



Conceptual Show Design Formula: Ability + Concept = Design

Part 6: “Character and Plot: The Guard Designer”

By: Sherry Stone

Where to start?

The music has been chosen and written, the drill designed, and now it's time to develop the show's main visual character - the color guard. When creating the color guard show, I need three very important items before I begin - a recording of the music, a copy of the score, and the drill charts. A recording of the music is imperative in order to hear what the band is playing, the dynamic of the music, and the accented parts throughout the show. It is necessary to use a score because it is sometimes difficult to know exactly which instrument or section is playing what notes, and it is also extremely helpful to know the time signatures throughout each piece. I never begin writing work for a color guard without first seeing the drill, and learning where each move occurs. I write work specifically to the drill, paying close attention to where the color guard is staged, what needs to be accented, which direction and step size the performers are traveling, and knowing exactly where and when a pass through is taking place. This avoids many problems when learning drill. Being a performer, instructor, and writer/choreographer of color guards for the past fifteen years, these three aspects are essential before the design of a color guard show can begin.

Creating the color guard show

A writer/choreographer must know the color guard's ability level and desired goals for their show. Every color guard has a different skill level as well as skill sets, whether it be how long the students have been spinning flag, if any of them are dancers, or if the students spin any weapons such as rifle or sabre. It is my responsibility to speak with the color guard coach and band director to learn the guard's current ability levels and what they would like to achieve for this competition season. I write/choreograph the color guard work to the specified ability levels and desired achievements, along with utilizing any and all equipment the color guard wishes to incorporate. I will spend much time familiarizing myself with the musical idea and the drill charts as they pertain to the music. Once I am accustomed to this, I will decide where each piece of equipment will be the most utilized, such as spinning flag for the opener, and having dancers in the ballad, etc. I will write down what equipment will be spun at each particular point in the show and where there are equipment changes.

Choreographing the work

Once I have done all my homework, it's time to write the choreography. I will look at the drill to see how many counts it takes to get from set 1 to set 2, listen to the music, write work for that drill set, and then move on to the next page. I write the work to how the performers would be moving in the drill. It would be counterproductive to write intricate footwork if the performers are traveling at a four to five step size, or to add a big toss when a pass through is taking place. It's important to be totally familiarized with the entire piece, because I need to know where my impact points are happening, know exactly what is to come, and write accordingly. It is important to stay innovative throughout the creation of the choreography and use new ideas in each piece. If flag work in the opener is similar to a certain phrase in the next song, the students' muscle memory may be compromised. Mistakes are more liable to occur.

As I write the work, I handwrite every single count of the choreography; this is to ensure that I will not forget any of the choreography I have already created, and it is a wonderful reference for the color guard students once they have been taught the show. For example, when I go to a school to teach, I never forget any of my choreography because it is all written down, and the students can use this as a tool as they are practicing if they forget where their left hand is on count 5 of set 15 in the opener. This entire process will take place for every count of every piece until all the choreography is written.

Teaching the work

Color guard work is undoubtedly the most difficult section of the marching band to teach. One cannot hand out a score to the students and say ‘go home, look at these notes on the paper, practice this, and we’ll put it all together tomorrow’. Color guard work must be taught from one person to another. Every color guard has their individual methods of teaching a show. Some may teach one piece in a day, work on it for a week, and use this process for each successive piece. When I write a show, I typically travel to the school and hold a four to five day color guard camp. I will teach one piece a day, and at the end of the rehearsal day, the students will be recorded performing the work. If there are any particularly difficult sections to a piece, I will record myself going over each count and performing the work for the students’ and instructors’ later reference. It is possible to have someone choreograph work and put it all to DVD, have the captains or instructor learn the work from the DVD, and teach their peers or students at their own pace. Though, it is extremely beneficial to have the choreographer teach the work in person, because if there is a section of the work that is just not going to work out or the instructor knows will definitely not be achievable, alterations can be more easily achieved. It is also in the students’ best interest to visualize the work as it intended to be performed while the choreographer teaches. Minor subtleties that may not be picked up on DVD are more apparent in person.

Coming Soon: Part 7: “The Final Product: A Teachable Product”

Author

Sherry Stone

Sherry Stone has been a performer, instructor, and choreographer of color guard for over fifteen years. She marched drum and bugle corps for nine years spending five years performing with the Phantom Regiment of Rockford, IL. Sherry is well versed in dance and movement having taken dance classes as an adolescent and continuing as a student at the University of Iowa, as well as being taught by multiple instructors throughout the country while performing with drum corps. Sherry has instructed drum corps and many high school color guards in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri. In addition, she is sought after to judge for competition shows. Color guards she has choreographed and instructed have received excellent ratings along with top color guard achievements. Sherry loves to attend drum corps shows every summer for entertainment, and to keep current with the marching medium. Sherry holds a bachelor of science in biology, and as her full time job, works in an infectious disease laboratory. She is married to a former Madison Scout percussionist and they have a two-year old little girl who also loves to dance and spin her very own two-foot flag!