

Equity Conference Birmingham Town Hall 18th-20th May 2024

Report by Dee Mardi, Chair of Equity Essex and Herts Branch.

This was an amazing and enjoyable conference! Well organised and slick- not least because pretty much all we needed to know what was happening was in the well laid and thought-out comprehensive agenda/guide and it was chaired brilliantly to time by President Lynda Rooke. Archaic conference jargon had been voted out with the new rule book so those who had or had not attended conference before were quickly able to get to grips with the processes.

Although not everyone liked being habitually called “comrades”, for sure this was a united group of pro-Arts and anti-Arts cuts activists in a convivial atmosphere, supporting each other’s overlapping difficulties. There was clear and strong leadership from the front by the General Secretary and union staff, and the President and Councillors, all reinforcing the motto: To all artists: good work, To all workers: good art. To all people: Equity.

The conference typically was over a weekend, starting at 2pm Saturday and ending 1pm Monday. After the **Conference Business Committee** report, the names of the many Equity members who’d passed away during the year were respectfully read out before conference gave them their final and rapturous standing ovation.

President Lynda Rooke gave a dynamic opening address. “We should never ever doubt our combined strength. We are 50,000 strong”, the 12th largest union in the UK. General election will be an opportunity to make a case for culture/arts. Her hard working for Equity has been making a mark and gaining much respect not just nationally but internationally.

In his Saturday speech introducing the 2023 annual report, Birmingham born **General Secretary Paul Fleming** was over the moon for being back in the best city in the world, and in the best union of course! A passionate and inspiration speaker, he mentioned 95% of scripted content is on Equity contracts, two thirds of Equity emails are opened, the campaign to remove Spotlight/casting directory fees, fighting for social security payments for members.

On Monday in bringing the conference to a close, he recapped on the outcomes of the voting and stated the unions 4 key values:

- 1 Accountability, mentioning this conference was the most attended and most women and diverse speakers
- 2 Inspirational, mentioning thanks to all
- 3 Collective in our approach, policies set by the reps/members, looked to ourselves rather than oppressive Council decisions. He described Conference as an impressive and energising event, gave thanks to all organisers and Lynda Rooke.
- 4 Industrial- thanks to everyone.

Assistant General Secretary Live Performance Adam Adnyana was delighted with the West End The Stand-Up for 17% Campaign compromise win of 16.7%, 5 day working week without loss of pay, improved accommodation/digs- minimum standards and code of conduct for hosts, 4 week advance pay for those touring. Increase rates in independent theatre. Producers responsible for accommodation. Mentioned pantos and opera similarly. ENO 94% turnout to strike. Management improved offer and all chorus kept their jobs. Spoke about singers and freelance opera work, variety engagement with union, cabaret-

looking into a new standardised cabaret contract. £115,000 was recovered for members who'd not been paid.

Honorary Treasurer David John delivered a well-received simplified financial report. Equity supported members through Covid with £1,250,000 of payments. £200,000 was used to increase union staff, their pensions, and Guild House refurb. (Details p 8, 9 of accounts report). Wants us to enquire of those standing for general election "Will you protect culture and the arts funding or not?" And, similarly about arts education. Only 8% of film and tv creatives are from working class backgrounds- the union is not happy about this. Said Equity has joined the Arts Apocalypse Campaign with other unions.

Assistant General Secretary for Finance and Operations Beccy Reese said was looking at internal processes. Reviewed types of membership as 21/22 different ones on different rates. Simplified now to 5 bands divisible by 12. 3 full, subsidised half rate, reduced rate, all with same benefits. Training and education rate includes other courses and on the job training. New insurance benefit to be launched. Tenders were put out and First Act is no longer insurer but new insurer will be Verlingue (rhymes with meringue).

Assistant General Secretary Recorded Media John Barclay was typically firing on all cylinders! He gave various thanks... Sister union SAG-AFTRA strike lasted 120 days and inspired us. Equity will be a revolution, take everything by storm, going beyond what S-A achieved. Recovered more than £1.5 million for the cast of The Terror. 1300 members signed up for the supporting artistes' network. Re those in the Games Industry refusing to engage with performers: "We're coming for you!" We are professional artistes and workers. "We want more!" We will take on A.I. in our interests. Commercials Industry does not consider our 50,000 members are part of it. There is money to be earned- Saatchi and Saatchi Agency's turnover is £57 million! In 2024, UK is a £37 billion industry, yet this £647 billion global advertising industry offers a £3 increase to wages! Equity has taken legal advice from several barristers who said we can set our own rates and the whole industry is being opened up to investigation. Equity will launch a Commercial Network to take back what belongs to us.

