

01.02_9.10_Rebecca Damon -Union Policy + Stance post Actors Strike

[00:00:00] **Caroline:** In the Podlight is hosted on SANDS Talks, the official podcast platform of SANDS College of Performing Arts at Pace University.

[00:00:08] **Grant:** Hi, I'm Grant.

[00:00:09] **Caroline:** And I'm [00:00:10] Caroline.

[00:00:10] **Grant:** Welcome to In the Podlight, where we spotlight creatives from different identities and experiences.

[00:00:15] **Caroline:** Join us as we illuminate how they blaze a path forward through the challenges [00:00:20] and opportunities of the post pandemic entertainment industry.

[00:00:24] **Grant:** On today's episode, I'm really excited. We're chatting with my longtime friend, Rebecca Damon. She's an amazing leader in our [00:00:30] fight for our labor rights and her current positions as executive vice president and New York Local 1 president of SAG AFTRA. In addition to her fierce advocacy with SAG AFTRA, [00:00:40] she is also on the board of POWHER New York, an organization committed to securing economic equality for all women.

[00:00:46] **Caroline:** Rebecca truly is a woman after my own heart. [00:00:50] There is so much in this conversation for our listeners to learn. to learn from and implement as they move forward in their own creative journeys. We chat about the [00:01:00] SAG AFTRA merger, the importance of sister unions, the impact of artificial intelligence on the entertainment industry, and the need for actors to stay [00:01:10] informed, get involved, and take control of their careers.

[00:01:14] **Grant:** Let's shed some light.

[00:01:15] **Caroline:** Welcome, Rebecca.

[00:01:17] **Grant:** Hi, Rebecca. We're so happy to have you. We're [00:01:20] so excited for this conversation. How are you tonight?

[00:01:23] **Rebecca:** I'm good. Thank you so much for having me. This is a lot of fun to be here tonight. And I'm very excited to talk

[00:01:29] **Caroline:** [00:01:30] to you guys. We are so excited to talk with you as well.

[00:01:33] **Caroline:** I thought I'd start with a fun question. In doing some research about you, I love that you grew up in the [00:01:40] Midwest. Because I went to school in the Midwest, and I have a feeling for community and vibe of that. And I also noticed that there [00:01:50] was a great love of artistry, voiceover, and the Muppets. And I wonder if you could speak to the Muppets.

[00:01:59] **Rebecca:** Oh [00:02:00] my goodness, to start with the Muppets, that's, that's really funny and great. Anybody who's listening to this, hopefully they're a huge Jim Henson fan. I know growing up, [00:02:10] when I was very young, I, You know, a lot of people like to get a barn and put on a show. I had a big backyard growing up and my parents had [00:02:20] two refrigerator boxes that had come, you know, delivery and I requisitioned them for my own purposes in the neighborhood.

[00:02:27] **Rebecca:** I was like, no, you can't like recycle and throw those [00:02:30] out. And, you know, borrowed other people's puppets. My brother's no puppets. He had animal, which I thought very unfair that he had animals. So he was too young to perform, but we did a whole Muppet [00:02:40] puppet show blaring from a player coming out of our house, sold tickets, sold popcorn and made a bunch of money.

[00:02:47] **Rebecca:** So I feel like this was my early days of [00:02:50] entrepreneurial love. And love of just the fun and the artistry of it all. It's funny cause it wasn't until many years later when I moved to New York that I actually got to [00:03:00] spend some time with many of the performers who either Sesame Street or the Muppets, but you know, I'm, I never do a fangirl, but I will tell you, I have a very special [00:03:10] place in my heart for puppeteers as the result of really what they gave to me in my, my early life.

[00:03:15] **Rebecca:** And it's hilarious to me that in our building where SAG AFTRA is located, [00:03:20] Sesame Workshop is on the other floors. So there are no coincidences in life. Did you

[00:03:24] **Grant:** have a fangirl moment meeting any of these, these artists?

[00:03:28] **Rebecca:** There is something about [00:03:30] the artistry of what puppeteers do. That is to me, I love everything that SAG AFTRA members do, but like, if you have a soft spot for a group of people, their [00:03:40] ability, To use their body and their voice to bring things to life.

[00:03:44] **Rebecca:** And the way they do it really is magical. And it's not just the Henson puppeteers, but just [00:03:50] puppeteers in general, I think are really amazing. And from that experience, I went on and actually took the show on the road and took it like to the school talent show. And one, I, [00:04:00] I figured out how to turn it into my own little business.

[00:04:02] **Rebecca:** So it was a good learning experience being in grade school.

[00:04:05] **Grant:** So you were an entrepreneur before you even knew that an actor had to be an [00:04:10] entrepreneur.

