



By Pat Aufderheide

LOS ANGELES

**A** TELEPHONE OPERATOR ON a picket line is a striker. But when Ed Asner walks a picket line, it's a photo opportunity.

That's one difference between the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and its fellow unions—the glamor factor. But the Screen Actors Guild, whose presidential election results should be announced this week, hasn't been in the spotlight recently only because it's the bit of sparkle in the labor field.

There is a struggle going on in the Screen Actors Guild for self-definition, at a time when the contours of film and TV production are changing faster than Woody Allen's Leonard Zelig could assume a new identity.

SAG has been rocked by controversy since the 1980 actors' strike. At that time, Ed Asner became Guild president and an ugly spate of infighting started when Charlton Heston and other conservatives charged Asner and other liberals on the Guild's board with "politicizing" the union.

Heston was already lambasting the Guild for donating \$5,000 to the families of striking PATCO workers and for setting up a speakers' bureau to aid other unions when Asner, speaking for a group called Medical Aid for El Salvador, publicly turned over a check for \$25,000 to the Salvadoran opposition. Asner said it was a personal gesture, but according to Heston, it implicated the Guild. (The taint extended to the "Lou Grant" series, where, because advertisers feared viewer disaffection, the show was cancelled.)

A watchdog group, Actors Working for an Actors Guild (AWAG), was form-

ed by conservatives to keep an eye on what they called "confrontational" tactics of liberals.

Many saw the controversy as a resurgence of the political warfare that marked the Guild in the '30s. They recalled, too, the McCarthy era, when the Guild made itself a handmaiden to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee.

But this is no reprise of former political battles. These days, the conservative assault is merely a backdrop for new drama.

### Believe It or Not.

The fact that a screen actors' union exists at all might well be a "Believe It or Not" item. Consider: this is a union in which only 15 percent of the members work on any given day, and in which four-fifths of them make less than \$5,000 annually at their union-card profession. Many of them don't make much more at other jobs—over a quarter of the Los Angeles and New York members live below the poverty level. It's a tiny union, around 52,000 members, and it covers only part of the performing field. Many SAG members also belong to the American Federation of TV and Radio Artists (AFTRA) and some wallets bulge with union cards for stage, nightclub and music as well.

"America has never supported its artists—most performers have never been able to make a living by their art," points out SAG information director Kim Feller. Maybe it's the tenacious quality of that fact that accounts for the existence of SAG at all. Before it was founded in 1933, screen actors put in work days that recalled Hitchcock's "actors are cattle" remark sound like a prescription for the good life.

"You could work for 18 to 20 hours," recalled Leon Ames, longtime SAG board member and one-time president,

in a SAG-sponsored collection of oral histories. "Hell, 24 hours, if you could stay awake long enough." Actors organized a union that challenged the big daddy authority of movie moguls, although they were still anxious to stay in the studio family.

As one founder, character actor Bradley Page, put it, "Bless their hearts, the producers had their organization, and why shouldn't the actors have theirs?"

But the "family" is falling apart. "Now," says labor relations attorney Howard Fabrick, who represents employers in production contracts, "what they call the collaborative production process is an amalgamation of different little entities. The whole system went from total control by eight studios to complete fragmentation."

Fragmentation in the system of production went hand-in-hand with control of the industry's finances by conglomerates. The change didn't happen overnight. In 1948 an antitrust action made it illegal for movie studios to control theaters, thus shrinking their formal em-


pires. Then TV challenged film studios hegemony. By the late '60s, what once had been a dream factory turned into a collage of cottage industries, and the end of the deal had arrived.

Studios began to act more like bankers, arranging for funds and distribution of "independent"-made films. Film productions floated around the world buoyed up by the strong U.S. dollar and the favorable foreign exchange rate it created. Large companies, even multinationals, snapped up studios. Mel Brooks in *Silent Movie* didn't dub his fictive conglomerate "Engulf and Devour" for nothing.

SAG found itself up against a too-familiar problem for all unions today: it was ready to take on an opponent that was vanishing. It had over the year fought and won excellent wages and working conditions, but enforcement was growing difficult.

At the same time that the studio era passed, the actors' union grew dramati-





**T**he make-up of the film industry has undergone a dramatic shift. And so must the strategy of the Screen Actors Guild.

cally, thanks in part to the increase of jobs in TV commercials. SAG's 13,000 membership roll in 1960 ballooned to 25,000 by 1971 and doubled again in a decade. Many of those who got a job in a commercial—their ticket into SAG—didn't find another job soon. Others working in films watched production shrink as blockbusters soaked up budgets.

Just as the world of work was changing, so was SAG's constituency. The largely Los Angeles crowd of film actors that had always defined the Guild was getting outnumbered by actors who the old guard saw as having less skill, and who might work their entire lives without making a movie. Many of the new members signed up in New York, which doubled its membership between 1956 and 1962. By 1970 it had a membership that rivalled the West Coast—and, after much pressuring, proportional represen-

tation in the union, too.

