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ETCP rigging certification in an educational setting

ETCP HAS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED rigging instruction and how universities are preparing aspiring technicians. During my freshman year of college, my parents gifted me with what came to be a life changing experience—tickets to *Phantom of the Opera* in its first year on Broadway at the Majestic. The

moment the show began, I was fascinated by the various technical effects used in the production, particularly the rigging effects. After the show, I told my roommate, a lighting design major and member of the school theatre club, I wanted to learn everything about how I could have a career in technical theatre.

My first professional experiences after college were working as a carpenter at Juilliard, the Berkshire Theatre Festival, and the George Street Playhouse. These experiences reaffirmed and fueled my passion for entertainment engineering, leading me to secure an MFA in structural design for technical production from

Boston University. I never received formal rigging instruction during my performing arts education. Rather, this training and education was received informally during load-in. Structural engineering courses taught math, physics, and truss design, however, they were not rigging specific and text books were merely provided as supplemental reference materials. The custom was: Learn on the job.

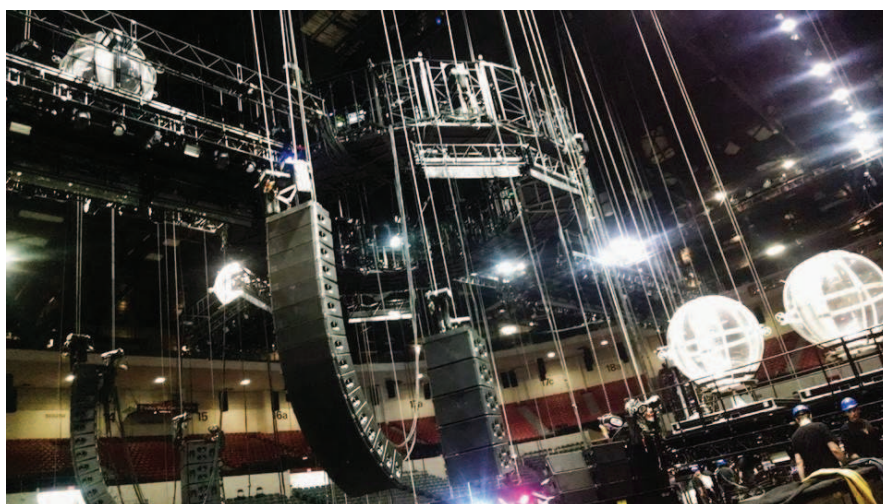
After graduate school, I spent years working at some of the top theatres, venues, and event companies in the country. I learned safety and rigging techniques from a variety of experienced professionals. From Broadway-style theatre to arena concerts, everyone had their own idea of what was safe and acceptable. As much as I respected those I learned from, I observed that *experience* does not necessarily mean *expertise*. Once ETCP came onto the scene, the training I received from ETCP certified IASTE professionals was the exception to this. Eventually, I became an IATSE Journeyman and those IATSE ETCP certified members helped cultivate my interest in achieving certification.

“ [With ETCP certification] I am instantly regarded as an expert in my field. ”

ETCP has made a definite impact in my current role at San Diego State University School of Theatre, Television and Film (SDSU TTF). More rapidly than ever, the advancement of technologies seen in high-end professional productions are making their way into university settings. Modern technical elements help captivate and draw audiences, creating the desire for increasingly complicated and sophisticated design and technical components. Complex rigging is now the norm, requiring an advanced skill set. As an example, the SDSU TTF has started to produce concert-style productions that require arena-style rigging. Simultaneously, SDSU installed a new automated rigging system. The



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Load-in for Muse at the Valley View Casino Center ©2016 Samantha Allen, IATSE Local 122

ETCP program gives me a comprehensive standardized way to approach each unique set of these production demands. Consequently, my certifications have become crucial components in both how I perform my work and train the next generation of technicians.

ETCP certification provides me a sense of professional accomplishment, yet the level of recognition of my achievements has been unexpected. I am instantly regarded as an expert in my field. My ETCP certifications garner increased recognition by students, industry experts, and the University. To illustrate, the University of

California (UC) Regents are standardizing theatre safety practices across all UC and Cal State campuses. Once they learned of my certifications, both the SDSU Office of Environmental Health and Safety and the UC Regents Safety Commission approached me to act as an advisor to this initiative. These policies affect a countless number of future entertainment professionals, and because of my ETCP certifications, I will now be part of this legacy.

The OSHA, ANSI, and ESTA standards incorporated into the ETCP program, and the guidelines set by the ETCP Subject Matter Experts allow me to easily institute

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new safety protocols as a basis for all work that is sponsored by the SDSU TTF. In contrast, college and university faculty and staff across the country have shared with me the challenges they face gaining consensus on even small changes to their programs. I do not encounter the same difficulties, because my ETCP certifications are documented evidence that my requests are based on nationally recognized standards of best practices and therefore, my suggestions are more quickly accepted. Case in point: We implemented a new requirement that no rigging is to be done at *any* event associated with the SDSU TTF without the direct supervision of an ETCP certified rigger. We have two certified riggers, so while this could have presented an issue from a workflow scheduling perspective, I had the full support of my faculty and staff to implement the requirement. There have been zero rigging accidents or mishaps since implementation of the rule, attesting to the soundness of the policy.