[00:04:10] **Rebecca:** A hundred percent.

[00:04:11] **Grant:** So take us on a little bit of your just back story from, you know, the puppet show in the barn to, you know, university [00:04:20] to then moving to New York and, you know, you have a, clearly have a body of work as an actor and as a voiceover artist.

[00:04:26] **Grant:** Can you give us the sort of succinct version of how you went [00:04:30] from the barn to being an actor and voiceover artist in New York?

[00:04:34] **Rebecca:** I'm gonna laugh at the phrasing of went from the barn. Are you still in the barn? No, no, [00:04:40] no, no. But growing up in Nebraska, I grew up in Omaha, which is a city. I knew many people, you know, just, just in case you were wondering there, Grant.

[00:04:48] **Rebecca:** I should probably say for the, [00:04:50] for the audience that obviously you and I actually had a chance to work together off Broadway and spent many a day backstage talking about the industry and all the rest of that, [00:05:00] which was a lot of fun. So I grew up being an actor, worked in children's theater, helped put myself through school by having worked at a children's theater when I was younger.

[00:05:09] **Rebecca:** And [00:05:10] the. Amazing part of all of the things on the journey of being an actor, whether it was on stage with you or whether it was [00:05:20] voiceover or otherwise, is the love of all of it. But I did

definitely always have a strong draw to the activism piece of it. And the [00:05:30] activism piece of it led me to eventually becoming our New York local president and our national executive vice president.

[00:05:36] **Rebecca:** And a few years back, as you and I were talking about, I transitioned into [00:05:40] taking on this role as executive director for New York local and for our labor policy, international affairs. And I think it's funny because all of the skills that you need to have [00:05:50] as a performer. You also need to have when you are representing performers and to be able to have the ability to really sort of talk about the issues that our members face, [00:06:00] especially now as technology is evolving in such a rapid fire way.

[00:06:04] **Rebecca:** I feel like the personal skills that you'd have to develop as an actor actually work out really well when you're [00:06:10] working with legislators and other people to make sure that they really understand what's happening in our industry and the impact it has on real people, not some of our [00:06:20] highest. Profile members, which we love them.

[00:06:22] **Rebecca:** And it's great that they're a part of our union and they bring us huge power and leverage. But when I think about [00:06:30] our members, I think about our rank and file members that are busy doing the things to put together a career. And I think having come from that. space. You have the [00:06:40] ability to see how a union and how sticking together change people's lives.

[00:06:45] **Rebecca:** And so I think I get to have a certain amount of real [00:06:50] pride in being able to help people to understand what the challenges are and, and, and what's really being faced by our members.

[00:06:59] **Caroline:** A huge part [00:07:00] of the efforts in the merging of SAG and AFTRA way back in the 2012 era. Way back in the 2012 era. But [00:07:10] honestly, you talk about bringing community together, bringing together different organizations.

[00:07:15] **Caroline:** They're all actors. They're all artists. And I think the successful [00:07:20] efforts you had in merging SAG with AFTRA back then, huge. Huge. Could you speak a little

[00:07:26] **Rebecca:** to that? Oh, I certainly could. I gotta say, it never made [00:07:30] sense to me when I was a younger performer why you would have two unions representing you for the same work.

[00:07:37] **Rebecca:** It had grown into this situation where [00:07:40] the evolution from stage to film to TV, if you were, I always had this basic thought in my mind that if you were doing this today, what would you [00:07:50] do, and it certainly wouldn't be, let's have two or three unions representing you for the same work. That would not be what you're trying to build power and leverage for members.

[00:07:58] **Rebecca:** You wouldn't have [00:08:00] all that competition when at the end, it's the same actor doing the job. And so when we started to merge the unions, it was actually a multi year [00:08:10] process that started out with a listening tour, SAG and After Leaders. I was then Screen Actors Guild, New York vice president. And I worked with our New York.

[00:08:18] **Rebecca:** team and folks from around the [00:08:20] country to talk to the members to see what they were really interested in doing, because at the end of the day, the members have to guide the path forward for the union. It's so, so important. And [00:08:30] so we did sessions all around the country and all the then locals and branches of SAG and AFTRA to hear what people were really interested in and what they wanted.[00:08:40]

[00:08:40] **Rebecca:** And. So overwhelmingly people really wanted to see one union. It was the refrain over and over again. And the passion that people brought to [00:08:50] that, it was really quite tremendous. Even the people who weren't as excited about it also understood that we had this problem and merger at the end of the day was the [00:09:00] essential problem that we had to solve.

