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Fellow Members,

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the past month, the **#Pro99 / #Changefor99** debate has probably caught your eye. There has been vigorous (and unfortunately sometimes vitriolic) debate among members in town hall meetings, audition studios, rehearsal halls and green rooms, and especially on social media. As a candidate for Eastern Principal Councilor in the upcoming Equity Election, I've been gathering as much information about the issue as possible. Here is where I stand on the issues:

THE BASICS, AND TAKING SIDES

The Actors' Equity Association Council has put forward a proposal which would amend Los Angeles' unique 99-Seat Plan, requiring that union actors working in these small theaters receive minimum wage for their work, including rehearsals and performances. This would be a significant change from the current Plan, which allows actors to work for no compensation during rehearsals, and to receive per-performance pay ranging from \$7-25.

According to the terms of the 1989 settlement agreement under which the 99-Seat Plan was first codified, any major changes to the Plan proposed by the Council may be put to a non-binding advisory vote by members residing in Los Angeles. In the wake of the proposed amendment, such a vote is being held, and **results of this Referendum will be tabulated on April 17.**

The Council is asking that Los Angeles members **Vote Yes on the Referendum**, arguing that Equity actors are professional workers who deserve no less than what state law requires of anyone performing a service for an employer. To an outside observer this seems like a no-brainer. What union workers would fight for the right to work for less?

A vocal faction of Los Angeles-based Equity actors (of consequential yet indeterminate size, and many of whom are member-producers or members of existing companies) has come out strongly against this proposal, urging L.A. to **Vote No on the Referendum**. They argue that Los Angeles requires more flexibility due to the predominance of the television and film industries, and that 99-seat theater in its current form allows for experimentation, risk, and artistry that would be impossible under the new plan.

“So, whose side are you on?”, I’ve been asked. I bristle at this question.

We, the members of Actors’ Equity, are a UNION.

Literally, from many becoming one.

We’re all on one side.

Anyone who seeks to divide us - be that a producer, an administrator, or even a member - does us all a disservice. Also, I firmly believe that members in both camps have the best interests of the union, its actors and stage managers, and theater in Los Angeles at heart. (Yes, even those of us who live and work in New York.) I’ve seen no evidence of anyone acting in bad faith. We can all want what’s best for L.A., even in disagreement.

OUR COUNCIL

We are a national union.

We don’t have local chapters that make policy to suit regional needs, but rather a democratically elected Council with proportional representation by region. As such, we entrust our Equity Council with the task of negotiating agreements appropriate for the communities in which our members live and work. And for all the grief our Council has received in the wake of this proposal, it’s worth remembering that its ranks are composed of fellow actors and stage managers. Their service and commitment is worthy of praise and commendation, even if you take a different position on issues.

In a perfect world we’d have a Council that truly represents all of Equity; a body composed of Councilors from many cities and states, and of varied ages, ethnicities, and work histories. **Unfortunately, the makeup of our Council is widely unknown,**

existing in the minds of many members as merely a list of names and titles buried on Equity's website, rather than as a robust and visible presence in the daily lives of union actors and stage managers. **I find it unsurprising then that a growing number of members doubt the wisdom and perspective their own union leadership.**

For all its representational faults, however, the Council we have is the Council we've chosen. Every Equity member gets a vote in our annual elections. (Here it must be noted that Council Election turnout rates are notoriously and atrociously low. I sincerely hope that those screaming the loudest about not being heard have perfect Equity election participation records.)

Therefore it is critical that every Los Angeles member vote on the Referendum, as it will be the only way that Equity staff, the Council, and the membership-at-large will truly know what a majority of that constituency wants. And while the Referendum is advisory and non-binding, **I urge the Council to heed the results of this vote.** I will not be casting my own ballot in this year's Council Election until after the Council acts on the results of the Referendum on April 21.

If Los Angeles Votes No, I will not vote for any Council member who votes to enact the proposed changes despite the election results. That's a promise.

CHANGE WE CAN AGREE ON

Despite their opposition to the Council's **#Changefor99**, I have been encouraged that the voices of **#Pro99** have acknowledged a need for change in the 99-Seat Plan (even if it is - as they have so eloquently hashtagged it - **#NotThisChange**).

The current Plan already represents a HUGE concession on the part of Equity and its members. As a rule, we generally won't work for anything less than a weekly salary plus health and pension benefits. Limiting our work to such agreements is what makes it possible (if not terribly easy) to cobble together a secure, middle-class living as a professional theater actor. Codes that allow for exceptions to this rule (such as the 99-Seat Plan and Showcase NYC) acknowledge the uniqueness of certain markets and serve as prime examples of how a national organization can respond to local realities (even if it does take a lawsuit to enact them in the first place).

