £1 they invested in local arts organisations, it leveraged £88 in the wider city. Basically, the arts pay their way and contribute to the provision of other social needs.

So here in Bristol, we are not resting on our laurels – and neither should you. This wasn't the first attempt to cut the arts budget, and it probably won't be the last. We do not know what the council's plan is beyond the next three years, but it's our job as trade unionists to ensure elected officials listen to and act on our demands.

And the fight must take place even if we don't win. Bristol City Council now know that their local Equity branch won't hesitate to stand up for arts funding – making them think twice about any future cuts. What's more, when we come together to resist attacks on our industry and livelihoods, we build up our collective and grassroots strength as trade unionists. And you can do the same with your Equity branch too.

I'm reminded of Jennie Lee's comment in her pioneering 1965 White Paper 'A Policy for the Arts': "...some local authorities will need a good deal of persuading before they are convinced that the money it is in their power to spend on the arts and amenities is money well spent and deserving a much higher priority than hitherto.

"But it can be done."

To get involved in your local branch, contact them via the relevant email listed on the Getting Involved pages 44-45.

Photos by Luke John Emmett



READY TO FIGHT FOR OUR AI RIGHTS

An overwhelming majority of film and TV performers confirm they are willing to take industrial action over artificial intelligence protections.

The failure of UK law to keep pace with rapidly evolving artificial intelligence technology has left thousands of performers at risk of exploitation – with some seeing their likeness or performance used without payment or their consent.

But Equity members are taking a stand.

In December, performers working in film and TV voted 'Yes' by a landslide 99.6% to taking industrial action in order to secure AI protections. It was the first time this whole section of the union's membership had ever been balloted, comprising 7,746 actors, stunt performers, and dancers working in film and TV. And a huge 75% of them turned out to vote.

Equity called the indicative ballot after Pact (the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television, the trade body representing most of the UK's production companies) refused to add the protections performers are asking for to film and TV agreements.

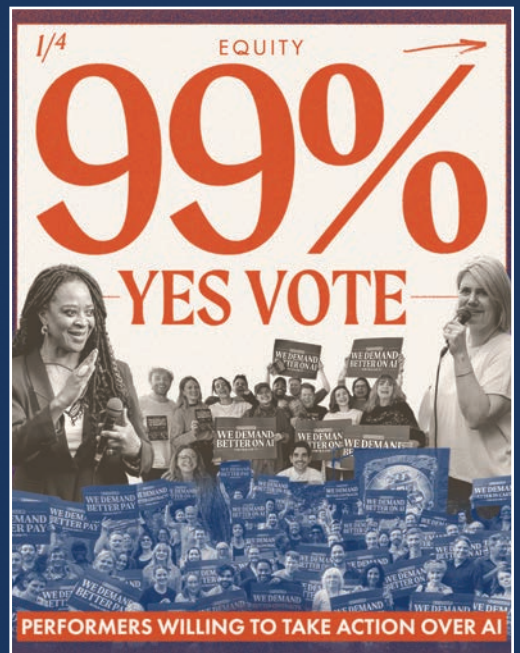
A key focus of the negotiations has centred around the use of performers' digital likeness to create digital replicas and synthetic content. Speaking to Sky News about the ballot result, which was announced live on air, Laurence Bouvard, Chair of Equity's Screen and New Media Committee, said "It is only right there should be transparency, consent, and compensation when it comes to the use of our data."

Members were asked whether they would be prepared to refuse to be digitally scanned on set. While the ballot was non-binding, the overwhelming 'Yes' vote demonstrated the strength of feeling amongst performers and, last January, brought Pact back to the table with an improved offer on AI rights.

While good progress has been made in other areas of the film and TV negotiations, such as pay, talks over AI are continuing at the point of going to press. If Pact refuse to give Equity members the protections they're seeking, the union will move to a statutory ballot on taking industrial action short of a strike, in the form of refusing to be scanned on set. Watch this space.

Words by Zoe Ellsmore

Photo credit: Mark Thomas



A POINT OF PRIDE



(Photo credit - OnlyOneBimmy)



When the company behind Manchester Pride collapsed last year, performers were shamefully left out of pocket. But as **Zoe Hodges** details, Equity members have come together to make sure this doesn't happen again – and helped to restore the true spirit of Pride.



The Equity North West team on Canal Street

“Over 50 performers were impacted by the collapse of Manchester Pride”

“Looking back, there were warning signs but it wasn’t expected. Manchester Pride has always been there, how could this happen? It puts it into perspective how precarious the industry is.”

Daniel Wallace, better known as Anna Phylactic, has been performing as a drag queen for over 15 years on the Manchester scene.

The devastating impact of the collapse of the organisation behind Manchester Pride is still being felt by Equity members like Daniel. In October last year, after months of ghosting performers and creatives, it was announced that Manchester Pride Events Ltd would be going into liquidation. Whilst it came as a shock to some, for others it was just confirmation of what they already knew – that they had a fight on their hands to get the money owed for their work at the 2025 festival.

Equity Organiser Kirsten Muat says that members began contacting Equity long before Manchester Pride Events Ltd released their official statement. “On the contracts people had signed with Manchester Pride, it gave them 60 days to pay people, which is an exceptionally long time. Normally, 30 days is the standard. Members were getting towards that 60 days and they still hadn’t heard anything, so they contacted us.”

Over 50 performers were affected by the collapse of Manchester Pride, with over £70,000 owed to them. “The impact has been massive,” Kirsten says. “Manchester Pride is arguably the biggest gig some of these performers do all year. The money they make at Pride is what will carry them through those quieter periods, so they lost their safety net.”

It was not just the financial burden that weighed heavy on the performers’ minds. As Kirsten reflects. “A lot of LGBT+ performers hold Pride close to their heart, it was something they’d all taken part in and visited when they were young. They were really proud of performing at it. So there was also that toll of being let down by an event that had meant so much to them and to the city.”

Daniel hosted a stage at Manchester Pride last year and had invested not just money into the performance, but time. “I was hosting for about 10 hours, so I spent time researching all the acts, creating a little bit of banter to have with the audience, and I’d paid for costumes. There were others in a worse situation than myself because they had a whole team that they had already paid out of their own money.”

Some performers couldn’t afford their rent or their prescriptions, another had to sell their car. “It was stressful. You do the work and you expect that money to be coming in within the 60 days. I was commissioning things for future

projects. I had a pantomime coming up so I commissioned a wig for a finale outfit, knowing I had this money coming in to pay for it. When that doesn't come, you've still got to pay for those commissions."

Another Equity member, Nathaniel J Hall, is an LGBT+ theatre-maker, artist, and activist, who has been Creative Director of Manchester Pride's Candlelit Vigil for the past five years – the ceremony that remembers those lost to HIV. He speaks of the emotional toll the collapse of Manchester Pride had on the people involved. "I think it really eroded a lot of trust, particularly for drag or cabaret artists, or those who work in the nighttime economy."

Pride performers, unite!

The union had already been organising in the Village, the heart of Manchester's LGBT+ community and nightlife, following the formation of the Greater Manchester & North West Drag Network in 2024. Many of the Pride performers were already members and there was direct knowledge of the long standing issues.

This enabled the union to move fast. Within a couple of days of the Manchester Pride liquidation announcement, a Zoom call was held with approximately 40 affected members, which led to the 'Pride Dispute Committee' being set up.

Daniel reflects on the importance of that first meeting: "A lot of people like myself just didn't know what was going to happen next or if we could do anything about it. So I think at that point it was really useful to be talking and hearing each other's experiences, and working out a way forward. I've never had to navigate through that so being in a union was really useful."

Equity North West Official, Karen Lockney says: "Because we already had some groundwork for organising, we were able to quickly call meetings of the North West Drag Network and ascertain how many people were owed money. And then from that, we were able to build a campaign around it."

Equity began calling on Manchester City Council to pay the performers. Although the council was not responsible for running the event itself, it was they who had oversight and without whom Pride could not take place.

Through a petition, media appearances, and lobbying, Equity made the point that it was the

council's responsibility to ensure the workforce of one of the city's biggest events – bringing in £34m to the local economy – were not left out of pocket. And that any future Pride event should be carried out on a union agreement, ensuring proper pay and conditions for performers – and no non-payments.

"We know how much Manchester Pride Events Ltd owe versus how many assets they have, and it's unlikely that performers will get a substantial sum of money from that," says Karen. "And if they do, it will take a long time. So we've been trying to get that money from the council, and we had a meeting with them in November where they were very positive. They made lots of promises about where funding could come from."

Members of the Pride Dispute Committee attended that meeting, in which Manchester City Council said they believed they were not liable for the debt but that they would explore other options for paying back performers. And on 26 November, the council passed a motion resolving to "Continue to Work constructively with Equity" and others representing employees who have not been paid for last year's Pride.

Karen says: "While we are disappointed that the promises from November's meeting have yet to come to fruition, we are still eager to work with the council to explore options to recoup some of the money. And to make sure that their commitment to Pride is more than words – that it is backed up by them valuing the work that was done in 2025."

Thanks to the contact they had with performers, Pride Dispute Committee member Nathaniel and a group of other impacted creatives were able to begin fundraising to attempt to distribute hardship grants to those who were out of pocket. "There were a few creatives who started their own fundraisers and I just thought, if everyone has their own, we're not going to get much money because we're going to get giving fatigue quite quickly. So we decided to pool our resources and start the 'Together for Creatives' fund. We were overwhelmed by the public support and raised £15,500."

The stature of an event like Manchester Pride going into liquidation amplifies the precarious nature of the industry. As Nathaniel says: "Some might view Pride celebrations as frivolous, but we fought hard for this party. It's an expression of our hard-earned right to equity, freedom and joy."

"Some performers couldn't afford their rent or their prescriptions"



Nathaniel Hall (Credit – Jennifer Smith)



Ana Phylactic (Credit – Fake Trash)

“The agreement is one of the first for a Pride event in the country”

“Being in a union was really useful”

Speaking about Pride in particular, Kirsten says: “It tells us that the model of commercialised Pride, which is not run by the community, is not working. But next year, Manchester Village Pride is going to be rooted in the Village.”

Pride for the community

In place of Manchester Pride Events Ltd, sprung up Manchester Village Pride CIC. A Community Interest Company (CIC), it is not-for-profit, reinvesting all of its earnings into local queer groups, and is made up of volunteer business owners, residents, and activists from the Gay Village. And in January this year, Manchester City Council announced that the new CIC would be responsible for running Pride events in the city going forwards.

It was then that Equity was able to score a landmark victory for members. After having called for all Pride events in the UK to take place on union agreements, setting out minimum pay, terms and conditions for performers, Equity negotiated just this.

Alongside Durham Pride, the agreement with Manchester Village Pride is one of the first for a Pride event in the country and was endorsed unanimously by affected Equity members. It ensures minimum 20% deposits, 30-day payment periods, and that no performers will be asked to work for free. It also sets out health and safety protections and a Dignity at Work Policy, protecting performers from any potential bullying or harassment that they might face.

“This is as it should be,” said Karen at the time. “A celebration of LGBT+ rights must be tied to workers’ rights. The agreement will be revised annually and we aspire to strengthen it further.”

Kirsten adds: “For Manchester Village Pride, coming to a union agreement is part of that process of rebuilding the trust, of giving performers the security that they will be treated properly and that they will get paid fairly and on time for their work.”

Finally, Daniel says: “If anything has come out of this, it’s that we can rebuild something that is more community focused and central to the Village. There’s definitely hope there, and there’s vision.”



The launch of the London Nightlife Network (Credit – Mark Thomas)

AFTER THE PARTY'S OVER

London's nightlife is world-renowned, but a new Equity survey has revealed that the performers who power it are struggling with low pay and increasing safety fears. **Nicole Vassell** finds out what Equity members are doing about it.

“London’s nightlife performers earn an average of £12,411 a year”

“This is an effort to find solidarity between those workers”

Colour, politics, sex, charm, fire – a Smashlyn Monroe show has it all. Over the last decade, the cabaret artist has made their mark across London’s nightlife scene with performances that combine burlesque with music, circus skills and rousing messages of fat positivity and LGBT+ pride.

But after the adrenaline of being on stage wears off, Smashlyn is left with the mixed realities of life as a nighttime performer. Depending on the venue, they might have performed with a bag of personal valuables visible behind them, just because there was nowhere safe to leave it backstage. Smashlyn may have had to change into their costumes in a disabled toilet rather than a dressing room, simply because one wasn’t provided. And even safety isn’t guaranteed.

“Say your nightly pay is £150,” Smashlyn points out. “You then have to decide whether it’s worth paying the £35-50 for a cab home, or taking the tube or night bus, which comes with its own set of potential dangers.”

