

ETCP in education: Emphasizing safety and certification in a graduate training program

ETCP CERTIFICATION has changed the operations and hiring practices of arts organizations and placed proper emphasis on the health and safety of crews, performers, and audiences around the country. Certification is a requirement

expanded their curriculum to help their students develop the abilities, skills, and knowledge necessary to become certified and therefore more competitive applicants when they enter the workforce.

As a faculty member at the David Geffen



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAO-EN HU

Neil Mulligan (right) explains a piece of rescue hardware to Martin Montaner.

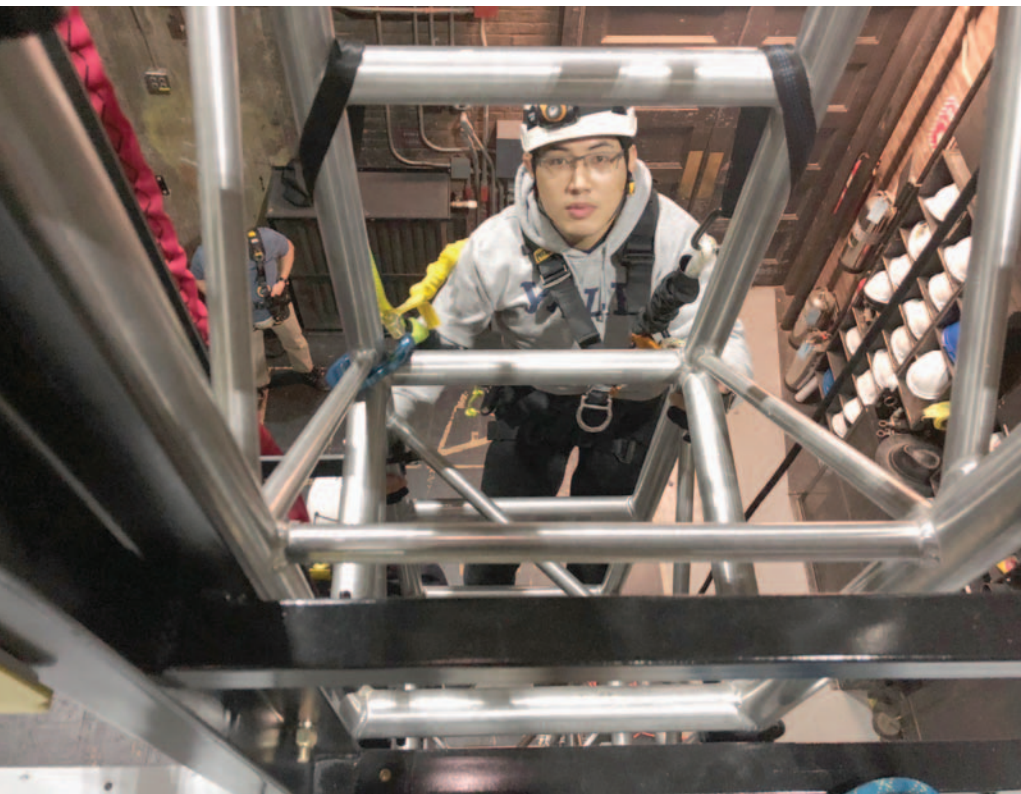


PHOTO COURTESY OF TD&P DEPARTMENT

Hao-En Hu practices truss climbing techniques.

for many positions and gives applicants a competitive advantage even if it is not a requirement listed in the job description. As the ETCP Certification Program has grown and gained acceptance, schools have

School of Drama at Yale, I am fortunate to have been part of this trend. Eight years ago, the department of Technical Design and Production decided to support ETCP Certification for the members of our

faculty and staff who work directly with rigging in their department (scenery, sound, lighting, and projections). Eight of us are currently ETCP Certified Technicians, and half a dozen more are working towards their certification. Most of us are certified in Theatre – Rigging because that is the primary focus of our program, but we also have faculty certified as Arena – Riggers and Entertainment Electricians. In addition, six of our staff and faculty are SPRAT certified.