[00:09:02] **Rebecca:** We had to fix it. I look at that process and I. Just, I met so many amazing, amazing performers and [00:09:10] broadcasters and singers and dancers, recording artists, stunt people, everything, all the things that are SAG AFTRA and don't forget those puppeteers either. I met so many amazing people in that [00:09:20] process who are all trying to get to the best.

[00:09:23] **Rebecca:** Way to solve this for members. And at the end of the day, after we did that listening tour, we began an actual [00:09:30] process called the group for one union of which there were five people from SAG and five people from AFTRA that were the co leads for the different groups. [00:09:40] And I was one for Screen Actors Guild, the one from New York, and we worked together around the clock.

[00:09:45] **Rebecca:** Putting together the actual structure of the new union, whether that [00:09:50] was the constitution and the rules, whether that was working with our staff on the operations, really exciting stuff like that finance,

you name it. But we had to build [00:10:00] what the new thing was going to look like. And the overwhelming thought was that what people wanted us to do was not just do.

[00:10:07] **Rebecca:** Here's one from column A, here's one from column B. Let's [00:10:10] just slam these two things together and call it SAG AFTRA. What they really wanted us to do was to think through not only what were the best things of SAG AFTRA, but [00:10:20] what were the things that people hadn't imagined in generations before, and could we put that into the union?

[00:10:25] **Rebecca:** And then talk about a creative process that was so exciting [00:10:30] because it was actually birthing a union. And I was so impressed by All the people that were involved in that, whether they were super excited [00:10:40] for it or not, it didn't really actually matter in the end because the ability to decide that we were going to go and do this thing that people had tried before, unfortunately it hadn't passed.

[00:10:49] **Rebecca:** [00:10:50] And then to get the overwhelming support of the members at 80 plus percent is just huge. In this day and age, it's really hard to get those kinds of percentages in anything, anywhere. So the fact that both [00:11:00] the members of SAG and AFTRA did that, and on the day that we merged the unions, I remember our then president, the late Ken Howard said, SAG AFTRA is born.

[00:11:09] **Rebecca:** [00:11:10] And it was such a huge, beautiful moment. Not every day do you get to actually be a part of the founding of something. And I'm so proud of our members for doing it.

[00:11:18] **Grant:** I got chills from that statement. [00:11:20] There was so much talk recently, talking about merging unions, there's so much talk recently around the, the most.

[00:11:26] **Grant:** Recent strikes with the Writers Guild and SAG AFTRA. [00:11:30] I wonder if you could speak a little bit to leveraging the importance of sister unions and leveraging, you know, one membership to sort of help support or [00:11:40] buoy or navigate a space to achieve success for the prosperity of its members.

[00:11:46] **Rebecca:** Grant, that's a great question because it's, it's funny, we're just having [00:11:50] talked about the merger.

[00:11:51] **Rebecca:** I think about Had we been two unions and then in this strike, how much less power and leverage we would have had. And the fact that we were [00:12:00] one strong union was really extremely helpful. When I think about the power of the unions, In the industry to [00:12:10] work together is really been at an all time high since I have been doing it.

[00:12:14] **Rebecca:** And when I say that, I guess I would, let me flash back just a little bit to the pandemic. And you know, the [00:12:20] pandemic was a real, such a hard time for the members of all the unions, such a hard time for the country society. But during the pandemic, the, the unions in [00:12:30] the industry work so closely together on getting people back to work and the return to work and finding a, the, the.

[00:12:37] **Rebecca:** The safest way forward. People [00:12:40] really understood in a way that I think was just, you know, honestly, it was very profound. In one of our meetings with our safety commission, we were talking about how we would, [00:12:50] you know, present different things. We were working with all the unions. So the leaders of all the unions were figuring out how we were going to present this to our employers.

[00:12:58] **Rebecca:** And the director [00:13:00] said, we would like to speak for actors. The actor said, we would like to speak for the crew. Everybody cared so much about the safety and security of each other. But to me, [00:13:10] even though we've always had good relationships, the depth of the relationships became, it was so powerful. And the level of people making sure they [00:13:20] understood.

[00:13:20] **Rebecca:** What all the other crafts in the space we're doing, it was a remarkable, I mean, I'm getting, you know, like it is of the things where you go, well, this is people doing [00:13:30] everything in the interest of the greater good and the ability of the unions to stand together in one of the hardest time led us to. The strength of relationships that [00:13:40] we had going into this strike.

[00:13:41] **Rebecca:** I remember on day one of the strike being out with the WGA and then the one of the WGA leaders was like, you're out here on day one and you have signs printed and you're [00:13:50] all ready to go. We have a great communications department. So that really helps, but they were so thrilled to see us in force and we committed to be there until the end.