For many of London’s nightlife performers, unsavoury dressing room conditions, low pay that doesn’t reflect the work that goes into preparing their act, and safety risks are all too familiar. And a recent survey by Equity has confirmed just this.

Published in March, the survey received responses from performers who work in a wide range of London’s nightlife professions, such as cabaret, burlesque, fire performance, circus, aerial, drag, club and pub singing, comedy, DJing, pole, tribute acts, and more. It found that these performers earn an average of £12,411 a year from their work, after average expenses for travel (£200 per month) and equipment, hair, makeup, and costumes (£162 per month) were subtracted.

This yearly earning is significantly lower than the London Living Wage, which is £28,860, and means many performers can’t make even half of what they’d need to survive in the city through their craft. Furthermore, a staggering 98% of survey respondents said that their rate of pay hadn’t increased in line with the cost of living.

These findings come alongside the launch of Equity’s London Nightlife Network, which aims to bring the capital’s nightlife performers together to organise for better pay, terms, and conditions.

It was a crowd of these performers who attended the network’s launch event in Soho, the heart of London’s nightlife. The event also featured a panel including Smashlyn, alongside other nightlife performers, as well as Justine Simons, London’s Deputy Mayor for Culture and Creative Industries.

Bringing performers together

Some may assume that the broad range of different professions that make up London’s nightlife scene do not have enough in common to be categorised under one umbrella.

Yet, while their specific output may differ, there are many ways they are unified through their experiences. In fact, whether they work in the day or nighttime, Equity has a term to describe gigging performers who have their own act and tend to work on a ‘genuinely self-employed’ legal basis: variety performers.

As Equity’s Variety Organiser, Nick Keegan, notes: “All the people working in those different genres are essentially working in the same way, gigging in the same workspaces, just on different days. They might never cross paths at the same time, which makes it harder to communicate – but this is an effort to find solidarity between those workers and build power, because they’re experiencing the same issues and struggles as each other.”

Minimum rates

Anjali Prashar-Savoie is a DJ, event programmer and writer who has been part of London’s queer nightlife landscape for several years. Her 2025 book, *Club Commons*, investigates queer nightlife and its role in community building and resistance. Having worked in theatres and clubs alike, she’s seen the benefits of minimum rates in the stage world.

“I realised that performers on the theatre side had union-negotiated rates of pay, but when I was working on the club side, it was a complete Wild West,” she recalls. “In my job as a programmer, I was trying to understand what standardised fees might look like. I even did my own surveys trying to find out how much promoters were earning, so that I could help figure out how we can make this work more sustainable.”

While some London nightlife venues hold agreements with Equity – setting union-

negotiated minimum pay, terms and conditions – the vast majority do not. This differs from the theatre industry, where all of the big West End venues, for instance, engage performers on an Equity agreement. One reason for this is due to the fragmented and gigging nature of nightlife performers' work, which makes them harder to organise than a cast of musical theatre performers who regularly appear in the same production.

However, 90% of survey respondents agree that it would be helpful if Equity published a rate card, featuring suggested minimum pay for nightlife performers in different working contexts – so of course, this is the next task for Equity's London Nightlife Network. Unlike a union agreement, these rate cards could not be enforced by Equity, but they would let bosses know what should be the standard, and act as a benchmark for the union and performers to push for more pay.

Safety concerns

Anjali, who also appeared on the panel at the London Nightlife Network launch, speaks urgently about the difficulties of low fees when having to account for travel costs. "I often play gigs in South London, but I live in North London – Ubers can be hella expensive, so if I pay for one, there's that fee gone," she explains.

While public transport like the Tube and night buses may be easier on the pocket, it means adding time onto her journey home and being out even later. "There is no way that I want to walk down an unlit towpath, usually alone, coming home from a gig," she continues. "For a lot of people, simply coming home from a night's work is unsafe. And from my work with queer nightlife workers, that lack of safety is amplified, especially for trans or visually non-conforming people. Moving through public space can be very, very dangerous."

Another major finding from Equity's survey was that almost a third of respondents (28%) said that an increase in transphobia, misogyny, homophobia, racism and far-right sentiment in recent years has led to them feeling less safe in their work. One respondent noted: "The world we live in is more homophobic, transphobic and misogynistic – travelling on public transport in full drag makeup is terrifying."



Smashlyn Monroe (Credit - Jennifer Forward-Hayter)

Smashlyn Monroe, who is also a member of Equity's Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee – elected to represent members working in these professions – wasn't surprised to see this feedback from their fellow performers, having personally been targeted with offensive comments when going to or leaving a gig. But even inside some venues, Smashlyn has been the subject of unwanted audience contact.

"Part of the safety aspect is also the sexual harassment from the audience," Smashlyn says. "In all types of venues, I have had my boobs or bum grabbed. And because there's no security, I have to manage that situation, and it's scary as hell. Some people think, 'Oh, well, you're up there taking your clothes off, so you're asking for this.' But it's never that. My body is my body, and there's nowhere where that behaviour's acceptable."

As well as having security, Smashlyn would also want venues to make greater efforts to stand in solidarity with their workers, with

"I will perform till the day I die, but it is still work"

“Travelling on public transport in full drag makeup is terrifying”

announcements on social media or a verbal reminder before shows for guests to keep their hands to themselves.

Responding as a union

As passionate as Smashlyn is about their performance work, the lack of proper pay and standards has made the job harder than it needs to be. “I love performing; it is ingrained in my soul, and I will do it till the day I die, but it is still work,” they explain. “It is hard. And as much as I love the shiny, twinkly bits about it, there are days when I’m like, ‘Okay, I don’t think I can do this.’”

Unsurprisingly, Smashlyn and Anjali have both seen peers leave the late entertainment industry in search of more sustainable opportunities. “We’re leaking cultural and artistic talent from the sector every day,” Nick Keegan adds. “It doesn’t really make sense for workers to stay in this career if they

can find something else to do, and I think that’s to the detriment of the whole economy and the whole picture.”

The establishment of this new network can be a step in the direction of strengthening the nightlife sector – as long as the workforce participate. “We rely on members to communicate with us about the issues that you’re facing,” Nick notes. “If you’re facing serious concerns in the workplace, we would encourage you to come forward. That includes whether you’re asking for support in individual circumstances – such as cases of sexual harassment or non-payment – or whether you want to develop a collective response to change the industry for the better.

“That’s what Equity is here for.”

If you’d like to join Equity’s London Nightlife Network, visit tinyurl.com/london-nightlife-network



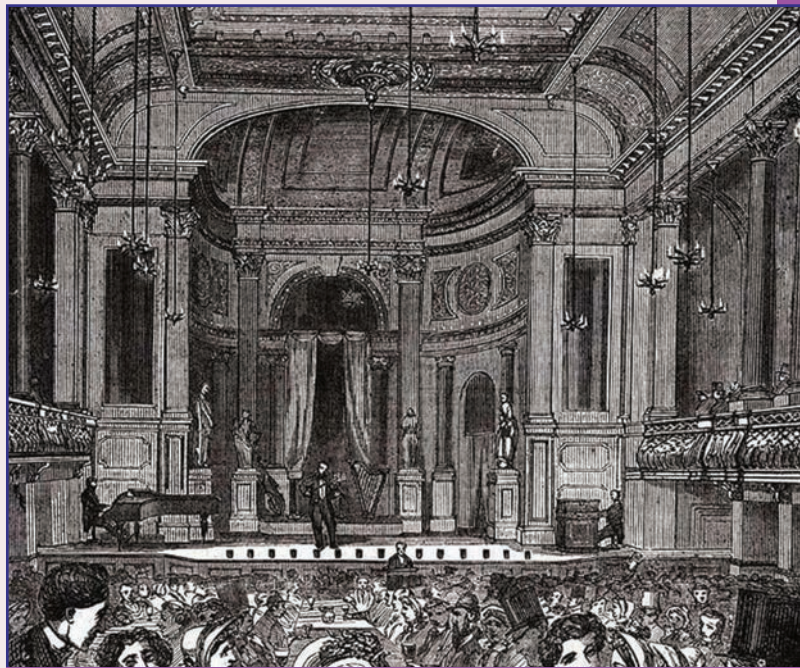
Anjali Prashar-Savoie (Credit - Mark Thomas)

A HISTORY OF VARIETY ORGANISING

From the taverns of the 1700s to Drag Race, variety performance has enjoyed a long and ever-evolving history. Equally colourful has been its history of organising, with workers and trade unions engaging in efforts to improve pay and working conditions across the professions.

Music halls

The origins of the music halls run all the way back to the taverns of 18th century London, when performers would sing to lively rooms of punters enjoying food and drink. By the mid-19th century, this had evolved into the music hall – dedicated venues with stages, with a lineup of different acts, such as songs, comedy, and variety entertainment. So popular was this genre of performance across the UK, that some of these venues were built on a vast scale with grand interiors.



An illustration from 1875 of the Oxford Music Hall, London (Credit - Art Collection 3)

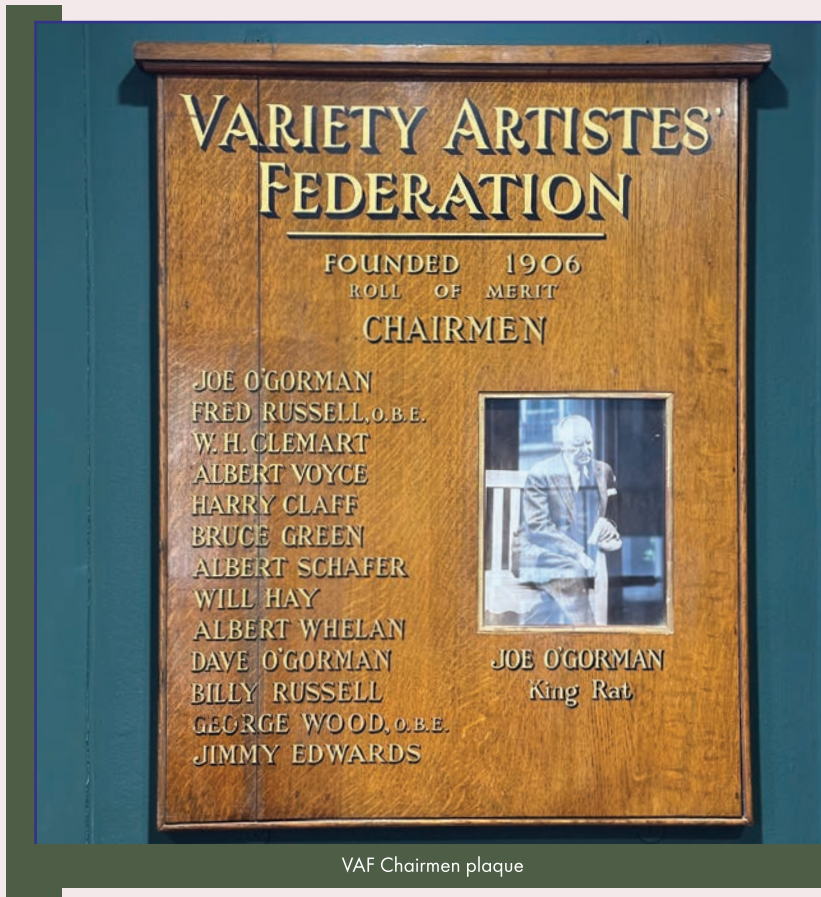
Working conditions

As the genre soared in popularity, so did the fame of its stars, such as singer Marie Lloyd, comedian and dancer Little Tich, and male impersonator Vesta Tilley. But a lot of the power lay with the managers, a small group of whom controlled many of the halls.

Issues for artists included: an increase from the traditional format of one-show-a-night to two, then the introduction of matinees, both for no extra money; a Barring Clause that meant artists under contract could not perform in halls belonging to another manager within a certain distance; and managers making artists work in the different halls they controlled, which could be far apart and meant artists could not complete their other engagements.



Little Tich (Credit - Photo 12)



VAF Chairmen plaque

The Variety Artists' Federation

From this context, the desire for a trade union grew. Philanthropic and social societies for variety performers already existed, but attempts at forming a trade union had not yet been successful. That is, until 18 February 1906, when representatives from the Grand Order of Water Rats, The Ancient Order of the Terriers, The Music Hall Artists' Railway Association, and The International Artistes' Lodge formed the Variety Artists' Federation (VAF). Within the first 12 months of its creation, the VAF had 4,000 members.



Marie Lloyd (Credit - Archive PL)

The Music Hall War

The VAF set to work – but managers refused to negotiate on the issues affecting variety artists. So, in January 1907, the VAF called a strike. Orchestras and stage hands joined the dispute, as well as many of the prominent music hall artists. Marie Lloyd, known as the 'Queen of the Music Hall', performed on picket lines and fundraised for the effort, donating her fees to the strike. At the time she said: "We the stars can dictate our own terms. We are fighting not for ourselves, but for the poorer members of the profession".