The old Guild had mirrored the old studio star system. Big names ran the show. If the Guild looked something like a club, this did not reflect pure-and-simple elitism, but the strength that stars brought the union. And then it reflected elitism, too, or at least a distinction between a professional association of artists and a union of workers.

### A new vision for SAG.

In the '70s, a new vision began to creep into SAG, with a succession of liberal presidents that began with Dennis Weaver. The ascendancy of these people—who were typically successful actors but not stars—also reflected the changes in SAG's membership.

"It was a kind of palace revolution," remembers Norma Connelly, Aunt

Ruby on *General Hospital* and SAG board member. "They were working actors. They knew what concerned the rank-and-file actor and they thought that the stars, for all their good intentions, didn't have a clue.

"Kathleen Nolan [who followed Weaver as president] also gave SAG a presence in Washington, D.C., and she introduced a dozen or so committees with advisory power that increased rank-and-file participation. There was a legal committee, and one for children and one for minorities."

Janet MacLachlan, a black actress who recently worked in the PBS production *For Us the Living*, recalls her work as liaison between the women's and minorities committees. "Together, as women and minorities, we represented over 50 percent of the Guild," she says. "We realized that united we could be a potent force—no one had ever threatened the position of the predominantly white male board. We didn't want to be adversarial, but it was hard even to get adult recognition from board members."

The rank-and-filers' "revolution" meant infringement on old privilege. "You mean, I would no longer have the right to use my art to portray an Indian?" one actor asked MacLachlan indignantly. "We are asking that an Indian have an equal chance at that role," she replied.

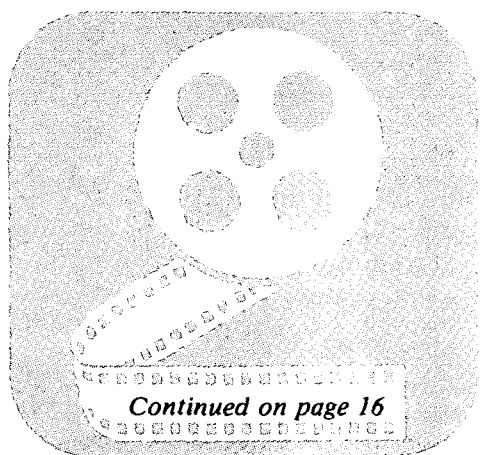
The rise of the liberals also meant a change in the kinds of political gestures that the Guild made. Among other things, the Guild in those years offered support for the Equal Rights Amendment and for the J.P. Stevens boycott. When Anita Bryant stirred up anti-gay sentiment, the board passed a resolution censuring "such attacks on civil liberties and human rights," and it opposed the 1978 California Prop. 6, the "Briggs initiative." The father-knows-best style of leadership of the old days was gone,

along with its close focus on traditional dollars-and-cents issues.

Murmurs of discontent and shuffling of board slots turned into counter-organizing in the wake of the 1980 strike, which forced many actors into thinking for the first time about their union. From a strategic point of view, the strike should never have happened; but the timing was perfect to point up dramatic changes in the world of production.

Two words make a quick-and-dirty summary of those changes: "Pay-TV." Or, if you like, "New Technologies"—Cassette. Cable. Direct broadcast satellite. Pay-per-view. Live performances, film work and TV work suddenly overlapped, sometimes marketed in a way never handled by previous union contracts.

In the 1980 negotiations, SAG had to set a precedent. How were producers going to pay actors for their work—what percentage of the profit? Net or gross? How many times would a product reach an audience before residuals begin? Actors wanted to make sure they didn't sell any birthrights. Memories of the 1960



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## EDITORIAL

# BONZO GOES TO WAR

FEATURING  
THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF  
(AS HIMSELF)



Mike Peters, United Media Enterprises

## Grenada invasion is a major step-up of Reagan aggression

*The struggle for peace is indivisible. We cannot pick and choose where we will support freedom. We can only determine how.*  
—Ronald Reagan, October 24

With 1984 only two months away, our president has demonstrated his mastery of newspeak. Where do we support freedom? Wherever it doesn't exist—in El Salvador, in South Africa, in the Philippines, in Lebanon. How do we support peace? By making war.

Reagan and his aides and allies also tell us that nowhere are we engaged in hostilities, much less war or invasion. Thus Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica, appearing with Reagan at a press conference to lend the semblance of collective action to the invasion of Grenada, insisted that this action was "not an invasion," but was merely intended to help the people of Grenada "choose for themselves" the type of government they want. And the president insists that the Marines who were blown to bits in Beirut were not engaged in hostilities, but were simply "peacekeepers," blocking the path of an evil force waiting to take over the Mideast—"a force" that "is ready to do that." And Reagan has repeatedly insisted that the U.S. is not engaged in war against Nicaragua. At first, he claimed that he was merely trying to stop the flow of arms to the rebels in El Salvador. When it became clear that there was no longer a detectable flow of arms he insisted that the Sandinistas were destabilizing Central America, and that he was simply trying to quiet things down.

