

# Leading Man

*A Broadway actor on the “true spark of theater”*

NICK WYMAN '72 has done something very rare: made a living as “an entertainer, a mere mummer,” primarily in live theater, for 40 years. As president of the Actors' Equity Association (AEA), celebrating its centennial this year, Wyman wants to make the same “gift of a career in this frustrating, exhilarating business” more possible for its nearly 50,000 members: actors and stage managers from Broadway to the smallest local theaters. “My ambition,” he says, “is to figure out how to expand opportunities for them.”

The statistics are disheartening. If only one aspiring actor and actress at each of America's 90,000 high schools pursue a career, that's 180,000 swarming to auditions each year. Meanwhile, Wyman estimates that there are only about 200,000 union-card-carrying actors (members of AEA and/or the nation's three other performing arts unions\*), most of whom work part-time, at best. “A little less than half our own members even work at all,” he points out, “and only at some point during the year.” Also “appalling” are the wages. The median earnings for the 2011 season for an AEA member were \$7,256.

Wyman's own run has defied those odds. He has 15 Broadway credits and has been in countless regional productions, films, TV shows, radio spots, voiceovers, and more than a hundred commercials. Some may recall his edgy portrayal of the contract terrorist Mathius Targo in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (he kicks Bruce Willis in the face, but is killed in the end), and a viciously funny Thénardier in *Les Misérables* on Broadway.

In part, this is due to genes. Wyman's genial blond-haired, blue-eyed looks and broad-shouldered physique have often led to roles as moral authority figures: doctors, judges, or fathers. In March, he played Henry Woodhouse, a patrician newspaper publisher, in the debut of *The Single Girls Guide* at the

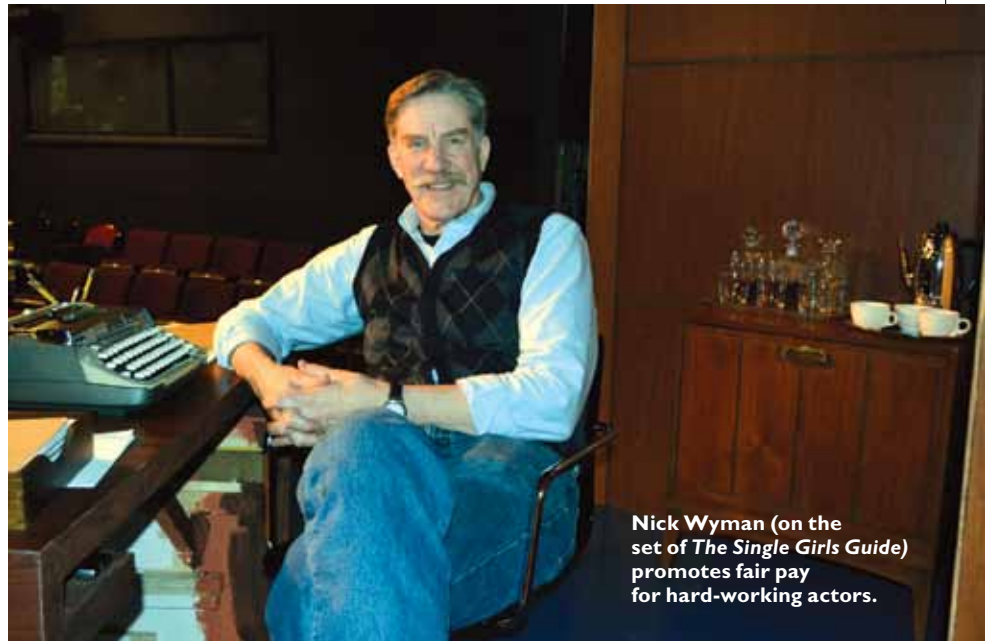
\*The other unions are Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the American Guild of Musical Artists, and the American Guild of Variety Artists.

