

by Tom Lizotte

Everyone in this judges association is a creator. Whether or not you are still involved in the process of designing a product for the field or are adjudicating, you are part of the creative process.

Whatever our past accomplishments, we can still get better. As adjudicators, we must.

We are a critical part of the artistic continuum.

My life as a programmer and judge changed several years ago when Frank Dorritie recommended a book, "The Creative Habit" by dance choreographer Twyla Tharp. More than anything else, it helped me find my artistic voice.

Never, ever will I look at design in the same way.

The most important things Tharp teaches us are that creativity can be taught and it is a lifelong process. For truly creative people, the search is never over.

That's what binds us.

Tharp says creativity starts with a routine — in her case, a workout to get locked and loaded for the day. Nelson Riddle, Frank Sinatra's arranger, would meticulously line up his writer's pencils; Herb Pomeroy, the distinguished Berklee College of Music professor, the desks in his classroom. Tharp says, "Creativity is a habit and the best creativity is a result of good work habits.

Before reading "The Creative Habit," I thought of creativity as a muse. She disabused me of that idea.

This past summer I was fortunate enough to attend a four-day clinic at Carnegie Hall that featured Tharp and Marin Alsop, the conductor of the Baltimore Symphony.

Tharp said some things that apply to anyone who is involved in the creative process. The beginning of every creative project presents us with a mix of anticipation and fear. These are the fears:

*People will laugh at me.

*Someone has done it before.

*I have nothing to say.

*Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind.

Her answer:

*Laugh at me? Not the people I respect; they haven't yet and aren't about to start now.

*Done before? "Honey, it's all been done before. Nothing's really original. Get over yourself." She's right. Homer cribbed; so did Shakespeare. Jim Carrey cribbed from Jerry Lewis. The Beatles cribbed from Chuck Berry. When he started out Jim Prime cribbed from Larry Kerchner.

The key is finding ways to make what has come before us our own without imitating.

*Nothing to say? "An irrelevant fear," Twyla says,

*Concerned that what is in your mind is better than it will turn out? "Better an imperfect dome in Florence than a cathedral in the clouds."

Says Tharp: "Our ability to grow is directly proportional to our ability to entertain the uncomfortable."

Another Tharp-ism: "The real secret to creativity is go back and remember." The Blue Devils are absolute masters of this. In an anniversary show, how do you not imitate yourself? Do what Tharp suggests: "Connect with something old so it becomes new again." BD did that brilliantly last year.

If you're at a creative crossroads, Tharp has a solution — scratching — digging through everything to find something. A fashion designer is scratching when he visits vintage clothing stores, studies music videos and sits at a sidewalk cafe to see what pedestrians are wearing.

Tharp says scratching is a springboard for establishing connections and that connections are a key element in creativity. “Seeing those connections are what defines a creative artist,” she says..

There are applications of this for us.

A few years ago I was consulting for a marching band and the idea well was running dry. I went to a local used book store and roamed the stacks, looking at book titles. I left with 20 stow ideas. There aren’t many used record stores around, but if you can find one, cruise the stacks and check out album titles. Many show possibilities.

Many interesting applications of “The Creative Habit” for me have been in judging. I found myself being to better able to understand concepts and connections. I could much better follow staffs’ thought process. I could better see making something old new again.

I am better able to help staffs connect the dots.

One band that accidentally created a narrative. Combination of literature, props and show title created a narrative — a good one. But...there was a disconnect. They said to me, “We just picked four tunes that worked together; we are not telling a story.” But...it was telling a story, just not coherently.

They were able to make a few adjustments, and the narrative ended up working well. Giving them the news was difficult, but worth it. A creative breakthrough might not have happened without “The Creative Habit.” I had initially seen the broad connection, but not the more subtle one.

To me, one of the most enjoyable aspects of judging is helping staffs find their creative voice. There are staffs out there on the verge of making creative breakthroughs and we have a key role in helping them find their voice. I wish more would listen, but it is one band at a time.

If we develop as creators, we will become better judges. We will simply have more to offer. Continuing to work in design has made — and will make — me a better judge. First off, I will look at my judging through the eyes of the judge. Second, art and music literacy increases when you have other people in the room.

My current drum corps design project started out as “Old Wine in New Bottles” and evolved into an art deco show. One of the young staff members brought Lady Gaga to the table and an approach to turn this into a fugue — new wine in an old bottle. By exploring art deco I ran into Erte’s art, and realized all these many years later the creative impetus behind George Zingali’s great winter guard.

As Tharp teaches us, the creative impulse is irresistible. As judges, we must live and promote that continuum.