Good evening everyone, and welcome to the 2019 National Annual General Meeting of Canadian Actors’ Equity Association. My name is Scott Bellis, and I am Equity’s current Council President, a role I have been honoured to hold for just about 15 months now. I have been a member of Equity since 1988, and am now in my third term as a National Councillor for the BC/Yukon region. I’m also a resident of Vancouver, where the daffodils have been up since late January. I offer that as a quaint observation only, and definitely not as a statement about the superior living conditions of one particular region over any other. (ha ha.)

I’d like to extend thanks to those of you who have joined us here today in person, and to those who are watching remotely via our live stream. If you are viewing this as a recording later on, I hope you will find this recording enlightening and informative. Welcome to all.

I’d like to start things off by reading Equity’s Equality statement.

Equity embraces an open and inclusive environment, and encourages respectful behaviour that affirms the dignity of all individuals. Equity further recognizes our shared responsibility for vigilance in creating and maintaining this environment. Any behaviour to the contrary will not be tolerated by the Association.

Okay! 2019 is under way, and so is a new term of activity for your National Council. You will recall Equity elections occurred last fall. The results saw eight Councillors returning to represent their respective regions, along with the others who have previously served on Council prior to the 2015 term. Institutional memory is sometimes hard to come by after Equity elections, but we have a basketful! Additionally, 12 Equity members are trying on their Councillor hats for the first time, injecting a bunch of fresh energy, ideas and perspectives, which are essential to the progress and evolution of Equity.

Returning Councillors from last term (along with myself)
Karen Bassett – Atlantic (NS, NB, PE, NL)
Deena Aziz - Quebec
Catriona Leger - Eastern Ontario/Outaouais
Ian Leung - Alberta North/NWT
Raugi Yu – BC/Yukon
Peter McGillivray - Eastern Opera
Diane Speirs - Western Opera
New Councillors this term:
Maev Beaty, Ryan G. Hinds, Richard Lam, Nora McLellan, Michaela Washburn, and Jennifer Wigmore – Ontario
Joshua Beaudry – Saskatchewan
Valerie Planche - Alberta South
Erika Morey and Melissa Novecosky - Stage Management
Van Abrahams – Eastern Opera
Jenna Savella – Dance

Also returning from previous terms on Council:
Donna Fletcher – Manitoba
Kerry Davidson – BC/Yukon
Kristina Nicoll – Ontario

Many thanks to our staff, some of whom are here tonight, who have industriously organized tonight’s meeting. We have them to thanks for all the arrangements.

All right, let’s get started.

Since the first meeting of this Council term, in November, your national Council has been engaged in learning about Equity’s governance system, how our Association operates, and the responsibilities of a volunteer governing board. We have just completed two days of Council meetings, attending to Association housekeeping items and exploring many new ideas on how to help Equity work better for the members: More details on that in a minute. Over the first few meetings I have observed a ton of creative and constructive energy with this renewed Council, and I have no doubt that the membership is in good hands for the next three years.

I’ll speak now about Council work over the past year. It has been a tumultuous time for our Association in many respects. Events last year surrounding allegations of sexual harassment at Soulpepper Theatre Company here in Toronto affected a lot of members across our entire community, and provided Council with some significant challenges to deal with, as these events occurred on the heels of the launch of our Not in Our Space! initiative the previous year. I corresponded with almost 200 individual members through emails, social media messages, texts and phone calls in the months following. Although the circumstances were difficult, I was grateful for the contact with so many members and the opportunity to hear their concerns. In the wake of these events, your Council, with input from the membership, undertook further review of our bylaws and procedures in this area, and made certain changes to augment the large amount of work already undertaken in this area. Among those changes was an extension of the reporting deadline for incidents of workplace harassment to two years, and a special Council resolution opening a temporary window with no time limit for the reporting of any past incidents stretching back more than two years. It doesn’t matter how long ago it happened; if you wish to report it, Council will listen and respond. That unlimited reporting window will remain open until June of 2020, after which time the two-year reporting deadline will remain in effect.
In the positive, Council has observed an extremely encouraging uptake of Not in Our Space! from engagers across the country; they have, by and large, been great partners with us in this venture, and it seems that the culture of our collective workspaces is changing for the better as a result, with standards of safety and respect rising significantly. Great news. Clearly there is more work to be done, to keep our practices current and effective, and Council will do it.

As a side note, it has been encouraging to see the changes coming from the new leadership at Soulpepper, where so many of our members have worked over the years.

Our National Office has seen some staffing changes over this past year, starting with the sudden passing of Manager of Business Rep Services Keith Davidson one year ago, and the retirement of our long-time Director of Finance, Doug Irons. Others from the senior staff and business rep team have recently departed as well, or are about to. While staffing changes are not unusual in an office setting, this high amount of turnover has presented some organizational challenges this year, and I have witnessed extra efforts from our staff to maintain a high level of service. Their constant commitment to the members is appreciated.

