



A Brief History of the Actors' Fund

In the mid 1950s the Actors' Fund of America, which had been in existence since 1882, asked members of Canadian Equity, then a subsidiary of its American counterpart, to help them raise funds for their cause. It was, however, decided - in the words of Jane Mallett - "that we could better look after those in need in the theatrical profession, either visitors or residents in Canada, if we raised such a Fund and administered it ourselves." Five actors, Ms Mallett, Barbara Hamilton, Donald Davis, Barry Morse and William Needles, put a symbolic \$1 into a pot, and the Fund was launched.

After a series of Benefit performances at the Crest Theatre, the Fund was incorporated on May 27th 1958. Its stated purpose, "to care for the aged, sick and destitute", was not confined to any one branch of the entertainment business, but was "designed to help anyone, anywhere, who has ever been engaged in any branch of the entertainment industry," a commitment which the Fund has held dear ever since.

Despite its name, in other words, it is not and never has been a fund intended only for the benefit of actors. Jane Mallett, to whom the Fund and its beneficiaries owe an enormous debt of gratitude, remained its President until her death in 1984.

During the first couple of decades the demands on the Fund were relatively modest, amounting to a few thousand dollars a year. Canadian Equity provided a small space in its offices and the services of a part-time administrator to handle applications, while the six members of the Board met as necessity required. The watchword was, and has continued to be, prudent husbandry of financial resources, both to respond to immediate needs and to protect against any future emergency. Benefit performances, audience collections and individual donations formed the basis of the Fund's income, together with special events such as the Celebrity Train, on which well-known television and theatre personalities served box lunches to patrons travelling to a special matinee at the Stratford Festival.

The 1970s saw a rapid growth in the number of theatres throughout the country, together with a growing film and television industry. These developments would eventually lead to an increase in the Fund's income streams but by the middle of the decade the more immediate effect was a significant rise in the number of applications being received. By the mid-70s, the Fund was dispensing around \$50,000 per annum, a sum that by 1981 had more than doubled. By that time, however, in addition to individual donations and audience collections, income was being derived not only from the Stratford Festival (which had supported the Fund from its inception, and remains its largest theatrical contributor), but also from the Shaw Festival, from ACTRA and from Equity's annual Theatre Ball in Toronto.

In the mid-80s, the Fund was to face the biggest crisis of its existence when the devastating effects of the AIDS epidemic began to be felt throughout North America. Clearly, the Fund would be called upon to play a major role in supporting those who had no other resources to cope with this agonising illness. It was therefore imperative to ensure that the Fund was in a position to respond quickly and generously, and plans for a wide variety of fund-raising initiatives were speedily implemented. Additional benefit performances, increased individual donations, special events by musical companies and a raft of audience collections throughout the country under the rubric of 'Equity Fights AIDS' were some of the ways in which the entertainment community and its public rapidly responded to the crisis.



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This period was a watershed in the history of the Fund. Of necessity, its operations expanded significantly at this time, and the increased workload could not be carried out by the volunteer members of the Board alone. After having occupied office space in various Equity locations for almost 40 years and employed various secretarial assistants for a decade, it moved to its own premises in the mid-90s, and in the person of David Hope, hired its first Executive Director. The size of the Board, which for many years remained at 6, was periodically enlarged (it now numbers 15), and the scale of its operations, both in terms of its sources of income and the range and number of people it serves has continued to expand over the years.

Now, 50 years after those visionary actors put \$5 into a pot, the Fund they created disburses over \$500,000 annually to camera-operators, grips, stage-hands, actors, directors, make-up artists, location managers, dancers, carpenters, musicians - in short, to members of all the many and various trades and professions that make up the entertainment industry. In turn, it is generously supported not only by individuals and long-standing contributors such as theatres, festivals and enterprising producers, but also by the majority of the performing and technical unions and associations whose members it exists to serve.

Over the years, many distinguished members of the profession have voluntarily given a great deal of time and care to ensure that the Fund will always be ready to help those in need. Robert Christie, Grant Cowan, Penelope Doob, Gino Empry, Marion Gilseman, Gary Goddard, Celia Hamilton, Vanessa Harwood, Araby Lockhart, Judy Richardson, Sandy Webster, William Webster and Kenneth Wickes are just some of those who over five decades have served on the Board of the Fund with distinction, a tradition the current members strive to continue. Like their predecessors, they are dedicated to preserving and strengthening the health of the Actors' Fund of Canada so that it can provide the timely, sensitive and much-needed assistance on which all members of the entertainment community can continue to rely.