The strike lasted for two weeks and ended in success for the VAF, with much of their demands being met.



A Royal Command Variety Performance at the London Coliseum in 1953 (Credit - PA Images)

The rise of new media

The growth of film, radio and television changed the way variety performers worked and led to the decline in popularity of the music halls and variety theatres. The phenomenon of commercial TV in the 1950s could not provide enough work for music hall artists, and many fell into poverty. It also led to overlap with another trade union which held contractual agreements for performers with the new media bosses – the British Actors Equity Association.

Incorporation into Equity

In 1961, both the VAF and Equity went on strike against ITV, demanding a new pay structure related to the size of the increasing viewing audience. However, when the VAF accepted a deal, this was criticised by Equity who said that it undermined their membership who were still on strike. From such clashes emerged the proposal for a single trade union – and on 16 May 1967, Equity incorporated the VAF.



Gerald Croasdell, centre, general secretary of Equity at the time (Credit - Henry Bush, ANL, Shutterstock)

Working men's clubs

During the mid-20th century, variety performance found its home in the popular working men's clubs across the country, which offered members live entertainment and cheap drinks. However, these spaces were at times not welcoming to everyone, as some clubs operated a 'colour bar' banning clientele and performers who weren't white. This led Equity to boycott such clubs, with variety performers of all races refusing to play at clubs which operated a colour bar.



A working men's club in Newcastle, 1973 (Credit - Homer Sykes)



A rally to save Bethnal Green Working Men's Club in 2024 (Credit – Jack Witek)



(Credit – Jack Witek)

Variety today

Although variety performance looks very different today from the music halls of the 19th century, it has flourished into vibrant new forms. A growing appreciation of queer culture has given a new lease of life to drag, cabaret and burlesque, while British comedy is as popular as ever, and the skills of circus artists, magicians, DJs and more are sought after in the events industry.

But the modern day presents its own set of challenges, with the closure of live venues, low pay and precarious work remaining an issue for performers, and far right sentiment posing a threat to safety. In response to this, Equity is organising, with members saving Bethnal Green Working Men's Club from closure, agreements for Pride events negotiated for the first time ever, and politicians being lobbied to improve working conditions.

If you work in a variety profession, help shape the future by visiting tinyurl.com/equity-variety-and-circus-hub for contact details and how to get involved.

SHOW US THE MONEY

From show cancellations to late pay or no pay, bad bosses and engagers can give gigging or 'variety' performers the runaround for their money. But that doesn't mean they can get away with it – **Sarah Woolley** finds out how Equity can help.

When we think of contracts it's easy to picture a formal handshake over pen and ink. But in this business, variety performers are more likely to book a drag night or a stand up gig over WhatsApp and email. What Equity members don't always realise is that any agreement about pay, terms and conditions constitutes a contract itself – and can be enforced.

That's why Equity Variety Official Michael Day wants everyone to know that the union is on their side. "Variety performers are mostly gigging freelancers working solo," Michael says, referring to the wide range of Equity members who do this type of work, such as those working in comedy, drag, burlesque, cabaret, circus, club singing, DJing, and more.

"It's not like being in a big theatrical cast where you're all in the same boat. They're dealing with very short-term contracts that they've negotiated themselves. The most common issues are cancellations, late pay, or not getting paid at all. That's where we can help."

If you do experience any of these issues, Michael says: "The first thing is to get in contact with us. We'll send you a form to fill in and get you to send the contract and any correspondence, and then we take it from there. We follow a protocol that's necessary if we have to go to court and then

we'll take you through all the stages and hopefully get the payment sorted."

But having your back legally doesn't stop there and you don't have to be in a crisis. "As a member you can access our guides for negotiating your own contracts and deciding what fee to charge," Michael says. "We also have template contracts, but above all we are always here to look at a contract and answer any questions you have. You're not in this alone."

If you're a variety member, you can find contact details, template contracts and guides by visiting [tinyurl.com/equity-variety-and-circus-hub](https://www.equity-variety-and-circus-hub.com)

Michael Day



Katy Ellis, Taylor Swift tribute act



(Credit – Simon Hunt)

“A booker cancelled with less than 24 hours notice”

“As a Swiftie myself, I feel so lucky to cover my favourite artist and bring this to life for people. It’s been a real journey from when I started off in the local pubs, which was a bit of a nightmare – getting changed in the toilets and people shouting. But today we’ve spent three years touring Taylormania around the world with a live band, dancers, and 18 costume changes. It’s been absolutely mental and it really does bring people together, but it wouldn’t be possible without an incredible team and the backing of a union.

“I’ve been a member of Equity since leaving training at 19 and they’ve always been there for me, including a recent situation where a booker cancelled with less than 24 hours notice. That made me really angry because my team is relying on that work to pay their bills and put food down on the table.

“But when I went to Equity, they handled it so well and ultimately we were successful in court. There’s no way that would have happened without Equity’s help. The union has also given me so much guidance on how to create and take on contracts independently.

“I tell my band, my dancers, anyone: be a part of Equity. There is such a sense of community because you belong to a network of professionals who understand the challenges you face and they have your back. It makes you feel so much more secure in a world where things are so uncertain.”

“After one letter they just paid it”

“It’s really important that members know that a contract is binding even when it’s confirmed over an email or a text instead of a physical signature on a document. In 2022, a legal firm booked me for a Christmas party and there was confirmation by email. They’d booked me about a week before the event, but they changed their mind last minute and cancelled. They paid the deposit but they wouldn’t pay the balance – they just said, ‘Well we’re not paying you’ and then they ignored me.

“That’s when I got Michael Day involved and after one letter from him they just paid it, which is crazy. He does a superb job and has been my legal representative for other issues, which meant I didn’t have to worry about legal fees either.

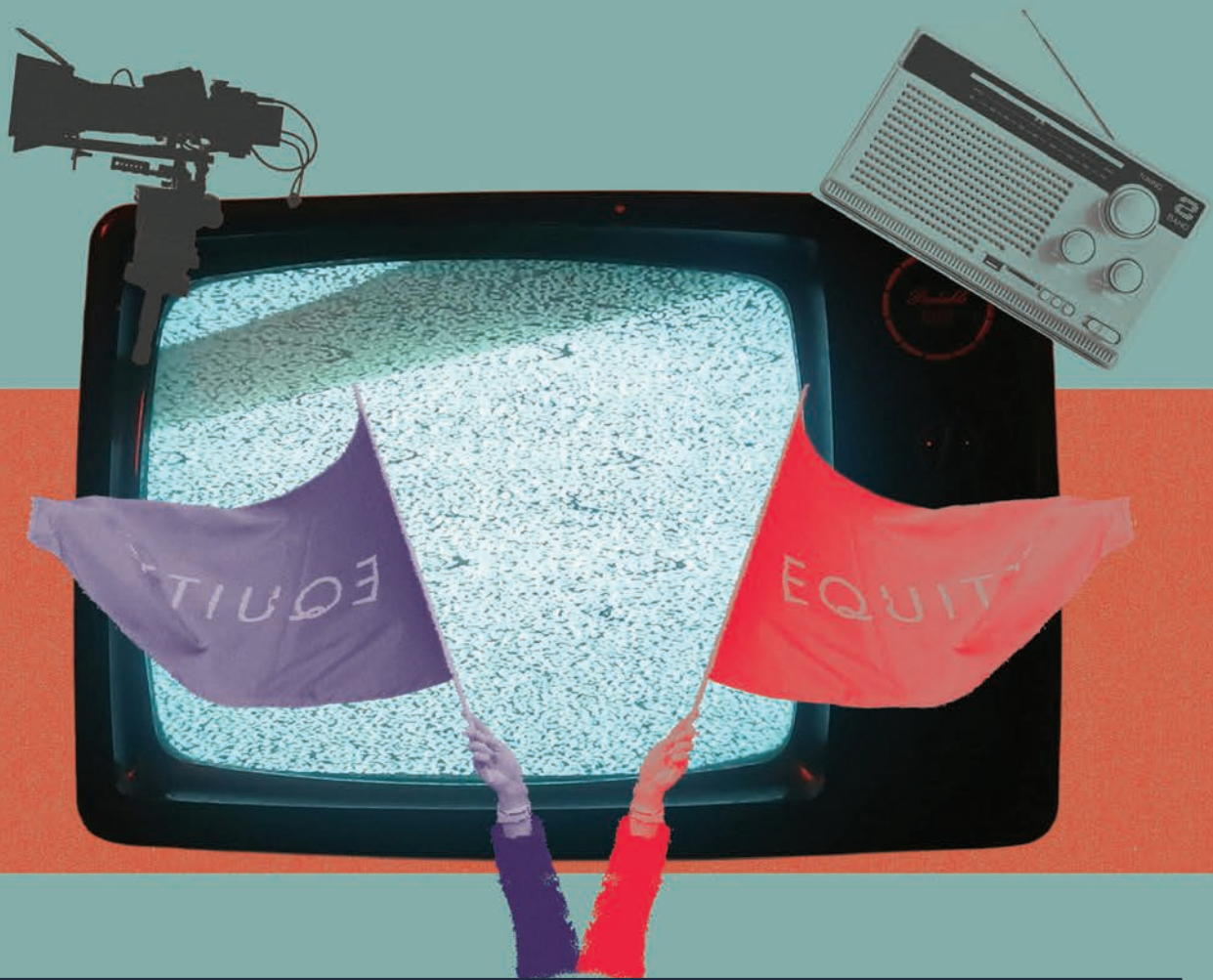
“But it’s not just about making a claim. Michael is there when you need a bit of advice and to know where you legally stand. That’s really important when you’re a one-man band with a family to feed and a mortgage to pay.

“Michael and the union are always there on your side. And of course, with your membership you also get public liability insurance which covers you up to £10 million, as well as personal accident insurance and backstage personal property insurance. I just think it’s an all-round win and your membership will pay for itself. It’s totally worth it to have that peace of mind.”

Michael Gee, magician



WILL THE REVOLUTION BE TELEVISED?



With the BBC Charter up for renewal, we have the chance to shape it into a public service broadcaster that truly serves the people – and its workforce.

Elena Cresci reports on Equity's bold new vision for the Beeb.

Few public service broadcasters can compete with the BBC in terms of size and scope. It employs performers over a wide and varied range of genres and mediums, from soaps to radio dramas to prestige television.

But right now, as it does every ten years, it's facing an existential debate on its mission and purpose. And it's a debate with a looming deadline, as the clock on the Royal Charter runs down.

The Charter is what defines the BBC: how it works, what it produces, and how it's financed. Its renewal is a chance to reshape the broadcaster – and make it work for everyone.

What is the Charter?

The original Charter was established in 1927, as the public British Broadcasting Corporation replaced the commercial British Broadcasting Company Limited. Similar names but very different outcomes, as the aim was to create a publicly-owned broadcaster independent of government control, officially defining the BBC as something for the people.

This meant providing not just news, but entertainment and education and representing all parts of the country with a depth and breadth that commercial broadcasters – who are concerned largely with profit – tend to shy away from.

The Charter has usually been replaced every ten years, with each renewal adapting to technological updates of the time. For example, renewals over the BBC's 100-year history have included responses to the introduction of colour television, satellite TV and, later, digital services.

The current Charter is set to expire on 31 December 2027, meaning while revellers ring in a new year on 1 January 2028, it also means 'New Year, new BBC'.

How does renewal work?

While the Charter's end is about a year and a half away, there is still some way to go before a new one can be implemented. The long process was kicked off in December 2025, which came alongside a consultation in the form of an online survey for the public and industry to respond to.

However, this survey was boycotted by Equity, which criticised the questions for only

allowing limited responses – such as 'agree' or 'disagree', or restricted wordcounts – and did not ask about the workforce.

Instead, Equity shared a written submission with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, setting out its vision for the BBC, and encouraged members to email the government too. "The point was not to disengage with the process," says Equity's BBC & ITV Official Natalie Barker, "but to boycott the survey itself because it was too limited to be complete."

The survey closed on 10 March, with a white paper policy document formalising the government's recommendations expected later this year.

What do workers want from the BBC?