[00:13:58] **Rebecca:** And they were there even [00:14:00] because we got done after the fact we had gone in later And ultimately ended later. And they were out

there with us on the last day of the strike. And their solidarity was so meaningful that on the [00:14:10] last day I was standing with those same people that really, really matters and all of the other unions, IATSE, the Teamsters, everybody came in [00:14:20] such force over and over again.

[00:14:22] **Rebecca:** In our rally in Times Square, the Teamster truck kept going around Times Square honking every few minutes. I don't know if anybody, if any were there, but it was [00:14:30] amazing. Yeah.

[00:14:30] **Grant:** Yeah.

[00:14:31] **Rebecca:** And so everybody in the sector, but then all these other unions that aren't in our sector actually understand on a deep level what it is to [00:14:40] be on strike.

[00:14:40] **Rebecca:** Nobody ever wants to go on strike. It's the last resort, right? You, you go on strike when you don't have another choice. Other unions [00:14:50] all around the country and even all around the world, the unions in FIIA were out supporting SAG AFTRA members, WGA members in just such [00:15:00] amazing, not only in amazing numbers, but constantly sending off letters, supporting when we were introducing legislation, all of these things.

[00:15:07] **Rebecca:** It's cool to be in a union. [00:15:10] I think that People really understand it and the generation of people that are coming into the industry, understand it in like such amazing way. They are proud to [00:15:20] include activism in their acting. And it was, it was terrific. It was really terrific. I cannot say enough thank yous to all the unions and all the union members who came [00:15:30] out to support SAG AFTRA.

[00:15:31] **Rebecca:** It was really seriously, you, you cannot do it without that kind of solidarity. And we had it, we have already been back, back out on other [00:15:40] people's picket lines. Supporting them. And I think it's a real, it's a really good thing. I think people are finding their power.

[00:15:45] **Grant:** You mentioned the pandemic, but I think should not go unsaid about the, the [00:15:50] influence that SAG AFTRA and other unions had.

[00:15:53] **Grant:** I think you in particular working with Schumer in, in making sure that artists. And the entertainment industry were included [00:16:00] in accessing the support that was available to the citizens from the government.

And I think that that, in addition to the variety and multitudes of things that the union has done, you [00:16:10] yourself, you know, it should not go unsaid.

[00:16:11] **Grant:** I think how influential and impactful it was for. For your advocacy and making sure that we were included in it.

[00:16:18] **Rebecca:** Yeah, I will say that was a [00:16:20] really important piece that SAG AFTRA and the other unions knew we needed to get done because of our workers. At the end of the day, people often forget that because just because you're [00:16:30] creative, you still need to put food on the table, right?

[00:16:32] **Rebecca:** You got to feed your kids, you got to pay your rent, you got to do all those things. It's really obvious to all of us, but making sure that people understood that we have members, some of whom [00:16:40] have 1099 income, all these venues were closing. I remember being on the different Zooms with Senator Schumer, with his team and their level of [00:16:50] understanding.

[00:16:50] **Rebecca:** It's great to have somebody that understood what the arts, what people that work in film, television, theater, [00:17:00] music, really understand what the arts We were going through and really, really heard what those needs were. So we did a lot of advocacy, but I also am just super [00:17:10] grateful that people really got it and understood that without that safety net, people weren't going to make it through the pandemic.

[00:17:16] **Rebecca:** And so I'm very proud of the work that we did. Senator [00:17:20] Schumer invited us a big part of his work on the American. Rescue plan, save our stages, all of that, and we were very happy and proud to do it. Love it.

[00:17:28] **Caroline:** So I have a [00:17:30] question about artificial intelligence because there's a lot of conversation around it.

[00:17:36] **Caroline:** But my question about it is what does it look [00:17:40] like for us to embrace AI moving forward post strike? Is there a, is there a space for it?

[00:17:47] **Rebecca:** It's a great question. And I think sometimes [00:17:50] People paint all of this with too broad of a brush and don't really think about what it means. And so it's helpful that you asked it because I think that people

[00:18:00] sometimes have to think of AI's impact on creative industries, creatives.

[00:18:05] **Rebecca:** Creative workers, it's not just this big fight between these multi [00:18:10] billion dollar companies. It's not like technology versus content that some people try to envision. It really is a larger existential issue for everybody in America and around the world. [00:18:20] And it just happens to have hit our industry.

[00:18:23] **Rebecca:** Early, and I, this is not different in that a lot of technology has hit our industry early. Think about the move from [00:18:30] silent film to the talkies, right? So like our industry has always been impacted by changes and will always be. And I think we're well positioned to [00:18:40] sort of think this through. And our members did a very good job of this.

