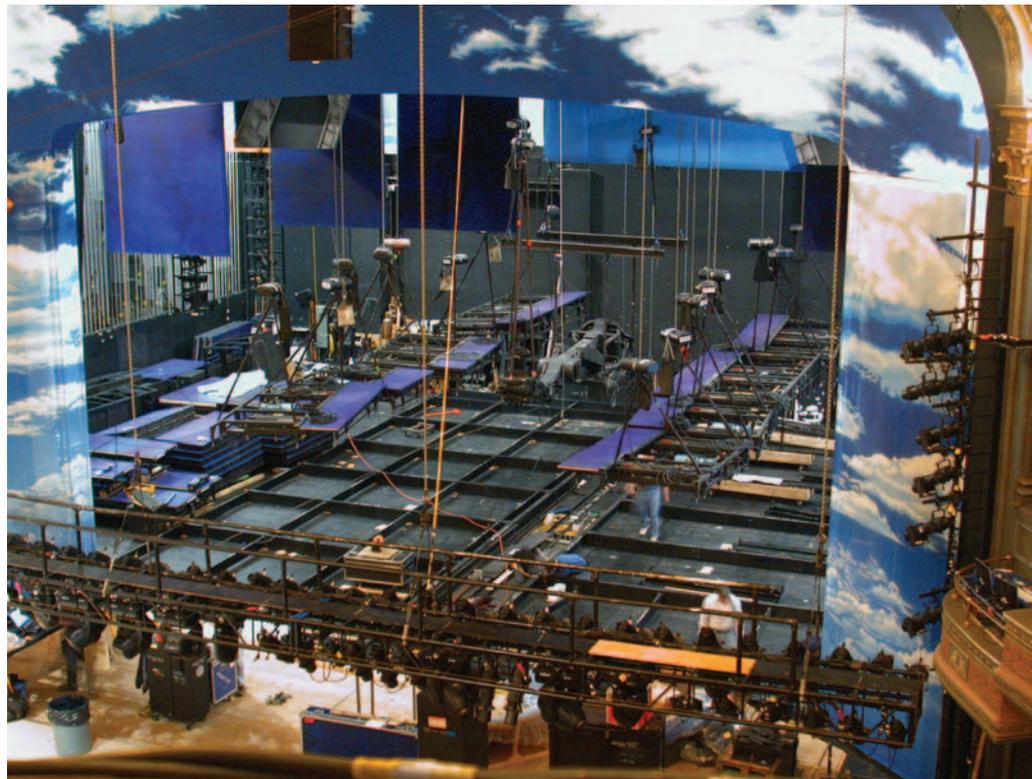


Production Electrician: Same job title, different career paths, both ETCP SMEs

AS YOU HAVE READ in this column in the last couple of issues, ETCP is launching the new Portable Power Distribution Technician (PPDT) Certification this summer. When the process began over a year ago, we followed the same path as when the first three certifications were created, and one of the first steps was to form a Subject Matter Expert (SME) panel for PPDT. We reached out to industry leaders in the world of power distribution and were given a very impressive list of names to choose from. One of those was Rob Baxter, Technical Director and Production Electrician for the NBA and owner of Baxter Controls, Inc. in Texas. Rob also just happens to be the younger brother of Rick Baxter, SME for the Entertainment Electrician Program since 2006 and Production Electrician on the Broadway stage. We thought it would be interesting to get some perspective from the Baxter brothers on how very different electrical jobs in the entertainment industry can be. ~ Meredith Moseley-Bennett, ETCP Certification Manager



This photo captures the deck installed for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. They had to fly the show deck, then install the steel that went under the deck, and finally, land the deck on the steel. Mike Kelly was the carpenter. As Rick Baxter says, "Kind of cool."



Rick Baxter sits in the car for *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. Rick carried the doll all over New York and took photos for a young relative's school project; here the doll is pictured on Broadway!

