

Monday, August 27th, 2018... Problems and Solutions: How Choreographer Kristin McQuaid Solved the Challenge of "Florets"

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Today's editorial comes from one of the VanderVault's first recruited staff writers, Thomas Hall, who has returned to shed some light on what has to be the most ambitious, and well executed, fan tribute video to Grace VanderWaal ever created; Kristin McQuaid's dance video inspired by Grace's song "Florets".

If you haven't seen it, go and check it out now before reading today's article.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX2wo_t6NSk

Not coincidentally, The VanderVault is also dropping a trailer we cut for Kristin's "Florets" inspired dance video today as well...

<https://youtu.be/PyYCsAxSDCA>

Problems and Solutions: How Choreographer Kristin McQuaid Solved the Challenge of "Florets"
By Thomas Hall

A few months back, upon learning that Kristin McQuaid was set to release a new dance video to be themed with Grace Vanderwaal's "Florets", I started reading up on dance videography. I wanted to be able to write sensibly and wanted to be in a position to award critical praise to the production effort, because I already knew from her past work that Kristin would surely deliver something wonderful.

However, I soon fell into a state of confusion -- dance is a complex subject. And so is video dynamics. To see how this confusion started, follow me down an analytical rat hole and watch me struggle to re-emerge in what follows. To begin, while taking notes about "Florets", I managed to write the paragraph below.

"Note: "Florets" appears to present a real challenge to any choreographer due to its sweeping symphonic soundscape and numerous references to nature. It lends itself to ballet more so than recent dance trends. How can you communicate the emotional force in Grace Vanderwaal's "Florets" in terms of dance movements and other visual elements? Given that the lyrical references point to natural elements such as blowing winds, delicate flora in motion, trees, forgotten cares, breathing, waking and dreaming -- what do you hook onto here? None of these things are that abstract. But this is the situation for anyone who turns to interpret or extend Grace Vanderwaal's music: the lyrics will reference basic concrete concepts, but will be so arranged and delivered as to create what my friend Mark Lalonde calls "abstract lyrical impressionism". Given the basic ideas expressed by Grace's lyrics, the most natural setting will be outdoors, but how so? How can Kristin map music to motion under these conditions? Endnote."

That note sat for days, while some part of my mind must have latched onto "challenge", because a memory was soon served up about a film director who challenges his good friend to make a shorty based on deliberately vague guidelines and abstractions (The two may have been Swedish, or Danish). The director under challenge is shown waking up in the middle of the night in a bit of a panic, whispering 'I don't know how I'm going to do it.' This memory is the source of how I framed the "challenge" put to choreographer Kristin McQuaid and director David Javier shown below.

The "Florets" Challenge

The gauntlet thrown down: create a visualization in dance of a feel-good song with a dreamy vibe in the melody, but one which is made up of references to, or is congruent with, the basic elements of nature. Here's your starter script.

Your scene elements: air, wind, flowers, and trees.

Your characters behave thusly: they dream, breathe, dance, grasp, fall down, or are carried along by the wind.

Your emotive themes are: relief from stress, enchantment, and the strength in the bond of togetherness.

Your interpersonal references: you, me.

Your core musical articulation: legato, with variable-length crescendos.

This sketchy starter script captures the general force of the melodic "Florets" by Grace Vanderwaal. Or so I say. Perhaps this is not at all the problem description that a choreographer or video director would generate. Yet in the spirit of professional challenges, surely I'm not too far off the mark.

My brief, nay very brief, foray into solving the challenge myself died like this. I imagined the groups of dancers from Kristin's "Light the Sky" and "Moonlight" videos placed in an open, grassy field and dancing with the wildflowers in flowing dresses. I debated which color or colors the dresses should be. In my mind, one of the dancers supplies a sweeping legato texture to her spin and then promptly trips and falls over a gnarly tuft of grass at her feet. Ahhh! That looks like an insurance nightmare!, I thought; some dancer or equipment operator is going to get hurt. I reckoned that the dancing-group-outdoor-in-nature approach is fraught with peril and would be tough to direct. I marked this problem's solution as "unknown" and waited for the video.

Then the end of May 2018 arrived and Kristin McQuaid released "Florets - Grace Vanderwaal Dance Film", starring Kayla Radomski and Sam Krumrine, directed by David Javier. And there was great rejoicing all around!

How Was the Challenge Solved?

Was there a dream? Definitely -- each of the two dancers lapsed into their own dream states and they converged in the end.

Did anyone wake up in a dream? Yes -- the first scene with Kayla.

Did the dance motions capture the sweeping symphonics of "Florets"? Oh yeah -- Kayla pushed her flowing white summer dress to maximal sweep and swoop, and Sam's wingspan and long legs afforded him numerous grand gestures.

Did the characters conform to the behaviors cited in the sketchy script? Spot on -- our romantics do dream, and breathe, and embrace, and they emulate being carried along by the wind in some very creative ways.

Interpersonal theme? She got it -- the 'you and me' in Grace's song equals the two romantics in the dance video. Easy peasy.

How about the dance group in the open field danger problem? Yep, solved -- reduce your dancer count to two and stay on the dirt path.

Any enchantment happening? It's a budding romance -- of course they are enchanted with one another

In the end, did any one concept carry enough weight to wrestle this problem to the ground and win the overall solution? Love.

Surprise Elements Not Foretold by the Song Alone.

Any surprise elements not suggested by the song? Yes! Several in fact. First, the scene where Kayla's character takes a moment alone to collect herself. We do not know where she has been, or where she is going. We do learn that after a quick study of her reflection in the mirror, her courage manifests

itself, and to “Should I or shouldn’t I?”, she answers with apparent readiness to play at the game of love. This was a touching part of the video and relatable to most everyone. Also surprising was the amount of time spent by each of the dancers searching for each other within Sam’s dream.

They had to work hard to find each other at the estate home. This time allowed the musical drama to unfold, and gave each dancer a chance to develop before our eyes, as their strengths, and their elegances, are enacted superbly. The time is well spent filling up a bucketful of suspense, until the two lovebirds race towards each other and finally meet where the footpaths cross in the orchard. Also above and beyond, the introduction of a famous natural element: water. The swimming pool, into which Kayla and Sam jump together, and the ocean at the coast. Final surprise: the precisely timed, but subtle, staccato textures offered by Kayla Radomski reflect the giddiness felt by one who is enamored. These were sprinkled throughout and gave her character more detail.

Lessons Learned

- You can leverage highly contrasting changes in setting to great effect, but there should probably be an obvious link between settings (here, a subset of (indoor) party guests, the romantics, are transferred to the (outdoor) estate home, thus linking the two settings)
- Special machinery, such as a drone camera, may be used to great effect in capturing richly textured landscapes (here the California coastline) or cityscapes (see Kristin’s “Light the Sky”), but this must be properly offset by down-to-earth ground footage for the case of dance.
- There was a much deeper feeling of love in Grace’s song “Florets” all along – I just didn’t see it until Kristin McQuaid brought it center stage.

Thank you for following me down the rabbithole and back up again. The next time Kristin McQuaid creates a dance video, I feel like I will be much better prepared to be amazed than I have ever been before. Cheers.