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Our goal is to have every staff and faculty member who works with rigging or interacts with students in a rigging context to be ETCP certified. We want to demonstrate the best practices in our work, and certifying our staff and faculty is the first step in that process. Our program emphasizes hands-on training, and we believe our students learn best through the positive examples set by the staff and faculty with whom they work every day. The ETCP Certification Program is central to establishing and maintaining that standard.

This commitment to promoting safety and risk management comes with a significant financial obligation, but we thought it was important enough to reallocate funding from other program areas to pay for both the certification and the renewal credits. We believe the investment in our staff and faculty is worth the cost—and, I have seen firsthand how our students benefit directly from our emphasis on ETCP Certification in the classroom and onstage.

In addition to being certified, our faculty is also active in the ongoing work of developing and guiding the ETCP Certification Program as it continues

to grow. Anna Glover, our Director of Theatre Safety and Occupational Health, is a volunteer member of the ETCP Certification Council. Neil Mulligan, the technical director for the Yale Repertory Theatre and a faculty member, is an ETCP Recognized Trainer and a Subject Matter Expert serving as a test developer for the Theatre – Rigging exam. He also teaches the rigging classes for our students, gives regular training sessions to our staff, and offers a summer course for renewal credits.

Every first-year MFA candidate in our program is required to take a one semester theatre rigging class (and we encourage our

technical interns to take it as well). This class examines traditional and nontraditional rigging techniques, including counterweight and mechanical rigging systems and their components. It presents the theory, materials, and methods the students will need to know to take the Theatre – Rigging exam. This class also acts as the foundation for their rigging work on their production assignments for the remainder of their time in the program. When they are planning and loading in their shows, they apply the knowledge and skills learned in the rigging class with the support and guidance of ETCP Certified staff and faculty.

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After they have taken the first rigging class, second- and third-year students have the option of taking an advanced rigging class to learn the fundamentals of arena rigging, rope access, performer flying, and fall protection and rescue. Each student purchases their own harness, learns the fundamentals of climbing truss and working safely at height, and spends a significant amount of time developing the skills to rig in arenas and other non-theatrical environments. This class covers knowledge and skills students would need to take the Arena – Rigging Certification exam.

The most recent addition to our training program is our new Rigging Lab, a facility custom-built to provide our students with the opportunity to hone their rigging and rope access skills. The Lab was funded by an anonymous gift in honor of Ben Sammler and Bill Reynolds, two long-time faculty members, for their unwavering commitment to the safe practice, teaching, and mentorship of students. We look forward to using the Rigging Lab to give our students a safe and controlled environment where they can practice the skills they learn



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAO-EN HU

David Phelps (left) and Matt Lewis practice rescue techniques from a truss structure.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HAO-EN HU

Tatsuya Ito (left) watches Neil Mulligan (right) help Yaro Yarovich with knot tying.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LIBBY STONE

Matt Gaffney (ETCP Theatre – Rigger, SPRAT-2) practices a rope access maneuver in a staff training session.

in class. Hands-on work in this dedicated rigging space will allow them to build confidence without the pressure of working onstage under the tight deadlines of a production schedule.

In addition to the rigging classes, we offer a stage engineering class as part of our theatre consulting concentration. I taught the class last spring and was excited to share my experiences as a theatre consultant

with our students. The class introduces the concepts for designing overhead rigging and understage machinery for permanent installation in performing arts facilities. In the rigging portion of the class, we cover counterweight and motorized rigging systems and study the relevant codes and ANSI standards developed through ESTA's Technical Standards Program. The class teaches students how to design rigging systems safely and in keeping with industry standards and demonstrates how ETCP Certification establishes our professional competence to architects, engineers, and other non-theatre people who don't always understand what we do.