Capital Repertory Theatre in Albany, New York. The stylish 1960s-era musical romp revolves around Woodhouse's daughter, Emma, a Manhattan advice columnist forging her way in a male-dominated culture (à la Helen Gurley Brown). Invariably, her plans to promote alternatives to marriage go awry, and Woodhouse assures her that life is imperfect: “perfect is—boring and dead.” “Perhaps there is a world of technicolor, where life plays out like pictures on a screen,” he sings, with a tenderness belied by his hulking, six-foot-five frame. “I'd rather have the mess of love.

unsympathetic” streak: “If people don't meet my expectations, I can be rude or even abusive,” he reports. “I try not to be that way.”

On stage, though, those less-than-lovable traits can shine. Using his outsized nose and a distinctive facial crease that mar his look of WASPy erudition, Wyman easily transforms into a villainous, mangled-brow bully. For almost 2,500 performances, from 1997 to 2003, he revealed in the “feral fierceness” of Thénardier. Amid a tear-jerking drama of redemption filled with poverty and death, “there is one juicy, funny thread, and that is you,” he says of the role. “The audience is thrilled when you appear because they feel like, ‘Oh my God, give us a break. Make us laugh.’ And you do. But Thénardier is not merely a clown. He has a very dark side. He is there scrabbling around to make money to put the next day's bread on the table—and pulling people's teeth out of their heads to get it.”

Wyman has held the elected, unpaid post of AEA president since 2010, following 20



Nick Wyman (on the set of *The Single Girls Guide*) promotes fair pay for hard-working actors.

I'd rather have the fight. 'Cause love's gone in an instant. When you find it, hold it tight.”

“He's an audience favorite, of course,” says Capital Repertory's producing artistic director, Maggie Mancinelli-Cahill. “They like the authenticity of his relationship with his daughter. Nick is also charming, funny, an eloquent speaker, and has wonderful manners—all of which play into the role. He is the guy who pulls the chair out for you at the table.”

Conversely, Wyman is terrific at playing what he calls “powerful, rich jerks in suits.” Casting directors must sense an “arrogant,

years on the governing board. In 1987, cast as Firmin in *Phantom of the Opera*, he heard rumors that the show might be canceled due to a conflict between the union and its producers over casting Sarah Brightman, star of the London production, because she wasn't American. “I realized,” he explains, that “the people making the decision had a direct impact on my life and livelihood—and I am enough of a control freak that I wanted to be a part of the decision.”

Pre-union, actors were routinely exploited. They rehearsed for days without pay, were

left stranded on the road if shows closed suddenly, and had to supply their own makeup and costumes. Today, union contracts with more than 100 U.S. theatrical organizations address those issues, as well as health, disability, and pension benefits, and, increasingly, digital use of images. Because acting is such physical work, rules govern what time actors show up for performances and how long they can rehearse (only “10 out of 12” hours during the arduous technical runs that precede opening day). Monitored, too, are the angle at which a stage is raked, custom-fitted elbow and knee pads, the cleaning of costumes and hairpieces, and exposure to special-effect make-up and chemicals (e.g., smoke and fog machines). Most pressing, Wyman reports, “is maintaining decent wages and working conditions in the face of economic difficulties and downward pressure on ticket sales, subscriber rolls, and donor contributions.”

His roles straddle two of America’s frailest institutions: unions and live theater. (Third in line, he notes, are probably newspapers.) “Look, there’s never been an acting bubble: ‘Hey, come on down, money’s growing on trees here at the theater!’” he says. “We do this because we are junkies. We have to. We’ve gotten a taste of this in elementary or high school when we were on stage and people laughed or applauded or cried or, that most precious of audience reactions: utter, breath-holding silence.”

In this, the union also protects actors from themselves. “They will do a 29-hour play-reading for \$100 and a bottle of water,” Wyman says. “There are theaters in L.A. where actors work for weeks on end—for carfare.” Wyman himself worked for only a little more than that at the Capital Repertory Theatre (“one-and-a-half times what I would make collecting unemployment,” he notes). Accommodations were primitive and the six-day weeks in Albany, away from his family, precluded auditioning for other jobs.