The unexpected non-ratification of the new CTA by our colleagues at PACT last spring was a major surprise to us, as Council had been informed us that a good deal for our members had been struck in a constructive negotiating environment. Everyone on the Equity side was shocked by the news. That negotiations would have to roll back and start up again was a clear cause for concern for Council, and among the membership, as the CTA is the most commonly used agreement for contracting Equity members. Our negotiating team, led by our Executive Director, Arden R. Ryshpan, is currently working to strike a new deal with PACT, and I have confidence that our team will achieve a deal that will benefit our members, and, I hope, mitigate the concerns of PACT members at the same time.

On the plus side, it was highly satisfying for my colleagues on the Council Education and Renewal Committee, and myself, to see the increase in member engagement during the Council elections last fall. There was a noteworthy increase in voter turnout, a number of regional member meetings were organized across the country, and a higher number of candidates put their names forth for election. This is hugely important for our Association. We are a relatively small Association stretching across a vast country, and it requires the will and energy of our members to help drive the work forward. I was especially glad to see elections held once again in the Ontario region, where the majority of our members live and work, and where 17 people ran for seven Council seats. Other great races were run in the Dance region, BC/Yukon, Alberta North, Western Opera, and in Manitoba (a real nailbiter) and it was encouraging to see the overall increased interest in Council activity. Equity runs much better with it than without it. If you have an itch to get involved, check out the Council Committees page on the website.

A whole series of regional membership meetings also took place over the last year, which is something I hope to see continue. It gave members a chance to connect with their Regional Councillors in person and chat about issues they are interested in. Council’s aim is to see that trend continue. If you would like to see a membership meeting organized in your region, get in touch with your Councillor. They will be happy to hear from you.
But enough about the past. Let's look ahead.

Many Council committees have already been renewed, and have started up their work, and I'll mention a few of them here:

The **Senior Artist Support Task Force** is looking at ways to address the concerns of senior Equity members in our community. The research will examine ongoing professional career support, maintaining creativity in senior years, retirement, legacy perpetuation, retirement income planning, advocacy opportunities, insurance and health. There is much cultural wealth, skill and wisdom to be retained from the experience of our long-time members, and we want them to have the opportunity to share it and keep contributing to the artistic landscape of our community.

Carving out a career in performing arts is not an easy road in any case. Inconsistent work opportunities and financial instability can take their toll over time. The **Mental Health Task Force** is researching the nature and prevalence of mental health issues in Equity's membership, and the needs of members for support in this area. It will make recommendations to Council for any policy changes and/or action that may arise from this research.

The **Diversity and Inclusion Committee** continues to provide linkage to members, particularly those from diverse communities (including, but not limited to, diversity of race, religion, sexual orientation, and difference in ability, whether physical or mental), for the purpose of:

- increasing Council awareness of concerns and issues important to these diverse communities within the membership, and making recommendations on how to serve those communities; and
- seeking ways to raise awareness in the theatre community (e.g. engagers, and members who are directors) about ways to encourage representative diversity onstage, and in all related hiring within Equity's jurisdiction.

The **Safe and Respectful Workplaces Task Force** works to strengthen Equity's commitment to Safe and Respectful Workplaces through policy recommendations and implementation, and increasing education / awareness between Equity members and engagers to promote more positive work environments. **Not in Our Space!** falls under the purview of this committee. If you have suggestions on how to make this program better, let us know. Look for the “talk to Council” link on the website.

At the start of each term, Council looks at all the input collected from the **Council Focus Survey** attached to the election process. There were over 700 suggestion details put forward by members around various topics including Auditions, Arts Advocacy, Governance, Insurance, Inclusivity, Member Engagement and Safe Working Conditions. Council is now tackling that material to see what important trends are out there among the membership that we can take up and make improvements on.
Of course there is more activity beyond what I have described here, but I hope this gives you a sense of our present focus. We have a huge pile of work ahead this term, and I trust to see Council dive into it with drive and energy.

In closing, I’d like to quote something I read recently in a biography of Thornton Wilder, the American dramatist, during a run of his comedy The Matchmaker that I just closed yesterday in Vancouver. In assessing whether he should pursue a career in teaching or keep on eking out a living a writer, his father, who was generally distrustful of artists, nonetheless offered this observation. “I believe that the one who does a thing must hold a higher value than the one who tells how it is done”. Wilder kept on writing, and eventually won three Pulitzers. When I read this I felt strongly that this applies to us. Equity members are by nature and necessity, doers. We are the makers. We are the givers. We are the ones who stand up and put the work out there. We make the schedules, we run the rehearsals, we create the worlds, and we tell the stories. Equity is here to ensure that it happens in spaces that are fair, respectful, and safe. Let’s keep on being doers together.

Respectfully, and in solidarity,

Respectfully submitted. Thanks for listening.

Scott Bellis,
Council President