

RESOLUTION 26

Recognition of Theodore Bikel's Years of Labor Service

Submitted by Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO
Referred to the Legislation and Policy Committee

THEODORE BIKEL, better known as Theo, is the epitome of a Renaissance Man. Not content with a robust and diverse résumé as a multihyphenate performer, Theodore Bikel also leads a life committed to social justice. A longtime labor leader and president of the Associated Actors and Artistes of America, AFL-CIO (the 4 As) since 1988, Theo's 55 years in the American labor movement are a testament to both the man and the professional. A member of five different AFL-CIO unions (Actors' Equity Association, American Federation of Musicians, American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, Screen Actors Guild and American Guild of Variety Artists), Theo has never backed down from his conviction that "working people as individuals are helpless and powerless unless they band together to make common cause." Or, as *The Boston Globe* put it, "Bikel has been an articulate spokesman against oppression, dictatorship, inhumanity, [and] war."

Bikel the Actor on Stage, Screen and Television

Born in Vienna in 1924, educated in the United Kingdom and naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1961, Theodore Bikel began his career as a professional performer in the theater. Discovering his love for the stage after his family fled Austria to settle in Palestine, Theo's first position was as an apprentice at the Habimah Theatre in Tel Aviv in 1943. In 1944, Theo co-founded the Cameri Theatre, which is today Israel's largest and offers classical and modern drama in Hebrew. After the Second World War, he went to London to study at

the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, graduating with honors. In his first role in London's famed West End theaters, Theo was directed by Sir Lawrence Olivier in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Vivien Leigh. In 1954, with a career in the UK thriving, Theo received an invitation to appear on Broadway in a play starring Louis Jourdan titled *Tonight in Samakand*. For this role, Bikel earned his Actors' Equity Association union card and, in his own words, "Little could they suspect that, by doing so, they bought themselves a future president for their own union."

Theo went on to an extremely active career in American theater. He starred in the world premiere of *The Sound of Music*, where he created the role of Captain von Trapp. The role he has been most identified with since his debut in 1967 is Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Theo has played this iconic role more than 2,000 times, more often than any actor. Theo was twice nominated for Broadway's Tony Award: once, in 1958, as Best Supporting or Featured Actor (Dramatic) for *The Rope Dancers*, and again in 1960, as Best Supporting or Featured Actor (Musical) for *The Sound of Music*.

During his time as Captain von Trapp in 1960, Theo was moved to greater service to his union. In his autobiography *Theo*, Bikel recounts Actors' Equity's fight for pension benefits in its contracts with theaters, which resulted in the 1960 actors' strike. "Over two thousand Actors' Equity members marched down the street to the Astor [hotel] in orderly fashion," he writes

of a membership meeting to discuss pensions, "carrying an American flag, the Equity banner and signs proclaiming the names of their Broadway shows." During the strike, Theo became an increasingly vocal member of Actors' Equity, correctly arguing that the local government would need to be involved to settle the dispute. In the end, New York City earmarked a portion of admissions taxes for performer pensions.

Soon after, Theo was appointed as an observer to the Actors' Equity Legislative Committee and in 1961 joined the Equity Council. His commitment to the practical survival of his fellow actors was confirmed in 1962 when he became one of the founding members of the Actors Federal Credit Union, pushing for the auto and home insurance that were often denied to performers based on imagined "risk." In 1964, Theo bested the veteran stage actress Lillian Gish to be elected Vice-President of Actors' Equity. In 1973, Theo was elected President of Actors' Equity, a position he held until 1982. During his tenure, Theo helped establish the Manhattan Plaza residence for low-income artists and was appointed to the National Council on the Arts, advising the National Endowment for the Arts from 1977 until 1982.