All the classes and training opportunities I've described incorporate the fundamentals of the ETCP Arena – Rigging and Theatre – Rigging certifications, as well as the principles encouraged by the ETCP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Obviously, taking these classes or going through our program doesn't automatically

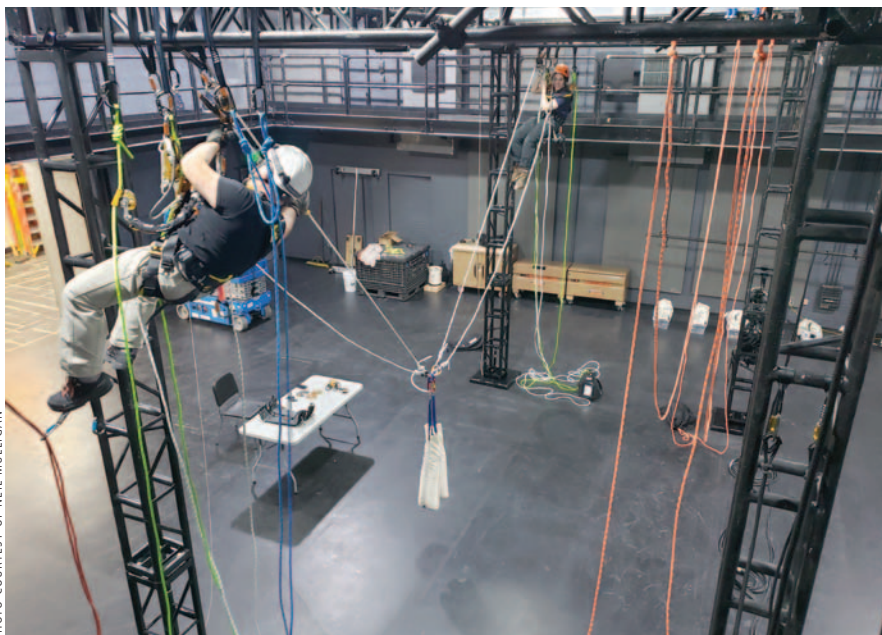


PHOTO COURTESY OF NEIL MULLIGAN

Shannon Csorny (right) and Shaoqian Lu practice a cross-haul maneuver.



Alex McNamara, Mike VanAartsen, and staff member David Willmore learn about chain motor inspection and maintenance.



The Rigging Lab was funded by an anonymous gift in honor of Ben Sammler and Bill Reynolds, two long-time faculty members, for their unwavering commitment to the safe practice, teaching, and mentorship of students.

make someone a qualified rigger, and the points they earn from a graduate degree in entertainment technology are only ten percent of the total they need to qualify to take the exam. They still need to get a lot of work experience—which is as it should be. The best way to become a good rigger is to spend lots and lots of time rigging. There are no shortcuts. However, giving them the time and space to learn safe rigging practices in our program is an effective way to get them started on the right path as they prepare to take the exam.

As of this writing, over thirty of our alumni are currently ETCP Certified. About half of them graduated before we started certifying our staff and faculty, and the other half were students when we actively began our emphasis on certification. That's not enough data to draw any concrete conclusions about how the staff and faculty certifications are influencing the number of alumni who are certified, but we can say that we have had as many students who

graduated in the past eight years become certified as those who graduated in the thirty years prior. And regardless of the cause, it is encouraging to see our overall certification numbers trending upward along with the rest of the industry.

For our staff and faculty, being ETCP Certified does more than demonstrate knowledge and experience. It highlights our commitment to using the continuing education credits to stay on top of current trends in our industry, and to bringing that new knowledge back to share with the students in our program. As more and more companies include ETCP Certification in their job descriptions, we are doing our part to set our students up for success as they head out into the next stage of their careers. Doing so not only gives them a competitive advantage over other candidates, it makes their work (and ultimately our industry as a whole) safer. ■



Matt Welander is the technical director at the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale and a Professor in the Practice of Technical Design and Production. He holds an ETCP Theatre – Rigging certification. He is also a

theatre designer at Nextstage Design, a theatre consulting firm in New Haven, CT, and a former member of IATSE Local 919.

Interested in learning about becoming ETCP Certified?

ETCP Certified technicians represent the top third of the industry! ETCP offers four certifications: Arena – Rigging, Theatre – Rigging, Entertainment Electrician, and Portable Power Distribution Technician.

Are you attending LDI in November? Check the ETCP website for more details on the ETCP Information Session at LDI. Find the date, time, and room number at the Las Vegas Convention Center at <https://etcp.esa.org/>. See you there.