

ETCP certification makes a difference

Years of experience can indicate techs probably know what they are doing; combining that experience with ETCP certification *confirms* techs know what they are doing.

IN THE DAYS OF PARTY LINES AND LEADED GASOLINE, I grew up on a large lake in the Appalachian Mountains of North Georgia. Throughout high school and college, I rode horses, climbed rocks, sailed

boats, water skied, built tree houses, guided whitewater trips, built high ropes courses, coached tactical rappelling techniques, and taught high angle rescue. My father was an electrical engineer who worked for a

pipeline company, and my stepfather was an expert woodworker who taught at a private school and built houses, furniture, and a full-sized train in his spare time. Although I didn't realize it at the time, each of these



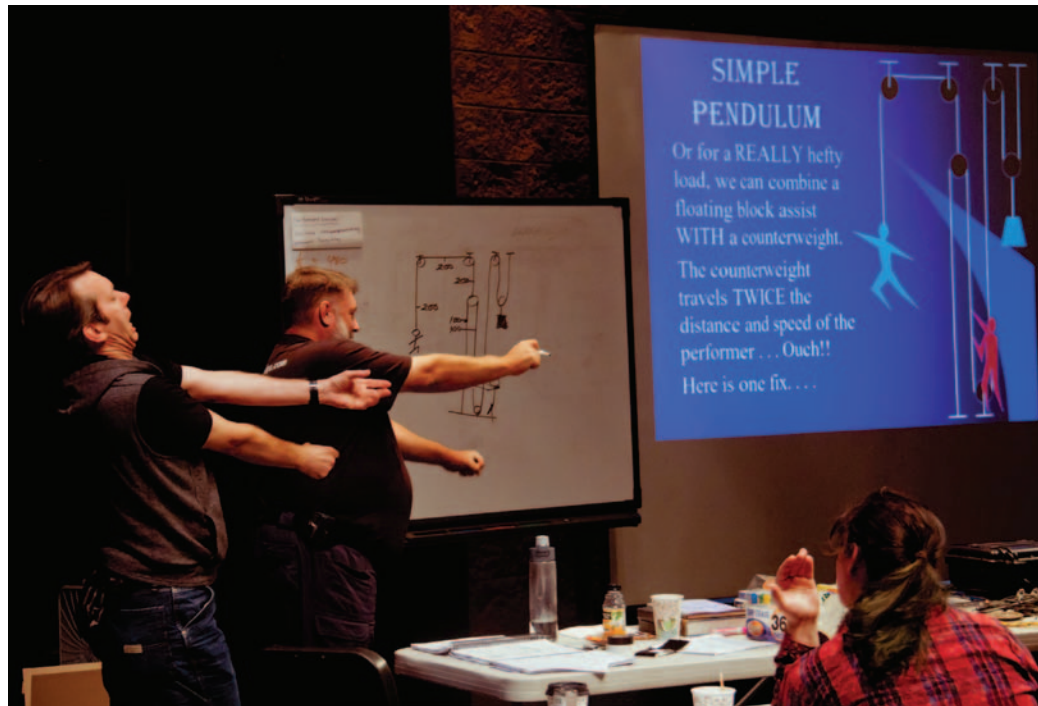
Flying a giant puppet and its performers at the TransAlta Calgary Stampede Grandstand Show in 2011.

hobbies would have a role in shaping my future career as a technical director and add to my skill set as a professional rigger.

My interest in theatre and entertainment began in high school, but I always considered it a hobby . . . a distraction . . . something that made me happy when I was done with “real work,” which was a new technology called “computers.” In college, I continued to work with the emerging technology of computers, referred to as a “math major” at the time, while having awesome adventures in the theatre department. About midway through my sophomore year, something clicked, and I realized that I could have a career doing this thing I loved so much, so I dropped my math major. I spent my school year in this amazing world of storytelling and my summers teaching climbing and rappelling, leading whitewater adventures, and working on high ropes courses. Looking back at my early days, I realize how lucky I was to be able to do the things I wanted to do and get paid for doing them.

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Throughout both my undergrad and grad programs, there were no courses in specific areas of theatre technology, but as I was already pretty good at carpentry, electrical, and creating gadgets, I guess many found me to be a useful member of their team. In my junior year at LaGrange College, we produced *Once Upon a Mattress*, and the director wanted to fly the bird character in a cage. At the time, I had no idea what “flying effects” were, but my combined experiences working with people in vertical environments, problem solving, and storytelling gave me the ability to create a safe, smooth, and effective flight for the bird cage.



