

BY DAWN COPELAND

Fortitudine vincimus

ETCP's ninth person and first woman to achieve all four ETCP certifications reveals the challenges

NOW WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? Who reads Latin? Well . . . Latin happened to be my language of choice in high school, and I took another semester in college. Why? At the time, I wanted to be a neuropathologist; it was prudent. And, to be quite honest, I learned more about conjugating verbs in Latin than I did in English literature classes. But what does it mean? *Fortitudine vincimus* was Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton's family motto: By Endurance We Conquer. In other words, have perseverance, fortitude, and strength of character, and your obstacles shall soon be felled. Have valor. Semper fit! Marines get it.

“ Studying made me a better, more proficient, and perceptive technician! ”

It took Shackleton-style perseverance to achieve all four ETCP certifications, most certainly. In fact, it took nine years before I even embarked on the quest. While working as rigging electricians on *The Dilemma*, Jimmy Dewinski informed me of the new ETCP Electrician Certification program, apprised me of the first study group amassing, and did I want to join? I wrote down the list of recommended reference materials, purchased some, gazed upon the obtuse texts, eyes-crossed, and then



Dawn Copeland operating Kinetic Remote Systems' SuperTechno 50 Techno Crane at Cinetech 2018, the Midwest's premier education event for film and television lighting and support.

tabled the idea of even putting an ounce of effort into such a formidable and surely unimaginably impossible task. Really? You'd have to be a genius to read some of those texts! Fortunately, I am, and, thankfully, Jimmy had faith in me; his optimism abided: "If anyone could pass, it would most definitely be you!"

Jimmy believed in me. He genuinely and resolutely believed that I could pass. This heartfelt assurance lingered in my conscious awareness; the crux between abandoning ETCP entirely, and, finally, diving in.

Number nine, number nine, number nine: Little did I know, when I discovered the *White Album*, a freshman in college, how significant "number nine" would become. My first memory, nine months old—staring up at the brilliant, beautiful moonlight, entranced! At nine, I won first place in a nationwide essay contest, "The Importance of Education." After nine years

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of studying the *Films of Buñuel*, *Dionysian Cinema*, surrealism, aesthetics, watching Fellini, Bergman, Cocteau, Kurosawa, and Japanese samurai movies, a ton of art and foreign films, working in movie theatres, a video store, and at the WPA Film Library, a fabulous stock film library housing the entire British Pathé collection, I decided to actually begin making movies. And, after nine years of evasion, I successfully completed all four ETCP certifications, becoming the *ninth person and first woman* ever to do so. Wow!

I have worked on live theatre productions, rigging, operating lights and manual lighting boards, and as a lighting designer and master electrician. I have

worked on movies, TV shows, commercials, corporate venues, trade shows, conferences, exhibitions, concerts, et al., from set-up to operation to tear-down. All fascinating work, which I continue and love doing.

The knowledge and awareness I've gained, since becoming involved with ETCP, are tremendous assets. When I think back to the mid-1980s, and what safety protocols we had then, all I can do is chuckle. Fall protection and safety included common sense, prudence, an awareness of one's surroundings, astute perception, experience, queries, experimentation and *learning things the hard way!* Being in excellent athletic shape helped. Attaching coiled telephone cords to my crescent wrench and beloved Altman Lighting wrench—super helpful. Rigging lights in the rafters of the main/proscenium arch theatre, while deftly and dexterously balancing a PAR on my outstretched legs, safety included envisioning how to land like a cat, on the FOH seats below. In the black box theatre,



Dawn Copeland manning the dino on *The Dark Knight*

I'd climb a rickety wooden A-frame ladder carrying a 2K Scoop half my size to the very top, rigging it over my head! Now, that ladder would make better firewood, replaced by a far more reliable and SAFE Z-Boom Lift, allowing me to get just about anywhere I desire, easily and deftly, while wearing a full body harness, safely anchored to a 5,000 lb. rated attachment point—without rocking and precariously shifting with every



Laying a river of 4/0 cable for *Jupiter Ascending*

movement! Times have certainly changed.