Rick Baxter – ETCP Entertainment Electrician SME since 2006

Currently I work as the House Electrician at the August Wilson Theater in New York where *Jersey Boys* has been running the last 10 years. I've often referred to it as my retirement job as I'm planning on retiring

“ . . . a Broadway electrician works in incredibly cramped spaces. ”

from here in about two years. I spent most of the last 40 years working in the Broadway environment as a Production Electrician opening a show and then moving right on to another new show. Occasionally I've reflected on how certain choices in my life could have made dramatic differences in where I've ended up. I was once asked to



Rick Baxter preparing for *Little Mermaid*.

work on one of the *Star Wars* movies, so I could easily have ended up in film. There was another period of time that I worked in the industrial and events market, where my brother Rob spends most of his time. Basically, I was there as I had become fed up doing Broadway flops—but, Broadway was really where I wanted to be. So in the end, that is where I ended up and fortunately managed to do a fair number of successful shows.

“... to be able to say that you have earned the certification is a real feather in your cap.”

There are some major differences in the scope of the jobs which my brother and I do. A theatrical electrician doesn't have to deal with as much power distribution requiring the use of transformers or generators that an event electrician will be using. An event electrician is generally working on what we might refer to as a one-off. Usually less time will be spent in the shop putting together a package for an event or an industrial. A Broadway show or tour should be set up in the shop so that if the show runs for years the inevitable changing staff will easily be able to troubleshoot the rig, hence more time in the shop labeling and packaging the

gear. Another major difference is that the event electrician will generally be dealing with large spaces and long cable runs—a Broadway electrician works in incredibly cramped spaces.

I've frequently been asked about my experience as a Subject Matter Expert. I've joked often that I became an SME so I wouldn't have to take the test. The joke's been on me, however, as we keep taking the test over and over and over again. Each time we, as a committee, update the questions we subject ourselves to having to answer all the new questions from the other SMEs to see how they work. I know I have become a more knowledgeable electrician because of serving as an SME. The give and take with other SMEs over the questions that we use has been a good experience. It's been fun working with SMEs from Canada, the film industry, and others from all over the country. In the end it's all pretty much the same, but we sure can look at things from different points of view.

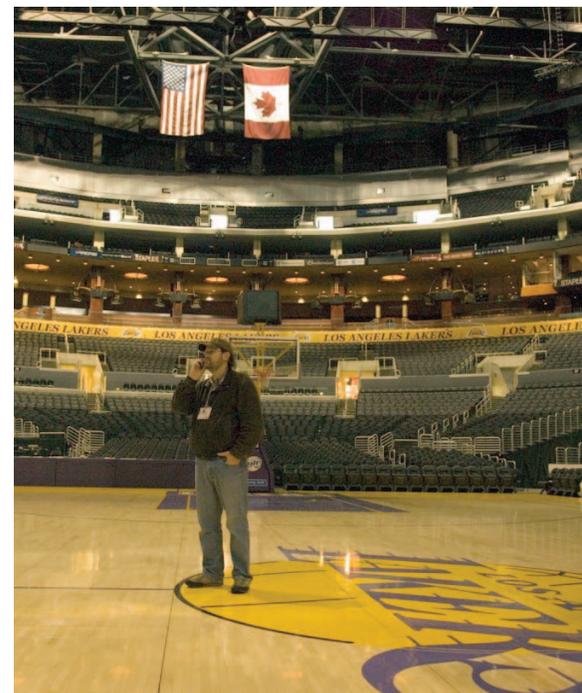
If I were to give some advice to someone trying to further their career in the business, I would tell them that taking and passing the ETCP exam would be a good place to start. It's not an easy exam and to be able to say that you have earned the certification is a real feather in your cap. I can see down the road where more and more employers will be requiring it of their staff. I know if I were interviewing someone for an electrician's job and they came with certification I would certainly look at them more favorably than I would at someone lacking it. It says a lot when someone has put forth the effort required to get that certification and becomes part of an elite group in our industry.