But, in fact, in Nicaragua, Grenada and Lebanon the use of American force—whether "covert" or overt—is the major destabilizing force, a force that consistently creates what the administration claims to be opposing. In Nicaragua, encouragement of the *contras* has steadily undermined the possibilities for pluralist democracy and has left the Sandinistas with no alternative but to become steadily more dependent on Cuban and Soviet aid. In Lebanon, the presence of U.S. Marines has virtually eliminated the pos-

sibility of a peaceful accommodation of the various contesting forces. In Grenada, the American invasion has eliminated any chance for self-determination.

And in all three areas the administration's bellicose moves have vastly increased the chances of an escalation of hostilities that could lead to world war.

Reagan tells us that his primary reason for invading Grenada was to secure the safety of the 700 American medical students at St. Georges University medical school. But four plane loads of students left the island unhindered the day before the invasion, the remaining ones said they were unconcerned about their safety, and Charles Modica, chancellor of the university at its facility in New York, and other school officials said they had no reason to believe the students on Grenada were in any danger.

In the coup three weeks ago in which Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, three cabinet members, two labor leaders and others were murdered by soldiers under the command of Gen. Hudson Austin, the issues were murky. The administration initially claimed that the coup was carried out under the direction of the Cubans or the Soviets—a charge repeated after the invasion by Dominica Prime Minister Charles. But the Cubans denounced the coup, which was clearly not in their self interest or in that of the Soviets. Even had there been no invasion, the murderous seizure of power was a propaganda windfall for Reagan hardliners. Indeed, in the absence of any other evidence, based solely on the principle of who benefits, the coup would easily have been one more CIA operation. The "brutal group of leftist thugs," as Reagan called Gen. Austin and his supporters, may yet turn out to have acted under American direction.

### Reagan aggression.

The invasion of this tiny island nation in clear violation of the Organization of American States charter (which forbids intervention in the internal affairs of any state for any reason without an invita-

tion) marks a major escalation in Reagan administration aggression. In Nicaragua, the U.S. is only indirectly engaged in hostilities. In Lebanon, American troops are present as a result of a war started by Israel. But in Grenada, the U.S. is openly resuming the role of world policeman—a role that most Americans had hoped and believed was ended with the defeat of American forces in Vietnam.

Reagan's excuse for this action is the same as it is for Nicaragua and Lebanon, and for his plans to place Pershing and Cruise missiles in Western Europe. It is

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part of what he sees as a struggle of the "free" world against uncivilized barbarians. He may even believe this rhetoric, but if so it makes the situation into which we are being plunged all the more dangerous. If every attempt at revolutionary change by oppressed peoples in the Third World is seen as part of a Soviet plot, if every manifestation of popular hostility to the U.S. because of its support for undemocratic regimes is seen as an attack on the American people, then we are headed for global disaster and inevitable defeat.

The nature of the revolutionary movements in various Third World countries is not really the issue. Whether such regimes are democratically elected, as was the case in Chile, attempts at revolutionary pluralism, as in Nicaragua, or military dictatorships, as the short-lived regime in Grenada seemed to be, successive American administrations have done their best to undermine and destroy them. By casting every attempt at self-determination and social progress as the result of Soviet plots, the Reagan administration is doing its best to create the bi-polar world of its rhetoric.

But that bi-polar world never existed, not even when the world Communist movement actually was directed from Moscow decades ago. In recent years even the Communist world has become increasingly diverse, in large part because of attempts by Communist countries to move away from the undemocratic character of the Soviet Union. And if the Soviet model is unpopular even in Communist countries it is even less emulated by revolutionary regimes in the Third World—even in countries that have no democratic traditions or experience.

After the Vietnam war ended, in large part because of popular pressure, the U.S. did move toward policies that were less hostile to revolutionary change—at least on the surface. This was done largely under popular pressure that resulted from the realization that we were not in Vietnam to support democracy or freedom, that the people of Vietnam in overwhelming numbers saw us as colonial oppressors.

For a while, at least in the Democratic Party, many of our political leaders acted as if they understood that revolutions and revolutionary movements could not be orchestrated by Moscow, that they were the result of conditions within each country and that in many instances it was the U.S., not the Soviets, that shared responsibility for revolution—not because of its support of the revolutionaries, but because of its role in sponsoring the oppressors.

When Reagan was elected president, he made no secret of his intentions to bring us back to the pre-Vietnam days of Cold War confrontation. When his initial attempts to intervene in Central America met with popular opposition it became clear that he had no mandate to do so. But while that slowed him down a bit, it did not stop him.

Now it is clear that his policies in Lebanon, Nicaragua and Grenada remain unpopular—the initial polls on Grenada indicate 43 percent of the people opposed Reagan's invasion and only 17 percent supported it. But one would never know this if one looked to the Democratic opposition's response. House Speaker Tip O'Neill and the leading presidential contenders have either supported Reagan's actions or mumbled incoherently, waiting, no doubt to see which way the wind blows. True, unlike the Vietnam days, the Democrats are not now leading us into aggression, but neither are they offering any leadership in opposition. Once again, if we are not to continue on the road to disaster, the leadership will have to come from grassroots movements and popular initiatives.