

# BACKSTAGE

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Unions Forming Global Contract

By Roger Armbrust

Performers unions from North America and other continents are in the throes of developing a concrete international contract to globally protect actors in film, stage, and television productions.

The Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA) hosted a multi-national meeting of performers unions over last weekend in Toronto to discuss and charge up the global protection process. The meeting included representatives from Actors' Equity Association, Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists in the U.S.; British Actors Equity Association; Canadian Actors' Equity Association; the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance in Australia; New Zealand Actors' Equity; and International Federation of Actors (FIA).

The group agreed to form a legal committee to begin drafting the international contract which the unions will eventually present to stage, film and television producers. It's too early to tell how the document might both protect actors globally while also insure individual unions' jurisdictions. For example, SAG has jurisdiction over filmmaking in the U.S., while ACTRA possesses that jurisdiction in Canada.

"We established a legal committee to examine the process of coming up with a model contract, and the legal implications of a model global production agreement that would attempt to establish the best rights, working conditions and uses possible for performers appearing in international productions," Stephen Waddell, ACTRA's national executive director, told Back Stage on Monday. "As you can imagine, there would be some significant opposition from producers where they see unions getting together to negotiate a production agreement which would be extraterritorial. This is our reaction to the globalizing of productions. We're now dealing with multinational and multibillion-dollar conglomerates. We can no longer sit in our own backyards and not be able to deal with them."

Greg Hessinger, AFTRA's national executive director, spoke with Back Stage last Friday, expressing both his union's overview of concern about media consolidation and hopes for finding some solutions at the Canadian confab. He noted that in a recent meeting with Michael K. Powell, chairman of the Federal Communications Committee, "We expressed to him our experience has been that a diversity of voices and viewpoints in the marketplace is something that cannot exist in a massively consolidated industry; that ultimately the voices that emanate from those different consolidated TV and radio stations are coming from a single source which dictates that those voices are going to be singing the same tune. We do not believe that it's a healthy thing in terms of localism, which we believe is an important element of broadcasting; it certainly is not a good thing for an informed electorate of a democracy."

Waddell echoed that on Monday, saying, "multinational corporations are free to merge, consolidate, grow larger; but unions themselves, on one hand, are concerned about indigenous productions, and concerned about preservation of our culture; but with the global environment, we're still restricted by labor laws from exercising extraterritorial jurisdiction; for example, at ACTRA, we're confined to jurisdiction in Canada, and SAG and AFTRA in the U.S. We've got to be able to find legal means where we can get together, cooperate and eventually bargain together; to attempt to establish this kind of international production agreement."

Hessinger said at the time he was looking forward to the Canadian gathering as a meeting "intended to be a forum for us to explore strategies on how all of us, working together, can find a way to achieve the best terms for and protections for performers wherever they may work throughout the world."

The group seems to have begun positive pursuit of that goal, according to Waddell, who said, "We're giving ourselves a fairly short period of time in which to do this," i.e., come up with a draft of an international pact. "Such meetings in the past have been nothing but talk shops where we'd bring things to each other and nothing happens. In this case, we're giving ourselves a few months, and we'll get together and get firmer ideas about how to proceed. We have an ongoing relationship with SAG and AFTRA as unions in North

America, and we're ready to advance this concept in a significant way. SAG's Rule One and its May 1 date gives us real need to move forward."

#### Rule One Specifics

SAG has announced that its Global Rule One, the provision which states that every member of SAG shall work under a guild signatory agreement anywhere in the world, will become enforceable as of May 1. Traditionally the guild has enforced Rule One only on productions shot in the U.S.

"We appreciate that we're in a global production environment, but how SAG's extension of Rule One might impact our respective jurisdictions is a concern," Waddell explained. "To that end, SAG has waited until this meeting to go further through their committee on defining the rules. So it was useful that we had this discussion. SAG will go back to the Rule One committee and put together some draft rules and will circulate them to our English-speaking union group and get feedback before Rule One is extended on May 1."

Waddell indicated that, while the other unions agree with SAG's efforts, they needed to see the specific wording that the U.S. guild will include in the rules.

"We think it's very positive that they're focusing on Rule One," Waddell stressed, "but our membership and memberships of the other unions who have dual members – we have ACTRA-SAG members, and British Equity has SAG members – we need to know how the rules will impact them when working in their own countries. For example, a Canadian performer who's a resident of Canada and happens to be a SAG member, what will be the impact? Or what's the impact with respect to productions they're involved in Canada, for the CBC for instance, or other domestic companies? Or does it only impact performers who go to the States during pilot season? Questions like that."

John McGuire, SAG's senior adviser, represented the guild at the Toronto talks. "We had very strong indications of understanding and support of what we're trying to do," McGuire said regarding SAG's extension of Rule One. He agreed with Waddell's assessment that SAG's Rule One committee would review the other unions' concerns which they presented to McGuire at the meeting.

McGuire also emphasized the meeting's chief purpose "to fully explore how best to coordinate all FIA unions and the English-speaking unions and maximize protection of performers everywhere." He indicated he and SAG staff would be preparing the first draft of the unions' model international contract.