Actors and Career Development Examined in Columbia U. Survey

By Amy Hersh

Approximately 6,000 Equity members from around the country will be asked to fill out questionnaires for the Artists Training and Career Project, a survey that will take an in-depth look at the career development of actors, along with painters and craftspeople, according to Prof. Joan Jeffri, director of Columbia University’s Research Center for Arts and Culture and Columbia’s program in arts administration.

“We’re trying to determine the points of greatest validation and greatest resistance during an artist’s career,” says Jeffri. The study, beginning in 1992, will take three years to complete, and is only one aspect of the research center’s 10-year-long project focusing on the arts labor market. The project is Jeffri’s brainchild, and she brings first-hand knowledge to it, since she was an actress for six years and remains an Equity member. Jeffri moved from acting into arts administration, and created Columbia’s first course on the subject.

One impetus for the training and career study, Jeffri says, is “I got tired of funding agencies who said they were giving grants to artists at a seminal period in their development, but they had no idea when that seminal period occurs.” Through information gathered from questionnaires, the study will explore artists’ backgrounds and history, from early childhood through their mature careers.

Since she comes from an acting background, Jeffri says, she is especially interested in the question of training, and is curious to see what professionals feel is crucial to an actor’s training.

According to Jeffri, the research center is expecting a 40-50 percent response rate from the 6,000 actors who receive the questionnaires. The information is kept completely confidential and anonymous, since it involves detailed financial information. The list of actors comes from Guy Pace, executive assistant at Equity. “Equity has been very cooperative,” Jeffri says, “and I’m very grateful.” The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is providing $165,000 to fund half of the project, and Jeffri is still trying to raise the remaining portion.

“The point of all of this is the integration of the artist into society,” Jeffri says. “Artists are the social glue that hold it all together.”

The first phase of the research center’s study was a book called “Artishtelp: The Artist’s Guide to Work-Related Human and Social Services.” This includes information about where artists can get health care, life insurance, and legal and financial services in 128 cities around the country. “Artishtelp” was funded by the Ford Foundation and published by Neal Schuman in 1989.

The second phase of the research center’s work was the Information on Artists study, which was completed last year. More than 1,000 actors around the country answered the survey concerning the work-related human and social service needs of artists. The good news from the study is that a higher percentage of actors make a living in their profession than do other artists. And, more than any other artists, actors felt that professionalism was tied to making a living at their art. Information on Artists is not available in bookstores, but can be read at the research center. Sections of the 11-volume study are also available for sale there.

The final stage of the study will be a book that examines the artist in American society from the 1930s Work Projects Administration until the present. Jeffri says the research center will commission experts to each write a chapter. Work on this project probably won’t begin until 1993.

Jeffri’s other work at the research center includes a study of black members of symphony orchestras for the New York Philharmonic, and a study for New Jersey Transit about commuters’ transportation needs for attending Broadway. She has also consulted with Save the Theatres.

Conceptualizing the problems that all artists face is key to doing these studies. Jeffri insists, “Numbers mean nothing without issues.” Jeffri says, “They do nothing, they say nothing, they mean nothing. We need to train more people not only to be specialists, but to be generalists... and to think of whole country, not just own turf.”