



"The theory was that if you thought you were safe then you were - there wasn't enough knowledge for anyone to disagree with you."

Serendipity, a willingness to grasp every opportunity and a strong work ethic are common themes to the success story of so many careers in entertainment. Pete Smith's is no different. He started on the bottom rung of the ladder, cleaning floors and emptying bins. Over nearly 20 years he has steadily climbed to the top - literally as well as figuratively - and now runs Pete Smith Inspections Ltd.

Pete has arrived here by following some unusual, occasionally unplanned routes and facing some hefty challenges, personal and professional. However today, with a wealth of experience and knowledge under his tool belt, he understands his industry inside out. As a result he is relaxed, confident and a total pleasure to be around.

Pete fell into rigging completely by accident: "Between the ages of 12 and 17 I was setting up PAs for punk bands in Coventry and Leicester. The work was sporadic and the money terrible. More often than not we got paid in beer - it wouldn't be unusual to drink 12 to 15 pints each per job!"

Sarah Rushton-Read talks to Pete Smith of Pete Smith Inspections . . .

Eventually, at just 18, Pete gave his young liver a holiday and got a proper job. "I was made redundant and serendipity struck for the first time. A friend had a brother working in London. There were some jobs going. I had an interview on the Friday, started the job on the Monday and never went back home again - not even to empty my flat!"

The job was sweeping warehouse floors and emptying bins at Samuelson's Concert Productions. After six months someone finally read Pete's CV and noted he was a trained fitter. "He asked if I fancied running the rigging store. I said 'what's rigging' and they replied 'you know more about it than we do, get on with it!'"

Pete openly admits it was more by luck than judgement that he didn't kill himself or anyone else in the first six months. "I worked in the warehouse during the day and tagged up with site riggers at night. It was the only way to learn, we worked the extra hours for free. My first onsite job involved putting a three 2-tonne motor points into the roof of the Albert Hall. My next mission was to persuade someone to pay me for doing it."

In 1991 Pete moved to Unusual Rigging: "I was living in South Harrow in a two-bedroom flat with 14 other blokes - it was tight. The landlords owned an off-licence. They must have thought they'd died and gone to heaven when we arrived. Not only had they managed to rent their tiny two bedroom flat to 15 blokes for £75 a week, but we then spent four times that on beer in their shop!"

After four years Unusual moved to Northampton and Pete moved with them. "I moved from assistant warehouse manager to maintenance and servicing of

chain hoists. Back then, rigging wasn't the regulated, respectable job it is now. The infrastructure for health and safety and training simply wasn't there. We filled trucks, emptied them, threw kit into the roof, then pulled it all out and put it up again elsewhere."

Pete worked at Unusual for 11 years. "My department grew and we introduced equipment testing and certification. As the kit on long-running theatre shows started to wear out, we'd service and repair it on site to avoid disrupting the shows."

However, this was still only 1992: the PPE regs had just been introduced and it was relatively rare to see anybody in a harness. "You could spot the big American tours - their riggers had harnesses, we used spansets and shackles! The theory was that if you thought you were safe then you were - there wasn't enough knowledge for anyone to disagree with you."

Pete did many of the safety checks for big West End Shows - *Cats*, *Oliver*, *The King and I*, *Phantom*, *Starlight Express*. "I also serviced 48 performer-flying winches at the Dome. It had to be done overnight, for three weeks out of every four."

Around that time, 20 years of heavy lifting was taking its toll. "A visit to the doctor with lower back pain resulted in the diagnosis that I had three months until I was either quadriplegic or dead - I'd crushed 70% of my spinal cord in my neck! This resulted in seven months off work. My physical health degenerated fast; I couldn't wash, dress or feed myself. I lost my sense of touch and much of my motor function. People were asking me when was I coming back to work and I was thinking 'actually, it'd be nice if I could wipe my own arse!'"

After surgery, Pete had to learn to write again, how not to poke himself in the face with his fork and other simple skills. "I had to wear a surgical collar for 18 months. My role at Unusual changed: someone had to drive me from job to job and I had to take a much more finger-pointing role. Three years later I was made redundant."

Pete then worked for a crane firm in Manchester before leaving to join Tomcat UK. When Tomcat was sold to the Vitec Corporation, Pete changed direction again and became 'man in a van', providing maintenance and testing services to a variety of venues and leading rigging companies. Things went well and Pete was joined by Andy Jones in 2007.

By January this year, the company had grown and Pete was disappearing under a mountain of paperwork. "It had just about beaten me - I would still be up at 1am emailing people and then out again at 5am on the next job."

But then serendipity struck again. "We did a job in October for Special Project Solutions run by Tim Roffey and David Green. I had taught Tim when he was an apprentice at Unusual. There was an affinity between our two companies and we joined forces. Today Tim runs the big installation projects, David Green looks after business development and day to day running of the company, and Andy and I are out doing what we are good at - inspection and testing. Our USP is this: unlike insurance companies - which tout for the same work - we provide a testing and solution-based service. My aim is to develop Pete Smith Inspections into the company people automatically think of when they need rigging kit inspected, serviced and tested - the accepted industry standard for what we do."