He met his wife, Juilliard graduate Beth McDonald, in 1978, while they were playing Lennie and Curly’s wife in *Of Mice and Men* at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre. “My line about that is, ‘As I broke Beth’s neck eight times a week for six weeks, we fell in love,’” he says. They married a year later. Their grown daughters live in New York City: Caitlin is a fashion buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue; Madeline is a kindergarten teacher. Their son, Tommy, has Rubinstein-Taybi syndrome and lives with the Wymans in Yonkers.

Suddenly Wyman tears up. “I just made a

connection,” he says. Lennie and Tommy are both overgrown children who “need to be protected,” he explains, taking a deep breath. “I hope my son’s life ends better than Lennie’s.”

It’s a shared moment of vulnerability: the essence of why live theater is so powerful and, Wyman believes, so critical to a cohesive society. “Theater brings you things you’re not going to see on TV or in the movies, things that take place in the same room with you,” he explains. “Like that sense you had when I caught my breath in talking about Tommy.”

Digital screens, he thinks, remove people from the universality of visceral, intimate human connections. “Everyone is glued to their Facebook feeds or on their smart phones or their iPads and laptops,” he adds, getting heated. “We’re all staring into each other’s screens when we should be staring into each other’s eyes. And it’s a loss.”

The “true spark of theater” is most palpable at smaller theaters like the 286-seat “Cap Rep.” “We are the *real* 3-D,” director Mancinelli-Cahill makes clear. The nonprofit, founded in 1981, draws diners and shoppers to Albany’s architecturally stunning, yet often depopulated, downtown. Given its League of Resident Theaters (LORT) AEA union contract, Cap Rep audiences can expect “a certain professional-level production,” she says, reflecting national standards and seasoned union workers.

On a \$2.5-million annual budget, Cap Rep puts on 250 performances, year-round. None are plays that tour from Broadway. Mancinelli-Cahill keeps classics alive, and helps launch new creative works (crucial to furthering the art form of theater itself) such as *The Single Girls Guide*, even at financial risk. Audiences may shun shows they’ve never heard of, but actors flock to them. “It’s very exciting to do new work. It’s still inchoate,” says Wyman, who collaborated with the playwright and lyricist to hone his role. He wouldn’t have sacrificed family time to do *Hello, Dolly*.

Big-budget commercial theater is relatively successful: according to The Broadway League, more people see a Broadway show than see all of New York City’s professional sports teams, and the shows generate higher gross earnings. Yet most regional theaters limp along. “The rich get richer and the poor go out of business,” Wyman says. Live theater is being replaced with more reliable crowd-pleasers like “concerts, cabarets, or open-mic nights” that further erode opportunities for his members.

Armed with an English literature degree,

Wyman calls himself a “true Harvard man, a wordaholic possessed of a vocabulary that I can beat the crap out of anyone else on the planet with.” He makes use of his talent in writing and speaking whenever possible. In Albany, that meant impassioned talks with reporters and speeches to playgoers and Cap Rep’s donors. Such chivalric schmoozing suits him. “I am superficially charming,” he allows. “If I can convince some of the relatively deep pockets in the area to pony up money or to see more value in theater, that will benefit my members—and the world.”

Raised in affluent Summit, New Jersey, where his father was a carpet-company executive, Wyman went to Harvard “because Yale didn’t pay me enough,” he quips. “I only applied to Harvard, Yale, and Kalamazoo, because I knew I was a catch.” He planned to major in psychology and become a lawyer, although he noted Yale’s drama school and thought, “Maybe I’d do some acting.”

Lured to Cambridge by a Harvard National Scholarship, he made good friends, appeared in about a dozen shows—Hasty Pudding, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Loeb Theatre productions—and failed at rowing. Some classmates “still have bruises on their backs from my hitting them with an oar because I was so out of sync.” As for academics, to this day, Wyman can recite the words, from the English department head tutor, that quashed his hope of becoming a professor: “Your grades in English are too erratic to warrant having a senior member of the faculty read your thesis.”

This rejection made it easier to eschew the typical trajectories of an Ivy League education in favor of acting, “a job that brought me joy.” He moved to Manhattan, graduated from the Circle in the Square Theatre School, and by 1974 had earned his Equity card as an understudy in the touring company of *Grease*. Then in its original heyday, the musical and its gang-of-guys antics were about as much fun as it gets for a fresh young actor in love with his trade.

