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Continued from June 2009 CTI Newsletter

What's It Like To Be On Tour With A Broadway Show?

One of my early mentors in show business, NY Local One stagehand Petey Joe, told me, "To be a competent stagehand, you have to know three things: your area of technology, the shop, and the road."

Living and working on the road is a prerequisite to being a great stagehand due to the experience you gain from encountering so many different theatres, crews, and challenges, both technical and human. Roadies have to be experts in human relations to get their shows up quickly, have to be able to solve every problem that they could possibly encounter, and fix every bit of their gear with only what they carry in their crowded road boxes. Living on the road is a surreal existence of airports, theatres, hotels, restaurants, and bars, with an extended community of show business that extends across America, Canada, and around the world. A musical may have over 50 people including cast, crew, and musicians, living, working, playing, and traveling together for years at a time.

I asked [Roger Desmond](#), Head Electrician on the tour of *The Phantom of the Opera*, some questions about his tour and life on the road:

CTI: Where is your home town?

RD: Houston, TX

CTI: What was your first show on the road, and how did you get it?

RD: *FAME*. When I was attending Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri for my Bachelors Degree, I was working for a local electrical contractor who also happened to own a very small theatrical lighting package. *The Vagina Monologues* was in town, and the local lighting rental came from that shop. A coworker and I had everything hung, circuited, and colored prior to their arrival, and they said that had never been done before. I didn't think anything of it because it was only 20 lights, but I guess they did and after I graduated, they offered me a job on the *FAME* tour.

That had to have been the most grueling schedule that I have experienced. Every night was a one nighter with a few split weeks sprinkled in, but I believe everyone in touring should have to do that once. It teaches you to think on your feet, and make split second decisions while totally exhausted.

CTI: How long have you been out with *Phantom*?

RD: A little over three years. Yikes!

CTI: How big is the electric crew, who are they, and what do they do?

RD: 6 Touring Electricians

1 Head (Me) in charge of maintaining the original design of the show, and managing the crew to execute that.

1 Advance Electrician who assists me on the pre rig. He and the local crew hang and focus all our FOH units (we have two identical sets). I believe in allowing my crew to take care of things themselves, and with that they run their own group of crewmembers. I relay to Keith Harris (my advance electrician) where the hanging positions will be, and I can leave to him the responsibility to get it done without any concern.

1 Cover (when I go to the Advance) fills the position that I leave vacant. He comes in and runs a spotlight (we have two road spot positions) and another one of my assistants (who had been running a spot for three weeks) runs the console. I try and keep people rotating so that they can do any position, at any time.

1 Pyro (who is an electrician). He just sticks to the pyro track because of licensing etc.

2 Assistants, who run 2 of the 6 spots in the show.

CTI: What's your schedule when you move from city to city?

RD: I leave the show the last week of each city to start setting up the advance package for the following venue. We have a three-day advance for electrics and a 5-day (sometimes longer) advance for the carpenters. I meet my Advance electrician in the following city where he hangs all the FOH units to whatever specs I give him. I do the power distribution required in the building and onstage electrics. You would be amazed how much power the wardrobe department and wigs department requires. They are usually off in distant parts from the power source, so I have to run distribution boxes to their rooms, or come up with creative methods to transfer power sources into their room.

CTI: What it's like living on the road for years at a time?

RD: I enjoy the experience of a constant changing environment both in my professional and personal life. It is great to be able to visit all over the country and Canada. The show was in Toronto for four months, Washington, D.C. and Chicago for two, and pretty much anywhere else for one month stops. This allows you enough time to actually experience a city, rather than just in and out like the one night or split week circuit.

It is something you get used to. When I first started I was doing one nighters. Three trucks set up, then a show, then a load out followed by sleeping on a bus (at least it was a sleeper bus) and then all over again sometimes eight days in a row. You wouldn't even



Roger Desmond, Head Electrician of the Phantom "Music Box" tour.



Loading the proscenium in L.A.



Carpenter Don Frasco sorts his automation cables in Syracuse

know what city you were in most of the time, and it didn't matter anyway. You find ways to make yourself comfortable while touring.

CTI: What's the worst thing about being on the road?

RD: Playing cities with nothing downtown like restaurants, bars, etc. Especially cities that have these, but they all close at 9 pm and are not open on the weekend. When you're living downtown with no car, that makes things tough.

CTI: What do you like most about being on the road?

RD: The challenges that each venue brings because they are all different.

CTI: What are the best U.S. cities for traveling shows?

RD: San Francisco, Chicago, and Hartford CT. These cities stand out to me because they have such great crews that possess a can do attitude. When you have a great strong head of department like JW, Danny Borelis, Joe Crowley and Scott Houghton in San Francisco, Jody Durham in Chicago, and Tom Burnes and Jr. in Hartford, they make your life a whole lot better by taking care of you like family. I really enjoy my visits to these places, and look forward to many more in the future. Their professional courtesy and expansive knowledge make me look forward to seeing them again.

CTI: How has changing technology affected the *Phantom* tour since you have been on it?