But I also think that exceptions to rules should not become the rules themselves, and worry about how Los Angeles' 99-Seat community (much like New York's Off-Off-Broadway scene) has established low wages and lack of benefits as a “new normal” for the services of professional actors, especially in one of America's most expensive cities.

Actors are the ingredient without which theater cannot exist, and their pay relative to all other production costs needs to reflect that. After all, there have always been expenses that are non-negotiable when one wants to produce a play, rent typically being chief among them: **If you can't afford the space, you can't afford to produce.** If I agree with the Equity Council about anything, it's that a paradigm shift is needed in the way that producers nationwide consider the monetary value of actors' work. Their proposed change to the Plan is, if nothing else, a push in that direction: **If you're going to use union actors, paying them equitably has to at least be near the top of your budget, and certainly not at the bottom.**

As such, I have heard calls from many for a tiered code in which the 99-Seat Plan is amended so that actor compensation is tied to either production or annual budget, with a cap placed on the size of organizations allowed to use the Plan. I think such a system could work for L.A., though **I believe actor pay needs to be set at a higher percentage of the overall budget than 15-20%**, as is called for in New York's Seasonal Showcase Code (a code that I believe is itself in need of revision).

Furthermore, I believe **any revision to the 99-Seat Plan should include encouragement for growth**, with companies being incentivized to eventually outgrow the Plan and move towards offering agreements rather than codes. But please do not read this as some veiled attempt to kill the Plan slowly. **It is all too often the producers with the voices that need to be heard the most for whom affording union actors is the hardest.** Just as Showcase NYC affords small (and often young, progressive, and activist) producers the opportunity to create socially and artistically important work with Equity actors, any revision to the Plan should offer Los Angeles the same option.

What makes the work of performers unions particularly difficult is that the product itself is often just as important as the paycheck. Talking about the value of workers and bargaining power is all well and good, but the actors and stage managers of Equity

are artists, and the importance of art in a democratic society cannot be ignored in these conversations. **To treat the work of an Equity member like the work of a plumber or a furnace worker is to miss the point entirely of what makes these negotiations so difficult.** In fact, the best arguments I've heard in opposition to the changes to the Plan, rather than being about economics have been pleas for the health and well-being of Los Angeles' 99-seat theaters as incubators of new and promising actors and plays. I believe there is room in an amended 99-Seat Plan for small companies whose purpose is to do this vital work. They will still need to compensate actors appropriately and equitably, but I don't believe their very existence should be endangered.

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

So, how do I think Los Angeles should vote in the Referendum?

Since the Council's proposal was unveiled, the company line at Actors' Equity has been that **"A Vote Yes is a Vote for Change"**. Its detractors have warned against giving the national office a "blank check", and are urging members **to see a Vote No on the Referendum as a refutation of the specifics of the proposal**, rather than a general desire for change.

I have refrained from endorsing either a Yes or No Vote on the Referendum because I don't believe it's my place to do so.

This Referendum is an exercise in self-determination, and while I've been more than willing to offer a New York actor's perspective to the conversation (especially as I've sought the opinions and concerns of countless L.A. members in order to become more informed), the members of Los Angeles are more than capable of telling the rest of us what they want (and perhaps, more importantly, what they don't.)

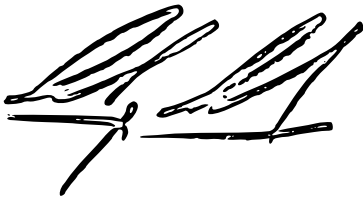
Again, I will not be casting my votes in this year's Council Election until after the dust has settled on the Referendum. Now, it is possible that for all the shouting from the rooftops being done in opposition to the proposed changes, a vast majority of L.A. members are in favor of the Council's proposal. **If that's the case, the Council is in no position to ignore them.**

However, I'm convinced that unless we have resounding numbers Voting Yes on the

Referendum (i.e. >60%), the Council needs to table the proposal at least until after this year's Council Election. For despite what I think are their best efforts and best intentions, it is undeniable that the current Council has lost the hearts and minds of a sizable portion of its membership (and not only in L.A.) **To enact the current proposal as is, even with a simple majority of votes in favor, could be disastrous for our unity.**

As a candidate for Eastern Principal Councilor, I'm running on a platform of **Communication, Compromise, & Common Sense.** Just as I have sought to apply these three guiding principals to the 99-Seat question, I am eager to bring them to the Council table, **and to be a visible, transparent, and reasonable voice for all members.**

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with questions, comments, or concerns.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sid Solomon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sid Solomon

Candidate for Eastern Principal Councilor

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