Now 62, Wyman is a veteran of the stage—he says “theater hack,” in self-mocking moments—and of the unromantic slog required to make it in the stage *business*. Ardor for “cool parts” in megahit musicals has lessened. “It’s about, ‘What am I doing with my life? What have I learned that I can share?’” he says.

With his daughters grown and three pensions (thanks to actors’ unions), Wyman is now a little freer to engage in art over commerce. *The Single Girls Guide* role was one he naturally covets: nurturing father. “It’s dif-



ficult in the face of the world and the acting business, which constantly say 'No!' and beat the joy out of life, to maintain one's faith, enthusiasm, and spirit," he says. "My job is to let my members know the merit and wor-

thiness of their choice: that they are doing a good thing, and should keep on trudging."

On March 30, the Albany show ended its run. Wyman will attend galas and award ceremonies around the country honoring the

union's centennial. A PBS show he hoped to shoot in Prague never panned out. With little else waiting in the wings, "I am," he says, "like my members, looking for work."

~NELL PORTER BROWN

## Vote Now

THIS SPRING, alumni can vote for five new Harvard Overseers and six new elected directors of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA). Ballots, mailed out by April 1, must be received back in Cambridge by noon on May 24 to be counted. Results of the election will be announced at the HAA's annual meeting on May 30, on the afternoon of Commencement day. All Harvard degree-holders, except Corporation members and officers of instruction and government, may vote for Overseer candidates. The election for HAA directors is open to all Harvard degree-holders.

Candidates for Overseer may also be nominated by petition, that is, by obtaining a prescribed number of signatures from eligible degree-holders. The deadline for petitions passed on February 1; no candidates were presented.

For Overseer (six-year term):

**Susan L. Carney** '73, J.D. '77, Hamden, Connecticut. Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

**Christopher B. Field** '75, Stanford, California. Director, department of global ecology, Carnegie Institution for Science; Melvin and Joan Lane chair in interdisciplinary environmental studies, Stanford University.

**Deanna Lee** '84, New York City. Chief communications and digital strategies officer, Carnegie Corporation of New York.

**Walter H. Morris Jr.** '73, M.B.A. '75, Potomac, Maryland. Retired principal, Ernst & Young LLP.

**Gilbert S. Omenn**, M.D. '65, Ann Arbor. Professor of internal medicine, human genetics, and public health and director of the Center for Computational Medicine and Bioinformatics, University of Michigan.

**Sanjay H. Patel** '83, A.M. '83, London. Managing partner and head of international private equity, Apollo Management International LLP.

**Ana Maria Salazar**, J.D. '89, Mexico

City. Anchor, *ImagenNews/Living in Mexico/El Primer Café*; CEO, Grupo Salazar.

**Gwill York** '79, M.B.A. '84, Cambridge. Managing director and co-founder, Light-house Capital Partners.

For elected director (three-year term):

**Theodore "Ted" H. Ashford III** '86, Wilmington, Delaware. President, Ashford Capital Management.

**Richard R. Buery Jr.** '92, New York City. President and CEO, The Children's Aid Society.

**Patrick S. Chung** '96, J.D.-M.B.A. '04, Menlo Park, California. Partner, New Enterprise Associates.

**Shilla Kim-Parker** '04, M.B.A. '09, New York City. Senior director, strategy and

business development, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

**Lori Lesser** '88, J.D. '93, New York City. Partner, Simpson Thacher and Bartlett LLP.

**Barbara Natterson Horowitz** '83, A.M. '83, Los Angeles. Professor and cardiologist, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA; author.

**Julie Gage Palmer** '84, Chicago. Lecturer in law, University of Chicago Law School.

**Argelia M. Rodriguez**, M.B.A. '84, Washington, D.C. President and CEO, District of Columbia College Access Program.

**Jacques Salès**, LL.M. '67, of Paris. *Avocat à la Cour* (attorney at law), Ginestie Magellan Paley-Vincent.



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### OVERSEER



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### DIRECTOR