This industry going forward is in a constant state of change. Keeping up with the technology is vital if one is to excel at their jobs. Obviously, the use of LEDs and automated fixtures have been two of the biggest changes to affect our industry and there are certainly more things to come. The ETCP certification is a badge one can proudly carry as a statement that an

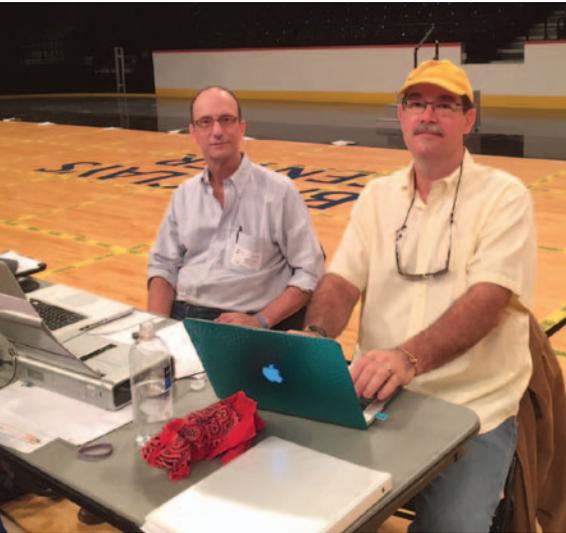
individual is someone willing to keep up with the challenges that our industry will continue to present.

Rob Baxter – ETCP Portable Power Distribution Technician SME since 2015

My brother and I, with our different yet parallel careers, are living evidence of the unique subsets of Entertainment Electrics as now being delineated by ETCP. The fact that ESTA pulled us both into the ETCP SME process is their acknowledgment of the fundamental differences within our electrical craft. While I am now the Production Electrician for the NBA and have been doing mainly sports broadcast and “one-off” events for a few decades, Rick has spent the majority of his career excelling in theatrical electrics, literally inventing some of the standard procedures we all use today. (i.e. Rick was first to bring a computer for paperwork into Four Star Lighting in the '80s . . . or, first used adding



On the Los Angeles Lakers home court, Rob Baxter talks with the court lighting board operator.



Rick Pettit (left) and Rob Baxter (right) tune-up the Brooklyn Nets' "Baxx-Truss" Portable Court Lighting System installation.

“... line voltage loss and under-rated cables over these humongous runs can become a more persistent problem in an Arena ...”

machine tape as a hanging tape—I was there for that stroke of genius.) His four decades on Broadway and on the road with National tours and Broadway tryouts have made him one of the most, if not the most, renowned electrician in the business.

I began my career as Tech Director/ Electrician at the University of Texas' Hogg Auditorium with acts coming through like Twyla Tharp and The Royal Shakespeare Company while still working as an undergraduate in Austin. Soon after, due to contacts made there and at the Spoleto Festival, I ended up working all over the country, from the Ohio Ballet and tours of several different natures to Miss USA/ Universe broadcasts. I also spent 20 years with the New York City Ballet as their touring Production Electrician. I really feel that I owe much of my career to luck and serendipity so I have some thoughts about that for those of you just starting out in the business. What you know is very important and goes without saying, but it also is as

much about who we know, who we meet, how we treat them from “hello” and how we work with them later. Simple rules...Be on time. Be nice. Work hard. Play hard. Ask questions and observe, then take initiative when able and appropriate. Be quick, but not hurried. Stay calm, but not ambivalent. And most of all, respect your colleagues, especially your elders. They will teach you and in time you will learn your craft. The work will follow, through the goodness of colleagues and friends, but some luck is always involved. Just don't push it, but be open to it when it comes. Because one thing leads to another.

felt it important for electricians to be knowledgeable about all facets of the industry. The one-size fits all test was then created and administered. I, and many other electricians, considered this a serious flaw and for this reason I did not participate in the initial ETCP process. However, with the advent of the Portable Power Distribution Technician Certification (PPDT) this flaw is being addressed and that is why I am involved now.

The electrical side of our professions, in film, TV, arena, event, theatre, power distribution, automation, exhibition, generation, to name a few, all deserve and



One NBA All-Star Game used 150'+ runs of 70+ multi-cables requiring air-space for heat dissipation. To accomplish this, Rob Baxter made 2" PVC "roller-bearings" to support, space, and slide the nearly three tons of cable. They called this the "Vegas Cable Condo."

