

Maintaining the Mystique

By Adam Quest

A glance at the talented and tenacious sign people who work and repair the signs of Times Square.



When you work in Times Square, there's always a chance to meet the stars. (Photo by David Rinella.)

About the author: Adam Quest is a New York freelance writer and a neon junkie.

ON ANY GIVEN DAY OR NIGHT, amidst the glare and grandiosity of Times Square, anonymous, purposeful figures make their rounds ensuring that the *Great White Way* remains so.

Maintaining the steady glow of signage in Times Square requires a constant vigil by various sign professionals, including the ominous sounding *night riders* who monitor the signs from street level nightly. They report their findings to highly skilled repairmen who must then scale the heights of these spectaculars and crawl into the guts of luminescence to perform highly technical, often dangerous operations.

Constant monitoring of the signs in Times Square is necessary because of their complex nature and a wealth of hazards peculiar to *The Avenue*.

"Times Square is basically a canyon and that causes really strong gusts of wind," says Bob Dianuzzo, electrical supervisor for Artkraft Strauss — the dean of Times Square sign companies. "Also, with some of our lower signs, somebody might come along with a broom handle or stick and decide to whack at it. You have a variety of people in Times Square, good and bad, and some of them cause problems for us."

It is estimated that 15 million people pass through Times Square on a weekly basis.

Repairing spectaculars is a highly esoteric craft that requires specialized skills and years of training. Although there is a union-run school that trains people to work specifically on these signs, those who wish to ascend the heights of Times Square acquire the bulk of their experience through on-the-job training.

Dianuzzo says, "I don't care what company it is, these guys have to be in the business at least five years before they can come on the scaffolding because their lives are at stake here and if they're not sure what they're doing... it could be very bad news."

Technology has changed the entire sign industry, especially the way spectaculars

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are constructed and how they operate. Signs once composed of mechanical parts are now electronic and controlled by computers. Consequently, sign repair has changed as well.

Most repairmen seem to take the pervasion of electronic sign technology for granted. Dianuzzo, for one, embraces the simplicity that comes with technology.

"Electronics are replacing mechanical components," he says. "Now there's less moving parts and the signs are easier to fix; less repairs need to be made."

Ira Sugarman, electrical foreman for Van Wagner Advertising, while no less cognizant of technology's influence, has a different perspective.

"Electronics last longer but servicing itself is more difficult because now we're getting into computers, so there's a lot more components than just changing a mechanical figure," he says. "It's a whole series, a whole circuit for each flashing figure. There could be 10 components within one circuit so you have to be able to wade through a lot more in order to troubleshoot and repair it."

"With neon you can just get on a scaffold and service what's in front of you," Sugarman continues. "This wouldn't be in front of you and there's a lot of different things that could be wrong with a sign like this. The voltage coming up could be bad, the element driver could be bad, the main driver could be bad, the cables could be bad, moisture in the line could cause a weak signal, the tubes could be bad. It's a lot more complicated."

Ironically, many time-honored, low-tech tools and methods are still used to repair spectaculars. "We start out with step ladders and double ladders, scaffolding, bosun's chairs — everybody rides the chair and the scaffold," says Dianuzzo.

Sugarman adds, "Generally we use screwdrivers, needle nose pliers, lineman pliers, channel locks, wrenches; basic electrical stuff. Oscilloscopes can show you the wavelength of the chips, but generally that's very time consuming."

To imagine Times Square without its signs (if such a thing can be done) is to see