Deputy General Secretary Louise McMullen gave a slide presentation. A win for the new Equity website and commendation for the journal at the TUC. 255 appeals for help were handled by the union's social security tax team.

As there were no fellow stunt performers attending conference, our Essex and Herts Branch Member David Guinan-Brown asked me to second his/our branch motion. Rather than attend the Sunday Fringe Events, we discussed the stunt performers situation and I went away and wrote a Secunder's speech to deliver Monday morning. However, the **Fringe Events** set up in the Rep were: Being Creative in Campaigning; Being A Young Performer and Young Trade Unionist: A Global Conversation; Star Crossed: Representations of Classed Life Stories around British Film and TV Stars with Professor Michael Wayne and Dr Deirdre O'Neill; Both Not Half: How My Mixed Heritage Made A Trade Unionist; From Allyship to Action: Ensuring the Future of LGBT+ Rights; How Artists, Activists and Trade Unionists are Fighting for Justice in Columbia; Student Workshops: Building Union and Student Power in Education and Training Institutions; Why We Need Intimacy Coordinators; Boundaries,

Bargaining Tools and Basic Advice that Can Help all Creative Workers Move from Resilience to Resistance; Public Arts Funding: resisting Cuts and Influencing Policy; Equity- A Radical History; Reducing the Potential of Art Worker on Art Worker Exploitation; Let's Make Commercials AD Up Campaign; Fighting the 'Tax on Hope': Using Union Power to End Casting Guide Exploitation.

The 24 motions covered Equality and Inclusion, Internal Union Business, Live Performance, Variety, Equity Motion to TUC, Recorded Media, Policy; **plus one emergency motion** put forward by Council in support of the Welsh National Opera (unfortunately I was one of several who can't be seen in the published photo). All the motions were supported by Council and passed either unanimously, overwhelmingly, or nem com (without opposition). Only London North Branch's Motion 7 did not achieve the two thirds majority necessary to be binding upon Council to act upon. Council will therefore consider whether a Senior (i.e. older) Artists Committee should be set up to address the impact of limited performance opportunities available to the older generation.

The Race Equality Committee Motion 1 called for the national art funding bodies and Charity commission to make the full range of political expression conditional with their funding and that the benefiting organisations be accountable for their decisions, when defining something as "political". "Keep your hands and arms off our cultural sector!" "Racism should be prevented but censorship should not!"

Motion 2 LGBT+ Committee highlighted huge concern about the growing influence and endorsement of right-wing extremism. Additional speakers said this is happening world-wide. Joseph Ballard spoke of problems with "media thugs", even Mumsnet, and chatted to me about the physical as well as verbal attacks and threats he has received, even though his drag act is "clean content" and non-offensive. Joseph is trying out a new venture as a pub landlord of his Norfolk local which was set to be closed by the brewery even though he provides a venue for entertainment. I told him maybe I could summon up some of our branch members to go there for a social evening.

Motion 3 was passed overwhelming to give Deaf, Disabled and Neurodivergent members equal opportunities of employment. The main point successfully argued was "Let us try first and then give (the opportunity for casting) to the Laurence Oliviers."

Motion 4 Women's rights were supported with the needs to empower and inform younger women of them and of the reporting processes when those rights are being violated. Kent Branch's motion 5 will lead to Council surveying members to explore how widespread is the practice of stories with women aged 40+ not being told, with aim to campaign for a more accurate reflection of society within tv and film. Sharing a table with the proposer and seconder, I was able to get them to add into their points that women's state pension age has increased meaning that women must work longer.

Despite the proposed and actual cuts in Opera funding, 61% of 18-34 years olds surveyed would consider going to see an opera for entertainment. Cuts to public arts funding as they affect publicly subsidised companies was described by Motion 8 Opera Deputies Committee Proposer David John Newman as "Cultural vandalism".

in his capacity as Singers Committee Representative, our branch member and former Chair and Secretary and founding member of Essex General Branch Martyn Harrison proposed Motion 9 informatively and convincingly gaining unanimous approval. He called on Equity to support and prioritise an organising campaign to inform of workers' rights for singers, stage management and opera performers.