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More often, universities are including at least one ETCP certification as a preference in the hiring of production personnel. Students taught by ETCP certified riggers are typically more safety-conscious and recognize safety issues more readily. Because SDSU TTF rigging instruction is based on the ETCP program, our students routinely notice and convey examples of unsafe or outdated practices they see out in the field. These safety issues may otherwise go unnoticed, because while demand for ETCP certified riggers is high, the number of certified individuals has not yet reached capacity, and facilities may not have anyone who is certified or have rigging experts on staff. Our students may be their first warning that there is a potential problem.

The ETCP-based knowledge we have directly bestowed on our students allows both the students and our certified experts to assist outside venues to correct their safety issues quickly, collectively benefiting the industry.

Recommendations by industry-certified professionals have helped the SDSU TTF continue to refine the baseline curriculum for rigging practices by supplementing instruction with ETCP Content Outlines, concurrently formalizing rigging education, improving the quality of productions, and the reputation of the SDSU TTF program.

Any student interested in rigging should start preparing themselves for ETCP certification as early as possible. ETCP certification brings a wealth of benefits to professionals, including: Confidence in their own abilities, instant authority and recognition as a leader in the field. Along with learned technical skills, certification demonstrates an attitude of constant improvement and recertification shows the desire to maintain and update skills and knowledge. These attributes give individuals a clear advantage in the hiring process and result in increased pay incentives.

The ETCP certification attests to the fact that technicians are tested using standardized technical and safety information and possess documented proficiency in the subject matter, as well as a significant number of hours of working in the field. This combination is invaluable and organizations across the world look for these attributes in seeking the best employees. Further preparing students for these professional opportunities is paramount to their future employment success.

Assisting students in obtaining qualifying credits through professional work experience and achieving success begins on day one of the SDSU TTF program. SDSU TTF applies a multi-tiered strategic rubric to this objective, by providing intellectual instruction to students consisting of required lecture and skills-based instruction and testing in areas

required to pass the written exam once they have accumulated the necessary professional work experience, connecting students to opportunities to gain rigging experience and qualified working hours for the exam, and encouraging participation in social activities that reinforce their skills. Each tier of this approach complements the next, provides a broad foundation of rigging principles, and increases overall comprehension of the material, both in theory and practice.

“Students are also required to prepare a rigging plan for each production that is verified and approved by an instructor who is ETCP certified.”

Students start with safety instruction, setting the safety groundwork before any skilled tasks begin. This is the fundamental basis for all work going forward. As part of safety training, students are required to pass OSHA10 along with first aid, CPR, and defibrillator training within six months of their first day of class. OSHA30 training is optional, but highly recommended.

Production graduate students are required to complete a semester-long course focused on rigging taught by an ETCP Certified Rigger. Students participate in *all* production rigging under the supervision of a certified rigger. Students are also required to prepare a rigging plan for each production that is verified and approved by an instructor who is ETCP certified. Additionally, student attendance is mandatory at all rigging inspections. Graduate students are strongly encouraged to take a structural engineering course to strengthen their in-depth physics and math knowledge to apply the correct science in each rigging situation presented. Throughout their graduate program, certified riggers work intensively with these students during every class and each production to help them learn industry standards and professional best practices as

defined by the ETCP program.

The ETCP website provides a list of training programs and Recognized Trainers intended for renewal credits. Outside training is encouraged and students are provided time and assistance to attend conferences like USITT and LDI, which are a great way to gain exposure to industry professionals and methods used worldwide.

Relationships fostered with ETCP Recognized Employers promote on-the-job training for students by certified mentors. Internship and fellowship opportunities provide necessary hours of professional experience. Introducing qualified and competent students to the IATSE Local Referral Hall encourages them to sign up and take calls with experienced Journeymen. IATSE Local 122 in San Diego, for instance, has twenty-one certified ETCP professionals. IATSE offers students access to a variety of trainings, workshops,

financial compensation, and on-the-job instruction at different venues. In addition, IATSE offers a wide range of experience, knowledge, and networking opportunities. Local 122's Referral Hall labor calls vary and are a great way for students to work professionally while allowing flexibility to manage course work expectations.

Social activities can help solidify learned skills and knowledge. Student participation in *in-person* ETCP study groups and in social media groups help evaluate their accuracy, get a fresh perspective from other ETCP candidates, and fill in any learning gaps. Activities like rock climbing, canyoneering, sailing, and slack-lining are fun and social ways to enhance their training in a casual environment as well.

Investing in a formal rigging curriculum makes acquiring experience and knowledge for the ETCP exam manageable within a relatively short time. Students begin rigging

with the benefit of knowing the rules and regulations immediately instead of having to learn piecemeal on the job. Based on this consistent pedagogy, the students are taught everything they need to know once they have the necessary requirements to take the ETCP exam and become part of a nationally recognized family of top tier qualified and competent professionals as they move into the workforce. ■



Andrew Young holds an MFA in Structural Design for Technical Production from Boston University. He is ETCP Certified in Theatre and Arena Rigging. He is an active Journeyman with IASTE Local 122; the ATD, Shop Foreman, Safety

Coordinator, and Rigger for the San Diego State University School of Theatre, Television and Film; and the Technical Director for The Diversionary Theatre and The Playwright's Project in San Diego, CA.