

## From the frontier to the future

*“I am he as you are he as you are me. And we are all together.” ~ John Lennon*

MY STORY IS PROBABLY a lot like yours: I was a kid searching for legitimacy and a reasonable income in an interesting profession. For years I’d worked in the construction trades, and while I enjoyed the puzzles of engineering, I was tired of the monotony. I was curious, artistic, technically adept, and reasonably intelligent, which unfortunately meant I was also easily bored. My artistic nature was being smothered, and traditional employment didn’t suit me. As a young adult, my mind was boggled by the corporate maze and the “grownup world” at large. After a series of missteps, I stumbled



Working *Beyond the Break* as best boy electrics.



Commercial shoot for an insurance company, shot in the Kaa’awa Valley on Oahu. This location has also been used for *Jurassic Park*, *Mighty Joe Young*, and other movies and commercials. It also happens to be four miles up the road from Rick Crum’s home.

into stage lighting—and, it was there that I finally found my footing. To this day, stage lighting is still my dominant craft.

When I joined the industry in the early 1980s, it felt like the Wild West. On movie sets and in lighting booths, oily, sparking carbon arc lights were regularly belching soot and smoke, and in a pinch you could control a dimmer with a 9 V battery. Disco was poised to bring us robotic lighting, while we were still using brass rings and spring-loaded carbon bits circa 1900. It was a true frontier full of untamed technology, and it was empowering. We had no fancy power connectors, no digital data, and no networks to rely on.

We also had no certifications.

In the building and engineering trades, you do your time training in a single discipline, then get bonded, tested, certified, documented, and approved to be a properly licensed professional deemed fit for employment. Stagehands had no such licensing; we were often simply put on the payroll as a “technician” along with a hundred other “technicians,” with no way to differentiate us and our skillsets. However, some of our jobs have more inherent risk than others. We can take tests to operate fork, man, and scissor lifts, but what about something like electrical work? That can be scary if done wrong, especially if you’re working with portable power being used by many people in a hurry. What

about rigging? That involves suspending equipment overhead or attaching equipment to people. These jobs are laced with risk.

So the question was: *How do we know who’s the best qualified to do a job?*

Long before networks, we used networking. We still do. Back when I started, we had no fax machines, no cell phones, no social media—even FedEx Overnight had no love for us here in the Hawaiian Islands. Thirty-five years ago, I was clacking away on an Apple II, communicating with the few hundred touring people in our technical sphere on computer bulletin boards. We were a tiny contingent, so it was easy enough to keep track of the names.

“ ETCP has set the bar and given so many of us the legitimacy we’d been craving. ”

Now look at us. We’re communicating with thousands of experts instantaneously, and in such sophisticated fashion. Our industry’s demands have also evolved in much the same way. These days we’re asked to provide bigger power and more lavish rigging for increasingly complex systems—all on shrinking timetables. The handshake deals of the OG promoters have given way to the corporate management systems

and risk assessors of the 21st century. You post your CV online and look people up on IMDb. Your Internet reputation always precedes you. In the Wild West era, we had very little information to go on. Now we're in the digital era, and we have too much. So again, we're left wondering how to identify true talent.

This is where ESTA stepped in.

ESTA saw our need as an opportunity to assemble industry professionals and start a conversation. The result was the

don't need no stinking badges" became our battle cry.

Except, we did need those badges.

As a longtime stagehand with a long resume, I saw this as an opportunity to show myself how much I could do. I'd heard it was a serious exam, which I found refreshing. But, if it was a serious exam . . . uh oh . . . I hadn't taken a test in decades.

When I asked for a study guide, I was pointed toward the only resource, the *National Electrical Code*. Geez Louise. That's

was still daunting. So, I devised a plan to take the exam without studying or telling anyone; no one would be the wiser if I failed.

Fortunately, I passed that first test (Electrical), and then another (Arena). I was enthusiastic about being certified, so I decided to create lesson plans and partner up with other technicians to do some training. A lovely gal in the organization, named Meredith, was kind and supportive and calmed our fears before we took the



A lantern floating event on Memorial Day at Ala Moana Beach Park Magic Island in Honolulu with Waikiki in the background. This image is shot from the top of the control tower.

Entertainment Technician Certification Program, better known as ETCP, and its goal was to put all the puzzle pieces in place. With a great deal of outreach and response from industry professionals (myself included), the ETCP Council charted paths to certification for rigging and electricity—two crafts with the greatest peril factors, and thus the least room for bone-headedness and shenanigans.

a 3" thick tome of tables, regulations, and jargon. I could power lasers, dimmers, movers, and foggers, but the content outline

exams. She was utterly accessible and optimistic, with real belief in the mission.

ETCP has set the bar and given so many

“ETCP is worth it. You put in the time, and you deserve the recognition.”

The ETCP Council realized that this would not be a cure-all. They guessed there would be some natural resistance from all of us self-assured misfits who didn't want to be “approved” by anyone. How right they were. We're a stubborn bunch, and “We



Load in for *Wheel of Fortune* shot in Waikoloa.





Rick Crum (left), working as head electrics, at the U2 concert in Aloha Stadium.

of us the legitimacy we'd been craving. When we were alone out there on the frontier, ESTA stepped up and helped us stagehands shape our future.

And yes, it's true: we're a tough sell. We're proud, jaded, outspoken, inappropriate, and bluntly honest folks who live for the work we do. Secretly, I'm writing this to send a message to my friends and colleagues:

ETCP is worth it. You put in the time, and you deserve the recognition. Yes, it's just one piece of your professional profile, but it's a big one. I'm discovering that this kind of validation is empowering in so many ways. For instance, you'll see that people trust your knowledge—and you'll trust it, too. My certified colleagues have more confidence, and I've noticed a distinct shift in the way they're perceived by those who sign their paychecks. I'm hoping my backstory gives me enough street cred to be taken seriously. But, if you still think certification is lame, well—get certified, anyway. Those pesky lawyers, UPMs, promoters, facility managers, and producers will definitely care,

even if you don't.

You can try to keep using the tools of the past, but our industry will keep racing into the future. As our profession grows, our standards will continue to change. The great news is that our maverick spirit will remain. ■



**Rick Crum** is an ETCP Certified Entertainment Electrician and Rigger – Arena and ETCP Recognized Trainer; he serves as an IATSE trainer, has achieved CTS certification, is licensed to transport explosives, and holds numerous equipment certificates. Rick continues his involvement at Quantum, Inc., is IMDb listed, an IBEW member, and President of IATSE Local 665 in the Hawaiian Islands. These days he mostly wishes for more time to play with his family.