

'Name rules create a crisis of identity'

Although actors are free to use any name they choose by law, Equity and Spotlight's different rules lead to confusion over the identity of some performers, as agent **Stuart Piper** found out

In 2006, I went to my first Olivier awards ceremony as an agent, and watched three children, including George Maguire, become the youngest ever recipients of best actor in a musical gongs, for their performances in *Billy Elliot*.

Following in Jamie Bell's celluloid footsteps, they made theatre history, and their image became iconic.

Some years later, a colleague mentioned to me that he'd seen George in a fringe musical called *Lift*. When I Googled his name, he didn't look anything like he did in 2006. But the biog on Google said it was him.

Then George wrote to us for representation, on the recommendation of a casting director. So he met with Alex Segal and me, and I asked him why *Lift* wasn't on his CV. "I wasn't in *Lift*" he replied. "That's another guy with the same name."

I'd encountered this once before: I represented impressionist/comedienne Jess/Jessica Robinson, and another Jessica Robinson popped up in *Over the Rainbow* – the BBC's search for Dorothy. I contacted the girl's agent, pointing the problem out, and Jess kindly adopted Jessica Daley as her stage name, given Robinson was already established, and she wanted to avoid confusion.

So we reached out in similar fashion to CAM, the agency representing the George Maguire from *Lift* to

discuss the problem. It sent an email, simply with the words: "Absolutely not I am afraid". To a second message we received no reply.

We asked Equity how it had two members using the same name, given the Equity name register is a key selling point it uses when persuading

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actors to join the union. I was told that our George Maguire had joined Equity first, and so the second George Maguire to join Equity is registered as George Edward-Maguire.

The latter is with Spotlight as George Maguire so our Olivier award-winning client is not able to join Spotlight under his Equity name.

However, Spotlight allows a child to be registered with the same name as an adult. In a world where children can win acting awards this seems to me a recipe for disaster, and makes no sense. Actors should campaign for Spotlight to change its policy.



George Maguire, who won a joint Olivier award in 2006 for best actor in a musical (*Billy Elliot*)

In a separate case, we have a client called Jacob Chapman, whose CV identifies various projects including two series of Channel 4's *Beaver Falls*, and who is about to star in a lead role in Universal's new film *Legacy*. Jacob is on the children's register, but he cannot progress to the adult register because there is another Jacob Chapman, Jacob is 20 but we have to keep him as a child to keep his identity.

In response to this, Spotlight said: "Jacob Chapman appears in Children

and Young Performers where we do allow same names to be used both within that directory and in conjunction with any adult performer. If Jacob wanted to transfer to actors at a later date, however, he would be asked to change his name."

But because this is a Spotlight policy that is preventing our client from going on the Spotlight register, surely Equity could help us, given its name register is one of its primary sales tools when recruiting union members.

On the contrary, Equity appears to

Ellie Kirk, George Maguire, Nikki Davis-Jones and Julie Atherton in *Lift*, Soho Theatre, in 2013

have washed its hands of it, writing: "The position of Equity and Spotlight is very similar. We do not, and cannot, dictate what names people choose to use in the wider world, and under UK law there is no prohibition on two members working in the same industry under the same name – be it plumbing or acting, the same rules apply.

"Our organisations assert that we will, separately, only allow one member per name to register, but we do not share a database. Firstly as a

trade union we are prevented by law from revealing the trade union membership of any member without their prior consent, and secondly because our remit (covering not just actors, but directors, stage management, models and other entertainers) is much larger than Spotlight's, which applies its rules to each directory separately. While we always advise members to work under their registered Equity name, there is no sanction under our rules for failing to do so."

If there is no sanction under Equity

rules on failing to operate in the industry under the name given on the name register, what is the point of the register? If Equity cannot do more to set its register as the industry standard by which all others follow, then one of its principal reasons to compel actors to join falls into question.

Is it in the actor's and industry's interest for Spotlight and Equity not to mirror databases? Each claims it has no legal right to enforce the other, but why can they not simply agree to work together, even if the

law does not compel them to?

This isn't a petty squabble. We have a real problem. A young man needs to make a living. And his identity could be confused with that of another actor, who joined Equity later than him, which might affect his future employment and career progression.

On Spotlight's own website, under "Your name in Spotlight", it states that members should "always decide on one professional name, across the board" and "use the same name for your Spotlight membership [and] your Equity card". This statement is clear and unambiguous, yet Spotlight does not seem to want to enforce these words that appear on their website as of August 15.

Equity says it can't stop George Edward-Maguire using the name George Maguire. Spotlight says it doesn't have to follow Equity's register, and that it plans to continue to allow children and adults to share the same names on Spotlight – but not when a child becomes an adult.

Call for action

I urge Equity to:

- Consider meeting Spotlight to discuss mirroring the name register they operate

I urge Spotlight to:

- Give due consideration to that request to mirror Equity's name register
- Stop allowing children to have the same name as adults on its database or at the very least allow name duplicates on its adult register

I call upon Spotlight and Equity to answer my two suggestions above, to reasonably consider two simple actions which would serve our industry better for the future.

I bring this to The Stage and its readers, to improve everyone's ability to earn a living in our profession, uninhibited by poorly thought through rules, and would welcome a dialogue with all parties to resolve this positively for all.