





# SET DESIGN

## ENDURING ADVICE FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

by Terry Voss, Keith Stevens, Michael Sferro,  
Rick Lunt, Kaitlin DeSpain & Brett Carroll

Hear from some of the best names in  
the business about winning techniques  
for stage design and show design.



## Five Building Blocks for Award-Winning Show Design

*Rick Lunt, Director, Evolution (UT)*

Evolution, American Leadership Academy's mixed show choir, was awarded the Best Show Design in April 2014 at the FAME Nationals in Chicago. As a director, I saw this award as a great accomplishment which required much foresight, planning and development. Brainstorming a show design starts in the spring after our final competition. For the past couple of years, we have centered our shows after two movies: Willy Wonka and Monsters, Inc. The choir members often provide ample ideas; however, final decisions are up to the director and show design team.

We first determine if the design will have a storyline, theme, or typical Midwestern show with five songs. Having designed each of the above show styles, I have determined five building blocks that will aid in providing an award-winning show choir set design.

### 1 Pinpoint a Theme

Many directors may find a specific song to plan a show around. However, I have determined that it is important to motivate and teach a life skill. My advice is to find a story, movie, or musical that has a great plot with an even better lesson. While you will not have time to tell the complete story in twenty minutes, you can design a show that will motivate, move, and inspire your choir members and their audiences.

### 2 Select Appropriate Music

Each year, my wife asks why I have purchased nearly fifty songs on iTunes. It is important to look at a variety of music that will not only aid in the plot but will also provide diversity and musical variety. It is important to select some current repertoire that the students will be excited about, as well as selecting others that mature audiences may relate to also.

### 3 Collaborate

It is imperative to share the new show design with the production team,

allowing more eyes on the show design and a critical evaluation of the project up to that point. Someone might have a clearer vision, a different song choice, or a twist to add. Allowing others to participate in the process is not only vital in engaging all stakeholder, but it also helps them choreograph or write arrangements with the complete vision in mind.

### 4 Plan the Costumes, Set, and Band

Considering your costume design, costume changes, and band members' abilities is crucial. Thorough set designs that have included costume design, costume changes, band abilities, and solid band arrangements will produce excellence.

### 5 Share

Alumni often will share life lessons they learned in choir. I advise directors to provide opportunities for this sharing by allowing students to tell each other what they are learning from the text, from the plot, or this year's choir experience.

## A Technical Designer's Planning Process

*Keith Stevens, Technical Designer,  
John Burroughs Powerhouse (CA)*

The most important thing technical directors can do is to first, do no harm, just like the doctor's creed. Our goal is to ensure that what we do will only add to the experience in a way that stays within what was originally envisioned. Booster Club members at John Burroughs are incredibly supportive, with people giving hundreds of hours a year to make our shows possible. We are also fortunate to have an amazing ROP technical program run by Jon King, including two classes with over fifty students enrolled whose main focus is stagecraft: lighting, sound, set construction, painting, and rigging.

We consider several things in planning our backdrops and effects. First, we evaluate the venues that we will be performing in, the size of the stage—width, depth, and height—and the

dimensions of the entrances, including possible elevators. We ask ourselves how we will transport the equipment, and we determine electrical wattage and number of amps. We ask if the venue will allow atmosphere compressed gas (HAZE), fire extinguishers (co2), dry ice (fog) and confetti. Just as importantly, we learn how long we will have to set up and breakdown, and if workers at the venue will assist. We ask if riser setup will count in our time, if we will encounter a union house, and if there are steps. This is just a partial list of items that goes through our minds when designing a production.

Through the year I often find myself daydreaming, staring at something on the street (a billboard, some new lighting effect, etc.) that catches my eye. I look at it in a way that few probably do. Will that work on stage? How will it look? Will it fit? How fast can we set it up and break it down? I look forward to going to professional musicals and CIR QUE

types of shows just so I can see what they are using. Sometimes I just watch in awe and wonder, “What if?”

### **Set Design as Show Design**

*Terry Voss, Director,  
Company of Singers (MN)*

Show Design is one of the areas I enjoy the most. Even though I work with several other instructors, I primarily come up with the show ideas. Sometimes the idea can be drive by costume, theme, or even a particular song, but it always has the same thread: audience appeal.

I have usually been successful at choosing shows that appeal to the “masses” because I try to keep my audiences in mind. For instance, when we perform for senior citizens, I find something that is nostalgic; for younger crowds, I arrange something hip enough for “kids” and then something reminiscent for parent-aged audiences.

Of course, costuming and staging are important considerations as well. Though many groups sometimes push the “is it appropriate for high school?” envelope, the intention is for the costumes to “light-up” the stage; color and creativity appeal to all types of audiences. I can also say that my show designs are planned to entertain participants and audiences; I do not plan with the judges or ballot in mind. Lastly, under strong consideration in the planning of a show is this question: Can I live with this show for up to a year?

### **The Show Drives Set Design**

*Brett Carroll, Director,  
Burbank's In Sync (CA)*

At Burbank High, the show drives what we do with our set design. Rather than getting stuck doing a “this is what we do every year” set design, we try to think about what fits the show

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aesthetically and how we can fit those ideas into our budget. Each year is such a different animal, and it almost feels as if we reinvent the wheel each time! This demanding work pays off when we know we have helped communicate the show's story.

Designers must consider what the set design is going to do for the show. Is it going to merely be a static scenic background, or is it going to have a fluid integral role in the performance? In the past, our shows have used set designs as simple as "nothing" (literally nothing on stage except risers) all the way to a full wall of LED panels that are choreographed to the show's music. Usually, we try to use something that propels our story and sets the atmosphere.