Giving a visual demonstration at TOP Flight with fellow co-instructor William Auld (left) in 2017.



Teaching an automation workshop to students in 2009.

During my graduate studies at Florida State University, I created many elaborate rigging effects for our productions. Some involved flying scenery while others involved

flying people, but they all involved telling the story through an airborne entity. I still never really isolated this skill set as unique or complex because it was something that

came so easily to me and I never really perceived it as a “special skill.”

My first in-depth training in entertainment rigging was shortly after graduate school when I took a workshop with Harry Donovan. When I first learned about this “rigging workshop,” I was not completely sure what it was, but I heard we were going to be able to climb around on the beams of an arena, so I was the first in line! The theory and techniques he reviewed began to open my eyes to the fact that “rigging” was a unique skill set, and I was completely fascinated by the math he taught us. What I had always done through intuition and instinct could be planned and engineered mathematically! This wizardry put me on a new course to learn everything I could about rigging physics.

“... [Vertigo has] evolved into a strong organization, and I feel that ETCP’s esteemed recognition played a part in that growth.”

Since that workshop with Harry, I have designed rigging effects for many productions and events, and I have learned a lot along the way. I have been teaching at Northern Illinois University since 2000, and as an educator who specializes in rigging, I realize that most of my students did not grow up surrounded by the level of rigging related activities that I did, so I try to strike a healthy balance between theory and practice. I want them to have the math and engineering that was lacking in my earlier years as well as the practical hands-on experiences that I was fortunate enough to have growing up.

Even though I have been teaching since 2000, I have continued to work as a professional rigger. I continue to design rigs for arena and ballroom shows, inspect and install fly systems in theatres, and design, build, and work with custom rigging equipment for my own company, Vertigo. As I reflect over the last 30 years, I realize how

lucky I have been to work with wonderful people telling amazing stories in incredible places.

When the first ETCP exams were available in 2005, I was delighted to see that candidates were required to demonstrate a history of practical rigging work before being allowed to sit for the exam. I was also impressed with the variety and scope of questions on the exam itself. The original intent of the certification was to establish a level of leadership in the field of entertainment rigging, and I feel that the ETCP has been incredibly successful in attaining that goal.

Even though I am an “old guy,” I feel that

ETCP certifications add legitimacy to my professional opinions, and being an ETCP Recognized Trainer adds an important endorsement to my classes and workshops. Having years of experience means that I probably know what I am doing, but combining the experience with an ETCP certification means that a body of other professionals *also* think I know what I am doing. It makes a difference.

I love to rig and I love to teach. Every year, I present sessions at conferences like LDI, USITT, SETC, and various Thespian festivals throughout the country. Through Vertigo, I also host at least one annual multi-day workshop on rigging and performer flying



Creating the Human Castle with Accialt Flying Effects in Barcelona, Spain (2010).



Inspecting an eagle prior to flying it during the 2011 Winter Universiade in Erzurum, Turkey.

called TOP Flight, usually presented near the end of summer. It's an opportunity for technicians, operators, performers, and others in the entertainment industry to either introduce themselves to flying effects or refine their skills on the subject. As an ETCP Recognized Trainer, it's also an opportunity to help certified individuals earn ETCP renewal credits.

Vertigo is also an ETCP Recognized Employer. As the company's owner, it's extremely important to me that we represent the highest standards of quality and safety. I feel that this recognition helps us earn our clients' trust, maintain our brand's reputation, and provides the

opportunity for the company's name to be associated with a credible program. Over the years, we have evolved into a strong organization, and I feel that ETCP's esteemed recognition played a part in that growth.

Like those who helped me along the way, I aspire to become a resource for others on their journeys in this amazing field of endeavor. It may be a cliché, but I honestly love every minute of it. As my late father, Charles Nunnally, told me many times, "To be truly happy, find something you love to do, be the best at what you do, and figure out how to get someone to pay you to do it." Thanks for that, Dad. ■



Tracy Nunnally is the Head of Design and Technology at Northern Illinois University's School of Theatre and Dance, owner of Vertigo, and one of the first 45 professional riggers to be certified in both Theatre – Rigging and

Arena – Rigging by the Entertainment Technician Certification Program. He is an active member of IATSE, USITT, ESTA, EdTA, and a lifetime member of the Illinois Theatre Association. He is also a voting member of the ANSI accredited ESTA Technical Standards Program's Rigging Working Group, which is responsible for developing standards and recommended practices that facilitate the use of new and existing equipment in the entertainment industry.