RD: The constantly changing world in regards to technology has been amazing. It is really cool to work on a show that uses 20 year old technology because it shows the world can exist without moving lights. When I first came on the show, we were still using a Strand Mini Light Palette. I asked about the condition of the primary and backup, and I received a long stare. I later found out that the board was prone to "hiccups" etc., and the shop didn't have any to send me, so they flew out a tech to fix it. I immediately saw that this was a bad situation and consulted my Production Electrician, Bobby Fehribach, who convinced Management it was time for a change. We went with the Obsession I which the shop had in stock and spares. Because we don't have moving lights, this was an optimal option. We have updated the wireless dimming system to the City Theatrical WDS system and rebuilt the custom boom foggers with City Theatrical modified dry ice systems. We changed the light curtains from an old 0-10v system to a DMX system. They are still just HAM radio antenna rotator motors with 0-10v pot for reference, but with a DMX head end made by Howard Eaton in the UK. We have replaced the 0-10v relay system which runs the footlights. We swapped out the old FOH Altman units and replaced them with Source Four units. It has been a fun project to update a classic.

CTI: How do you keep the show looking and running perfectly over the course of years on the road?

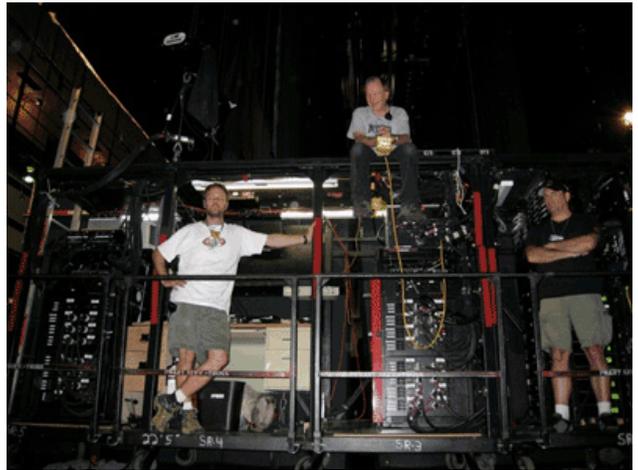
RD: Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. I also enjoy having our lighting supervisor, Vivien Leone, come out for tune ups. It is like taking an exam when she comes, but a test we always enjoy.

When you look at something over and over again, anything wrong just stands out like a sore thumb to me, even minor things. I am also a stickler for the tiny things.

I also have a great crew and production staff that supports me 100%. Without Kevin Ankele, Keith Harris, Jim Phelps, Will King, and Edgar Vanegas, none of this would be able to happen. And Bobby Fehribach is the best production electrician anyone could ever ask for.

CTI: Do you have any advice for any young technicians who want to get a job touring with a Broadway musical?

RD: Be honest, be persistent, don't take it personally. This is a tough business but full of great people.



Todd Higgins and Jim Phelps prepare to fly the SR service truss. To save wing space, dimmer racks are flown.



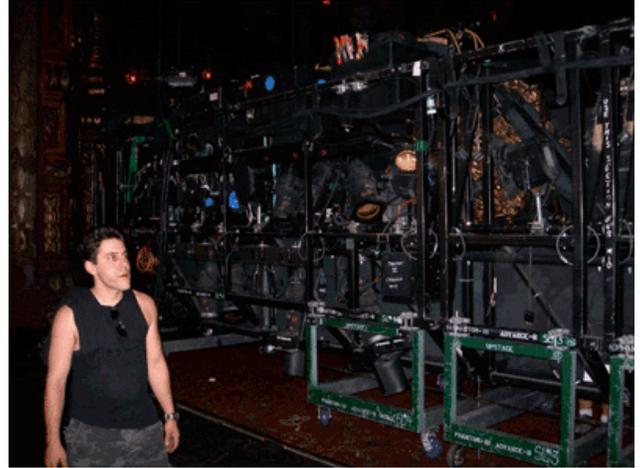
Don Adcock and Dan Frasco examine the chandelier motor.



Loading the automation deck.



Jimmy Fedigan, Roger Desmond, and Bob Fehribach at the August Wilson Theatre, NYC.



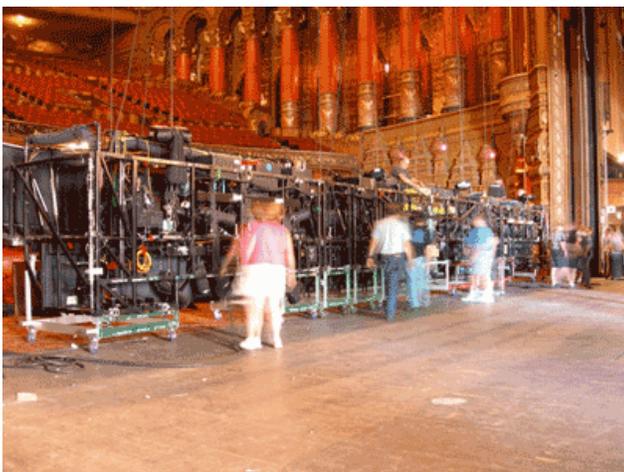
Edgar Vanegas inspecting the proscenium.



Dan Frasco setting up advance automation cables in Birmingham, AL.



Syracuse, NY loadout



Bringing in the proscenium during the St. Louis loadout.



Using a tow truck to load the service truss in L.A.