His work in support of international labor solidarity is of equal note. A staunch supporter of Actors' Equity's membership in the International Federation of Actors (FIA), Theo became Vice-President of FIA in 1981. His 10 years of service to actors' interests the world over were punctuated by assisting the formation of Canadian Actors' Equity, facilitating interaction with the (then) Soviet and Cuban actors' unions, speaking to internationally influential bodies such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) and UNESCO on the topic of protecting and nurturing the arts, and rapprochement with British Actors' Equity. Given that the U.S. entertainment industry is one of the most densely unionized and the U.S. entertainment industry represents one of America's largest exports, Theo's advocacy on behalf of the arts has been in service to not only

our unions and our economy, but also our culture. Of unions for performing artists, Bikel writes, "If it were not for the unions and guilds, we would have nothing to protect us from our own folly or from those who seek to abuse our love for what we do."

To call Theodore Bikel's film career varied is an understatement. Theo has appeared in more than 30 motion pictures, ranging from his first film role in 1951's *The African Queen*, opposite Humphrey Bogart, to a rock group manager in Frank Zappa's 1971 rock film *200 Motels*. Bikel has portrayed numerous memorable characters, such as the Hungarian language expert ("the hairy hound from Budapest") in the film version of *My Fair Lady* and the Southern sheriff in 1958's *The Defiant Ones*, which earned him an Academy Award nomination. Theo joined the Screen Actors Guild in 1955 and remains an active member to this day.

Theo's work in television has been no less dynamic, spanning more than 35 years. Witness his repeated appearances in different roles on "Murder, She Wrote," his guest-starring parts on such series and specials as "Dynasty," "Falcon Crest," "Victory At Entebbe," "Paper Chase," as Worf's adoptive father in "Star Trek: The Next Generation," two appearances as a "space rabbi" and a Minbari leader in "Babylon 5," a survivor battling memories in "L.A. Law," and an embattled father in "Law and Order." He won a Los Angeles Regional Emmy Award in 1988 for his work in public broadcasting's "Harris Newmark." As a member of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, Theo's dedication to his fellow union members does not stop even for honored rites of passage. Mr. Bikel tells the story of going from his wedding reception in New York City in April of 1967 directly to AFTRA's picket line outside NBC. He asked his new wife to stay in the limousine as he borrowed a picket sign to join the protest. Later, on his first wedding anniversary, his wife asked him whether he intended to find a picket line to celebrate the occasion.

Bikel the Musician

Theo's love of music, in particular folk music, has remained a constant throughout his life. From his concert debut at the Carnegie Recital Hall in 1956 to spending his off time during *The Sound of Music* playing at small folk music clubs to his heavy touring schedule to this day, Theodore Bikel is a 52-year member of the American Federation of Musicians New York Local 802 and a deeply committed performer. Having appeared in concerts around the world, his capabilities in seven languages and experience as an accomplished translator of song lyrics are often on display. Theo has appeared with 25 symphonies and orchestras; recorded 36 albums, most recently in 2007; and has appeared in clubs from El Patio in Mexico City, Mexico, to the Bottom Line in New York City.

Bikel's passion for folk music has offered a forum for the fusion of Theo the Artist and Theo the Activist. His many accolades in the folk community include co-founding the Newport Folk Festival, to this day the premier folk music festival in the United States, in 1959 and seeing his 1961 book *Folksongs and Footnotes* demand three reprint editions. His experiences as a folk musician in turbulent times in America's history, however, provide much insight into

this compelling labor leader. A supporter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in its early years, Theo often traveled the American South performing with bass player Bill Lee, father of filmmaker Spike. At one point, Theo was arrested for taking part in demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, and led his fellow cell mates in song to protest their treatment. As a delegate to the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Theo was asked to mount a protest in response to Hubert Humphrey's victory over Eugene McCarthy. Theo decided the most symbolic way to demonstrate the collective frustration of many delegates was through song, leading the 1,000-strong McCarthy delegation in the folk songs, "We Shall Overcome," "Ain't Gonna Study War No More" and "We Shall Not Be Moved."

In his autobiography, Bikel writes, "It seems that I have conducted my life on two different emotional planes: one lighthearted, gregarious, even frivolous; the other politically and socially involved and following a serious social and moral commitment." The labor community is grateful to have interacted with Mr. Bikel on both planes and on behalf of the workers it represents, extends its thanks.