Working in lighting is hard, physically demanding, and great exercise. For me, running cable is fun. While working on *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, I cracked myself up one day, realizing that I had just, quite literally, wrapped a TON of cable in one hour—4/0 weighs one pound/foot! Hauling cable and 30 lb. sandbags or lifting lights larger than your body for several hours each day for days, weeks, and months takes considerable fortitude, stamina, and strength. Having been on the precipice of earning a black belt in Kendo, I could take it. Besides, I grew up during a time of fierce determination when people were fighting for various rights and causes: handicap accessibility, acknowledgement of the devastating effects of war, equality, integration, the empowerment of women.

Discovering a dearth of females when I entered the world of movie making was less than surprising. I had entered the theatre department, a tiny but mighty bright-eyed 16-year-old photographer with a keen eye, as the *only* female in the lighting department. Over a three-year time period, three women worked in the lighting department, but only I remained.

For the first 15 plus years that I worked

in film, there were only six female grip and/or electricians in the union at any one time. Over the past five years our numbers surged to two dozen, now five to 10% of grip and electricians in motion pictures in Chicago.

In an industry dominated by men for such a long time, it is imperative that capable, dedicated, strong women be seen working with vitality and vigor, courageously, adeptly, skillfully and confidently, as I have, for over two decades.

The percentage of women working in lighting in other areas of the entertainment industry has also been historically low. I've driven forklifts, moving freight for the Teamsters, beginning in 2002. On many occasions work would begin in McCormick Place's South Building with a sea of Teamsters and riggers on surrounding forklifts. Out of that sea of 1,000 faces, there'd be four women. The Teamsters always considered, and respectfully referred to me, as a "lady," which I appreciated. It was like having a legion of brothers.



On condor duty, in the middle of a snowstorm, working on *CPD*. It was the third time shooting that scene at that location. A day filled with freak weather, despite appearances, wind speeds remained safely within acceptable range, confirmed by a trusty anemometer!

Working with Local 2, Stagehands, and Local 110, Motion Picture Projectionists, the percentage of women is also low. Surviving in the entertainment business takes tenacity and grit, male or female. I consider a person someone with unique merits and wondrous

gifts to offer, gender is merely their biology. What matters most is who they are as a person. And, when it comes to work—can they do the job well? Do they have aptitude and/or an affinity for the work? Are they talented, do they have integrity, do they have a good work ethic? Can they reasonably and adequately perform the requisite tasks? That’s what’s important.

When I meet someone, it is their soul—who they truly are as a person—that registers first. All else is secondary: gender, height, ethnicity, eye color, etc. From there, *what makes them unique?* What is essential and inimitable to their personality, what are their defining characteristics, affinities, attitudes, body movements, et al? Having been a photographer since age eight, when my Gran Marie, who worked at Eastman Kodak, gave me my first camera, I capture the person in my mind and “eye,” photographing their essence into memory. The more distinctive, interesting, and unusual, the stronger the imprint.

For years, I was one of the guys, dressed like a guy, wore mostly black, bought guy jeans, and faded into the shadows. During the early days, when shooting risqué scenes, our G&E crew would *wear skirts!* As I was Best Boy and the only female, I’d wear shorts, which I never did otherwise, minimizing exposing too much skin at work. (*Now, I’d wear a kilt and opaque tights.*) After two abdominal surgeries, Old Navy jeans fit most comfortably. And, after nearly dying, I decided to let some color into my life, release my artistic flair, donning colorful and whimsical buffs, while still being “professional.” I became more “me,” which included being female.

“Essentially me” is loving learning! ESTA and ETCP’s encouragement of ongoing education nurtures my thirst for knowledge. ETCP certification is a bit like earning a black belt, in a martial art—it is a beginning, an indication that one has the requisite foundation, skills, and requirements for embarking on the journey towards mastery. There is a common misperception that a black belt represents the highest level of

achievement, when, in truth, earning a black belt is the gateway, the first essential step towards mastery. Beyond one’s first black belt, there are multiple levels of mastery. As levels increase, the number of constituents holding degrees decreases. Mastery takes time, fortitude, and Shackleton perseverance.

