

Uncle Bill Talks About... Why Accidents Happen

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News item. May 6, 2004. Stagehand falls to his death at David Bowie Show in Miami. Mr. Wally Thomas was wearing a harness, but he was not clipped into the safety line.

(So much for that nice little fluff piece about rigging seminars overseas that I was gonna write.)

Why do accidents like these continue to happen? In the last few years there have been several fall-related fatalities where the worker was either not wearing the gear or wasn't connected to the safety line properly. In this day and age, what with all the information available out there, you would think we'd have a handle on this by now.

My experience tells me that there are three main reasons for accidents in our industry. Lack of time, poor communications and bravado. Whoever invented the phrase "the show must go on" didn't give a rat's patootie about the technicians working backstage. Yeah, I know. Actors work very hard and yes, it's difficult to perform in front of people without proper rehearsals. (After that late night in Taipei, Karaoke will never be the same for me.) But it's the crew putting the show together without enough time and too little sleep that are the ones at risk. Google some sleep deprivation studies or the effects of overtime. You'll find one report after another that describes just how badly people perform physical tasks when they haven't had enough sleep. Many report a significant loss of ability after 10 hours. And that was with breaks. How many of you have gone 12, 14 or 16 hours (or more) without a break? (Standing up at the catering table and wolfing down some flat meat in 5 minutes and then going back onto the truss does not constitute a break.)

And poor communications? I would be thrilled if we could raise our communication levels UP to "poor". Most of the time we're sitting hard on non-existent. Now be honest. How many times have you finished an effect for a show only to find that the producers cut it a week ago? And remember the time you ordered 12" tower and got truss instead? And how many times have they changed/rescheduled/added a meeting/rehearsal/focus call without telling you?

Which brings us to bravado. Bravado comes in many forms. There's the "it can't happen to me" type. That's the guy who climbs without a safety because, as he says, "I ain't gonna fall cause I ain't gonna let go". And then there's the "we don't have enough time so I know this shortcut" type. Being unwilling or unable to tell someone that there isn't enough time to do a particular job safely is an example of bravado gone wrong. So what's up with this? Why do we succumb to that "show must go on" crap?

Why do we load a heavy rig into a building when we haven't a clue how much the roof steel will hold because someone else (the structural engineer) didn't do his job? And why oh why, in this enlightened day, do we continue to flex our muscles and pretend that we're invincible? Because most of the time we get away with it, that's why. And getting away with it feels pretty good. Tell me I'm wrong.

Staying up all night and finishing that killer focus can be a real rush. There's an acute sense of accomplishment when it all magically comes together. Let's face it, we're adrenaline junkies. We go for that high of accomplishing something under great stress against all the odds. (It's important to remember that the 4 gallons of Coke you drank all night may also have something to do with the feeling.)

And who needs to know what's going on anyway? We've been there, done that and know how to solve any problem that might come up so why waste time talking about it. If we didn't get it right the first time, then we'll fix it in the mix.

But then something like what happened to Wally Thomas comes along and we all get a jolt of reality. It's not every day that someone is killed in this line of work, so it gets some air time, at least for a little while. We post notices on websites; we talk about it in chat rooms and in e-mails. It gets a splash in the trade mags. And then it's gone. Time to move on to the next wiggle light show or big truss rig.

The trick is to make it stay.

We don't do such a bad job of staying safe in this business, but we have to do better. No one wants to hear about a friend taking a dive off a lighting truss or getting smacked in the head by a shackle pin from 651. No one wants the phone call telling them that their son or daughter is in an ER a thousand miles away.

The question is how. How to stop the serious accidents without totally compromising the work? I have some suggestions. The first is the hardest. Learn how to say no. When some fool boss asks you to work 14 hours straight with no breaks, tell him no. Tell him that it is illegal for him to require you to do something that is illegal or dangerous. And working those kinds of hours without proper breaks and I mean real live meal and sleep breaks, is dangerous.

And those people who take unnecessary risks - the ones who do stupid stuff like climb without the right gear or without clipping in? Talk to them. Make it known that you don't want to watch them do a headplant next to you. Remind

them just how damn easy it is to make a mistake and what the results may be. You don't want to be the one thinking, after something has gone terribly wrong, " I should've done something".

And finally, get some training. Take advantage of the people and organizations out there in the real world doing what they can to train folks in the fine art of working and staying alive in the entertainment business. Check with your IA local or where you work to see what kind of programs they have. If they don't have programs in place, then make enough noise until they do. It may take a little digging to find the program right for you, but they're out there. Considering the alternative, the search would be worth it.

No, I don't know why that accident happened in Miami. But I do know that I don't want it to happen any more. I don't want to read about any of you in the papers, OK?

Next article? Fluff.

Be well
Bill

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