[00:18:43] **Rebecca:** And our negotiating committee of thinking about the amount of time And this is where I really, you know, think about this [00:18:50] very, you know, deeply because it matters the amount of time performers take to work on themselves, work on their artistry, work on their professional voice, [00:19:00] their likeness, their talents, they go to school, they invest an enormous, very important piece of their life.

[00:19:09] **Rebecca:** They [00:19:10] then use that and read our favorite audiobooks. They give voice to our characters. They are doing film, TV, commercials, you name it. And [00:19:20] they are in a position where those familiar faces who also report the news, all those things, have put all of this into their professional career. [00:19:30] And the cornerstone of a career means that you have to be able to protect the voice and likeness.

[00:19:35] **Rebecca:** And so, you know, When I think about where we are [00:19:40] with AI is we're really at the beginning of the conversation. We're not at the end. SAG AFTRA was able to achieve really good guardrails and invest [00:19:50] in consent and compensation. Those are the things that we really needed to know. At the end of the day, our negotiating committee prioritized them and they came out with that consent and [00:20:00] compensation to make sure that these technologies, which can be helpful in a lot of different ways, also can have a real downside.

[00:20:07] **Rebecca:** And I think a lot of times people don't [00:20:10] really realize, and I think it became really clear, that In our strike is, you know, we now have the power at our fingertips where you can digitally create a lifelike

human and it can [00:20:20] be indiscernible to the human eye. We've seen it now more in political ads and other things.

[00:20:24] **Rebecca:** And so that kind of synthetic media can be a digital impersonation of a real [00:20:30] person. It can be a new digital character, but it is harder and harder to distinguish what is real and what is fake. And so while you can clone other people's voices. And [00:20:40] images, the boundaries that we put in the contract, I thought our negotiating committee, our president, Fran Drescher, our NED and chief negotiator, Duggan Crabtree [00:20:50] Iowan, they helped make sure that for all time, people can.

[00:20:54] **Rebecca:** Make a living in this business. And that to me is just amazing. There will be other things [00:21:00] with AI that have to be done that are outside of the four walls of our contract. I heard somebody say the other day, well, you know, we're going to be talking about this for a long time. And I'm thinking we've actually been [00:21:10] talking about it for a long time.

[00:21:11] **Rebecca:** We put in laws in effect around postmortem right of publicity, all these different things. We are working on a lot of different things that are, are [00:21:20] the same kind of guardrails that we put in our contracts, but outside of where our bargaining partners, we really are taking a very strong, [00:21:30] proactive approach to making sure that we also get what we need to get done legislatively.

[00:21:34] **Rebecca:** It's critically important that we do that, prioritize, and they do that. We have a wages and working [00:21:40] conditions process where members get to come in and voice the things that they think are the most important. They work with the staff to sort of look through the things that [00:21:50] have been pressing issues for other members.

[00:21:52] **Rebecca:** At the end of the day, the process is driven by the members, the negotiating committee, after that due process whittles those [00:22:00] things down to their top priorities, it goes to the national board. Along the way, members have had every piece of the contract [00:22:10] is something that members care deeply about it. In every negotiation, it's a negotiation.

[00:22:16] **Rebecca:** But when I think about what was achieved in this [00:22:20] contract, I don't look at it as like, What is the things that didn't it's always about what is the next thing you're going to do for next time and [00:22:30] they're the things that I pay the most attention to around AI as an example, given all the work that we've been doing in that space, I would say to

me, you know, [00:22:40] What the negotiating committee was achieved was really just amazing.

[00:22:44] **Rebecca:** They were able to get that consent and compensation locked in there. And that was what [00:22:50] needed to happen this time. The reality is we have a lot of other things to do with AI that are outside those four walls of the contract, right? Because, you know, there are a lot of [00:23:00] other people that create content that are not the AMPTP.

[00:23:03] **Rebecca:** And so that content, you know, it's why we're working on things like The no AI frauds act. And I, you [00:23:10] might've been going to ask me about that, but so if you want to ask me later or ask me now, you tell me,

[00:23:14] **Grant:** go for it.

[00:23:16] **Rebecca:** Tell us about

[00:23:16] **Grant:** the new frauds act, Rebecca.

[00:23:18] **Rebecca:** Well, [00:23:20] okay. There you go. I would be surprised if you let me get out of here without talking about that.

[00:23:24] **Rebecca:** So, so, so we're working on legislation, both. federally [00:23:30] and on a state by state basis to protect our members. It is one of the key things that SAG AFTRA's Government Affairs and Public Policy Department does, and the [00:23:40] No AI Frauds Act was just introduced. And so no AI frauds is no artificial intelligence, fake replicas, or unauthorized duplications.[00:23:50]

[00:23:50] **Rebecca:** Act. Isn't that fun? No AI frauds act. They did a good job. Usually when they name it, you can't actually remember all the words, but in this case, it's in

[00:23:57] **Grant:** the title.

