

THERE IS PRO 99 DATA AND THEN THERE ARE FACTS

A RESPONSE BY ARMINA LAMANNA

What responsibilities do we as storytellers who write and compose have to storytellers who give life to our words? Do we as writers have the moral obligation to ensure that the process behind the creation of our work does not take advantage of the actors who are collaborating on the development of our plays in theatrical establishments? These are the questions that I asked myself after reading Vanessa Stewart's Op-Ed *The Data* in the last issue of *The Dramatist*.

Naturally, I took the time to review the spreadsheet (<http://bit.ly/22OeVe9>) that she put together as evidence of her assertions. Since a few things jumped off the page immediately, like incorrect LORT designations, I decided to dig into this "data." And here is my very own research.

First, some background.

- Artist-subsidized labor in LA began in the early 70s with Equity

Waiver, transforming into the 99-Seat Plan in 1989. For over five decades – that's right, five decades – LA actors and stage managers have worked for zero wages for rehearsals and performances (later for \$5-\$15 stipends in lieu of wages for performances only).

- In his March 2015 article titled *Looking Beyond the Minimum-Wage Mess in LA Theater*, Don Shirley stated "back in 2011, according to Equity, there were 371 productions on the 99-Seat Plan" and "390 productions using the 99-Seat Plan from May 2013 to May 2014." One can safely argue that we have had *thousands* of productions built on the backs of unpaid actors and SMs over the last five decades.

- According to the latest data from AEA in an email sent out to its membership on July 14th, LA County is home to 7,000 Equity members, but "had 6,500 paid work weeks for Equity members; whereas, Baltimore/DC (with 854

members) had more than 8,700; Boston (with 845 members) had over 7,900; Chicago (with 1,589 members) had more than 15,800 paid work weeks; and Minneapolis/St. Paul (with 437 members) had more than 6,700." Ouch! Suddenly talking about 54 shows that went to a NY contract and seven shows that went to Broadway when these numbers are pulled out of a hat holding thousands of shows over five decades – seems inconsequential, and I would even say detrimental to Ms. Stewart's argument that 99-Seat theatres "create jobs and careers."

Now, on to the spreadsheet.

- Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*, which did go to Broadway, had a Broadway producer (Ken Davenport) behind it from the get-go.
- The production of *My Antonia* started at the Rubicon and then later moved down to the smaller 99-seat Pacific Resident Theatre and not the other way around.
- Whitefire Theatre's production of *Precious Piglet and Her Pals* was TYA and simply not permitted under the 99-Seat plan. Thus, this was a violation.
- *They Don't Talk Back* at the Native Voices at the Autry shouldn't have been on the spreadsheet to begin with since it was never on the plan. It was on a HAT contract.
- Black Alley Theatre's *Fox Cried* debuted at the Source Festival in Washington, D.C. in 2013 and was nowhere near Los Angeles. How did that even get on Stewart's spreadsheet?

- Only two of the eight cast members from LA's production of *Everything You Touch* at Theatre @ Boston Court continued to be on contract in NY at the Cherry Lane Theater.
- Sacred Fools Theatre's *Stoneface* did not really create contracts. It did move up to the Pasadena Playhouse (where I saw it and must admit that it was pretty great), but it didn't create additional contracts, since another show would have been in its place and would have provided contracts for LA actors had *Stoneface* not moved up. It wasn't an unplanned addition to their season.

These are just a handful of inaccuracies that I was able to find in the time that I had. But these numbers are not really the heart of the problem. What is - is that Ms. Stewart, who is currently suing AEA because they dared to finally stand up for their LA members, clearly thinks that the talent and contributions made by actors only have value when the show is a success and even then only to the playwright and producer, though not in actual payment for their time and talent. Who pays for the unsuccessful shows? The same answer: the actors, but they don't matter. They have no value. Success or fail - the actors have no value.

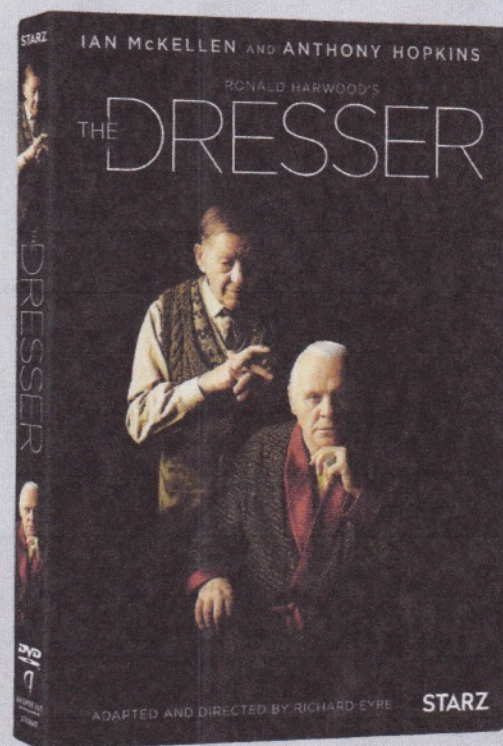
Ms. Stewart is not alone in her thinking. An April 12, 2015 article in *HowlRound* titled *Playwrights in LA and the Whole 99-Seat Thing*, a group of writers who develop work using the 99-Seat Plan claimed that without the unpaid contributions of

actors permitted by the Plan, new work would not happen. "Without the opportunity to experiment in LA's 99-seat theatres, to see my work in front of a live audience, to explore, experiment, and take risks, I don't know if I'd be a playwright today" said Jonathan Caren. Using this logic, and taking into account that the 99-Seat Plan does not exist elsewhere, one must conclude that new work is only developed in LA. But then how does one explain the *Orbiter Three*, *PlayPenn* and the *InterAct Theatre Company* in Philadelphia, for example?

Circling back to my original reaction to the Op-Ed, I ask - must we proactively educate ourselves on the conditions under which actors working on our work give life to the characters and music we create? I happen to believe that we do. After all, it is only after we recognize our own value that we make to society and humanity as artists, that society and funding sources will do the same. It must begin with us - the artists. Ms. Stewart is a talented and bright storyteller, and I don't doubt that with a few changes to her production process, she (like all of us) can ensure that all artists who collaborate on her projects are valued for the professionals that they are.

ARMINA LAMANNA is a Los Angeles based playwright, director and stage manager, and a proud member of DG, SDC & AEA.

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