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What's It Like To Be A House Electrician In New York City?

New York's [City Center](#) is an amazing theatre. Built in 1923, the 2,750 seat house is one of the largest in the city. It fills its stage year round with performing companies from all over the world. **Eric Schultz**, City Center's Head Electrician spends many days there from 8:00 a.m. until after the evening's show, making sure everything runs smoothly. The Head Electrician hires and directs the electrical crew, works with the visiting companies and lighting designers, and maintains the theatre's electrical systems. It's a lot of work with long hours but it's also an interesting and creative job with the chance to meet new people from around the world, and to work with a wide range of theatre professionals.

We asked Eric to tell us a bit about his life in the theatre:

CTI: How did you get started in technical theatre and where did you get your training?

Eric Schultz: I started in technical theater in high school when some friends and I took over an old gymnasium on campus and converted it into a theater. A wonderful physics teacher found an article in Scientific American with a circuit layout for making lighting dimmers using SCRs, although we eventually found it easier to use household dimmers to build our control system.

We also provided wet shows, slide shows, and other electrical effects for local dances and concerts. I learned a lot by finding out why the things we built sparked, melted, or caught fire.

I never had any formal technical theater training. I learned basic electrical wiring from my Dad, and I've had some great mentors along the way: in college, Tony Giovannetti (now a NYC master electrician at The Metropolitan Opera, and during my apprenticeship, Myles Ambrose (now at Avery Fisher Hall). I also read a lot of technical literature, manuals, electrical codes, etc., and I always try to learn from those around me. I've seen lots of ingenious stuff and some really scary things and I try to learn from both.

CTI: How long have you been at City Center and what were you doing before you became the Head Electrician there?

Eric Schultz: I've been at City Center for 17 years. Before that I had been head contract electrician for several Broadway shows – "Guys and Dolls" (1992), "The Secret Garden" (1991), "Tru" (1989), and "Into the Woods" (1987). From 1985 to 1987 I was the Master Technician at The Joyce Theater, a dance venue in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York. Before that I was the laser operator for "Sunday in the Park with George" (1984), a job you took over, and the motion picture "Manhattan Project", and Master Electrician for several New York Shakespeare Festival productions in Central Park and downtown.

CTI: What is your yearly schedule? Is your theatre open and busy all year?

Eric Schultz: Our schedule has become fairly predictable, partly because we do more of our own productions. We usually begin the season in September with our "Fall for Dance festival", 20 to 25 dance companies in 10 nights. With every ticket at \$10, it's very popular. That is followed by various dance companies (usually a week each), including our co-production of Morphoses, the Wheelodon Company. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater finishes the calendar year with a 5 week run.

The second half of the season has three of our "Encores!" productions, revivals of Broadway musicals with the original orchestrations – also very popular. The Paul Taylor Dance Company does three weeks and we usually have the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players, the New York Flamenco Festival, and a few other dance events. The season ends with our own gala followed by the FOX Upfronts, and our "Encores! Summer Stars" production, a more fully produced and longer running version of our "Encores!" series.

We usually have a month off in the summer (but not always) followed by a month of maintenance before the next season.

CTI: What part do you play in coordinating with shows that come in from all over the world?

Eric Schultz: A few companies, such as ABT and Ailey, come in with a yellow card crew and I act as a traditional house head. I hire the local crew and, if they're using our dimmers, I lay out the cable runs.

With the rest of the companies I act as their production electrician. We have a production meeting at which we assess their lighting, sound, and video needs, try to economize by matching their plans with our extensive equipment inventory (now including Clay Paky moving lights), and settle on the crew requirements.

Some of these companies are very prepared with scale lighting plots, Lightwright paperwork, and framed color. Others have only a sketchy plot with no scale, so I will create a set of paperwork in order to hang the show, do color changes, etc. I will do a shop order for any additional equipment and cut and frame the color. We are really a full service venue.

CTI: What is your electrical crew like for load ins and for running shows?

Eric Schultz: I usually have from 10 to 18 in the electrics department for the load in and anywhere from 3 (the basic crew of head, assistant board operator, and assistant sound) to sometimes 12 for the running crew, depending on the number of followspots, extra sound, video, and the extent of the color changes. The FOX Upfronts and one-off television tapings will use many more electricians.

CTI: What is your role when a show is in the theatre?

Eric Schultz: I am the house electrician and, except for yellow card shows, the production electrician. I come in early and turn on and check the lobby and house lighting, then I make sure my crew has arrived, we turn on and check out all the show systems, and set for the top of the show. Sometimes I have cues in the show and when requested I make a video archive of the show. At the end of the night I put out the ghost light (now a CFL).