[00:23:58] **Rebecca:** It is, it's right in the [00:24:00] title. It makes it really, I just, just really easy. This bill is about protecting people's likenesses and voice from AI exploitation.

[00:24:08] **Rebecca:** And what is amazing about [00:24:10] it, it's very well crafted. I'm so, so impressed by everybody that put it together, but it prohibits the publication distribution and transmission of an unauthorized digital.

[00:24:20] Replica without consent. And so people should have the right to decide if the use of their image or their voice is going to be used in a digital replica.

[00:24:28] **Rebecca:** Now this, this, this [00:24:30] sounds, you know, really basic to all of us because, you know, performers, casting directors, everything, we all have an understanding of what that means. But years ago, when we were first talking [00:24:40] about this, this was not something that was on people's minds as much, legislators particularly, because it was, it seemed like it was.

[00:24:47] **Rebecca:** so far into the future, like we were talking [00:24:50] about some sort of fantasy in the future. Now it's a lot less of a fantasy and the right basically would be violated if somebody published or distributed or [00:25:00] transmitted an unauthorized digital replica and there was no consent. And so this is really key. It's key about how are we going to have AI [00:25:10] technology?

[00:25:10] **Rebecca:** Is it going to serve people or are people really serving? You know, these multi corporations that would go out there and do this. It protects us in [00:25:20] a different way than a contract can do. And so we're doing that on a, you know, on a federal basis. And we've had such good bipartisan support so far. So that's [00:25:30] exciting.

[00:25:30] **Rebecca:** But we're also doing a number of things on a state by state basis that I think are really important. Things like Embedding into tax incentives, which are [00:25:40] really good jobs programs by making sure that it's actually jobs that happen. So you don't want to have taxpayer money going to tax incentives. [00:25:50] They need to create jobs.

[00:25:51] **Rebecca:** So you don't want that to be benefiting because they've replaced people with AI. So we've done work in that space. We're also doing some work in terms [00:26:00] of making sure that digital replica rights should only happen if they're licensed and making sure that there's informed consent and knowledge of attorneys and [00:26:10] unions.

[00:26:10] **Rebecca:** And so we're also have legislation in different states because, you know, federal legislation, we all know takes a little longer, especially in this day and age, for making sure that we [00:26:20] also protect people all around the country. In the various states where our members live and work, we figure we can do it in both ways and it can be really strong.

[00:26:28] **Rebecca:** There's another piece that we're working [00:26:30] on, especially here in New York, but we'll be working on it in other places as well. That is, that has to do with synthetic media. And so, you know, as a consumer, it would be really [00:26:40] good. And we think that people have a right to know if they're interacting with AI, if they're being sold something by AI, if AI is the entertainment or [00:26:50] they're being basically persuaded to take actions by AI and not a person.

[00:26:53] **Rebecca:** So we have been working here in New York on this bill that requires that synthetic media, when [00:27:00] it's in a commercial endeavor, has to be accompanied by a clear and conspicuous disclaimer, which it seems like a pretty basic thing. And yet these were things a few years ago [00:27:10] that nobody was thinking about.

[00:27:11] **Rebecca:** But SAG AFTRA and other industry unions have been working out on this stuff for a long time. So we're in a good position to get these things done.

[00:27:18] **Caroline:** I have a question. It [00:27:20] piggybacks on this, but it has to do with advice for pre union actors or non union actors. I'm just wondering about the consciousness around Pre union [00:27:30] considerations, when we're talking about AI, about voice and body and their use and conflicts that feel as if they're in perpetuity.[00:27:40]

[00:27:40] **Rebecca:** You're not born as a union member, so I do like to think about people that are just not. Members yet and that if you're making a life as a professional performer [00:27:50] or broadcast or otherwise, it's just a matter of time before you're a SAG AFTRA member. And so I also think about how, how vulnerable you are until you're in [00:28:00] a union and the need to take extra care.

[00:28:03] **Rebecca:** Over every single piece of paper that you sign and we publish our agreements, you [00:28:10] can go and read our whole TV theatrical contract and you can look at the summary of the protections in AI and not sign anything that's inconsistent with that until you become union. The [00:28:20] downside, while we were in the process of enacting these laws, the downside is they're not enacted yet.