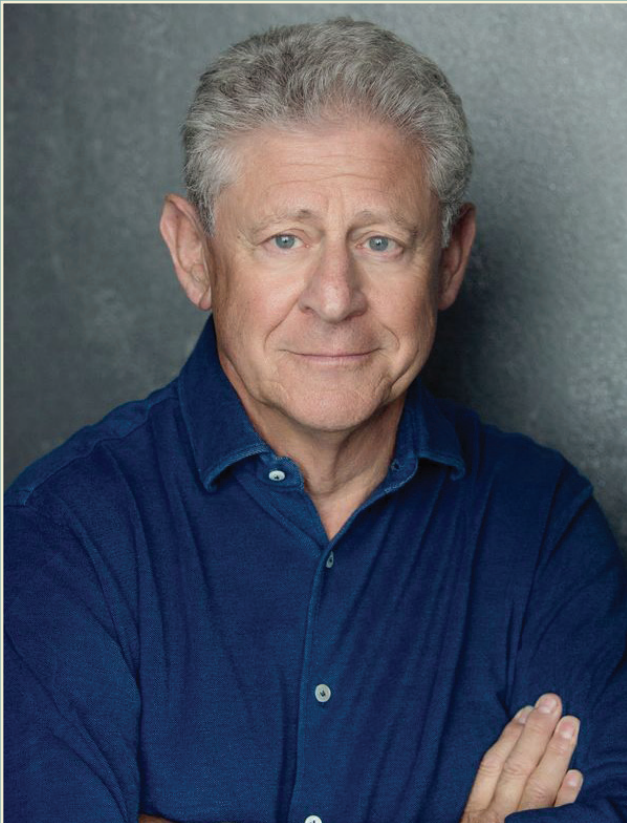
One key demand from Equity is proper investment in audio drama. While podcasts have enjoyed increased support from the broadcaster in recent years, audio drama has been hit with swingeing cuts. In fact, last year the BBC cut drama from Radio 3, only to install a long form slot on Radio 4 after a coordinated campaign from trade unions, including Equity.

It's something seasoned audio and screen actor Jon Glover believes is a crying shame, particularly as someone who grew up with radio drama. "I was probably the last generation that was allowed unlimited radio but limited television," he says.

For Jon, that means encouragement of new writing in key afternoon drama slots. "The audience is there, they're driving in their cars, they're sitting in their living rooms. The radio company is incredibly important because it gives employment to younger actors new to radio, as well as older performers who pass on their experience teaching radio drama techniques – a sort of radio drama apprenticeship."

Another at-risk area covered by Equity's demands is continuing and returning drama, which includes soap operas. In March of last year, BBC Scotland announced it would be decommissioning *River City*, the only Scottish soap, marking a blow to the nation's TV industry and its local crew and talent. With the loss of *Holby City* in 2022 and *Doctors* in 2024, this has reduced the number of BBC continuing dramas by half in the last five years.

"The BBC is facing an existential debate on its mission and purpose"



Jon Glover (Credit - Michael Shelford)



Harriet Bibby (Credit - RocketShots)

While viewer numbers have dropped off due to the fragmentation of the TV landscape, Natalie says it's a genre which deserves investment for many reasons. "The soaps still drive much of the viewership to the linear channels," she says.

"If it wasn't for the soaps in the schedule, a lot fewer people would be turning on each night and staying to watch whatever comes after. And it drives a lot of the viewers to their streaming platforms as well."

She also points out that many of the BBC's goals to invest in the nations and regions outside of London can be covered by commissioning continuing dramas which film for more than six months of the year in each area outside of London. "They're really good jobs that offer regular work in an industry that's built on precarity and going from one job to the next."

This is something Harriet Bibby has experienced firsthand, appearing on *Doctors* as well as having a regular role on ITV's *Coronation Street*. "Working on a soap is an incredible training ground," she says. "They also bring a level of visibility that's hard to match, introducing actors to millions of viewers and opening doors to future opportunities."

"While they're sometimes underestimated, soaps are a fundamental part of the industry – both as a launchpad and as a space for long-term, meaningful careers. That kind of stability allows people to live and work in places like the North West or Yorkshire, without feeling like they have to relocate to London to have a viable career."

She adds: "I think it's important for the BBC to continue to champion diverse voices and regional stories – making sure the industry feels accessible, representative, and genuinely national."

Led by members' views, this call for regionalisation is at the core of Equity's vision for the BBC, alongside the principles of democratisation and cooperatisation.

What is democratisation?

Equity argues that as a public service broadcaster, the BBC should be democratic so that it is accountable to the people who fund it and to the workforce that creates its value. Democratisation would also mean that the BBC has independent oversight that is separate from both management and the government, helping the broadcaster to retain its independence and reflect a diversity of views across the UK.

“Audio drama has been hit with swingeing cuts”

“Working on a soap is an incredible training ground”

“We could see the BBC drive economic growth in every part of the UK”

So the union is calling for workforce representation – of both employees and freelancers – at the highest level of the corporation, including via union voice. Equity also wants the government to consider a levy on the revenues of large streaming platforms and for the license fee to be reformed so that the BBC is funded by everyone in a way that is fair and ensures its independence. On a similar theme, Equity is also calling for the government to insulate the BBC from political interference by making the Charter itself permanent – something the culture secretary Lisa Nandy subsequently said she would do.

Other democratising measures the union is recommending include opposing plans to commercialise the BBC – which it says would undermine the principle of universality – and a commitment to an ethical and rights-based approach to AI, including seeking artists’ agreement.

What is regionalisation?

As well as establishing a continuing drama series in each nation and region outside of London, in order to support jobs in these areas, Equity wants fairer distribution of BBC investment across the UK.

As a public service broadcaster funded by people across the whole of the UK, Equity believes that we should all see our lives, interests and concerns reflected in the BBC’s content, and that we should share in any employment opportunities generated.

What is cooperatisation?

Equity wants the BBC to be owned and run by licence fee payers and its workforce, believing this structure would better reflect the values that underpin the corporation as a public institution and improve working conditions.

This includes the creation of panels made up of licence fee payers and the workforce to shape how the BBC is run; digital services with algorithms that serve the public service values of informing, educating, and entertaining users; and a strategy to encourage different models of production, such as cooperatives or mutuals, so that power can be shared more equitably.

A once in a generation opportunity?

The Charter Renewal process is a pivotal moment for the BBC, which faces challenges on a number of fronts, including competition from streaming giants to a decrease in licence fee payments – a crucial source of funding for the broadcaster – as well as the looming spectre of artificial intelligence in the creative arts and a planned cut of almost 10 per cent of its workforce.

However, Equity’s vision for the BBC is staunchly optimistic. “This is our chance to revitalise the BBC,” says Natalie Barker. “We could see it drive economic growth in every part of the UK and become the gold standard on employment rights, driving up terms and conditions for workers across the creative industries. Workers would be able to build lifelong careers in the performing arts and entertainment sector, whatever their background and wherever they live in the UK.”

“There is no time like the present to be bold with our public service broadcasting.”

A NEW ERA FOR WORKERS



Equity's Employment Rights Officer **Dugald Johnson** outlines the ways the new Employment Rights Act could benefit you.

Stronger pregnancy and maternity rights, the end of 'fire and rehire', guaranteed working hours for those on zero-hour contracts, getting rid of anti-union legislation...

These are some of the rights being brought in by the Employment Rights Act 2025 (ERA), which became law on 18 December 2025 – although specific rights are coming into force at different times.

The ERA was a key pledge of the Labour Party at the last election, developed in partnership with trade unions. However, after over a year of wrangling, the reforms are not quite as dramatic as was promised.

Nevertheless, there are some important benefits for Equity members. Here's what you need to know.

How do the changes affect freelancers?

Many of the Act's biggest measures, like changes to unfair dismissal, are rights given only to those with 'employee' status.

On most performance engagements, Equity members will have the intermediate 'worker' status, between employee and self-employed. But some members' work will count as full self-employment, including directors, designers and some variety work.

For those with 'worker' status, there are a few key changes to be aware of, explained below. If you're fully self-employed, changes in the ERA are less relevant. However, the union continues to lobby the government on measures to support the self-employed, such as on the issue of persistent late payments.

What changes does it make to individual rights at work for most Equity members?

The ERA makes some important changes to your individual rights at work. Of course, on many issues Equity's agreements give members better rights than legislation, and those agreements always take precedence over legal minimums.

The ERA removes the three-day waiting period for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), so that workers can claim from the first day of sickness. If your pay is below SSP (currently £118.75 per week), you're entitled to SSP at a rate of 80% of your weekly pay. This change came into effect from April 2026. You're entitled to SSP if you pay Class 1 National Insurance contributions (NICs) as an employee but not if you pay NICs on a self-employed basis under Class 2 and 4. However, many of Equity's agreements entitle you to receive the equivalent of SSP from employers regardless.

The ERA also introduces protections against the exploitative use of zero-hours contracts, which might be relevant to work you do in other industries alongside creative work. Workers on low- or zero-hours contracts will now have a right to an offer of guaranteed hours – a minimum number of hours each week – based on an average of their hours during a 12-week reference period. Workers will also have a right to compensation for shifts cancelled at the last minute.

What changes does it make in terms of tackling sexual harassment?

The previous government introduced a duty on employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment at work. This came into force in October 2024. The ERA strengthens that duty.

From October this year, employers will have a duty to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. The duty will extend specifically to sexual harassment by third parties,

such as audience members, crew, and other contractors at a venue or on set.

At a minimum, that means all employers must have an anti-harassment policy, conduct a risk assessment (for example, on what third parties may be in the workplace) and implement all reasonable steps to mitigate those risks.

How does it affect the union's organising and campaigning?

Some of the most significant changes in the Act are about trade unions' ability to organise workers and take collective action.

From August, trade union members will be able to vote electronically or in-person in ballots for industrial action, union elections and other statutory ballots – if the employer and trade union agree. Until then, unions have had to post ballots to members' home addresses. Of course, with many Equity members working away from home and on tour, archaic postal balloting presents a major challenge. If implemented properly, electronic balloting should make it both easier and far less costly for the union to ballot members.

From October, the Act also creates significant new rights for unions to access workplaces to speak to members and potential members, even where an employer refuses to grant access voluntarily. These new rights could help the union to grow membership and power in 'greenfield' areas of the industry that don't hold agreements with Equity, such as videogames, commercials and audio.

The removal of some of the most stifling anti-union measures is also welcome, including the rule requiring 50% turnout threshold for industrial action ballots, introduced by the last Tory government. From August, ballots will only need more votes in favour of industrial action than against.

What is not in the Employment Rights Act that Equity is lobbying for?

The new legislation does not amend agency regulations which relate to casting directories, including Spotlight. However, in February the government launched a consultation on reforms to agency regulations. Equity is urging the government to take this opportunity to remove a legal exception which allows casting directories to charge upfront fees, ending the "tax on hope" that performers pay simply to look for work. The union is also pursuing various changes to clamp down on unscrupulous talent agencies.

Reforms to holiday rights, to address the unfairness experienced by those working a six-day week, is also not addressed in the ERA. Equity has raised with the government that many members working a six-day week do not get a holiday entitlement that reflects, pro rata, their days worked. Alongside industrial efforts, the union continues to push for reforms to make the holiday rights system fairer.



NEWS

East Midlands variety showcase puts branch talent on display



Performers of the East Midlands variety showcase
(Credit - Christina Wildgoose-Swift)

Held at Leicester's International Arts Centre, the East Midlands Branch's variety showcase was an opportunity for members to shine.

Arranged by the branch's Variety Officer, singer Eleanor Mattley, the showcase took place on 14 January this year and was an effort to "try to reach out to variety members".

"We had four acts on the night – two vocalists, a storyteller and a poet – plus the compere, who was a comedian" says Eleanor. All were members of the East Midlands Branch. "It was an opportunity to get their performances photographed and videoed, and then we put together a showreel for them with the footage. They paid a contribution to secure their place and the branch subsidised the rest of the cost."

Attracting around 40 audience members, the event also provided attendees with opportunities for networking. "It worked out really nicely in the end," says Eleanor, who is planning to put the event on again in early 2027. "It's not too early for members to get in touch to show interest," she continues.

Also coming up for the East Midlands Branch is a free headshot session in June at the Y Theatre in Leicester that's open to all members. But before that, they plan to move their usual meeting place from Leicester to Northampton in May. "Leicester is where the majority of the committee is based, but now we're starting to attract more people from Lincolnshire, Northampton, and Nottingham as well," says Eleanor. "So we're going to hopefully be touring our meetings to the different major cities in the East Midlands."

If you'd like to get involved with Equity's East Midlands Branch, email eastmidlands@equitybranches.org.uk.

Sing it loud! New agreement secured for stage management at Opera North

Equity has welcomed the signing of the first ever agreement with Leeds-based Opera North that covers their stage management team.

The new agreement came into effect on 1 April this year and extends a long-standing trade union agreement in place between Equity and Opera North for members of the chorus. It now ensures that eligible stage management members are part of a collective bargaining unit covering issues of pay, hours, working conditions, health and safety, dignity at work, and more.