Once we know what our show is about and what we want to portray, we decide what we can build and how it will transport. Getting on and off stages quickly is probably the toughest part of designing a visual set. During competition season, we never know how difficult the venues will be and how we will load in/ out. Most of our California

competitions are held in auditoriums, presenting challenges due to limited backstage storage space and maneuvering through backstage doors; we have done "gym style" competitions in the Midwest, which often offer more room to get to a stage and to exit the performing venue. Basically, we have to be prepared to get everything through a standard size doorway. That can be tough when you have a full row of footlights for downstage, multiple light trees lining the sides of the risers, and an entire truss system in back with a full LED wall!

Speaking of LEDs, our Burbank team used one of the first fully programmed and choreographed LED displays in show choir. Using that kind of technology isn't for the fainthearted. I was terrified the entire time that something would go wrong and that they wouldn't be "synced" correctly throughout the performance. We were fortunate we never had a major disaster, and the show (with themes of man vs technology) was enhanced by the lighting. A few years later, our "Prodigal" show pushed the

technology even further and featured video content that was programmed to perform non-stop throughout the show. This content was customized by a video content designer and created to follow exactly every change in the music, including choreography accents. It was a huge undertaking but, once again, it fit a show that featured futuristic "robot toy" kids in a fantasy world.

However, the year after "Prodigal" we produced the "Civil War" set which was the "anti-technology" show. The only physical backdrops were two big flags that represented the North and the South. That was it. The biggest movement back there was when the flags dropped during the song "Crossroads" (which was when the soldiers decided which side to fight for)! The show wouldn't have made sense with overwrought lighting and lots of technology; it was better served by something simple and symbolic. The point really isn't to see how much money gets spent; decisions should be driven by what supports the show and enhances the performance. In the end, it IS all about the singers and

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### Parents as Set Designers

*Kaitlin DeSpain, Director,  
Red Hot Show Choir (WV)*

Regarding show design, I do not have a formula to follow as a director, and that extends to set design as well. The purpose of the set is always to enhance the show but not steal focus. I maintain that a choir should be able to perform their show without a set and flashy costumes and still be just as interesting. If they can't do that, they aren't doing their jobs as performers.

**Our work has evolved over time, but the approach has always been that our scenic designs were never the focus; they only enhanced the overall show, providing a backdrop that would drive the story and message of the show that the singer-dancers were working to tell. With that approach in mind, we were mindful to provide designs that were never distracting.**

I personally have almost no hands-on involvement in the building of the set, though this was not always true. During the beginning of my directing career (with the ARTS All Star Show Choir), I remember staying up until the morning light working on last-minute set building and repairs! These days I have a great group of parents who make my visions come to life. This year I literally handed them a sketch (very poorly drawn, mind you) and said, "Make this happen." If I still had that sketch, I would include it here as a picture; they practically pulled the picture off the page!

Jim Fankhanel, the parent in charge of the set committee, says that "our motto this year was measure twice and build three times!" He also shares that the choir is "blessed with a great crew of dads that work tirelessly to make the set the best they can" as their way of showing support and love for their children.

### A Collaborative Approach to Scenic Design

*Michael Sferro, Scenic Designer,  
Encore Entertainment Co. (OH)*

Scenic design in Medina is relatively new to us. James Welch and I began working with Encore in 2009, after one of the Encore parents enjoyed the work that we provided to the musicals at Medina. Our work has evolved over time, but the approach has always been that our scenic designs were never the focus; they only enhanced the overall show, providing a backdrop that would drive the story and message of the show that the singer-dancers were working to tell. With that approach in mind, we were mindful to provide designs that were never distracting.

One of the most critical aspects of our work is that the student tech crew assists in creating the set and is 100% on their own when assembling it at competitions. We decided that our kids would be trained well enough that we would only support them from the audience, while they did everything on their own during the show. They are split between costumes and scenic duties, and each has an assigned task. We rehearse the crew just like the singer-dancers rehearse, training them on every contingency when we are at a competition and how to back up one another's jobs if the need arises.

Over time, James and I have crafted our own design-language in set design. It began with wooden scenery and traditional sparkly fabric and has evolved into the sculptural/metallic designs we have used since 2011. My primary background is in lighting design, and in 2014 I was able to bring this expertise into our set with "The Phoenix." The set was

all plasma-cut metallic “feathers” that James created, along with the ingenious system to transport them so they would fit on the truck and through doorways, all while being quickly assembled and torn down while the crew is on the clock. I incorporated a full LED lighting system into this year’s set, and James, Katie (our assistant director) and I programmed the hundreds of light cues required to complement the show.

We were incredibly careful that the lighting—just like the set itself—assisted with the story, never coming out of the texture. The color choices, fades, bumps, and two short chases we used were all intentional and carefully planned, down to the measure of music each corresponded to. We trained a student to execute the light cues during the competition show, which she did flawlessly all season. Consistency and reliability were critical as we created this design.

Both our set and tech crew were recognized with awards this past season, which was thrilling for us. We are mindful, however, that we can’t have one without the other. An incredibly strong, professionally-trained crew and a high-level set design only exist if they work in concert.

*Revised and Updated; this piece originally ran in June 2014.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** Rick Lunt is Director of Fine Arts at Eastern Arizona College. Brett Carroll is Director of Burbank’s “In Sync.” Terry Voss retired in 2019 as the Choral Director of Totino-Grace’s “Company of Singers.” Keith Stevens is the Technical Director of John Burroughs’ “Powerhouse.” Kaitlin DeSpain was Director of Hurricane High’s “Red Hot Show Choir.” Michael Sferro was the Scenic Designer for Medina’s “The Encore Entertainment Company.”



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