[00:28:25] **Rebecca:** And when it comes to people that are not yet union, I would take such [00:28:30] extreme extra care, things like conflicts that you could create for yourself in the commercial space. Anytime anybody wants you to sign something in perpetuity, you should really run in [00:28:40] the other

direction because the momentary monetary gain in that can really harm your ability to, you do a major brand non-union [00:28:50] or even a little mom and pop, non-union, but they got you forever.

[00:28:53] **Rebecca:** You're gonna, you're gonna have conflicts. That's terrible for commercial performers. But I would, I would go farther to say, which is [00:29:00] the ability to know that you have consent, however you are being used when you are being scanned, even just today, I was on the [00:29:10] phone with a performer who was at a shoot where it didn't sound like they were doing it exactly right by the union and our field reps were already there.

[00:29:16] **Rebecca:** So when I think of people that don't yet have that, I [00:29:20] want them to follow as closely as they can all of these developments. Yes. And really make smart choices so that they don't cut off a career for themselves for [00:29:30] a lifetime. And it's, and look, it's hard. That's the reality. People will see it and think, Oh, it's just this one job.

[00:29:35] **Rebecca:** But if this one job is going to. [00:29:40] Scan you and you're going to give up unlimited use of you have to know what you're signing and make sure that you're not signing anything that takes you out of the market [00:29:50] forever. You should never have to compete with your digital self. That's not a good idea. So really, I would say also.

[00:29:57] **Rebecca:** Find trusted advisors. I mean, [00:30:00] the folks that are listening to this podcast are really lucky because they're part of a program. So they have a lot of resources. They've got people that are professional actors, professional casting directors, all [00:30:10] these professional people, all of you that are listening, you have access to the great people on this podcast.

[00:30:14] **Rebecca:** Use them because they also know people who can help when these situations [00:30:20] come up that are sticky. But when it comes to. All of this, I would also say like listen to, you don't have to be a union member to listen to the unions [00:30:30] podcast or these educational webinars that we do this podcast and taking all that information because this is all going to move fast.

[00:30:38] **Rebecca:** And the union [00:30:40] is in the best position to protect people, but you also have to be your own engine of protection as well. And so hopefully their, their journey to becoming a union member [00:30:50] will be short and they will be, hopefully I'll be welcoming them to a SAG AFTRA orientation one day soon.

[00:30:56] **Grant:** We hope so too.

[00:30:58] **Grant:** We have one last question then our little lightning [00:31:00] round to see. So much is resonating with me writing this program. I was thinking, once you're done here, you're still taking a class. It's your job to read the trades. It's your job to go to the union [00:31:10] podcasts or the union newsletters, you know? So I think it's so important that you're reinforcing these ideas that everything in moderation and also then [00:31:20] accepting responsibility for the profession that you choose to be in dentist and doctors.

[00:31:25] **Grant:** I hope at least when I'm sitting in the chair that they. Haven't not read [00:31:30] anything since medical school, you know, I've done some work between now and when they've got their Implements in my teeth. Okay. So here's our final question before the [00:31:40] oh my god What is the question that that nobody asks you that you would love to speak to?

[00:31:47] **Rebecca:** I think the question that nobody asks [00:31:50] me or That usually people don't ask me is how can they take better advantage of all the resources that they have? People [00:32:00] often forget because we get so busy in our day to day lives, how many things exist that will help us. That will not only advance careers, but advance your [00:32:10] personal negotiations because so much of life is about making sure that you're fully empowered.

[00:32:15] **Rebecca:** One of the things that people don't necessarily take advantage of [00:32:20] is the fact that there is a. A remarkable union full of elected leaders, volunteers, and staff. And they don't often ask [00:32:30] because sometimes things are just so busy. They don't often ask how they can be better involved in that so that they can turn that into real leverage in their careers.

[00:32:38] **Rebecca:** And so. It's [00:32:40] very easy to sort of call when you have a claim. It is harder to come and be involved and change the course of history. It's harder, but it's also [00:32:50] amazingly rewarding. And when I see members do that, and the other day I saw somebody coming out of a foundation class and they said to me, I didn't [00:33:00] know that this was here.

[00:33:01] **Rebecca:** And we have thousands of members that take advantage of it. But. Really taking the chance and really finding ways to really spread your [00:33:10] wings by jumping in is, to me, people don't often ask about that. The people that know, know, but the people that don't know, don't know what they're missing.

[00:33:18] **Grant:** Great. I love that.

[00:33:19] **Grant:** [00:33:20] Before we let you go, we just have the lightning round, Rebecca. So here we go, we have four.

[00:33:24] **Rebecca:** Four lightning round questions. Four

[00:33:26] **Grant:** lightning round questions.

[00:33:27] **Rebecca:** Yes.

[00:33:27] **Grant:** What is the first concert you [00:33:30] ever went to? Sting. Oh.