All ETCP Certificants are encouraged and required to *continue* training, learning, growing, investigating, and evolving, considering the substantial impact advancements in technology have had on the entertainment industry. Accordingly, it is imperative that technicians become acquainted with and proficient in new technologies, techniques, procedures, equipment, and developments. Like a katana, one’s mind must be kept sharp.

Once I dove in, it took a very short time for me to become intrigued by ETCP/ESTA’s mission. Education and learning have always been pre-eminent for me. Shortly into my very first day of school, I was shifted into a “more appropriate” kindergarten class, and, from that moment forward, my schooling was “different,” *exceptional*. 1978 – 1979 was a rare, unique, and pivotal time in Chicago’s educational system. Superintendent Hannon’s Access to Excellence Programs empowered students to participate in and have maximum access to outstanding programs and educational excellence. The policies and practices focused on the importance of each student as *an individual who was special and different*. Such an interpersonal approach gave value to each student, and encouraged perceiving others as individuals worthy of respect, while appreciating differences and sharing common interests.

Individual choice, individual worth, and positive human interactions were paramount objectives. Given free reign for growing, excelling, developing, and learning at my own unique rate and capacity, having my gifts celebrated and heralded, I was afforded the opportunity of freely growing and progressing at the pace and manner my brain required and preferred. This

created a powerful foundation within me which set, solidified, and abides. Quality education became requisite, and less than such intolerable. Education was valued and I was valued. Both, most definitely, were important.

That valuation made all the difference. Jimmy believing in me made a huge difference. Mark Hogan’s confidence in me and support. Bradley Matthys’ unclenching belief in my capacity for excellence. Local 476’s study groups, Don Rio McNichols and Bobby Gomez—amazing. This bedrock of confidence and support was integral to my successfully passing all four exams.

A lifetime of achievements and an eternal quest for excellence has often caused me to be a catalyst for change. While graduating from college at 19 may be out of the ordinary for most, I do offer the beacon of hope that the impossible and unimaginable are possibly probable!

ETCP certification took immense effort. The more I studied the more vast, intricate, cryptic, and complex, then simple, logical, and illuminating the material appeared. Studying made me a better, more proficient, and perceptive technician! And the more I worked, the more informed I became, as the study and reference materials grew more comprehensible. Because I wanted to know and learn the material thoroughly, I created a 300+ page study reference for the theatre rigging exam.

When I embarked upon this journey, head deluged with information, I remember scrolling through the list of ETCP certificate holders during a Local 476 study group break. My curiosity became piqued. I wondered—does anyone have all four? At that time, there were only three. An aspiration emerged, “If Mark could do it, then it is possible and, perhaps, I can as well . . . but Mark’s brilliant and could disassemble a generator and piece it back together while telling you a story over lunch.” I then met and worked with Brady Jarvis, the first person to accomplish the incredible feat of acquiring all four ETCP certifications; Mark Hogan was the second.

What impressed me is that though both are highly proficient, adept, and extremely intelligent, they're also supportive, still willing to learn, and immensely inspirational. Currently, 0.4% of ETCP Certificants have all four certifications, and I've had the blessed fortune of working with the first two. A long journey commenced, one which I'm amazed to have come as far as I have, and one which I'm yet completing. There's so much more to learn! So many techniques with which to become proficient. New technologies. So many ANSI standards. It feels like I've only just begun.

I welcome others to join us on the ETCP certification journey—a truly remarkable and indispensable odyssey. At the very least, most definitely read *ANSI E1.53 – 2016 Overhead Mounting of Luminaires, Lighting Accessories, and Other Portable Devices: Specification and Practice*—an invaluable resource for daily rigging practices.

Remember, you are the architect of your own destiny; **never** let the limitations, imprisoning paradigms, and erroneous beliefs of others eclipse your soul, your heart, and/or your truth. Endure, persevere, and shine brilliantly! ■



Dawn Copeland, member of Motion Picture Studio Mechanics, IATSE Local 476, since 2000, began her career at 16, working on theatre productions, as a college freshman. She loves rigging, learning, operating aerial boom lifts

and cranes, working on really big movies, TV shows, and with Local 2, Stagehands and Local 110, MPP, AVE & CT, and is a tool geek.