



# ON THE JOB with IATSE Local 28

**ALL HANDS ON DECK:** Rigging the KISS show at Moda Center is a team effort. Joel Gburek, left, works with a rigger 100 feet up to attach chain motors that will later lift the equipment.

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KISS, cackling, “Welcome to the Psycho Circus!” can descend on individual octagon-shaped platforms as flames shoot off in the background. Katy Perry can fly out over her audience sitting on a flying saucer. Tommy Lee of Motley Crüe can play drums on a rotating roller coaster above the crowd.

Some riggers get their start at rock and roll clubs. Gburek got *his* start his senior year of high school in State College, Pennsylvania, when his English teacher talked him into doing stage work on a spring musical. That led him to study technical theater production at Penn State, and a \$4.15-an-hour student job working back stage. After graduating in 1995, he moved to Portland.

“My number one priority was getting an IATSE card, no matter where I ended up,” Gburek recalls.

When he saw that the Broadway hit *Les Miserables* was coming to what was then the Civic Auditorium (now the Keller), Gburek, who’d previously worked on the show’s touring production, went to talk to two stage carpenters he knew on the crew. They introduced him to IATSE Local 28’s business agent. He joined, and started getting jobs through the union hiring hall.

Twenty-three years later, Gburek has rigged countless concerts, stage productions, conventions and trade shows. He’s been all over the world, rigging on six continents. He traveled with the Broadway show *Wicked*. He rigged the



Joel Gburek

2016 Republican National Convention. He toured with The Rolling Stones, Nine Inch Nails, The Killers, Michael Bublé, Kings of Leon, Macklemore & Ryan Lewis, and Imagine Dragons. And like most people in the industry, he’s never been starstruck.

“The star knows you’re not there to get their autograph,” Gburek says. “They know you’re there because you’re a professional. And they know that they hired you and they’re paying for you. You’re part of the machine that makes their show go on.”

“The touring lifestyle is not like the movie *Almost Famous*. Touring these days is a business. There are lobby calls and day sheets and time schedules and per diems and sexual harassment policies and non-disclosure agreements.”

Working for a band’s touring production crew is non-union, but Gburek keeps up with his

Local 28 dues while he’s on the road. And he calls Portland, and Local 28, home.

“I think we are one of the best rigging locals in the United States, and I say that with a lot of humility but also a lot of experience of being in all the other ones.”

Rigging a production is a team effort and a collaboration between “production riggers” who work for the traveling show, and “local riggers” who work for the venue.

“A production rigger’s job is to take the same show and fit it into 30 different boxes,” Gburek says. “A local rigger’s job is to take 30 different shows and shove them into the same box.”

Gburek said Portland’s Local 28 has a lot of riggers who’ve been on the road, so they understand the needs of a traveling production.

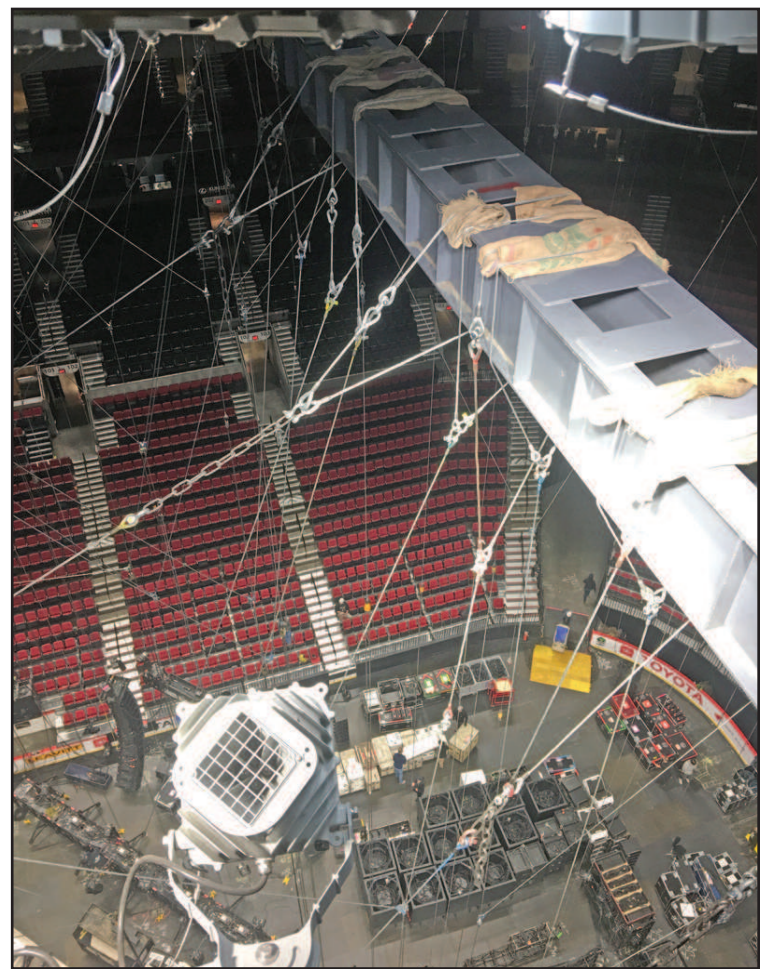
“We bring a lot to the table. We bring professionalism, we bring pride, we bring a sense of union integrity.”

And Local 28 enjoys a solid relationship with arena management, Gburek said: “We’re paid well, we’re treated well, we’re well-taken care of, and we’re respected.”

IATSE stands for International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. At Local 28, being a union rigger means a wage of about \$38 an hour, plus health, retirement, and training benefits.

Thanks to the professionalism of Gburek and his fellow IATSE members, serious accidents are rare. But the risks are real.

In 2003, a ceiling lighting grid collapsed at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City as riggers



**IT’S A LONG WAY DOWN.** For upriggers in IATSE Local 28, a work day means walking out onto beams 105 feet above the floor of the Moda Center arena.

were setting up for a concert by Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake. Thirty people were working below, and miraculously no one was hit, though three stagehands sustained minor injuries in the scramble to get out of the way. The accident caused \$1 million in damage to the tour’s equipment and to the false ceiling, and put the tour on hold.

Because today’s shows often exceed the rated capacity of venues’ structural beams, productions must hire an engineer to determine where load can

safely be applied to the building. Gburek doesn’t take any chances, and with an experienced union crew, he doesn’t have to.

“Every single thing we do, all the thousands of pieces of hardware we put together, each one of them is critical to a catastrophe not happening. So to me the union means knowing my brother or sister on the other end of the line. If I’m going to send something up to the grid and someone comes on the radio and says it’s safe and secure, I trust them unequivocally.”