

My daughter is getting married. And because as I look around, nobody here is invited to the wedding -- I'm just going to recycle my Father of the Bride speech. It works because my feelings toward my children -- love, protectiveness, concern and pride -- are analogous to my feelings for the members of AEA.

A wedding is an extended family celebration. It is a celebration of the historical family, the generations that have gone into producing the production's two ... central actors (I won't say the two stars because my wife has made it clear to me that the two co-stars of the wedding are the bride and the Mother of the Bride.) And it is a celebration of the future, of family yet-to-come, at least for this hopeful grandfather-to-be.

Tonight is also an extended Family Celebration. It is a celebration of the Actors' Equity Family; it is a celebration of

the New York Theater Family. It is a celebration of the past, of what we have done, of our historical family; it is a celebration of the future, of what we will do, of our family yet-to-come.

Over the past century Actors' Equity has had to earn the respect of not only producers and theatre owners and employers but also that of actors and stage managers. First we had to convince actors that they were better off working together and speaking with one voice. Then we had to convince them to trust Equity to represent them. That trust is something we never take for granted and something we work every day to be worthy of.

One hundred years ago, actors had little respect. To the public, they were ne'er-do-well vagrants, a collection of con men, clowns and loose women. To the theater owners and managers of the day, they were, aside from a small handful

of name actors who needed to be cared for, a vast ocean of chattel -- insignificant, fungible, utterly replaceable performers. Actors were never paid for rehearsals. They were expected to pay for and provide their own costumes (God help you if you were a woman in a period drama.) If a show failed out of town, it was up to the actor to figure out and pay for his way home. Actors were disposable parts.

To combat this, the actors -- despite the scoffing of employers who saw them as irresponsible, self-centered, narcissistic children -- banded together one hundred years ago in 1913. Well-known actors such as Francis Wilson, our first AEA President, joined together with their less well-situated brethren to form a united front that -- thanks to the month-long strike of 1919 -- achieved the acceptance by the producers of the Equity contract.

Over the years we have continued to band together to help one another. The better-known, better-paid actors have cast their lot with less-fortunate actors so that all actors are protected and taken care of. And as the business has changed from an industry based solely on Broadway productions and their resultant tours to one that includes stock theatres, dinner theatres, LORT theatres and a panoply of "Small Professional Theatres" in a multitude of shapes and modest sizes, Equity has changed along with the industry. With the flexibility of a gymnast, the tenacity of a bulldog and the patience of, if not a saint, at least a nicer person than I, Equity staff has brought the protection of Equity rules and working conditions to thousands of theaters nationwide.

But we have not merely taken care of ourselves. AEA has been at the social forefront, fighting selflessly and

courageously against the blacklist and against segregation, and on behalf of those suffering from AIDS, on behalf of workers' rights, and on behalf of marriage equality.

When I think of the history of our union, how actors and stage managers risked their livelihoods and careers to stand up to their employers and demand fair treatment, I am moved. When I think how these same AEA members -- most of whom are pretty far down the socio-economic scale -- have taken the time and energy from their own personal struggles to work for and help others, I am even more moved.

I think of Tom Joad in "The Grapes of Wrath" (remember Gary Sinise in Frank Galati's wonderful Steppenwolf production?) saying "Maybe I can do somethin', maybe I can just find out somethin', just scrounge around and maybe find out what it is that's wrong and see if they

ain't somethin' that can be done about it....Maybe a fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody... Then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark -- I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look -- wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there."

And Ma Joad's last lines: "We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out; they can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, because we're the people."

I see Equity as a sort of Tom Joad: wherever actors and stage managers need help, we'll be there -- a ubiquitous presence supporting the downtrodden, a force for good in the struggle to create Live Theater. With our stage voices, we'll be speaking Truth to Power and making them hear us, and we'll be stage-whispering encouragement to all who struggle. Because creating Live Theater is a struggle, not just for actors but for all of us.

But in the midst of this struggle, in the midst of what sometimes seems like a Dust Bowl, remember this: Each of us is part of a big soul, part of the extended Theater Family. We're the people. We're the people that live. We're the people that do Live Theater and we will go on forever.