

City Theatrical Talks With Pip Biancamano



Photo by Lloyd Bishop

One of the biggest and most exciting moments in television history occurred recently when [The Tonight Show](#) returned to its original home in Rockefeller Center's Studio 6B after a 30 year run in Los Angeles. Emmy Award nominee Pip Biancamano is the Head Electrician in Studio 6B and presided over the studio renovation, and now runs the day to day operations of the electric crew on the new [Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon](#), the most popular show in late night television. Pip has one of the most interesting jobs in all of entertainment technology, and we had a chance to speak with him and ask him what it has been like to be involved with the show.

CTI: How did you get started in show business?

PB: Well, basically I was born into it. Dad is an actor and member of The Actors Studio and my Mom did her fair share as well. When I was born Dad actually had an Off Off Broadway theatre on West Broadway in SoHo. When I was 15 years old I wound up behind a pair of resistance board dimmers at the Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street in the West Village. The rest as they say is history. I guess you could say I got the bug.

CTI: What was your path into Local 1?

PB: I spent many years doing off Broadway and regional theatre both as a technician and designer (lights and sound) I also spent almost 10 years on the road doing music production for national acts. I even had a brief stint as a member of The National Park Service doing live event presentation and consulting on technology associated with museum installations and grant proposals. I took the [Local 1](#) apprentice test in 1985 and started my apprenticeship under the tutelage of Eugene T. Rowland, the then head of the NBC IATSE Local 1 Electric Shop, truly a genius and a wonderful man. That was in 1993, I had never worked in television at that point for even one hour but found that I really liked the challenges.

CTI: Please describe the famous "30 Rock" building and environment where you work.

PB: What can you say about a building that is immediately recognized around the world, is one of the greatest real estate development stories in history and also the greatest homage to both radio broadcasting and television broadcasting history ever. It's quite a storied place.

CTI: Tell me about the process of transferring the studios over from *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* to *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

PB: Well first *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* (LNJF) was moved from Studio 6B and duplicated almost identically across the hall in Studio 6A, where *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and *David Letterman* had been (prior to this it was occupied by *The Doctor Oz Show*). We then totally renovated Studio 6B, almost a gut

renovation, with new everything. We redid the dimming system, grid, and all the electric services. Updated the dimming control system to the latest technology and installed all new LED lighting equipment.

CTI: What were the challenges of the load in?

PB: Working with the trades was the first challenge as we are used to doing things in a much more immediate fashion. But this was major construction with architects and inspectors and general contractors and project managers and suppliers and designers all working on concert to redo a television studio with one show in mind. We had worked on similar projects but none at this level. It was challenging but rewarding and everybody was engaged and did an awesome job. We went with an LED lighting rig which meant new suppliers and new learning curves as every unit now has a personality and a programmable interface. In other words every unit now has the challenges of a moving light. We had to do tests of everything to make sure it did not flicker when on camera. We had to watch the ampacity of systems like a hawk. We used a lot more powercon and far less stagepin connectors.

The LED lighting rig added more cable. Where you usually have one or two cables per unit (power and data in maybe data out) you now had as many as four (power and data in and power and data out). This of course meant many gateways (24 dual port gateways implementing 32 universes of DMX) and opto splitters (25). So paperwork and cable coding had to be tight or our way would quickly be lost. We had to come up with ways of quickly labeling and relabeling. There is a lot of paperwork and labeling associated with this type of install and it must be kept up with or you will never be able to add units or troubleshoot problems quickly.

We had to come up with ways to run all this cable but also quickly make changes without having to undress a lot of tie points. So new methods of cable management had to be explored and implemented.

Of course this meant the crews had to be brought up to speed with ways of working that were at times very foreign and had to be first embraced in some cases on faith alone. I am glad to say that now everyone who has been involved gets most of it and sees the need for it. It was rewarding in many ways to be a part of a very new thing and through healthy discussion and idea sharing come up with a way of working that makes sense and though it may not be the perfect answer gets us to a very workable place.

CTI: What new lighting technology have you used recently?

PB: Almost all of the lighting in this install and renovation is LED. That's from the studio work lights to the theatrical lighting and the set lighting. A 90% LED install. It is actually really cool. We still have some of the newer arc lamp based moving lights and a few old tungsten based units and practicals of course. A lot of Constant Current and Relay cards were used instead of conventional dimmer cards. LED tape and dimmers that are specifically designed to control this type of product were used throughout the set.

CTI: How have the demands on lighting technicians changed during your career. Where do you see that going in the future?

PB: We need to understand networking and power distribution better than we ever did. That means interfaces and the connectors that go with them as well as the software that runs the control systems. We must know how to deal with IT based communication equipment such as routers and switches. There are multiple systems integrated together to make the whole and you need to know how to integrate and troubleshoot a lot more stuff than we did as little as five years ago.

I see networking being a large part of the future of this business. As the demand for and on data controlled systems grows we are going to see new formats replacing old standards and larger and larger networking implementation and integration. We may stop using XLR connectors for control and use only RJ-45 ethercon in the very near future. Or maybe even a new connector that distributes multiple systems. I see larger and larger racks of routers and newer larger POE systems, as well as more use of wireless lighting control systems.

These systems also bring into play new safety challenges and we must be vigilant here as well. The first thing that comes into mind is all of this equipment is heavier than the conventional stuff we are used to, so weight loads and the way we work off the ground has to be reexamined. Inrush current and switching power supplies are also more of an issue than ever. Inductive interference is something we must take into account as well.

CTI: What is your typical day like?

PB: First thing in the morning we normally set and program music and then rehearse and camera block music. Then if time allows we will look at show elements. After meal break we rehearse with talent and then load in audience and do the show, live to tape, which means we do it in real time with commercial length breaks. Yes we do it in an hour just like you see it at home!

Of course while this is going on we are fielding info and strategizing shows for other days. I am very fortunate to work with a group of professional people who I trust fully to get it done every day in the best way possible.

It sounds simpler than it is but after each day I very rarely feel like we did not put in a good day.

CTI: What advice would you give a young technician today?

PB: Read! Learn the standards you use everyday learn how to not only implement the technology but how to troubleshoot it. Really read the cut-sheets and the manuals. Surf that web people! Learn the DMX 512A standard and understand the RDM component. Know your basic shop math. It always surprises me how many of us use these technologies everyday but really don't understand them. The days of getting by through empirical means is over, I'm afraid. We must not fall prey to the Luddite lurking in all of us. So much of this technology is in its infancy and changing so fast it may never have a chance to grow old it may just get replaced.

CTI: Pip, do you have any other thoughts on lighting?

PB: There is a brave exciting new world of technology before us and it is going to take all of us to bring it into a new age. I won't get into numbers but let's just say the new technology makes for a more efficient use of the natural resources in use for power today and paves the way for a real jump to the alternative sources being explored.

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