

November 17, 2017

Dear Arden and Theresa,

Arden Ryshpan's letter to the membership (Equity's Statement on Respectful Workspaces, November 3, 2017), and messages from ACTRA Toronto (ACTRA Toronto's Special Statement, November 8, 2017, Sexual Harassment Prevention Update, November 15, 2017 along with Theresa Tova's video message) together with Soulpepper's announcement regarding having cut ties with director, Laszlo Marton (K Nestruck, Globe and Mail, October 30, 2017) have got me reflecting on an experience of my own. I think many people are beginning to appreciate that, while it's important to hold individuals personally responsible for abusive actions, it's also important to hold organizations accountable; abuse of any kind is less likely to occur in a working atmosphere that is open and respectful. So I'd like to contribute the following story, because I think it illustrates that different types of harassment can sometimes be traced to the same unhealthy work environment.

Back in 2009, I was in the cast of Soulpepper's remount of their highly successful production of "Top Girls". I had agreed to take on the Equity Deputy role, which I thought would consist of the usual paperwork. It turned out differently, in that it ended up being my job to bring a formal complaint to Equity against the theatre.

What happened was, well before rehearsals started, Soulpepper auctioned off the cast of "Top Girls" at a fundraiser at which only one of us was actually present; they sold a series of dinners-with-the-cast without either asking our permission, or even telling us until months later. Soon after rehearsals started, I remember the sense of outrage and disbelief among the cast when these dinners appeared on the schedule; there was a strong wish not to attend the dinners under the circumstances, but there was an equally strong fear of saying so and refusing.

As Equity Deputy I brought our concerns to the Soulpepper management, and was really surprised and distressed to find that those concerns were not welcome. I then tried to directly contact the unwitting board members and/or supporters who had been sold the dinners, but again Soulpepper strongly discouraged me from doing so. As it turned out, I ran into a board member in the theatre lobby during our rehearsal period, and took the opportunity to bring the matter up in person. I told her that the cast felt coerced, our time and reputations had been treated with disrespect, and that we also thought it unfair to the supporters who had bought the dinners, never imagining that the actors at their table would feel exploited. She literally laughed off my concerns.

So my next step was to make a formal complaint to Equity, which I did. At the time I think our Equity reps did their best, and the cast received an apology from Soulpepper. The dinners, however, went ahead. I did not attend; and I never got the opportunity to RSVP to the supporters who had purchased the dinners, to let them know I hadn't snubbed their generous support of the theatre, but rather that there was an important principle involved. Soulpepper pocketed \$30,000.

It was my obligation as Equity Deputy to address the issue, and I was surprised and saddened by the atmosphere of bullying that I met with at Soulpepper when I tried to communicate our concerns; I was equally so, to see my fellow cast members – distinguished actors, all – intimidated and put in a humiliating position.

It was and is my feeling that the Equity response, though well-intentioned, was inadequate, and I am heartened to see better policies and mechanisms being put in place to guide our representatives and members.

I am glad that the Soulpepper Board has taken complaints of sexual harassment by Mr Marton seriously; I hope they see the connection between sexual harassment and a context of intimidation; and I hope their response is a sign that the unhealthy context I worked in is also a thing of the past.

Soulpepper supports and produces many fine artists and technicians and much fine work, and is vocal regarding its flagship role in our theatre community. It is therefore all the more important that artists, technicians, staff, board members and all stakeholders who value this important resource, take personal and collective responsibility to nourish and care for its health which includes transparency. In the end, we are all the better for it, and so is the art.

I'm glad I spoke up back then; I would do the same again. Speaking up may or may not have cost me professionally, but I know it cost me in terms of friendship, and I can never put a price on that.

Ann-Marie MacDonald