



## PROFESSIONAL PROFILE:

Name: Andrew Nikel  
Profession: Lighting Sales  
Experience: 40 Years  
Location: Carlstadt, New Jersey  
Education: Connecticut College, '80  
Community Leadership: Volunteer EMT, Domestic Violence Response Team (DVRT) volunteer, Boy Scouts/Cub Scouts Committee Chairperson (Caldwell, New Jersey), Soccer Coach

*Andrew Nikel is a lighting professional with 40 years of experience backstage and in front office. Having worked as both a Master Electrician and Sales Manager, Andrew has experienced and sold lighting solutions for major productions and installations nationwide. In the light of his retirement from City Theatrical, Inc. in April 2020, the company interviewed Andrew to learn more about where his career started and his experiences during his 15-year tenure with the Sales team.*

## THE INTERVIEW:

***City Theatrical (CTI): Congratulations on your retirement! Let's start our interview questions at the beginning of your career: How did you first get into the field of lighting for theatre and entertainment?***

Andrew Nikel (AN): While majoring in Art History at Connecticut College, I made friends with people in the Theater Department, and through them, started working backstage. I was an electrician for touring shows and concerts that came into Palmer Auditorium at the college. I also worked on a lot of student productions. The technology was less complicated back then, and I suppose I picked it up by doing it.

***CTI: What was it like to start your career in theatre?***

AN: My first job was during the summer in Houston, Texas, working at the University of Houston's Children's Theater in the morning, and building scenery for Houston Shakespeare Festival in the afternoon.

At that point my brother Dave worked in sound at the Whole Theatre, a regional theater in Montclair, New Jersey, where I grew up. He let me know about a Master Electrician job opening there. Before I knew it, I had the job. Soon thereafter, I was making safety cables, and in walked my now wife, Jennifer, who managed the Costume Department.

I spent the next eight years there, as the

Master Electrician and Carpenter.

In addition to meeting my wife, I met lots of New York designers who were willing to come to regional theater in New Jersey because it was so close to NYC.

I spent two more summers in New Mexico as an Electrician at the Santa Fe Opera. The shows were played in rep, with one of five different operas every night. That meant changeovers every day, racing around the amphitheater, and changing gel and having to refocus in daylight before the sun went down. It was hectic and fun. It was a magical setting.

***CTI: What was it like in your early days of lighting sales?***

AN: In 1988, our son Ben was born, and



Andrew with City Theatrical team members in 2006

**“Andrew is the perfect human being – he’s the nicest person you’ve met in your whole life.”  
- Gary Fails, President, City Theatrical**



Andrew with colleague Larry Dunn at USITT 2008

**“Andrew is a wealth of knowledge for all things theatre, lighting, and City Theatrical. His affinity for our custom and wireless DMX products has always shone through. He is an asset to our team.”**

**- Gary Vilardi, VP Sales, City Theatrical**

I went into sales. My first job in sales was for Sonny Sonnenfeld, where we helped lighting designers find what they needed.

From there, I went to work for Production Arts in Manhattan, which later became part of PRG. I worked the Rental Desk, putting together packages of lighting equipment for shows. We supplied complete systems with everything that they needed, and tried to give customers the ideal rental solution.

When Production Arts moved to New Jersey, the rental department was upstairs, but I started to eat lunch downstairs with the engineers. From them, I learned more about the systems installation side of the business and I eventually moved into system sales.

I then went to Vari-Lite for a new Sales opportunity. A couple of years later, Vari-Lite was purchased by PRG, and I ended

up back at PRG.

Then I got the chance to work with Gary Fails at City Theatrical. At the time, the company was based in a garage in the Bronx, but we were growing out of the space. When we arrived each morning, we had to open the garage door, and move the dumpster and the forklift outside to the sidewalk before we could get to work. I was proud to be a part of the company as it grew, invented new products, and moved to our current space in Carlstadt, New Jersey. It's been a great ride.

***CTI: You just celebrated your 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary at City Theatrical. What is the most memorable part of your 15-year tenure?***

AN: Terrific people. It's been great. We've gotten through floods, and all kinds of problems. I have to say, I've been

blessed. Every person I've worked with has taken their work very seriously. It was really a bonding thing. Plus, I truly enjoyed working with all the customers and designers, and seeing things change and grow, both at City Theatrical, and in the industry as a whole.

***CTI: Why Sales and Customer Service, as opposed to your prior roles in production? What's been your approach?***

AN: The hours are tough in production. It's mainly nights and weekends. And when you're all at the theatre, it's like a pressure cooker – you throw in actors, stage managers, lights, etc. – and lock the top, and see what happens.

I enjoy the work I've been part of in sales, we've always tried to help end users. It's also been a way to have work/life balance, and spend more time with my family, Jennifer, Ben, and Peter.

***CTI: What were some of your client's most memorable projects/installations from your work at City Theatrical?***

AN: I would say the re-launch of Pier 17 at the Seaport District NYC, which is home to the Seaport Museum and the city's largest concentration of restored maritime buildings. The custom beam control accessories we sold were part of



Andrew with Lori Rubenstein of PLASA at USITT 2014





Andrew demoing wireless DMX solutions at PLASA London 2009



Andrew testing beam control products before USITT 2010

a permanent architectural installation in a brand-new building. The facades are all glass, and each glass panel can slide up. Exterior lights were built into the 10-foot-long, 16-inch-deep trusses outlining the structure of the building. Each truss gave points that required beam control for the outside color-changing lighting that shone through the glass. The job of our custom accessories was to control the glare, and direct where the eye goes, from street level. Our products tightened everything up and were also easy for the maintenance team to adjust if needed with the panel movement.

Other projects I am proud to have been part of include custom dimmers for GPI, for their commercial space renovations, wireless DMX for the lighting of Philadelphia's Center City District, and wireless DMX control for props and costumes for religious plays at Sight & Sound Theatres in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

**CTI: What was it like spearheading some of the tech support/customer service efforts for early innovations by City Theatrical?**

AN: With any of our new technologies, people used to call, and they didn't know what to do with them. Our job was to talk them through it. It was like taking someone in front of the horse and walking a little ways. Some of my favorites include Aquafoq 3300 and PDS.

**CTI: How many trade shows would you say you've done with City Theatrical?**

AN: Five per year for 12 years, so 60 or so trade shows.

**CTI: How many product demo trips would you say you've taken nationwide with City Theatrical?**

AN: 200+ is probably a good guess.

PDS demos were great; the product did something very sophisticated in a not complicated box.

The new wireless DMX gear has come along very nicely. With SHoW Baby, I went office to office.

**CTI: What was your approach to writing the policies and procedures for the Sales Team at City Theatrical?**

AN: Make them clear and repeatable. After the flood, we also created a flood protocol.

**CTI: How was it working with your family members, first Jennifer, and most recently Peter at City Theatrical? Have you worked with your son, Ben?**

AN: When Jennifer and I worked in the theatre together, we were in our early 20s. The technical staff became very close, and we still get together for reunions.

Peter started working at City Theatrical for a summer job and never left. He has some chops. He's smart, and he's capable. He loves the Electronics department. It's been a pleasure working with him.

Ben worked at City Theatrical briefly, for one summer. Then he went on to do an internship at PRG for school, in the IT department. He's a smart man, and now works in IT for a large company in Austin, Texas.

I have enjoyed every minute working with and around my family members, as well as my extended City Theatrical team.

**CTI: Thank you for your service, Andrew, and congratulations and best of luck to you and your family!**

To stay in touch with Andrew during his retirement, reach out to him via email at: [anikel@comcast.net](mailto:anikel@comcast.net)