Equity's North East, Yorkshire & Humber Official, Dominic Bascombe, said: "It provides important recognition and rights for stage management, meaning they are no longer left in the wings when it comes to union negotiations."

Meanwhile, Opera North's Deputy General Director, Malgorzata (gosha) Szablowska welcomed the agreement, saying it was important to "make sure that our efforts to provide safe and stable working conditions are recognised and supported by our ongoing relationship with Equity and all unions representing our teams."

Now hear this: Improved pay and contracts for audio artists narrating children's stories

Equity has achieved significantly improved pay and stronger terms for a group of union members working in the fast-growing children's audio players market.

Six audio artists were engaged to narrate children's stories to be distributed via the Yoto platform. However, once the work had been completed, it became clear that the fees they had received fell far short of what was appropriate given the scale and nature of the recordings' use.

The performers stood together to demand fairer treatment. Equity entered into complex negotiations with the producers, pushing for proper compensation. The union strived to ensure that the work was valued correctly, securing a meaningful uplift in pay and adequate contracts for the six members involved.

With the rapid rise of children's audio products and storytelling devices, this case highlights a growing area of work where performers' rights must be protected. Equity is urging members to take particular care when reviewing contracts for similar projects. Understanding how recordings will be used, especially when tied to physical products or widely distributed platforms, is essential to ensuring fair pay and conditions.

This is a powerful example of collective action delivering results. When members stand together, supported by their union, better standards can be won.

If you work as an audio artist, visit our Audio Info Hub for advice, recommended rates, and how to take action to improve the industry:

tinyurl.com/equity-audio-info-hub

Calling all variety members: Update your details NOW and help the union to organise!

'Variety' describes gigging performers with their own act – and encompasses a big range of very different professions.

But whether you're an entertainer, comedian, puppeteer, storyteller, wrestler, fire performer, magician, street performer, or singer; or work in circus, drag, cabaret, burlesque, or so much more (phew!) – we need your input!

This is because Equity is always trying to bring members together so they can work to improve their own pay, terms and conditions – as well as raise standards for everyone across the industry.

We do this by regularly organising open meetings, starting new networks (for members who share a profession or interest), or seeking the appointment of Equity Deputies (members who represent the union in their workplace). Which

means we need to communicate directly with members who work specific fields.

You can help us do this by updating your membership record on the Equity website and adding up to three 'professional areas' where most of your business earnings come from. You can also tick boxes for 'interests' which relate to other work you do.

Even if you did this when you first joined Equity, or at some point since, it may be that your main work areas have changed. Having an accurate picture of the work you do is essential for us to provide appropriate support and, most importantly, organise!

And what better time to do this than NOW – before you forget – by logging in to our website equity.org.uk (it'll take a mere five minutes).

NEW Black Country & Staffordshire Branch gets off to a flying start



The Black Country & Staffordshire Branch at their launch meeting.

When actor Howard Chadwick moved to Stoke, he felt that joining a local Equity branch “was a bit of a no man’s land”.

“People felt they were neither Birmingham nor Manchester, so weren’t engaging with either branch,” he says. So, with the help of Equity’s North West Councillor Victoria Brazier and Midlands Official Ian Manborde, they did something about it.

And after two years of hard work, the brand new Black Country & Staffordshire Branch met for the first time in November last year, with Equity President Lynda Rooke and General Secretary Paul W Fleming in attendance as guest speakers.

This was followed by meetings featuring guests such as Theresa Heskins, the artistic director of Newcastle-under-Lyme’s New Vic Theatre; open audition days for branch members hosted by Anji Carroll, the casting director at the New Vic; and Bryn Holding, guest director and acting lecturer at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, talking about drama training.

Howard, who had never held a branch position before, now finds himself the Chair of this newly created branch. “I’ve always thought of myself more as a foot soldier,” he says. “But having found myself here, asking for a branch, it would have been probably impolite of me to not take some kind of responsibility!”

He says that their aim is to “get as many people to engage with the branch as possible”, especially variety performers “who maybe aren’t aware that they can join the union”, as well as “push out into the reaches of our branch boundaries” to “people who might live in more rural areas out in Shropshire”.

“We’re keen to get people seen, to get voices heard,” says Howard. “So come in and join the party!”

If you’d like to be involved, email the branch at blackcountryandstaffordshire@equitybranches.org.uk

SCOTLAND



Equity's Unionising in Dance event

Dance artists in Scotland are joining the union's push to raise standards in the sector

"Pay cuts, pay stagnation, shortening of contracts, concerns with Creative Scotland's assessment process, and a generalised shrinking of our industry" – these are just some of the pressures on the dance sector today, as explained by Penny Chivas, a dancer and member of Equity's Glasgow & West of Scotland Branch.

What's more, Penny adds that freelance dance work "does not fit neatly into traditional definitions and as such is often misunderstood, undervalued or misrepresented in conversations about workers' conditions," with the greatest impact felt by those already facing barriers in the industry.

But it isn't all doom and gloom, Equity members working as dance artists and choreographers are doing something about it.

In March, Equity in Scotland hosted 'Unionising in Dance', an awareness-raising session at The Work Room in Glasgow. The session focused on the realities of working in the sector and how collective organising can help improve pay, conditions and security, and support efforts to achieve fair work in dance.

At the same time, the session reflected a growing sense of confidence among artists to speak out and organise. For Penny,

the discussion felt "incredibly powerful and hopeful... I genuinely feel that the tide is turning."

The event sits within a wider picture of increased activity around dance in Equity, including the rapidly expanding Choreographers and Movement Directors Network and their fight for recognition in the ongoing TV and film negotiations with Pact.

Equity's Scotland Official, Marlene Curran, said the session showed a growing appetite among dancers to come together and push for better standards across the sector. "Sessions like this are about empowering members, sharing experiences and making sure no one is facing these challenges alone."

As activity builds across Scotland and beyond, Penny emphasised the importance of collective action, saying the sector is changing, but progress depends on artists "stick[ing] together as we drive that change so that the impact increases equity, and doesn't leave those working at the margins behind."

Words by Gail McAnena

TUAISCEART ÉIREANN



Muire McCallion ag caint ag Comhdháil Equity anuraidh i nDoire (Grianghraf - Neil Hamilton)
/ Muire McCallion speaking at last year's Equity conference in Derry (Credit - Neil Hamilton)

An dóigh a bhfuil craobh an Fheabhail agus an Iarthair de chuid Equity ag dul i dteagmháil le daoine cruthaitheacha lonnaithe faoin tuath

“Tig leis an aisteoireacht a bheith uaigneach go leor, beag beann ar an áit ina bhfuil tú” a deir Muire McCallion, Cathaoirleach Craobh an Fheabhail agus an Iarthair de chuid Equity, “ach go háirithe má tá tú lonnaithe i gceantar tuaithe. Ba mhaith linn go mbeadh a fhios ag daoine go bhfuil pobal anseo agus nach gá gur eispéireas uaigneach é (a bheith i do thaibheoir). Tar agus bí linn.”

Bíonn go leor post sna taibhealaíona lonnaithe i gcathracha agus is minic a bhíonn turais fhada le déanamh ag na daoine i gceantair faoin tuath le haghaidh oibre nó líonrú. Ach tá sé de mhisean ag craobh an Fheabhail agus an Iarthair de chuid Equity é a dhéanamh furasta d’achan bhall ina dúiche féin a bheith rannpháirteach san aontas, is cuma faoin áit a bhfuil cónaí orthu. Cuid thábhachtach den chur chuige is ea súíomh achán cruinníú craoibhe a athrú, agus an ceann deireanach ar siúl i gCúil Raithin seachas i nDoire, áit a raibh cruinnithe ar siúl go minic san am atá thart. Tá siad ag fiosrú fosta faoin dóigh a dtig leo dul i ngleic níos fearr le baill reatha agus baill fhéideartha ar na meáin shóisialta.

Deir Muire “Ba mhaith liom go dtuigfeadh aisteoirí atá lonnaithe faoin tuath nár ghá dóibh taisteal go dtí an chathair i gcónaí le bheith páirteach. Is iad na ceisteanna

céanna a théann i bhfeidhm ar achán duine cibé áit a bhfuil tú – an tóir ar íocaíochtaí, cuidiú le gníomhairí - agus ba mhaith linn go mbeadh a fhios ag ár mbail go léir go mbeimis anseo le cuidiú leat. Agus ba mhaith linn baill nua a thabhairt isteach fosta.”

Ba é teagmháil a dhéanamh le daoine nua an smaointeoireacht a bhí taobh thiar d’Fhéile Bhliantúil Equity Thuaisceart Éireann, a bhí mar smaoineamh ag craobh an Fheabhail agus an Iarthair. Is ionad ilfhreastail í an ócáid d’ealaíontóirí taibhléirithe gairmiúla agus uaimhianacha, atá ceaptha le go mbeidh eolas acu faoi Equity. Beidh imeacht an tsamhraidh seo ar siúl ar an 22 Meitheamh in Ard Abhann in Inis Ceithleann, agus beidh imeachtaí roimhe seo ar siúl i bPort Rois agus i nDoire.

Cibé áit a bhfuil an chraobh, áfach, tá rud amháin mar an gcéanna: “Is é an bealach is fearr le daoine a mhealladh ná trí phlé nádúrtha traidisiúnta”, a deir Muire. “Bím an-bhródúil i gcónaí as labhairt le daoine faoin aontas, agus is as Doire mé agus is maith le muintir Dhoire a bheith ag caint!”

Focail le Zoe Ellsmore

NORTHERN IRELAND



The Foyle & West Branch in Coleraine / Craobh an Fheabhail agus an Iarthair i gCúil Raithin

How Equity's Foyle & West branch are reaching out to rural creatives

"Acting can be quite isolating wherever you are", says Muire McCallion, Chair of Equity's Foyle & West branch, "but especially if you are in a rural area. We want people to know that there is a community here and that (being a performer) doesn't have to be a lonely experience. Come and join us."

With many performing arts jobs centred in cities, those in rural areas often face long journeys for work or networking. But Equity's Foyle & West branch are on a mission to make it easy for every member in their patch to engage with the union, no matter where they live. A key part of their approach is rotating the location of each branch meeting, with the last one held in Coleraine instead of Derry, where meetings have often been held in the past. They are also exploring how they can better engage current and potential members on social media.

Muire says "I want rural actors to feel that they don't need to always travel to the city to be involved. It's the same topics that affect everyone wherever you are – chasing payments, help with agents – and we want all our members to know that we are here to help. And we want to bring new members in too."

Reaching out to new people was the thinking behind Northern Ireland's annual Equity Fest, which was the brainchild of the Foyle & West branch. The event is a one-stop-shop for

professional and aspiring performing artists, designed to introduce them to Equity. This summer's event will take place on 22 June in Ardhowen in Enniskillen, with previous events taking place in Portrush and Derry.

Wherever the branch is though, one thing remains the same: "The best way to engage people is old fashioned organic conversations", says Muire. "I'm always very proud of talking to people about the union, plus I'm from Derry and Derry people do like a yarn!"

Words by Zoe Ellsmore

"We want people to know that there is a community here"

CYMRU



Hafnach (Credyd - Vox Pictures/S4C)

Equity yn dod i gytundeb mewn egwyddor ar TAC – gyda nifer o fanteision newydd

Mae Equity wedi dod i gytundeb mewn egwyddor gyda Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymru (TAC) ar ddiweddariad mawr i Gytundeb Teledu TAC/Equity sy'n cwmpasu artistiaid sy'n gweithio ar gomisiynau ar gyfer S4C. Mae'r cytundeb diwygiedig yn cynrychioli'r diweddariad strwythurol mwyaf arwyddocaol ers blyneddau lawer ac yn ystyried sut mae teledu'n cael ei gynhyrchu, ei ddsbarthu a'i wyllo heddiw.

"Mae'r cytundeb yn adlewyrchu'r newidiadau sylweddol yn y ffordd y caiff teledu ei wneud a'i wyllo," eglura Swyddog Cenedlaethol Equity dros Gymru, Simon Curtis. "Ynghyd â'r cynnydd cyflog hwn, mae'n cryfhau'r amddiffyniadau ar gyfer perfformwyr ac yn moderneiddio amodau gwaith."

Mae aelodau eisoes wedi gweld y budd cyntaf o'r trafodaethau, gyda chynnydd o 7.5% yn y ffioedd lleiaf wedi'i weithredu ym mis Gorffennaf 2025.

Yn ogystal â hyn, mae'r cytundeb yn cyflwyno gwelliannau i arferion gwaith o ddydd i ddydd, gan gynnwys darpariaethau cliriach ynghylch gwallt, colur a phrofi gwisgoedd, yn ogystal ag amddiffyniadau cryfach o ran urddas, parch ac amgylcheddau gwaith diogel. Mae darpariaethau agosatrwydd wedi'u diweddarau yn atgyferthu rôl cydlynwyr agosatrwydd ac yn gwella'r diogelwch ar gyfer perfformwyr sy'n gweithio mewn golygfeydd sy'n cynnwys noethni neu ryw wedi'i efelychu.

