Different Aspects to a Successful Actress' Life

Our interview with Valerie Dowd yielded many different aspects of a successful actress' life, including but not limited to Actor’s Equity Association (AEA), the AIDs epidemic, and philanthropy for those less fortunate.

To set up a historical picture of the US: Valerie was acting during a time in the US when women’s rights were still debated in modern society. Valerie stated in the interview that she had two children while still working, and would go to different auditions, handing her first son, Andy, over to a friend before going inside. “(...) In the early 1980s... it was getting harder for women’s rights advocates to talk about the patriarchal roots of economic inequality. They were criticized for denouncing media images of women in traditional occupational roles such as stay-at-home mom,” (Nathan 2007:55). Valerie was a working mother, and her two sons grew up in a household where both parents helped pay off for their middle-class lifestyle.

By becoming involved in the theatre out of college, Valerie was able to join the AEA, an actor’s labor union that helps its members work under correct conditions. She stated, “Actor’s Equity Association is run by actors, who know what it’s like to work for a living.” (Dowd, MacWilliam 2014 11-8) Similar to the AEA, the Screen Actor’s Guild (SAG) also has its list of problems that many actors in the film industry depend upon sounds like actors depend on SAG’s problems. David Prindle writes about the Guild, “Although the Guild cannot function as a hiring hall, this does not prevent it from trying to do so. Various schemes have been tried or proposed over the years to restrict the number of actors.” (Prindle 1988:676). Actors within the film industry are used to promote others’ needs, similar to Valerie’s assertion about producers, and without the help of SAG, many are still working too hard without representation. Katherine Fusco states this same feeling in her essay about the two films, Black Swan and The Girlfriend Experience, “(...) These filmmakers create art works that depend on the overexposure of their stars, leaving their actresses open to increased scrutiny.” (Fusco 2013:28). Actors, whether in the theatre or film industry, are still misrepresented by their unions, and have started to work together on other problems surrounding their community of artists.

In the 1980’s, the HIV/AIDs crisis swept across the United States. Homosexual men seemed to be at the center of this nationwide problem, affecting a large portion of the theater community. (Gavrila, 2013) During the interview, Valerie spoke of her experience with the AIDs crisis. Throughout her career as an actor, Mrs. Dowd has worked with many fellow thespians affected by this terrible outbreak. When asked about it, Valerie spoke about the hardship of knowing those affected by HIV/AIDs, describing it as “depressing” and “horrifying”. She spoke of how strange it was when, “you would do a show with somebody, and the show would close, and then 6 months later you would hear that they were dead.”

Due to the prominence that HIV/AIDs has in the theatre community, the acting population has become very involved in the fight against HIV/AIDs over the last few decades. Theater is used for the education of young people, the prevention of future cases, and fundraising for those who are already affected. (Elliott and Gruer, 1996) Broadway Backwards is an annual show that directly helps fight against AIDs. Through the Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDs and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center associations, Broadway Backwards is show put on once every year to help those affected by AIDs in the United States. In their latest show, this organization raised $423,182, beating their record of $347,060 from the previous year. (Broadway Cares, 2014) Valerie is a persistent advocate of this cause, having participated several years in a row in Broadway Backwards’ shows. She saw how this terrible outbreak was affecting people, even some of those around her, and she wanted to do whatever she could to help this cause.

Broadway Backwards is not the only organization that Valerie is involved in. As she talked about in the video, she does a lot of charitable work with Holiday Express. Almost 100 years ago, actress Selena Royle started the Actors Dinner Club, a charitable organization devoted to helping people in the theatre industry get back on their feet during the great depression. Her charity provided meals and shows to out-of-work theater workers, in much the same way that Holiday Express provides meals and shows to the impoverished today. Those involved in theatre have always been a close-knit community; they look out for their own and they always strive to help those in need, as demonstrated by their devotion to charity and philanthropy throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. this could use a reference

“Throughout history, following in the footsteps of female leaders of charitable organizations like Selena Royle, actors and actresses have traditionally given performances to benefit those in need, whether to help survivors of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or to fight inhumane conditions in Darfur” (Gordon 2011 7-8). oh, there's the reference! Almost 100 years later, Valerie Dowd is giving back to the community, and she is doing so in the same manner of selflessness with which many actors and actresses have been carrying themselves for over a century. She is but one of many remarkable individuals in the theatre industry: such organizations as Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDs, the healthcare support provided by Fractured Atlas, and the Actors Fund of America retirement homes continue the tradition of charity and philanthropy that was begun by actresses during the Great Depression, and has been continued ever since (Gordon 2011 8).

It is important to note that, with respect to religion, Holiday Express does not identify in any particular way. While they do give gifts, among other things, during the holiday season, their charity celebrates Christmas and the holiday season more culturally than religiously. They do not preach the history or religious significance of Christmas, nor do they discriminate based on religion. Holiday Express aims merely to spread joy and happiness through their gift giving.

As an actress, Valerie has touched the lives of many people, and it is simple to see how society and other people have touched her life as well. The different aspects to a successful actress’ life involve both hardship and prosperity, which allow for a closer look at society’s impact on the modern theatre business.

Good companion to the video.

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