

Weighing the Costs of Membership in the WGC

Having just completed an official script purchase, I was excited about the possibility of becoming a member of the Writer's Guild of Canada—that was, that is, until I got to talking with a fellow writer and Guild member here in Vancouver. She told me the Guild has decided recently to come down on its writers who work for non-signatory producers, a move which has left her questioning the value of her membership. As much as she relies on her member benefits, she told me, she could only think of three or four Vancouver producers who are signatories; reality is, if she hadn't taken the non-union work, she wouldn't have eaten.

I called the Guild, echoed my friend's concerns, and asked how just many Vancouver producers were signatories; the Guild couldn't give me an answer. I was instead referred to their website which lists all current signatories, but it's highly misleading as it lists signatory *productions*, not producers. Casting aside multiple company productions, that left about twenty I recognized. Of those, one company has gone under, six are service producers whose shows are written down south (and who are most likely signatories because of the strength of the parent Guild, the Writer's Guild of America), one is on the Guild's shit list, and two series are tied either to the CBC or CTV (both of whom are signatories and so all their shows must be signatories by default). Which actually leaves about nine. Not many to go around.

All other film unions officially state that members must not work on non-union shows yet turn a blind eye when they do; enforcement simply isn't practical and it's not in the interest of the membership. Putting aside the obvious reality that rent has to be paid and work is work, many film professionals rely on the non-union shows to expand and upgrade skills or take creative risks—why should writers be any different? Just because I've written a feature doesn't mean I don't want to write a short, or to lend my skills as a story editor to an indie film. Should I be punished for doing so?

I was also stymied by the Guild's restrictive application requirements. Unlike other unions where *any* film credits will at least qualify you for permittee status, the Writer's Guild will only

consider you for membership *after you've worked for a signatory producer*. The Guild's position when queried on the matter was that if you want to be a member and are being courted by a non-signatory producer, you should make her signing onto the Guild part of the deal. Get serious. It's tough enough in this town just to get a half-decent option fee. Would it not be better for the Guild to welcome any credited writer into the membership, pray for a hit, then let them use their new-found clout to promote the Guild and defend its guidelines?

On the one hand the Guild will only welcome you once you've worked with a recognized producer, yet if that same producer wants to work with you, the Guild offers the writer only two

options: become a member or pay a hefty 5% of your fees to the Guild as opposed to the usual member dues of 2%. This amounts, in my opinion, to blackmail.

Furthermore, it occurs to me this may be just another impediment to either party choosing to join the Guild: should a writer find herself in negotiations with a signatory producer who wants

her script badly enough, she'll be in the position to demand the 5% come out of the producer's pocket, not hers (and the producer still has to do all the paperwork). Is it any wonder, then, that so few producers seem to be in a hurry to sign up?

When I told the Guild I was quickly losing interest in membership, their response centered around their benefits: insurance plans, RRSPs, and their intercessory role in resolving disputes between writer and producer. But are these really worth 2% of all fees? How does the cost of buying private extended health benefits and life insurance, managing your own retirement plan, and hiring an entertainment lawyer compare to the cost of membership? Note also that while the Guild can intercede in disputes, it cannot enforce its ruling; all it can do is declare an engager "unfair" and forbid members to work with the offending producer.

In the U.S. the Guild has real clout. It all but shut down Hollywood with a strike. But until the Guild—and writers—have the same kind of clout here in Canada, I think the Guild ought to re-evaluate its hard line and find ways to be more inclusive, not exclusive.

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