[00:33:32] **Caroline:** He's my favorite. I used to work at the Greek theater, and I would be there for sound check and see Sting [00:33:40] was there and he was hugging his guitar and he had giveaways and I was right there in the front row.

[00:33:45] **Caroline:** Yes, Sting. Oh my gosh. There you go. All right.

[00:33:50] We've bonded over that. I'm done. Forever. There you go. Forever. My question, what's a favorite family [00:34:00] tradition or a chosen tradition that you've adopted?

[00:34:03] **Rebecca:** Spending the holidays with my family is so important to my husband and I [00:34:10] with my parents and all of our extended family and all the silly little pieces of the puzzle that make that up.

[00:34:17] **Rebecca:** Whether it's the traditional like baking cookies [00:34:20] and things like that. I know it, it shocks Grant that I actually bake cookies, but I do. Or, Just the small things that we all do together. I love that piece of life. It's a [00:34:30] beautiful, it's a beautiful thing.

[00:34:31] **Grant:** That's still home in Nebraska?

[00:34:33] **Rebecca:** Yes, it is.

[00:34:35] **Grant:** Not in a barn.

[00:34:36] **Rebecca:** Yes, not in a barn. Thank you. Thank you. We've established that. [00:34:40] There you go.

[00:34:41] **Grant:** All right, one more and then Caroline has the last one.

[00:34:44] **Caroline:** Wait, I'm very curious, what is the cookie?

[00:34:47] **Rebecca:** Well, the cookie, well many cookies, always [00:34:50] Christmas cookies, but coconut balls are a very family favorite for sure.

[00:34:54] **Grant:** Okay, a little left to center here.

[00:34:56] **Grant:** If you could compete in the Olympics, what sport would you compete in? [00:35:00]

[00:35:00] **Rebecca:** Luge, why not?

[00:35:01] **Caroline:** Oh my gosh, and last, what's something you think everyone should do once? Take a leap, whatever that is.

[00:35:08] **Grant:** Great. Rebecca, obviously [00:35:10] we could spend so much time with you. I have so many questions on this little piece of paper that I didn't ask because I'm mindful of time.

[00:35:17] **Grant:** But, you know, let that be an opportunity for [00:35:20] us to redirect everybody to the SAG AFTRA podcast or to the other podcasts that are out there that exist that are part of the tools that are available to actors who want to [00:35:30] pursue this and who want to make sure that they're doing it in a thoughtful and mindful space.

[00:35:34] **Rebecca:** Absolutely. The SAG AFTRA podcast, I would also say, make sure that your [00:35:40] students, that everybody that's listening, make sure you follow SAG AFTRA on social media, on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, you name it, but make sure you follow all those things because there's [00:35:50] constantly resources that are available, even though you might not be union yet.

[00:35:55] **Rebecca:** And you also will stay up to date on big campaigns, exciting things that are [00:36:00] happening, not just for actors, but video games, broadcasters, you name it. That's a good place. So, you know, what's really happening in the industry.

[00:36:07] **Grant:** Great. Thank you, Rebecca.

[00:36:09] **Caroline:** [00:36:10] So amazing. I loved this conversation so much, and I think I have a little fight for our rights crush on Rebecca.

[00:36:17] **Caroline:** She's so amazing. of both [00:36:20] union members and those performers and creatives who are pre SAG AFTRA, but also Sting and the Muppets.

[00:36:25] **Grant:** I know, there are so many new things I learned about from Rebecca that I loved. She's [00:36:30] so wonderful at the positive spin for what we may see as a scary challenge facing our industry.

[00:36:34] **Grant:** Turning the AI topic into an opportunity to negotiate better and stronger contracts and [00:36:40] advocating for legislation and regulations that work with, and with. As Rebecca pointed out, it's critical to build protections for performers to ensure our [00:36:50] creativity and ingenuity are never relegated to a machine.

[00:36:52] **Caroline:** Follow Rebecca Damon on Instagram and threads at RebeccaDamon.

[00:36:56] **Grant:** And don't forget to keep an eye on SAG AFTRA's website and socials to [00:37:00] stay up to date on all things. Including what's affecting us most and for opportunities to join the fight for our labor rights. The links are in the show notes.

[00:37:07] **Caroline:** Thanks so much for listening to In the [00:37:10] Podlight.

[00:37:10] **Caroline:** If these conversations resonate with you, follow on SANDS Talks or wherever you get your podcasts. Visit our website at inthepodlight.com. [00:37:20] Until next time, step into your light.

[00:37:22] **Grant:** Since 1906, Pace University has been transforming the lives of its students with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs with [00:37:30] campuses in New York City and Westchester County.

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