I also have to keep on top of maintenance of our house equipment, including all lighting, sound, and video equipment, laundry machines, steamers, backstage hydraulic lift, etc.

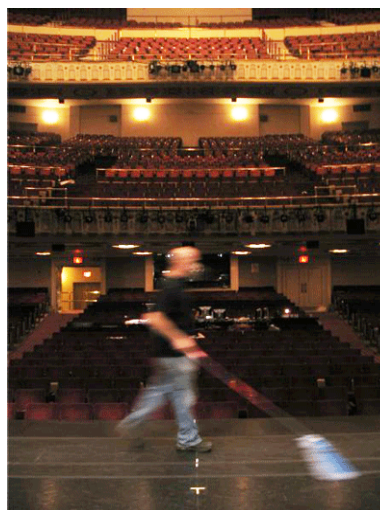
CTI: Weren't you a Local One apprentice? I met you when I was the apprentice at Four Star Lighting long ago. Can you describe the Local One apprenticeship program and how it helped shape your career?



Eric Schultz



Cutting a hole in the proscenium cluster



Greg Gould performing one of the most important duties in a dance house - keeping the floor clean.



A shot of the house from behind the Rose"



Eric Schultz: My apprenticeship reminds me of that BBC series "Connections" in which a series of events conspire to transform some part of our world. I started my apprenticeship in 1975 at Theatresound, a Broadway sound rental shop. It had just moved from the Feller Scenic Studios to Four Star Stage Lighting, a shop that supplied all the Broadway shows.

At that same time, Tharon Musser specified the first computer controlled lighting system on Broadway (instead of resistance dimmers) for "A Chorus Line". Since the sound shop was used to dealing with electronic equipment, it became the job of the Theatresound shop to prep the electronic dimmers (we housed them in audio racks, of course) and control. From then on we took care of the dimming and control needs for nearly every Broadway and most touring legitimate shows.

It was a unique opportunity; learning about electronics and non-linear circuits in a sound shop was a perfect segue into the world of electronic dimming and control.

CTI: Do you miss moving around from theatre to theatre, or do you like having a good steady house job?

Eric Schultz: No to the first part, yes to the second. Doing loads of production work at City Center keeps the job interesting and it's nice being able to go to the same place for work every day. The only thing I miss is running a show from the front of house, especially before the days of the "GO" button.

CTI: Your wife, Mary McGregor is a well known stage technician in New York, as is your son Tommy. What's it like being such a theatrical family?

Eric Schultz: There are advantages in that we understand the long hours and the unexpected changes in our schedules. We work in the same general neighborhood so we can often meet for meals and I get to learn about new gear and talented stagehands from the different venues in which they work. It also impresses out-of-town family and friends.

CTI: Do you have any advice for young technicians who want to make a career in technical theatre?

Eric Schultz: Be in the right place at the right time. Barring that, make connections with and learn from everyone around you. They probably know something that you don't and they may someday be in a position to give you an opportunity. And always keep a fire extinguisher handy when learning about electricity.

Ken Billington doing the usual Encores! focussing without a set.

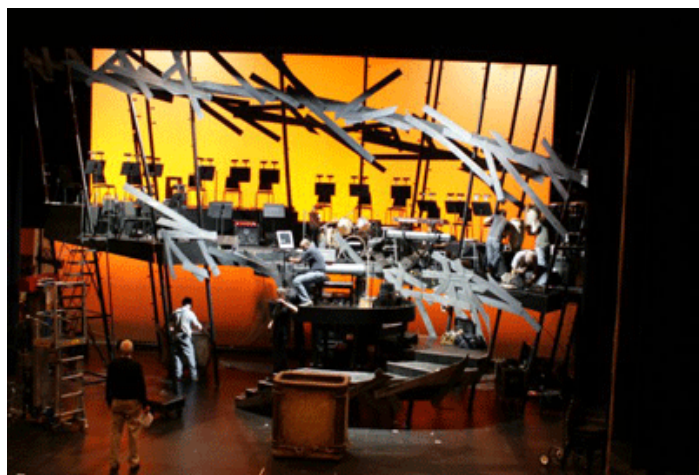


The carpenters building the American Ballet Theatre set for "La Spectre de la Rose"

City Center shop steward, Mike D'An during maintena



Ellen Horaitis and Scott Mendelsohn for the set of "The



The set for the 2009 Encores! Summer Stars production of "The Wiz"



Tommy Schultz trying out the new PowerQuickPersonal Ascender from PRG distribution



Augie Propersi, sound assistant, setti Dance festiva



Stage left color change boxes for the "Fall for Dance festival"