



A SHORT HISTORY OF PAGEANTRY

Flaggots Ohio creates an entertainment product that can be consumed on many levels. Our use of the “pageantry arts” is mostly about fun, color, excitement, and getting the crowd involved. Viewers can simply watch and enjoy the spectacle—clap, cheer, and sing along. But we often appear in the context of GLBT and Pride-related events, which in America’s 2006 are incapable of simply being cultural festivals and celebrations. The truth is that they are still political events as well—places where people who bear hardship and discrimination because of their sexuality gather and give voice to their collective experience. *One need not look much further than the history behind the colorguard activity to realize why it seems to be a vehicle so ripe with potential irony and so pertinent to our group’s mission in the current cultural climate at a time of war.*

The history of pageantry (in a Western context) dates back to the Roman Empire’s early military campaigns. Often, fighters in the Roman army were merely suburban farmer recruits with little or no military training, equipment, or uniforms. In the heat of battle where conditions were often dark and chaotic, soldiers needed to distinguish each other from enemy forces. They devised “maniples”, often made with makeshift materials available at a battle site, that could mark a home base for each side’s forces. These maniples were usually tall stakes with a custom pattern of branches tied to the end, like a broom standing upright from the ground.

Eventually, the Roman army grew in might along with the empire, and resources allowed them to create fabric banners and elaborate uniforms decorated with official patterns and insignia which left little doubt in the midst of battle as to a fighter’s allegiance. Other aspects of military training developed, such as rank-and-file marching technique coordinated to musical drumming, all designed to help orchestrate massive forces on large battlefields and create maximum psychological impact in the minds of enemies. The brute intimidation of seeing and hearing thousands of uniformed soldiers marching in unison over a country’s hillsides won Rome many new territories without a sword ever being bloodied.

Through Medieval history, this tradition of military pageantry evolved into the arts of Heraldry and extended beyond warfare and into the social sphere. The elaborate patterns devised on Roman shields and breastplates were adopted and customized for use as family “crests” by powerful feudal rulers, some such insignia gaining enough widespread recognition that they became monetary currency when stamped into metal coins. *And so, the use of flags and banners, crest symbols, and other heraldic devices became a show of family force—devices of psychological warfare for the presentation of a unified front against rival forces in staking claim to a territory during the Dark Ages when no substantive protective laws existed.*

Colonial American battlefields featured holdovers from European military traditions in the form of drum and fife “colorguards.” Each fighting group in a battle would adopt a particular song on the fife and also a unique “cadence” pattern played on a snare drum to keep the ranks marching in step. A main objective of each fighting force was to penetrate the ranks of the opponent and capture their flag (or “colors”) located in the back, along with silencing the fife and drum. Once a fighter could no longer hear their song and cadence being played on the battlefield, it was a signal that their company front had been compromised and that retreat to a pre-specified location to re-group any surviving forces was in order.

Does this sound like Friday nights in autumn at any American high school football stadium? *In fact, the traditions of football are copied almost verbatim from the colonial warbook.* Two opposing sides lined up in company fronts on a grassy field press into each other and try to penetrate ranks, capturing the prized ball in the backfield. Elaborate flanking maneuvers are executed and complex regroupings occur, all to the sounds of fight songs and snare-drum cadences of a military-style “marching” band complete with “colorguard” that carry flags, rifles, and sabres as visual symbols of the mock warfare at play in the present sporting event. Even a cheerleader’s pom-poms are connected to warfare: literal translations of the appearance of “bombs bursting in air” over the heads of the opposing team! It’s no coincidence we sing these words from the national anthem before every game, again connecting the evening’s events to a battlefield.

FLAGGOTS MAKE ART NOT WAR

How is all this connected to Flaggots Ohio? *In short, we are street artists that use appropriation as a primary tool in our arsenal of psychological weapons against homophobia and bigotry.*

It starts with the name: Flaggots...Faggots with Flags. How that word has struck fear in the hearts of so many gay men growing up! It



is a brazen act of appropriation to adopt charged, hate-filled language and strip it of its power to intimidate: exorcising demons, adding an “L for Love”, finding courage in adversity, and summoning strength and pride from common experience.

We appropriate the military history of the pageantry arts and turn the formula on its ear. We wear camouflage normally used to conceal and hide while paradoxically providing a brilliantly loud and colorful display of uncloseted, unheterosexual, and unbridled energy right in the middle of a city street! We take the flag and rifle—weapons of war—and instead of using them to divide and destroy, we use them to fight for tolerance and galvanize a community. We take fear and hatred and use art to transform them into better examples for society: inclusion, acceptance, and ultimately love—releasing bitterness from our own hearts along the way.

It is a time in world events when these forces are sorely needed. Our own military still discriminates against GLBT soldiers with a shameful and regressive “don’t ask don’t tell” policy while still perfectly willing to allow their ultimate sacrifice in the war theater. The exclusion of non-heterosexual people from the institution of marriage is currently being considered and debated for addition to our nation’s Constitution. We’re mindful of these connections and our history when we take to the streets, and we’re aware of the significance of providing a visible representation to the GLBT community in a Pride parade and rally festival. It amounts to urban warfare of a social kind: fighting for the right, if even for a day, to relax enough to speak and act without filtering every word and thought through a heterocentric value system: fighting for the right to redefine family wherever we find love, acceptance, and inclusion: fighting to confirm our suspicions that outright love and joy will trump intolerance and cruelty whenever we muster the courage to show it without a reason. And fighting to swing a shiny flag to a dance number in hot pink muscle T’s along an American city street for all to see.