Mae'r cytundeb diwygiedig hefyd yn cydnabod sut mae cynhyrchu teledu wedi esblygu. Mae atodiad newydd sy'n cwmpasu coreograffwyr a chyfarwyddwyr symudiad yn cydnabod y rolau hyn yn ffurfiol o fewn y cytundeb, tra bod Atodiad Cynaliadwyedd yn cyd-fynd â Rider Gwyrdd Equity ac ymgyrch ehangach Equity dros Fargen Werdd Newydd, gan gynnwys cydnabyddiaeth o rolau cynaliadwyedd o fewn cynrychiadau.

Mae amddiffyniadau newydd sy'n ymwneud â deallusrwydd artifisial yn sicrhau na ellir ail-greu na hailddefnyddio delweddau, lleisiau na pherfformiadau perfformwyr yn ddigidol heb ganiatâd priodol a mesurau diogelu cytundebol.

Gan ymateb i arferion gwyllo sy'n newid, mae'r cytundeb hefyd yn cyflwyno darpariaethau prawf ar gyfer argaeledd digidol estynedig rhaglenni ar lwyfannau fel BBC iPlayer, S4C Clic a sianeli YouTube awdurdodedig, ochr yn ochr â fframwaith ar gyfer rhaglenni Defnydd Digidol yn Unig a gomisiynir yn benodol ar gyfer eu rhyddhau ar-lein. "Mae'r rhain yn ceisio sicrhau bod artistiaid yn cael cyfran deg o werth rhaglenni wrth i gynulleidfaoedd wyllo fwyfwy ar-lein," meddai Simon Curtis.

Ar adeg ysgrifennu, mae'r cytundeb diwygiedig yn cael ei baratoi ar gyfer cyfarfodydd ymgynghorol gydag aelodau cyn pleidlais ffurfiol ar y telerau newydd.

Geiriau gan Sian Jones

WALES



Hafiach (Credit - Vox Pictures/S4C)

Equity reaches agreement in principle on TAC – with lots of new benefits

Equity has reached agreement in principle with Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymru (TAC) on a major update to the TAC/Equity Television Agreement covering artists working on commissions for S4C. The revised agreement represents the most significant structural update in many years and takes into account how television is produced, distributed and viewed today.

“The agreement reflects the huge changes in how television is made and watched,” explains Equity’s National Official for Wales, Simon Curtis. “Alongside this pay rise, it strengthens protections for performers and modernises working conditions.”

Members have already seen the first gain from the negotiations, with a 7.5% increase in minimum fees implemented in July 2025.

Alongside this, the agreement introduces improvements to day-to-day working practices, including clearer provisions around hair, make-up and costume fittings, as well as stronger protections around dignity, respect and safe working environments. Updated intimacy provisions reinforce the role of intimacy coordinators and improve safeguards for performers working in scenes involving nudity or simulated sex.

The revised agreement also recognises how television production has evolved. A new appendix covering choreographers and movement directors formally recognises these roles within the agreement, while a Sustainability

Appendix aligns the agreement with Equity’s Green Rider and the wider Equity for a Green New Deal campaign, including recognition of sustainability roles within production.

New protections relating to artificial intelligence ensure that performers’ images, voices and performances cannot be digitally recreated or reused without proper consent and contractual safeguards.

Responding to changing viewing habits, the agreement also introduces trial provisions for extended digital availability of programmes on platforms such as BBC iPlayer, S4C Clic and authorised YouTube channels, alongside a framework for Digital Use Only programmes commissioned specifically for online release. “These look to guarantee that artists share fairly in the value of programmes as audiences increasingly watch online,” says Simon Curtis.

At the time of writing, the revised agreement is being prepared for consultative meetings with members ahead of a formal ballot on the new terms.

Words by Sian Jones

Exeunt

Here follows a list of Equity members who have died and been reported as such to the union since the publication of the last magazine. This list serves as a notice to members, and organisations within our industries and beyond, that Equity has been informed of the death of the members listed below

Shirley Abicair
 Joyce Allan
 David Andrews
 June Anstee
 John Baddeley
 Elizabeth Bainbridge
 Joy Banks
 Lynne Reid Banks
 Dave Baron
 Stanley Baxter
 Simon Bennett
 Sheila Bernette
 Alvin Blossom
 John Bouchier
 Jon Cartwright
 Tony Caunter
 Robin Chadwick
 Derek Chafer
 Maria Charles
 Mr Chucklefoot
 Brian Tipping-Codd
 Kenneth Charles Cope
 Jean Couchman
 Doreen Croft
 Shelli Dawn
 Marian Diamond
 Robert Donald
 Donald Douglas
 Maureen Dow
 Keith Ducklin
 Isabel Duncan
 Frank Dunne
 Richard Edmonds
 Liz Edney
 Robin Harvey Edwards
 Hazel Ellerby
 Christopher Alexander-Elliott
 Tony Everest
 Dean Leon Finlan
 Suzanne Flowers
 Chuck Foley
 Patricia Ford
 David Garfield
 Weston Gavin
 Tom Goodall

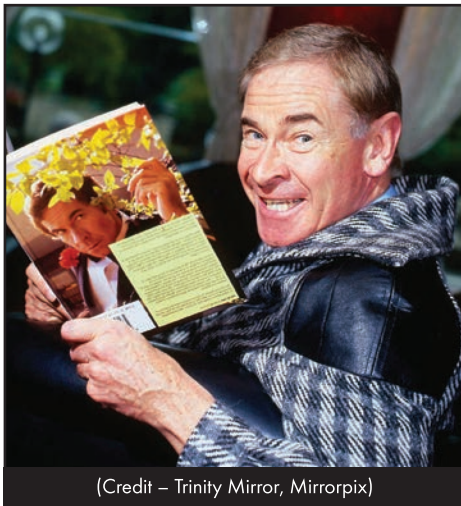
Martin Gordon
 Sally Grace
 Kim Grant
 Simon Gregory
 Frank Grimes
 Sophie Miranda Hamilton
 Caroline Harris
 Elaine Harry
 Giles Havergal
 Nicola Henry
 Valerie Hill
 Russell Edwin Hills
 Trevor Holroyd
 Freda Hurley
 Andrew Jarvis
 Bob Harding-Jones
 Jayasree Roy-Kabir
 Russell Kemmish
 Gerry Kersey
 Fay Lenore
 Christina Leopold
 Judy Loe
 Katherine Loeppky
 Freda Lowe
 Ian Lowe
 Clunie Mackenzie
 Oengus Macnamara
 Duncan A MacVicar
 Glenn Maloney
 Phillip Manikum
 Andreas Markos
 June Marlow
 Derek Martin
 Peter Massocchi
 Greg McCarthy
 David McNicholas
 Peter McVea
 Stanley Meadows
 Jill Melford
 Chris Melville
 Glen Michael
 Noel Millsopp
 Dave Monk
 Lee Montague
 David Moore
 Kenton Moore
 Angela Morant
 Andrew Neil
 Arthur Nightingale
 Annie Norledge
 Susanna Northern
 Kevin O'Brien
 Robert Ormesher
 David Panther
 Alan Partington
 Michael Patrick
 Gordon Paul
 Tony Peers

Antonia Pemberton
 Veronica Pettifer
 Ned Potts
 Ann Queensberry
 Maureen Quigley
 Soraya Rafat
 Julie Rayne
 Erich Redman
 Graham Rees
 Christian Roberts
 Anne Robson
 Rudolf Rombach
 Patricia Routledge
 Cynthia H Rover
 Tony Ryan
 Dolby Sinton
 David Sandford
 Ian Saxon
 Prunella Scales
 Jean Scott
 Monty Scott
 Paul Seed
 Nabil Shaban
 Rita Shaer
 Howard Shepherd
 Jack Shepherd
 Tony Van Silva
 Kayleigh Smith
 Patti Quinsee Sommers
 Audrey Squires
 Julie Stevens
 Julia Sutton
 John Swindells
 Margaret Tabor
 Lilian Tavendale
 Damien Thomas
 Alison Tighe
 Frank Topping
 Emma Trevor
 Burnell Tucker
 John Turner
 David Vickers
 Elizabeth Villiers
 Luke Virgo
 Laurie Webb
 Don Weinstein
 Vin Welch
 William Wilde
 Noel Williams
 Martin Wimbush
 John Tyson Winfield
 John Woodvine
 Barbara Young

In some cases it may be possible that another member may have used the same or a similar name subsequent to the passing of the above members

Obituaries

Remembering members who have served on Equity's governing Council



(Credit – Trinity Mirror, Mirrorpix)

Stanley Baxter

Words by Sarah Woolley

A true master of his craft, Stanley Baxter was a titan of variety television from the 1960s to the 1980s and one of our finest pantomime dames. Born and raised in Glasgow, he was a household name in Scotland long before his award-winning extravaganzas (including *The Stanley Baxter Picture Show*) won viewers of more than 20 million.

His dance numbers could rival those of an MGM production, but it was Baxter's genius for character that won his audience. Whether he was impersonating the Queen, a nun, or Joan Bakewell, his creations felt like someone people knew. The hallmark of an entertainer, who told the press in 1977 that he wasn't a comedian: "I'm a character actor who makes people laugh."

Ever the perfectionist, entertainment was a serious business for Baxter. So was its workforce. He was Vice-Chair of Equity's Scottish Committee from 1954-1955 when the union campaigned for the first Scottish-based television studio. He was also passionate about improving the working lives of pantomime performers, and in 1957 was behind a motion passed by the Scottish Committee calling on Council to prioritise a drastic revision of the pantomime chorus contract, particularly regarding minimum salary, understudy payments and rehearsal pay. He was elected to Equity Council in 1961.

Baxter also secured more public investment in pantomime from councils, an ariform he championed as "the first piece of theatre many children see".

By 1990, Baxter had largely retired with three BAFTA's and received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the British Comedy Awards in 1997. When he was recognised for his outstanding contribution to film and TV at the 2020 BAFTA Scotland Awards, Billy Connolly said "Nobody deserves it more... You're a marvel and you've got beautiful legs."

His friends remember a deeply kind and thoughtful gentleman.

Stanley Baxter served on Equity's Council 1961-1963

Natasha Gerson



Remembered by Kate McCall

I first met Natasha when she was six and my son Nick was seven, so I knew her for over 60 years. During her youth, she trained to be a ballet dancer and her first professional job was with Scottish Ballet. Over the years, we saw more of each other – Natasha and Nick both did extra work for television. It was also clear that Natasha had inherited her father Jack Gerson's gift for writing, and she wrote everything from audiobooks, Talking Books for blind people, and plays.

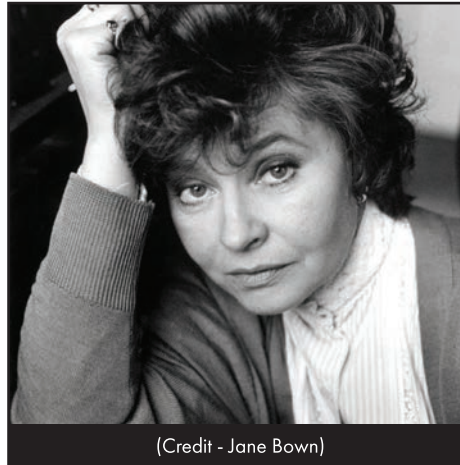
Meanwhile, she was asking me more about my involvement with Equity and became active herself, working tirelessly in union meetings and on many campaigns. These include campaigning for gender equality in the industry, particularly for older actresses; the referendum to change the 'Annual General Meeting' to an 'Annual Representative Conference', with the decisions of the latter being binding on the Council and its delegates representative of Equity's membership; and she was involved in setting up BECS (British Equity Collecting Society) in 1998, for the collection of statutory payments for audiovisual artists when their work is shown. Natasha was Vice Chair of BECS for the last few years of her life.

She also held positions on Equity's Glasgow Branch; the Scottish Committee; and Council, having been elected in 1994 as Ballet Councillor, which became Dance Councillor in 2000. In 2013, she took on the role of Vice-President for one year and has also served on the General Council of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the federation of trade unions in Scotland.

Since approximately 2002 she had been my house guest after my husband died and we shared work, holidays, and various scrapes and adventures. It has been a great pleasure to live with someone who agrees with you over such important things as politics, poetry, cats, and Moët & Chandon.

Natasha Gerson served on Equity's Council 1994-2014 and as Vice-President 2013-2014.

