

UNITED STAGES

Dreams of new Equity code allowing longer runs for Off-Off-Broadway hits

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*Susan Bernfield speaks on behalf
of
the Coalition for Code Reform*

Unions are big, intimidating organizations. They're supposed to be, since their function is to safeguard the best interests of its members. But if you're a New York, Off-Off-Broadway producer who relies on Actors' Equity Association actors and stage managers, how do you politely recommend that AEA alter its policy?

The Coalition for Code Reform held a gathering at the Barrow Street Theatre to discuss just that. This coalition is made up of advocates for Off-Off Broadway: the Alliance of Resident Theatres (ART/NY), the League of Independent Theatre, the New York Innovative Theatre Awards and the Community Dish, among others. They all agree that some change to the AEA Showcase Code is needed, perhaps overdue. Specifically, they're looking to negotiate for longer performance runs and extensions, a longer rehearsal period and a larger maximum budget for showcases. And they would like exceptions to the video prohibition. "The world has changed," said Susan Bernfield, artistic director of New Georges and ART/NY member. "This community has matured and grown, and it's time the Showcase Code kept in step with the changed reality for professional actors in this town who are not working under Broadway and Off-Broadway production contracts."

But what's in it for the union or its members? In return, the coalition wants to offer an escalating per-performance fee scale similar to Los Angeles' 99 Waiver Code. They're also willing to consider contributing to pension and insurance funds. But it's still uncertain whether or not AEA will sit down with them—such proposals have been rejected before. The coalition hopes to be armed with an industry-wide petition from union members and others, calling for reform. The petition, which unthreateningly states the code "merits revision," can be found at nyc99.org. Paul Adams, artistic director of Emerging Artists Theatre, who is currently transitioning his group to a Tier One Equity agreement, recently summed up his dream for a new code: "It's a win-win situation. When a small, Off-Off-Broadway show has long-term potential, the Code would permit time for audience buzz to build and fulfill the show's run. I think Equity and small producers want the same thing, which is to help more actors and small producers—many of whom are actors—achieve their dreams of having meaningful careers in the theater, both artistically and financially."

Written for United Stages by Ian Marshall.