

I am certified

History of an ETCP Certified (female) Technician

EVER HAVE THAT FEELING that you are the only one doing something? Although you feel confident you are doing the right thing, the lack of support or response gives you the unsettled feeling that you are about to make a complete idiot of yourself? That is how I felt before I took the ETCP exam.

I saw the list of the first ETCP Riggers, and thought to myself, "Wow, Rocky [Paulson] and Dean [Hart] have passed. I know those guys! I have to do this. I have to pass the electrical exam." So it became my goal, to pass the first ETCP electrical exam given. Not just the electrical exam, but the first. No one could ever question my abilities if I could pass a test where nobody knew the content.

This April, I will be celebrating my 20th year in the industry as a professional. I began my career as a follow spot operator at a local theme park while still in high school. I did not have a clue about professional theatre, and it was pretty much learn on the job. I learned, trained, and retained all that I could from colleagues. I also learned there was a very high male to female ratio. During those early years, I ran into two types of people—those who refused to work with women, "Because men are biologically stronger than women," and those who embraced it, "A girl is on a crew because she knows what she is doing, not because she can lift heavy things." I can remember being out numbered back then, easily 20 to one.

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For the first half of my career, I would tour with one of the foremost Japanese drumming ensembles, San Jose Taiko Group, as their Lighting Designer. I have probably stepped foot and designed in over 300 different theatres while touring all across the US. Because of my age and/or gender, I always felt like I had to explain or defend my lighting abilities to house guys at each venue. It was like I was being interrogated with the, "What does Natti know?" game.

So much has changed since I started in 1988. I have learned so much, but there was no way, until now, to document my abilities. Sure, if I had a degree (which I don't), or if I had an IATSE card (which I don't). Somehow, I needed a way to definitively answer the question, "Do you know what you are doing?" ETCP appeared to be that opportunity.

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I remember asking colleague after colleague about the first electrical exam, and every one of them responded that they would not be taking it. Here are these veterans of the industry that I regard highly, and even they are not taking it. I asked Dinna Myers at Musson Theatrical, and she just looked at me and said, "Good luck with that. I heard it is hard." Just what exactly did I get myself into when I signed up to take the first exam at LDI?

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Two days before the exam, I sat in the electrical power workshop at LDI with some fellow test takers. It would be my litmus test to see if I could pass this thing. How much would they be teaching me that I did not already know? I left class each day thinking, "Well if I do not know it by now, I certainly won't be able to cram it in my noggin 24 hours before the exam." I went to bed the night before the exam with piles of CDs and notes from the power workshop spread all over my hotel room, but I did not look at them. I figured, "If it is in there, it is in there. I might as well get a good night sleep instead."

I awoke the next day excited and a little nervous. I already did a "facility walk-through" the day before, so I knew exactly where the exam was being given. I arrived for the exam some 30 minutes before the test, holding my coffee, and realized out of the 50 or so people standing around I did not recognize anyone, and worse, none of them were female. I could not believe it. I strained and looked nervously. I walked around scanning for somebody I knew. I saw George Long who taught the generator section at the power workshop, but he appeared busy talking on his phone.

I looked and waited, and finally eureka! I didn't know her, but I was definitely going to let her know how happy I was to see another female. After a lengthy conversation about being the only two girls, another one appeared. Okay, we are up to three. We just kept watching the door, counting the candidates and waiting for more girls. Flocks of men were being checked in, one after another, but no girls. Very rarely a girl would walk in, and I would signal to the back door, "Hey, there's one more."

Eventually, I saw only a handful of women that first exam day. There were over 100 candidates and less than 10% female. It was a huge reality check and a snapshot of how the industry was 20 years ago. When you think about the amount of experience needed to qualify to take the exam, you would need somebody with a substantial work history in this industry. What I saw was a handful of very confident women that fought to break the tradition of a male dominated field and assert ourselves as equal with our peers.

After I received my letter that I passed the exam, I began proudly announcing it to any one that would listen—colleagues, clients, family, and friends. Of course it was so new that nobody knew what I was talking about. So I would have to revise my spiel, "I am an ETCP Certified Entertainment Electrician, and out of about 110 certified electricians, I am one of five females in the US and Canada."

Shortly after being certified, I got a call from an event manager who had a client in desperate need of a décor and staging person, not just a lighting designer, and she was wondering if I thought I was up to the challenge. "Sure, why not? Send her my info." Of course, maybe I would not have accepted so quickly if I had known it was an Executive Assistant for a VP of Apple Computers. This was an opportunity to get on their vendor list that I could not pass up. I remember sitting down at a long table in a meeting room at

Apple. They asked me about my qualifications, and I gave them the "ETCP one of five" spiel. They were very impressed. So impressed that I had qualified my experience with them, and they were ready to hear all about my proposal. I sat there, across from the executives, confidently presenting them with ideas and concepts for the design of their event. It felt amazing. For the first time in my life, someone new believed I knew what I was doing, and I did not have to play the "What does Natti know?" game. During their event, they proudly paraded me in front of their VP, introduced me, and kindly asked me to recite the "ETCP one of five" spiel for him. This was certainly a long awaited first, and I was more than happy to accommodate them.

This year, I made the conscious decision to add my company to the ETCP Recognized Employer Program. I feel it is a necessary and strong commitment to safety in our company and the industry. My responsibilities as an ETCP Recognized Employer are known by my staff, and they understand the importance of safety and risk exposure in the workplace. As a female business owner, half of my technicians are female, and there are many days when the women outnumber the men. It is just common place now, and the women schlep gear and pick up 66 pound lighting bases with the rest of the crew. I do not segregate the girls like I was treated many moons ago, instead forced to run mic cables around drum kits instead of building steel. Everybody does what they can; we are all on the same team.

The technicians I met the day of the first exam are some of the most talented and sought after technicians in the industry. These are the people you talk to when you need a problem solved. They know it forward and backwards. Theatre, corporate, television, film—it did not matter what your background was; you had to know a little of everything to pass the electrical exam. I did not get where I am today, because I "dated" somebody on the crew. I passed this exam, because I was the one schlepping the gear, managing the crew, designing the plot, and running the business. I gained enough experience and insight over the past 20 years to successfully pass it on my own. I take my oath very seriously to uphold safety first and foremost. By having my ETCP electrical certification, I feel I am among the best in my industry, and it does not matter whether I am male or female. I am certified. ■



Natti Pierce-Thomson is President and Senior Lighting Designer for North American Theatre Technology Incorporated which specializes in theatrical lighting design and production for theatre, social, and corporate events. One of the first ETCP Certified Entertainment Electricians and an ETCP Recognized Employer; she was the recipient of the Arts Council of Silicon Valley, Artist Fellowship Grant in 1997.