Prunella Scales



(Credit - Jane Bown)

Remembered by Samuel West

Her mother had given up the stage to marry; reasoning that no theatre producer would employ someone with the surname Illingworth because of the number of lightbulbs involved, she took her mother's maiden name and had a go herself.

Ma was the last surviving cast member of David Lean's 1953 film *Hobson's Choice*. *Marriage Lines* with Richard Briers made her a TV star, and then came *Fawlty Towers*. Always grateful for its success because it meant people coming to see what she did next, she rebelled only slightly at the label 'comic actress', because she said it meant she didn't get offered enough of her real love, classical theatre.

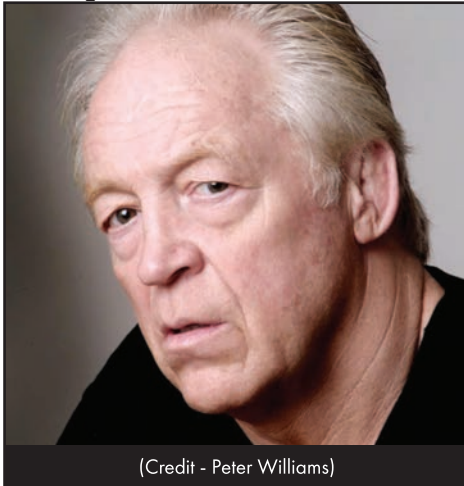
While on Broadway in 1955 she studied with Uta Hagen. It left her with a lifelong love of Stanislavskian principles. She never gave us a type and always needed a backstory. *Sybil* was the barmaid who fancied Basil in his Korean war demob suit "because he was so posh".

She married Timothy West in 1963, and died a day after what would have been their 62nd wedding anniversary, the first she had spent without him. Their wine-fuelled wanderings across ten series of *Great Canal Journeys* introduced millions to the delights of the waterways, and the challenges of dementia. 'I don't always know where I'm going, but I always enjoy getting there': her motto became a mantra. Though my parents were never happier than when working together, Pru's secret to the perfect relationship ('prolonged and frequent separation'), was hugely helped by nine years of embarrassing Jane Horrocks in the Tesco adverts, which subsidised Tim's work in touring theatre.

Pru was a lifelong socialist and an active member of Arts for Labour. She supported CND, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Anti-Nazi League and performed for the women of striking miners' communities. "Sometimes it's useful," she used to say, "to stand up and show that you are taking action, and not just acting."

Prunella Scales served on Equity's Council 1977-79.

Tony Van Silva



(Credit - Peter Williams)

Remembered by Jon Auty

Tony Van Silva was far more than a stuntman; he was an essential presence on every film and television set he joined. From his wrestling background to his unparalleled commitment to 'grappling', Tony always gave 150%, regardless of the situation.

Beyond his professional ability, Tony had a unique gift for inclusion. He looked after everyone, from seasoned colleagues to new team members. Stunt coordinators often told newcomers to "watch Tony" during large-scale sequences because he acted as a natural chaperone, ensuring everyone reached their mark safely.

We will all remember his incredible sense of humour. He could send an entire crowd into fits of laughter with just a look. He was also a man of great kindness, always the first to reach out to anyone who was ill or injured. I personally valued his support after an accident six years ago and was glad to return the favour during his own health struggles.

I had the privilege of working with Tony at BBC Belfast in 2013 during a stunt masterclass. Alongside stunt coordinator Rocky Taylor, Tony demonstrated fight routines with absolute precision. A particular highlight was a spectacular partial body burn we filmed in the BBC courtyard. Despite challenging wind conditions, Tony executed a twelve-second burn that was truly breathtaking. He was ecstatic with the result, and it remains one of his finest professional moments.

Tony was a remarkable man who will be deeply missed by everyone he encountered – from film crews to the canteen staff and parking attendants. Anyone who knew him is better for it.

Our thoughts are with his family and friends. Tony, thank you for everything.

Tony Van Silva served on Equity's Council 1996-98.

John Woodvine



Remembered by Malcolm Sinclair

John was one of our best actors, had a great career, a long life, helped his fellows through Equity, both on Council and on campaigns... and was simply a marvellous man. I was lucky enough to know him and to have worked with him on the BBC's Sunday classic serial *The Prisoner of Zenda* over 40 years ago.

John was born in Tyne Dock, then Co Durham, did National Service in the RAF, got a grant assisted place at RADA and graduated in 1953. He joined the Old Vic and then worked for decades in rep theatre all the way to the RSC and the National. He did masses of TV. In *Softly, Softly* he played a policeman. Alan Plater, who wrote the episode, said "I knew John's reputation as one of the finest classical actors of our time, and it came as a surprise in rehearsals when he said, 'Shall I play him as a Geordie?' John was the first actor I had met who owned up to being from Tyneside."

I remember him as one of Trevor Nunn's favourite actors: his magnificent Banquo with McKellen and Dench, and his definitive Ralph Nickelby in Nunn's epic *Nicholas Nickelby*.

He was a seasoned campaigner even before he became an Equity Councillor. In 1986 he supported the cultural boycott of South Africa, in 1997 he co-signed another letter for Fair Pay in the Theatre after the abolition of the closed shop. In 1998 he joined Equity's protest against the imposition of VAT on tickets, reading from the stage when in Newcastle with the RSC.

John married Hazel Wright in 1960 and they had two daughters: Emma, a voice coach, and Mary, an actor. They divorced in 1985 and he married Lynn Farleigh in 1996. He's survived by Lynn, Emma, Mary and four grandchildren: Bella, Rosa, Isaac and Morgan.

It truly can be said that he did the state some service.

John Woodvine served on Equity's Council 1998-2000.

GETTING INVOLVED:

A VARIETY MEMBERS SPECIAL

If you're a variety performer – an artist who has your own act and tends to work by performing at different gigs – there are many ways for you to get involved in the union. The best people to tell you about this are of course the Equity members already active in their professional variety network, local branch or industrial committee – read on to find out what they're doing and how you can get involved too. You can find contact details for each of these groups overleaf in the 'Getting Involved' section on pages 44-45. Or visit tinyurl.com/equity-variety-and-circus-hub for more information on variety networks and the Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee, or tinyurl.com/equity-branches to find your local branch.

Tink, Circus Network



(Credit - Matt Hennem)

“The Circus Network is run by performers”

“In the last few years, there's been a huge influx of new circus performers, which is wonderful, but sadly a lot of newcomers aren't learning how the industry works and how to stay safe in the air.

“I remember once ringing a venue and asking, ‘Could you let me know when your rigging points were last safety checked?’ and word for word they said, ‘Oh don't worry about that, we haven't bothered checking it. You guys don't weigh much, do you?’ That is insane, but inexperienced performers won't always push for those answers and I've heard horrible stories about dangerous near misses with safety.

“This is why we at the Circus Network created the guide ‘Fit to Fly: A Performer's Checklist’ which is everything you need to know, for example: What is a risk assessment? What is a technical rider? How do I check rigging points? Stuff you don't always learn in a pop-up class.

“Also the Circus Network is run by performers so it's other people with ‘circus brain’ who can answer any questions if you need help. As an experienced performer, I can't even tell you the amount of times I've called some amazing riggers to ask, “Can I hang off this?” We're all the same and it's a real ‘us and us’ space, not ‘us and them.’”

Barbara Fernandez, Comedians' Network



(Credit - Gary Manhine)

“There needs to be fair pay for artists”

“When I joined the network I wanted to try and do what I could. There needs to be fair pay for artists because the rates haven't been increasing in god knows how long, and we need more equality and less harassment in the workplace. I don't see any of those two things changing anytime soon and I'm glad I'm not doing this as a younger woman.

“Equity membership is well worth it because the union has your back. There was a guy recently who posted a video of me performing without my consent. It was on Tiktok and YouTube. I asked both of those platforms to take it down but neither one did, even though it's my personal copyright. But Equity's Variety Official Michael Day was able to send an email to him on my behalf with a cease and desist.

“It's just nice to have an intermediary support you in a situation where the venue might not care, the promoter might not care, or the social media platform might not care. But with Equity, you have a union that does care. And it's all for the same price as you would get insurance.”

Liz Weir, Storytellers' Network



(Credit - Mark Hamill)

“Nothing builds community like sharing stories”

“Storytelling is the most democratic of art forms. It crosses all sorts of potential barriers of age, ability, gender, nationality, you name it: nothing builds community like sharing stories.

“I have spent my life in Northern Ireland through the worst of the Troubles and in terms of peace building, nothing does it better than getting people to talk to each other. So it's wonderful that there is a network and a category for storytelling at Equity.

“I'm all for fair pay for fair work and the Storytellers' Network created a rates card in 2024, which was tricky but we spoke to people and did our research on the issue.

“I also think creating a Policy on Cultural Appropriation was really one of the best things we've done since we started. A lot of what we talk about is ethics – what stories do we tell and have we the right to tell those stories? And I believe in acknowledging sources and crediting the people that we've heard stories from. We thrashed out a pretty good document with the support of Equity.”

Le Fil, Drag Network



(Credit - Scallywag Fox)

“Drag is a family and we’re all siblings in solidarity”

“I’m really proud to be a part of the Drag Network. Too often drag is seen as a part-time hobby, but the network has created guides that help performers and promoters understand that drag is an actual profession that deserves professional rewards, insurance, and legal protection.

“We’re also laying the groundwork to discuss rate cards and develop outreach for younger performers because a lot of bars and clubs still don’t pay fairly or offer contracts.

“Safety is another big issue because nightlife audiences can get quite rowdy, but as a network we can collate research from the community and go back to venues and say, ‘This is what we need’.

“I think some people think Equity is only for established professionals but you should join us as soon as you start working. The network is for all types of drag – not just the queens – and whether you’re going into the big contracts or doing small gigs, Equity and the Drag Network is there for you because drag is a family and we’re all siblings in solidarity.

“Over time, the network will blossom into really big things and we can achieve so much together. Join the family!”

“It’s really important that puppeteers are recognised as artists”

“What’s really exciting about puppetry at the moment is that it’s become highly mainstream. We see it in blockbuster films, Broadway, and the West End, and it’s become a hugely, reinvigorated art form. That’s glorious to see, but it’s really important that puppeteers are recognised as artists in their own right, not just people holding props. A puppet tells a huge amount of story, there’s real emotional intelligence conveyed through the way it is physically manipulated.

“In the past, across theatre, film, and TV, puppeteers and creature performers were sometimes seen as crew, it was often a case of ‘stand there, wiggle it, move on’. We’ve come a long way since then and there’s a greater understanding of the time that puppetry takes.

“At the Puppeteers’ Network we are pushing for even stronger terms and conditions around pay and safety, and we’ve also proposed changes to theatre agreements that would mean a puppetry captain is treated the same as a dance or fight captain.

“Being involved in those negotiations allows us to have a voice and be seen as artists. We all get more out of the union if we engage with it proactively. We’re the people that do the jobs and we should be shaping how it’s done.”

Matthew Forbes, Puppeteers’ Network



(Credit - Pamela Raith)

Lauren Carnall, Wrestlers' Network



(Credit - Rob Brazier)

“There’s so much more that wrestlers could do”

“I’ve been a referee for about nine years now and I love it, but wrestling is an unregulated industry and unless you’re signed by one of the big companies you usually have another job as well.

“Like any entertainment industry, pay isn’t necessarily talked about and that’s why it was so important that the Pay Audit Survey by our Wrestlers’ Network went out to everyone, not just members. It brought so much to light and at a recent network meeting we talked about the possibility of a membership that is open to people who are still in training because it’s just as important for them to be a part of Equity. The insurance would cover them in training, but they’d also get the support they might need because there’s no kind of regulation around training schools.

“There’s so much more that we could do and I really would like more people to come into the Wrestlers’ Network, whether they’re wrestlers, ring announcers, commentary, or referees. Just come to one of the meetings. They’re open to non-Equity members and they can be online. Even if you don’t have a lot to say they’re a great way to hear the conversation we’re having.”

“The best part about Equity is having your voice heard”

“What inspired me to become Chair of the Variety, Circus & Entertainers Committee (VCEC) was noticing that the whole committee is full of these new, brilliant people. When I started on the VCEC everything was very ingrained, but today we’ve got all this energy.

