Panto producers in talks for landmark deal for actors

MATTHEW HEMLEY

Leading pantomime producers are working with Equity on what is understood to be the first union-agreed contract that stipulates minimum terms and conditions for the genre.

Plans for the agreement follow a landmark tribunal brought primarily against Qdos Pantomimes earlier this year, at which a group of 16 performers and stage managers won a case against the production company that hinged on their right to holiday pay. At the time, Equity said the ruling could result in millions being paid out to its members across the industry.

Following the hearing, the union also called on Qdos Pantomimes – now Crossroads Pantomimes – to use Equity agreements in the future, instead of its own contracts.

Now, talks have begun with a range of commercial pantomime producers – including Crossroads Pantomimes, Imagine and Evolution – about the creation of an "approved union contract" for their shows in the future.

An Equity spokeswoman confirmed conversations were ongoing and said: "We are currently in a constructive dialogue with a number of commercial pantomime companies with a view to arriving at an agreement for the use of an approved union contract for their productions. While these talks are ongoing they are confidential."

She added: "However, it is clearly in the interests of both producer and workforce for a union-approved contract to be in use, as it provides certainty on terms and conditions and sets a fair standard for all engaged."

Following the hearing earlier this year, Equity general secretary Paul W Fleming called on Crossroads – the UK's largest pantomime producer – and its managing director Michael Harrison to use a union contract.

"This would be easily resolved if the company had a collective agreement. The union position is this: the animosity is over, make us a settlement, and let's have an agreement for all of Michael Harrison's commercial productions, including pantomimes, going forward," Fleming said at the time.

This week, Harrison said Crossroads, which is staging 30 pantomimes this year – including the London Palladium's Jack and the Beanstalk – was in talks with Equity, which had in turn "opened up conversations between Equity and other pantomime producers to use the same agreement we are discussing."

"At the moment, nothing is finalised but I am confident we will reach an agreement which will satisfy all," Harrison added.

Meanwhile, Paul Hendy, who co-founded Evolution Productions – which is behind 11 pantomimes this year – also said the company was in talks with the union "about the possibility of using Equity pantomime contracts in the future."

"We have always put the welfare of our companies at the top of our agenda. Using a standardised contract across the pantomime industry will be a very positive step forward for the genre as a whole," Hendy added.

Writing in The Stage last month, he said he was "not aware of any commercial pantomime producers currently using Equity contracts."

"I think we have all been very fair to our companies, but an Equity contract is another step towards pantomime becoming, dare I say, 'legal?'' he added.

Meanwhile, Steve Boden, managing director at Imagine Theatre – which this year is staging 18 pantomimes across the country – said Equity had been in touch about an agreement and that he welcomed the conversations, adding that he hoped a standardised contract would help with securing staff to work on pantomimes.

"Any standardisation of terms will hopefully encourage performers and stage management and, by way of extension, those in training or planning a career in theatre, to see transparency in the recruitment and contracting process on pantomime, which is often one of the first professional contracts people receive as they leave training. Of course, nothing is finalised but the team here at Imagine looks forward to receiving drafts or updates as they become available," he said.

Boden expressed his view that an agreement would help to legitimise pantomimes, so that "everyone understands the importance of them" and that a union-agreed contract would provide "financial underpinning."

"It's about recognition that it is an important part of the sector," he said. "The Stage understands negotiations are likely to be concluded next spring.

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