

# The New York Times

## Arts&LEISURE

### Stage Acting: It's Nice Work if You Can Afford It.

Fame and fortune are never guaranteed, but should one really need a second career to pay for the first?

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

“We are subsidizing the theater.” Those words, addressed to an audience in a Lincoln Center auditorium last weekend, weren’t spoken by a corporate suit bragging about slapping the company name on the fire escape at one of the city’s often needy nonprofit theaters.

They were spoken by the actor Tim Blake Nelson to a group of 100 or so of his fellow performers at the National Congress of Actors and Acting Teachers. What did he mean? Essentially, that actors help keep the theater in business by supplementing their meager stage paychecks with other, more remunerative kinds of work — “Law & Order” guest spots, voice-overs, commercials, even that old standby, waiting tables.

That’s not really news to anyone paying attention, just common knowledge rephrased in an unusually discomfiting way. And unlike corporations and civilians, the actor doesn’t get a tax break for the charitable contribution he makes to the nation’s cultural life by working for a pittance. Applause aside, he doesn’t get much in the way of thanks, either. No drinking fountain named after spear carrier No. 2 in that Off Off Broadway production of “Coriolanus,” temping by day to give himself the chance to practice his craft and pay off debts from acting school.

For regular theatergoers, not to mention regular moviegoers and television watchers, actors are a bit like the weather: usually good, sometimes bad, but always there. Unless they reach the heavenly and lucrative realm of bona fide celebrity, and thus become subjects of swoony profiles in glossy magazines, we don’t ask where they came from or where they’re going, why and how they do what they do.

The daylong series of panels I attended on Jan. 7, presided over by J. Michael Miller, former director of the acting program at New York University and president of the Actors Center, shed some light on the answers to those unasked questions. (I also appeared on a critics and actors panel in the morning.) It was an eye-opening, often amusing, sometimes distressing look at the status of the actor in American culture, as seen by the practitioners themselves.

Journalists and theater executives are prone to hand-wringing about the high cost of theater tickets, a serious problem to be sure. But what about the high cost of living as an actor? Testimonials from actors at the congress suggested that in the past two decades, the acting life has been getting more expensive, which is to say the work is getting less remunerative.

Andrew Weems gave an explicit example, recalling that some two decades back he’d been in a production of “Troilus and Cressida” in Washington for which the actor playing Thersites had received about \$600 a week. Recently Mr. Weems found himself playing the same role, Off Broadway, in a production directed by the esteemed Sir Peter Hall. Mr. Weems was earning significantly less. Another voice chimed in to denounce the disturbing tendency of regional theater management to mimic the latest trends in the corporate world: While the artistic directors’ salaries have steadily grown, payments to actors have not kept pace.



Tim Blake Nelson appeared on film, with John Turturro, in “O, Brother Where Art Thou?” and on stage in “The Beard of Avon.”

What’s worse, a recent conversation I had with an actress in Los Angeles suggested that the paychecks for work in television and film had been spiraling downward, too. She’d been working in television for a couple of decades, and is today making less per job than she earned in the beginning; guest spots that would once have provided a week’s work were being squeezed into two days. No more “breaking top” — paying over strict scale for actors with extensive experience. But if actors feel increasingly marginalized economically, it was their neglect as artists that rankled perhaps even more at the conference. (As Ruben Santiago-Hudson somewhat ruefully observed: “You can explore the depths of your soul. That is your pay.” Which is doubtless true, but it won’t buy you much at Whole Foods.)

Marco Barricelli, a member for eight years of San Francisco’s major regional nonprofit, American Conservatory Theater, confessed to feeling “cynical about the theater” after more than two decades of steady work. After years of acting classical roles and becoming a “great justifier of other people’s choices” in productions over which he had no personal control, Mr. Barricelli felt actors might have earned the right to make some choices of their own. But he complained that the boards who control the nation’s theaters wouldn’t consider actors for roles as administrators, no matter how extensive their experience. Others lamented that theaters were happy to lavish funds on new buildings, production values and expanding artistic staffs but wouldn’t make the investment in establishing salaried companies of actors. (Mr. Barricelli was one of just four company members at American Conservatory.)

By recounting this gloomy litany of dissatisfaction, I may be giving a false impression of the day’s overall tone, which was far more buoyant than bitchy, more affirmative than anguished. When Dianne Wiest contributed a few words from the audience, she began by saying, a little giddily, “I never want to leave this room.” There was much talk of the emotional and intellectual rewards of the work, very little of the hard practicalities, the getting of agents and managers, the frustrations of the audition process. (In fact, the word “agent” might have arisen only when Denis O’Hare told a funny story of his hapless early years. Running into a familiar face on the street, he fell into a friendly chat before sheepishly saying: “I’m sorry. How do I know you?”

“I’m your agent,” came the seething response.)

Mr. O’Hare also confessed that some years back, when he’d been starting out, he’d tried to quit acting twice, for reasons he could no longer recall. To the theater’s benefit, he didn’t succeed. Likewise, Mr. Santiago-Hudson confessed that despite some bad days, “The heart won’t let me out.”

But will the hearts of future generations of actors prove as intractable? In truth, the answer is probably yes, such is the lure of the profession, which was referred to as a calling and a faith by more than one participant. (Every third actor seemed to have flirted with joining the priesthood.) And the frustrations discussed weren’t necessarily new; embarking on a career in acting has always been a risky enterprise.

But the testimony from the conference suggests that it may well be getting riskier by the minute. And that may be another dispiriting sign of a general shift in values in American culture, where the prerogatives of mega-corporations, their chieftains and their stock prices hold sway, and the increasingly pension-less workers are left to fend for themselves.

Big movie and television stars are the mega-corporations of the acting profession, and they seem to be acquiring an increasing measure of the industry’s rewards, leaving less for the vast numbers of fameless actors. As the status of the star has continued to crest, with celebrity-obsessed television shows and magazines proliferating like bacteria over the past quarter-century, the unfortunate byproduct may be a declining respect for actors who don’t happen to be household names. If performers’ attractiveness and fame are what studios and even theaters want to buy and market, talent and experience naturally become commodities with lesser or no value.

That’s a potentially calamitous situation. To gauge its impact on our culture, imagine a world in which there were no more actors, just stars. We’d have the cast of “Friends” performing Eugene O’Neill, and Paris Hilton as Hedda Gabler.

O.K., so I may be guilty of a little fear-mongering there. Things will probably never get that bad. But chances are we’ll all continue taking journeyman actors and their gifts for granted, and they’ll continue to scramble and scrape for opportunities to be taken for granted.