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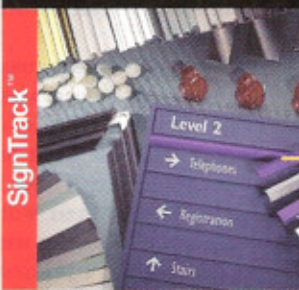
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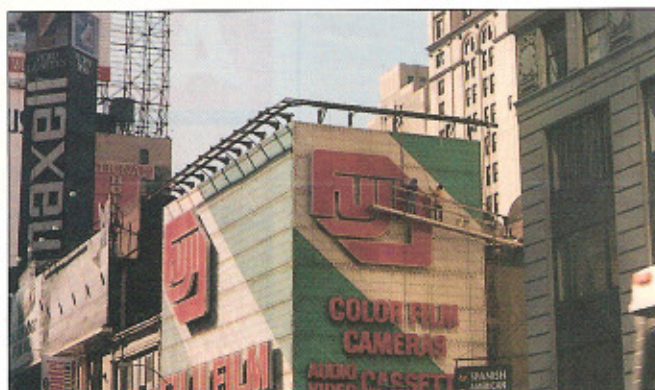
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Time for cleaning. Months of accumulated grime leaves a thick film on the Fuji sign. (Photo by David Rinella.)



Repairing and maintaining Times Square signs is an ongoing task that can take workers from street level to skyscraping heights. (Photo by David Rinella.)

a place stripped of its visual vitality, and reduced to a mere center of commerce, barely worthy of a tourist's gaze, let alone constant attention by photographers, filmmakers and chroniclers of the urban-landscape-as-art.

This dark, barely imaginable scenario seems to hover deep within the mind of every sign repairman who works Times Square. Part of what motivates these craftsmen to keep Times Square ablaze is the belief that their work possesses an urgency and visibility with ramifications far beyond the confines of a 40' x 60' amalgam of wires, metal and glass.

Perhaps subconsciously, they realize that to work on signs in Times Square is to work on an overlit landmark of international renown that symbolizes what America, and certainly New York, means to many people worldwide.

Bob Jackowitz, vice president of Artkraft Strauss and the unofficial poet laureate for Times Square signage, believes a bigger picture and other, less-than-concrete signs emanate from this spectacular realm.

"These men are almost doing topiary work — not just maintaining individual signs, but a whole landscape. The signs are part of the orchestra, and nothing is out of place. Visual pollution is an oxymoron as regards Times Square, there is no such thing.

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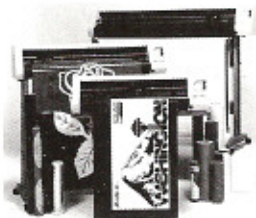
Indeed, a gawking, wide-eyed tourist dwells within the soul of every scaffold jockey on The Avenue.

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It's not all lights and glamour: Tying a banner. (Photo by David Rinella.)



A tour bus rolls by as two scaffolding jockies take care of business. (Photo by David Rinella.)

"It's a strange business, not the kind of work you grow up wanting to do, but there are a lot of families with two or three generations of sign workers because it's an interesting and viable product that's unusual. I can't see it ever becoming mundane because we're always pushing the envelope of what can be done."

Although they routinely dangle hundreds of feet in the air, within kissing distance of enormous celebrity visages, and wind their way through miles of live neon, most spectacular specialists are not, strangely enough, blasé about their work nor are they immune to the gaudy magic of Times Square.

Indeed, a gawking, wide-eyed tourist dwells within the soul of every scaffolding jockey on The Avenue. Charles Sperazza, an electrician for Universal Unlimited and veteran of 25 years in the sign business, probably speaks for his colleagues, "We work all over, but Times Square is special. The signs are much bigger here and it's more involved and energetic because there's more activity here, always something going on. People are always watching you; it's like you're on stage, and the tourists are constantly taking pictures of you."

"When you work on Times Square it's more of a thrill with all the lights, the glitter and the clatter. It's a lot of fun; we really enjoy our work. This is probably the ultimate job for a sign worker. The only other place I could see that's more exciting would be Las Vegas."

Standing on a 50-foot scaffold, 15 stories high at One Times Square One ("where they drop the ball on New Years Eve"), flush with the top of the awesome Minolta sign, Ira Sugarman is barely fazed by a frigid gusting wind that rattles the rigging. He's definitely in his element here, high above the clamor of the world's most famous intersection, gazing upon what Bob Jackowitz calls "The biggest Paintbox in the world."

"This is what it's all about right here," he says with conviction. "On the scaffold, it's another world, another view... We're the guys who are physically, actually out here doing it, repairing the signs and making sure that everything works, so we have a different type of feeling towards it than anyone else. We're connected to Times Square." 98