Although Bristol and West Branch rejected Council's amendment, their casting advertising motion 12 was passed with Council's amendment by Conference. Concern being expressed that to advertise all casting opportunities on the public accessible website/recruitment page per se would not protect members' interests but open up to a flood of applications from non-professionals leading to companies having to use their budgets to pay for administrators to deal with.

We were informed re Stage Actors Committee Motion 13: Charter is an unenforceable agreement but a Union Agreement is legally binding. This motion successfully called for events funded by Arts Councils to use Union Agreements.

Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee Motion 14 highlighted the need for a registration process for cruise ship auditions. Rhubarb the Clown made the point the ships aren't British.

Conference overwhelmingly supported Council's motion 15 to send to TUC and lobby government to repeal the unfair exemption for the performance arts and entertainment industries and to call for casting directory fees to be borne by producers not workers. However, Jackie Clune said we must be wary that if the casting directories stop the fee, they don't instead put in their TOB that everything on their site is their property. During the conference it was flagged up that Mandy had done this, and subsequently just dropped this.

Essex and Herts own Motion 17 to increase Equity UK stunt rates in line with SAG-AFTRA, the US market and Canadian Market was superbly and eloquently proposed by first-time conference attendee David Guinan-Browne and received a well-deserved standing-ovation. I seconded. Hwywel Morgan said the union was right behind him/stunt members. What we now need is member density of stunt performers, who are ready to join and support Equity to achieve what they want. After the motion was passed unanimously, David was subsequently approached by John Barclay and others concerning ways forward.

Conference was wholeheartedly supportive of Student Deputies Committee Motion 18 to abolish tuition fees, and to return maintenance grants and more funding opportunities for life-long learning, about the barriers to those from oppressed and marginalised backgrounds.

Motion 19 West End Deputies Committee was passed unanimously with aim to benefit all six days workers in our industry in the interest of balance of life and fairness.

In proposing Motion 20: Northern Ireland Nation Committee made the valid point "We shouldn't have to pick work above looking-after our children".

Motion 21 London North Branch on Council to promote our arts policy with MPs, local authorities, Labour Party, need to increase arts spending and restore the 50% cuts in arts spending in education and increase access to arts in schools.

Greater Manchester Branch's motion 22 was passed unanimously. The proposer said since Factory International (who uses significant public funding) got wind of this motion, they have stated their commitment to sign an agreement to use Equity's collective house agreement. Another win for the union!

Conference was in solidarity with Scottish Committee Motion 23.

Welsh National Committee Motion 24 was passed concerning the need for a review and unified approach to DBS application system.

Over the weekend, Conference welcomed several national and international Guest Speakers. The **Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Arts and Sports Thangam Debbonaire** was the first. She feels a personally strong connection with the industry and our union being a professional cellist, and with a husband who was an opera singer and Equity dep. She said Arts help us make sense of the world. "You tell the story of who we are as a country. You bring us face to face with our contradictions. You document our successes".

On Saturday Evening an **International Reception** was held welcoming arts activists from around the world. We heard of their successes and struggles against injustice. The speech of Palestine's **Dr Abdelfattah Abusrour**, Director of Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society, moved me to tears, especially hearing how the children are suffering.

Other speakers during the conference included but were not limited to the newly appointed Mayor of Birmingham **Richard Parker**, and Coventry South MP Zarah Sultana. **Al Vincent Jr**, Executive Director of Actors Equity from the USA talking of unionisation for Disney actors. **Marie Kelly from the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists** spoke on success for collective agreements in commercials. Marie Kelly is not to be confused with Equity's Kent Branch and Singer's Committee member Marie Kelly, and who has been a speaker at an Essex Branch meeting!

ICAF International Committee For Artists' Freedom was represented by Ros Shelley with plea for donations please to support global artists facing persecution to:

Account Name EQUITY- I.C.A.F. ACCOUNT

Account Number: 70582639

Sort Code: 08-90-61

Honorary Life Memberships were given to Abdelfattah Abusrour; Viv Parry, Equity Stage Committee; Tonia Daley-Campbell Equity Midlands Councillor; and dance-activist Yukiko Masui.

Next year's conference will be in Derry. I will be happy to represent the branch again.

Dee Mardi, Chair Essex and Herts Branch.