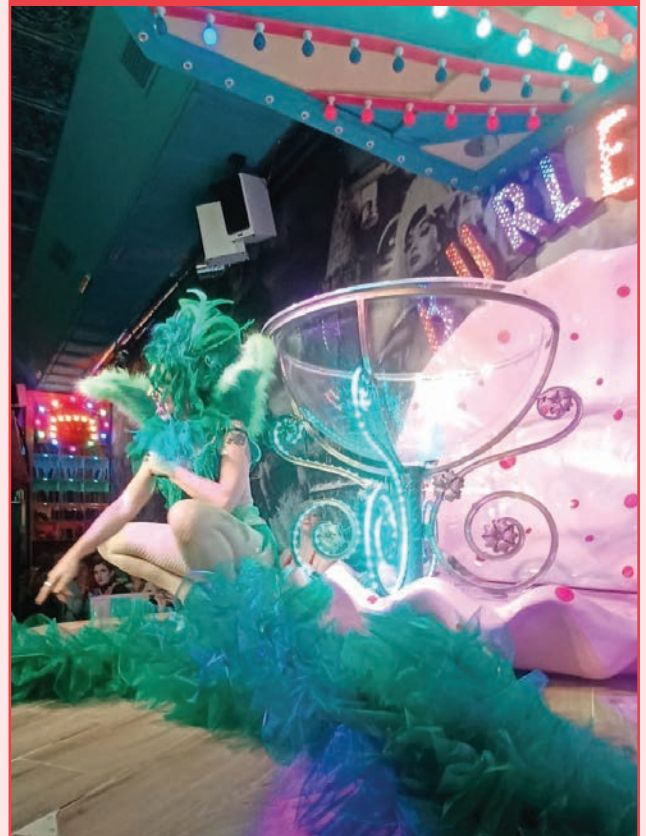
“A big thing for us recently has been lobbying and engaging with the Greater London Authority on its London Nightlife Taskforce. When it launched there was no representation of the nightlife workforce, it was just bosses, but we told them they have to involve performers and hear our stories, and that’s grown into a lot of work.

“In answer to our London Nightlife Survey, someone even suggested charging an extra fee to venues who don’t have security, ‘to compensate for potential sexual assault (which happens far too often)’. That’s shocking, but we have to share those stories and show what we’re up against.

“You can always contact the VCEC with your own experiences or ask about getting involved, because the best part about Equity is having your voice heard, especially as a woman. It’s really helped me come out of myself and not be frightened. I’m just wishing that we carry on as this strong unit, but it does depend on the force of the membership.”

Interviews by Sarah Woolley

Rachel Darq, Chair of the VCEC



Getting Involved

You are the union: together, we can implement real change in the industry. There are many ways you can stand alongside your fellow members and get involved in Equity's work, from joining your local branch to becoming active within a network.

BRANCHES

Wherever you are based in the UK, there will be a branch: a community of Equity members who meet as a group to discuss the issues facing the industry, both locally and nationally. Branches hold regular meetings, organise, and campaign.

EAST AND SOUTH EAST

Brighton & Sussex

brighton&sussex@equitybranches.org.uk

East Anglia

eastanglia@equitybranches.org.uk

Essex & Hertfordshire

essex&hertfordshire@equitybranches.org.uk

Kent

kent@equitybranches.org.uk

Oxford & Buckinghamshire

oxford&buckinghamshire@equitybranches.org.uk

Surrey & Berkshire

surreyandberkshire@equitybranches.org.uk

LONDON

London North

londonnorth@equitybranches.org.uk

London South

londonsouth@equitybranches.org.uk

MIDLANDS

Birmingham & West Midlands

birmingham&westmidlands@equitybranches.org.uk

Black Country & Staffordshire

blackcountryandstaffordshire@equitybranches.org.uk

East Midlands

eastmidlands@equitybranches.org.uk

NORTH EAST, YORKSHIRE & HUMBERSIDE

East Yorkshire & Humber

eastyorkshire&humber@equitybranches.org.uk

North & West Yorkshire

north&westyorkshire@equitybranches.org.uk

North East England

northeastengland@equitybranches.org.uk

South Yorkshire

southyorkshire@equitybranches.org.uk

NORTHERN IRELAND

Foyle & West

foyleandwest@equitybranches.org.uk

Lagan & East

laganandeast@equitybranches.org.uk

NORTH WEST

Greater Manchester

greatermanchester@equitybranches.org.uk

Lancashire & Cumbria

lancashire&cumbria@equitybranches.org.uk

Merseyside & Cheshire

merseyside&cheshire@equitybranches.org.uk

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh & East of Scotland

edinburgh&eastofscotland@equitybranches.org.uk

Glasgow & West of Scotland

glasgow&westofscotland@equitybranches.org.uk

SOUTH WEST

Bristol & West of England

bristol&westofengland@equitybranches.org.uk

Devon, Cornwall & Wessex

devoncornwall&wessex@equitybranches.org.uk

WALES

North Wales

northwales@equitybranches.org.uk

South Wales

southwales@equitybranches.org.uk

NETWORKS

Networks are a space for members with a shared interest to meet and discuss issues affecting their area, from choreographers to storytellers. Through these discussions, problems are identified and solutions offered, which the union can then implement.

Actor-Musician Network

hplant@equity.org.uk

Audiobooks Network

audio@equity.org.uk

Choreographers and Movement Directors Network

moceallaigh@equity.org.uk

Circus Network

circus@equity.org.uk

Class Network

classnetwork@equity.org.uk

Comedians' Network

comedians@equity.org.uk

Commercials Network

commercials@equity.org.uk

Drag Network

drag@equity.org.uk

Film & TV Network

productions@equity.org.uk

Green New Deal Network

equity4gnd@gmail.com

Gypsy, Roma & Traveller Network

imanborde@equity.org.uk

Immersive Network

nkeegan@equity.org.uk

Intimacy Directors Network

intimacydirectors@equity.org.uk

LGBT+ Network

lbudd@equity.org.uk

Liturgical Singers' Network

singers@equity.org.uk

Models' Network

models@equity.org.uk

Puppeteers' Network

puppeteers@equity.org.uk

Storytellers' Network

mday@equity.org.uk

Supporting Artists' Network

supportingartistsnetwork@equity.org.uk

Video Games Network

games@equity.org.uk

Rhwydwaith Gymraeg / Welsh Language Network

djones@equity.org.uk

Wrestlers' Network

wrestling@equity.org.uk

COMMITTEES

Members are elected to Equity committees to represent their fellow professionals and to improve their working conditions. Different committees cover the interests of different groups. Committees drive union policy, conduct negotiations and ensure that the needs of all Equity members are heard.

INDUSTRIAL**Audio Committee**

audio@equity.org.uk

Dance Committee

dance@equity.org.uk

Directors and Designers Committee

directorsanddesigners@equity.org.uk

Screen & New Media Actors Committee

screen@equity.org.uk

Singers Committee

singers@equity.org.uk

Stage Actors Committee

stage@equity.org.uk

Stage Management Committee

stagemanagement@equity.org.uk

Variety, Circus & Entertainers Committee

vcec@equity.org.uk

EQUALITIES**LGBT+ Committee**

lgbtcommittee@equity.org.uk

Race Equality Committee

recommittee@equity.org.uk

Women's Committee

womenscommittee@equity.org.uk

Young Members Committee

ymcom@equity.org.uk

NATIONAL**Northern Ireland National Committee**

nicommittee@equity.org.uk

Scottish National Committee

scottishcommittee@equity.org.uk

Welsh National Committee

pwyllgorcymru@equity.org.uk / welshcommittee@equity.org.uk

DEPUTIES**Continuing Drama Deputies**

nbarker@equity.org.uk

Opera Houses Deputies

lstable@equity.org.uk

Standing Dance Companies Deputies

lstable@equity.org.uk

Student Deputies Committee

students@equity.org.uk

West End Deputies Committee

hplant@equity.org.uk

INTERNATIONAL**International Solidarity Committee**

tpeters@equity.org.uk

Information on this page is correct at the time of printing. For the most up to date contact details, please visit the Equity website at equity.org.uk.

Do we have your up-to-date contact details? If not, you can amend them by logging into the members area of our website and going to the 'personal details' tab in your account. Alternatively, if you are having difficulties logging in, you can send an email to the Membership Team at membership@equity.org.uk

(Credit - Will Colebourne)



Directory

General Enquiries

www.equity.org.uk/contact-us
info@equity.org.uk
020 7379 6000

Membership Enquiries

membership@equity.org.uk
020 7670 0207

Social Security & Tax Advice Helpline

helpline@equity.org.uk
020 7670 0223
(Monday & Thursday 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm)

Equity Distribution Services

distributions@equity.org.uk
020 7670 0206

OFFICES

Head office, London: Equity, Guild House, Upper St Martin's Lane, London WC2H 9EG

Birmingham: Equity, Unit F3, The Arch, 48-52 Floodgate Street, Birmingham B5 5SL

Manchester: Equity, 5th Floor Suite 3, Sevendale House, 7 Dale St, Manchester, M1 1JA

Cardiff: Equity, Transport House, 1 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9HA

Bristol: Unit 2.6, Second Floor, Temple Studios, Temple Gate, Bristol BS1 6QA

Glasgow: Equity, Cambridge House, 8 Cambridge Street, Glasgow G2 3DZ

Belfast: Equity, SIPTU 3 Antrim Road, Belfast BT15 2BE

OFFICERS AND STAFF LIST

To email a member of staff or Equity Officer, type the initial of their first name followed by their full surname with no spaces and add @equity.org.uk. For example, the email address for 'May Whitty' would be 'mwhitty@equity.org.uk'.

Officers

Lynda Rooke, President
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Jackie Clune, Vice-President
Nick Fletcher, Vice-President
David John, Honorary Treasurer

Secretariat

Paul W Fleming, General Secretary
Louise McMullan, Deputy General Secretary
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NATIONS & REGIONS

Louise McMullan, Deputy General Secretary
Alice Adams Lemon, Northern Ireland Official (based in Belfast office)
Marlene Curran, Scotland Official (based in Glasgow office)
Simon Curtis, Wales Official (based in Cardiff office)
Dominic Bascombe, North East Official (based in Manchester office)
Iain Croker, East and South East Official (based in London office)
Kye Dudd, South West Official (based in Bristol office)
Gareth Forest, Campaigns & Education Officer (based in Manchester office)
Karen Lockney, North West Official (based in Manchester office)
Ian Manborde, Midlands Official (based in Birmingham office)

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Natalie Barker, BBC & ITV Official
Liam Budd, Streaming Official
Amy Dawson, Film Official

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Charlotte Bence, Head of Greenfield Organising
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Karrim Jalali, Subsidised Theatre Official
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Fraser Amos, Students Officer

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 Laura Messenger, Senior Officer, Production Registration & Royalties Compliance
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 Victoria Naughton, Social Security & Tax Officer

POLICY & COMMUNICATIONS

Sian Jones, Assistant General Secretary
 Tom Peters, Head of Policy & Public Affairs
 Anna Shea, Policy Officer, Industry
 Stephanie Soh, Press & PR Officer

MAGAZINE

Stephanie Soh, Editor

Tom Greenwood, Design

Jeremy Littlestone, Print Management

Precision Colour Printing Ltd, Printer

Contributors: Elena Cresci, Niall Comer, Zoe Ellsmore, Sam Foster, Graham Hamilton, Zoe Hodges, Dugald Johnson, Damien Jones, Sian Jones, Gail McAnena, Nusrat Raahi, Jean Rogers, Nicole Vassell, Sarah Woolley.



Equity members attend the Together Alliance march against the far right on 28 March 2026 (Credit - Will Colebourne)



North East workers demonstrating during the General Strike of 1926 (Credit - Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix)

“NOT A PENNY OFF THE
PAY
NOT A MINUTE ON THE
DAY”

The slogan popularised by the miners’ unions during Britain’s last general strike, 100 years ago.

The General Strike of 1926 began on 3 May and lasted for nine days, with 1.7 million workers stopping work in solidarity with coal miners who were threatened with wage cuts and longer working hours.

Although the strike did not achieve its immediate aims, it was a defining moment for the labour movement, bringing workers together in a monumental display of collective action to fight for their rights.

WHY JOIN A UNION?

Join a union because of who we are, together;
not just because of what you do.

Because together, our voice is loud when we make demands of bosses,
- whether in theatre, film, TV, audio,
new media, dance or variety.

Because together we will build an industry where your class, your gender,
your sexuality, your race, your disability does not limit what you can do.

Because together your lived experience becomes part of our voice too.

Because together we can fund insurances, legal support
and welfare advice - to enable artists to work.

Because together we educate each other and the industry.

Because together we put the future of our industry's workforce - freelance
and employed - at the heart of its future.

Because together politicians of every party have to hear us - and give our
industry, its workforce, and all working people the protection we deserve.

Because together we defend freedom of expression for artists
in the United Kingdom, and around the globe.

Because together we create the global society working people
and artists need to flourish - defend the environment,
fight for new housing, better transport, freedom to move.

Because together you are not alone. We are over 50,000 members,
and part of a global movement of millions, across the UK and the globe.

Together, and only together, can we say:

To all artists: good work
To all workers: good art
To all people: Equity