Ten years ago, ESTA embarked on a mission to certify Entertainment Electricians in the same manner they had the rigging side of our business. However, there was one significant difference; that being the rigging component was divided with respect to the real differences that inherently exist within that craft and the electrical component was not. While the rigging certification was separated into two natural subsets (Arena and Theatre), the original Electrical SMEs decided not to divide the electrical certifications by its multiple disciplines because they

require greater subsets that respect the vastly different facets of entertainment electrical technology that exists today. ESTA has now begun to address this electrical conundrum through the creation of the PPDT. Someday, I think it might be great to have even greater subsets, perhaps regarding controls and automation, or certainly film and television.

The extreme differences between Theatre and Arena in rigging is also mirrored in electrics. Theatre is generally done in a more confined, often cramped space and with more limited distances, while Arenas may have miles of cable runs and huge distances

ETCP testing information

The Entertainment Technician Certification Program (ETCP) will make computer-based testing available to all qualified candidates over the age of 21. The PPDT Examinations will be offered at over 190 testing centers in North America beginning July 15. There is no application deadline and once a candidate is approved he/she can usually test within a couple of weeks, depending on candidate volume.

ETCP uses a point system to determine eligibility to sit for examinations. A candidate must have 25 points to apply for the ETCP Portable Power Distribution Technician Examination. Points can be earned through work experience alone

or through a combination of training (i.e., internships or apprenticeships), licensure, and degrees from accredited institutions. Courses taken outside a formal program of undergraduate or graduate studies do not count towards eligibility.

To apply, candidates must submit the 2016 PPDT CBT Application, which can be found here: <http://etcp.esta.org/ppdt>.

If you would like more information or have questions, please contact Meredith Moseley-Bennett, etcp@esta.org.

to deal with. The balcony rail at the Dallas Cowboys Stadium alone is one-half mile in diameter. I once had to turn off the roof motors there and utilize all their 480 V services, 300' in the air feeding 150 kVA transformers hung 130' in the air so we could light an NBA All-Star Game Halftime and Intros. This was done after doing the line voltage loss calculations on the closest house 208 V services that were one-quarter mile away . . . in the building! (Everyone: Go buy an *Electri-Calc*...or get the app, now!) So, line voltage loss and under-rated cables over these humongous runs can become a more persistent problem in an Arena, while moving cable picks for flying scenery full of, or near, to electrical gear is a constant issue in Theatre. Going literally further afield, we can get into the concerns about water and weather in an outdoor event, something Arena and Theatre electricians aren't so concerned about. That being said, Rick worked on *Singing in the Rain* which had its own special needs regarding safety and water. Not only was he an electrician on that, but also the plumber. My point is this: These disparate realities require a disparate certification regimen. The PPDT begins to address this reality.

The discussions that took place during the PPDT-SME process with 12 other industry veterans, all SMEs in a room together for days on end and online together for months, are what shaped this new

certification. It is a certification hopefully geared toward the working professional in a more practical as opposed to theoretical manner. We brainstormed and argued and arrived at a consensus to emphasize practical applicability of the questions and test, while not denying the need to understand the theoretical. We hope we succeeded. ■



Rick Baxter, graduate of the University of Michigan and member of IATSE Local One, started working out of New York in 1975. He has served as a production electrician on industrials and over 40 Broadway productions including

shows such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Producers*, and *Mamma Mia!* He is currently the House Electrician at the August Wilson Theater in New York, home of *Jersey Boys*.



Rob Baxter has been an Entertainment Electrician professionally since the late '70s. His career has ranged from IBEW system tech and IATSE stage electrician to production manager and systems designer, where his systems

now light the Lakers, Nets, and other NBA events. Rob began his career building dimmer racks and lighting consoles in Chicago for Major Corporation. From the early '80s into the '00s he toured for New York opera and ballet companies. Rob resides in the Hill Country just outside of Austin, Texas.