

Certification strengthens our industry— no matter what gender

Get out there and take the darn tests!

SO I AM THE FIRST WOMAN to receive triple certification. I didn't necessarily mean to be. Mostly, I wanted to do it to gain the mark of a professional of the highest order. Our industry has long been known for its deviant nature, and certification helps legitimize us. I also wanted to encourage others in my local to take the tests—see, we can do this folks!

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I am the first Coloradan and the first member of IATSE Local 7 to gain all three certifications. At first, I was hesitant to write an article based on just the fact that I am the first woman to gain all three. Also, after 20 years with the stagehands in Denver, any sexist treatment I received has mostly gone by the wayside. The men I work with are, by and large, a pretty enlightened group, and I don't feel like I've really had to "prove" myself based on gender in a long time. The gender aspect did not stand out as strongly for me as the ability to be the first of my local with bragging rights because I've been one of the "guys" in my circle of stagehands for a long time.

Then came my WTH? moment. I went to order some official ETCP swag. I looked at the swag order form and discovered that women's styles were \$5 more per item than men's. Really? The certification manager

informed me that the costs are based solely on the supplier's pricing. As I spoke with others about this, I got some interesting responses. Most women in the industry that I know agreed with me that it's BS, as did a reasonable number of men. Some of the men I talked to though didn't quite get it. "What's the big deal? Just buy the men's stuff," they said. It reminded me that so often, I used to feel like I had to work more for the same recognition. It reminded me of the stories of the women in my local who came before me. It made me realize that being the first woman is still significant.

I have mixed feelings about that.

I want to be able to step onto a call and see all the hands as hands, gender notwithstanding. With that philosophy, my achievement, though worth being proud of, is not so based on gender. But that's not a reflection of reality.

Reality is that a group of female stagehands are still "girls." Can you imagine the response if I spent my days calling all my fellow stagehands "boys"? I've heard it used but not often. As a steward, I actually had to talk down a fellow member from meeting a roadie in the alley because he always referred to the crew as boys. I have been told that I am too sensitive. And no, I'm not your sweetheart, your baby, or your honey. I am your co-worker at least, and occasionally I'm your boss. So show a little respect and remember my name. But again, maybe I'm too sensitive.

Reality is that there are still a number of men who want to take tools out of my hands or take over a project that I'm working

on because they doubt my competence. Imagine the response were I to do the same? I'm pretty sure I know the names I'd hear. In fact, I've heard them.

Reality is that I'm still the only woman of 27 triple certified individuals. Reality is that women account for only 29 of the total certified individuals. Reality is that I still have to pay more for my swag.

Things are certainly better than they were 20 years ago, when I started in this industry. There were three women members of my local back then. We now exist in the double digits. But as a percentage of the workforce, we are greater than that. So often, the response to a woman rising to leadership roles is resistance. Assertiveness in women is still seen as bossy, which is one reason why I think that these certifications are even more important for women. Just as these certifications help to legitimize our industry, they help to legitimize our claims to the upper echelons of our industry; there, we are still seen as a unique item. But with the ETCP card in my pocket, I am one step closer to removing any remaining old-school barriers based on my shirt size.

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It is very much up to us, the women in the entertainment industry, to help change this old-school perception. Progress is slow. As I said, it has taken 20 years to gain ten more women as members of my local. But

I believe momentum can build as more and more women gain the experience and knowledge to be leaders on the crews. A part of that is gaining the professional certifications that reflect that knowledge and experience. Ladies, get out there and take the darn test.

This is also true when applied to the certifications overall. Stagehands, indeed labor in general, are often seen by employers as a necessary evil. As a labor force, we are all shuffled into the “anyone can push a box” category. But reality is that not everyone can push a box without hurting themselves or others. Not everyone can operate the machinery involved with accomplishing a load-in. Not everyone has the knowledge or experience to keep up with the increasingly complex and dangerous demands of the shows that employers want to produce. We’ve known this for years, but we’ve taken a little too much pride in being the

scallywags of the industry. I think we’ve all seen the Stagehand V. Pirate definitions. If you haven’t, follow this link for a smile. <http://www.pscrow.no/crew/stagehand.html> Ultimately, though, the world has turned in a different direction than your father’s stage crew. More and more, we work for employers who don’t think it’s cute that we like to talk like a pirate. We like to demand top dollar, and these employers want to know why they should pay it.

Here’s why. Because I’ve trained. Because I’ve studied. Because I’ve spent years working the brutal hours the industry required. Because I’ve put aside my social life, disappointed kids, ticked off my spouse, and confused family and friends all because of some twisted love for this crazy life. And (this is the important part), I can prove it. With one piece of plastic, recognized industry wide, I can show all the reasons I should be here. So when someone wants to

complain that I make too much money, like the squabbles over the recent Carnegie Hall stagehands, I can point out that actually, I’ve earned all of it. For freelancers especially, it strengthens the leverage you may have with any employer. For Union members like me, it strengthens the entire bargaining unit and your place in the hiring hall. For all of us, it strengthens our industry. So everyone, get out there and take the darn tests. ■



Christine “Beaner” Sheridan started working as a stagehand in Denver 20 years ago, almost exclusively with IATSE Local 7. She is currently working the bounce having served as house crew in a number of venues as both head carpenter and head electrician. She loves to spend her free time in the mountains with her husband, two sons, and their wonderdog.