

Ryan Heffington on showing non-dancers they can dance



October 11, 2016 - Since 2008, VMA-winning choreographer Ryan Heffington has opened his L.A. dance studio, the Sweat Spot, to non-dancers for "Sweaty Sundays - A Dance Class for Everyone." He choreographed Maddie Ziegler in Sia's "Chandelier," "Elastic Heart," and "The Greatest" videos and Spiderman star Andrew Garfield in Arcade Fire's "We Exist." He's also worked with FKA Twigs (twice), Sigur Rós, and appeared a number of times on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1922 words.

Tags: [Dance](#), [Inspiration](#), [Collaboration](#), [Beginnings](#).

You've directed music videos with people who aren't professional dancers. Is it complicated getting someone who's not a dancer to dance?

I think everyone has accessibility to dance. Maybe it's not traditional, maybe it's not studied, but I feel people have the capacity to move. For a lot of the characters in the videos that I've choreographed, their story is more important than their dance technique. As a choreographer, I work hard to articulate that story through movement and emotion. It's not necessarily about dance, but it's about expression.

Like working with Andrew Garfield in the "[We Exist](#)" video. He's not necessarily a dancer, but reiterating to him the arc of his character was what influenced him running across or leaping off the stage. It's the liberation he felt when he was making this transformation. That was the motivation behind the movement. A lot of times for me it's not about aesthetic, it's about emotion and storytelling.

You did a video featuring an inner monologue for the "Chandelier" dance. In it, you offer up a number of visual images that direct the movements. When you choreographed that video, were those the actual things you were thinking?

That's how I choreograph. When I sit to create, or when I stand to create, it comes out this way. Maybe it's one word in a song I hear and then I use a loose association: "What if we turned it and made it say this?" When I teach the Sweaty Sundays classes at [the Sweat Spot](#), that's how I relate a movement to my students. It's not about a "chassé pas de bourrée" but, "you need to go get that freshly dropped avocado off the ground. You haven't eaten in three weeks."

You use stories and people get it instantly. It's amazing. What I also think is beautiful, is when they interpret that, it's genuinely how they would actually do this movement. It's not about standing in front of the mirror and everyone hitting the same exact lines. For me, at this point in my art-making career, it's more about expression. I'll keep saying storytelling, but that's it.

What's the success of the "Chandelier" video been like for you? Suddenly, people who don't necessarily normally think about dance, are thinking about dance.

It's been interesting. When we were on set, we knew we were creating something interesting. Something unique, something special-and above that we were all having an incredible journey collaborating together. Then that day's over. You see an edit, and because I was a part of it from its inception, you just walk with it. The perspective of it being this world renowned video-I can't see it from that perspective, really, because it's not my perspective.

I have no control over what people are going to like of mine and what they are going to gravitate towards. I think it's a great project, it's a great piece of work, and a great collaboration. I don't take responsibility for everyone enjoying it. I don't know if that makes sense. That's their opinion, and I do think it's a great video. Maybe some people hate it and that's fine, too. I don't let that influence my art or whether it's a good piece or should be viral. I don't know and I don't really care about it. I have a very simple attachment to the process and that's where I hold my ground. I'm just an artist, I'm creating work. What happens beyond that, I have no control over, and I don't really care.

I've been super fortunate in that, in my career, it has been easier for me to work with bigger artists and people that I really respect. I don't have to fight to get a conversation with these people. It's my introduction now, and I'm very fortunate that way; but again, I don't have any control over that. I can't take credit in that way.

I think what I have to my advantage is that it's not a typical take on dance. If I were to do something spectacular for Beyoncé, it's like that pop realm. That's what they would probably classify me as-a pop choreographer. This is different. It's emotional. It's the fact that it's a younger subject. It's abstract. It's surreal in a way, too, so I think there are many different avenues for people to attach to it. As we know, it's gone viral, so people are attracted to it, I'm sure, for many different reasons.

I feel like I'm lucky in the way that people will say: "Oh, we like 'Chandelier' because of this, or because of that, or because of this." It's not so simple. I think it's perfect that this is the one that people have been so attracted to, and has made my name well-known over some other projects that I've worked on. It's that absolute perfect vehicle for me to be recognized for and I'm fortunate.

Like I said, I have no control over it, but I'm fortunate it was "Chandelier." It was like breaking a mold. I think people take that into consideration. That, "If we want a choreographer that's going to push it or make it super interesting, or down this path, maybe let's use Heffington." It's not like, "Oh, let's just do this backup dancer routine." I think that would have murdered my artistic career and mental state.

You started dancing at a young age. Did you have any specific training, or is this something that came to you naturally?

I'm such a visual person. I'm visual and I'm emotional. I feel like those are my two go-to's when I'm choreographing. I assume you can go to school and learn to be a choreographer, but I think it's just something that's inside of you. I know that not every dancer is a choreographer and not every teacher is a choreographer. I think it was just something that I developed.

When I was younger I would choreograph for school talent shows. I had that drive and I loved directing people at an early age. My mom said that I would invite the neighborhood kids over and make them watch me dance. I'd sit them down and say "I'm going to perform for you." I had this performative core. I don't think it was so ego based, I just loved doing what I did, even as a child, and I put myself in all these weird, embarrassing situations. That's what I had to do. It's just been an even evolution in technique and style.

Once I moved to Los Angeles, in the early '90s, I studied a little bit, but it was mostly about creating on my own with my own set of rules. Sure, I had years and years and years of technique from training, but I was never drawn to that. I didn't feel like my body was attuned to traditional lines. I understood them and I could process them but I had a different craving, which is very interesting in such a commercial based community down here in Los Angeles. Here it's very about lines and everyone looking the same, and getting that job. I tried that, but it's not where my art and drive were focused. We were doing clubs and bars and being more punk rock. Telling stories that were violent and humorous and gender fluid. It was much more about expression than technique or "this is how we do it." There were no rules.

Have you ever worked with someone who couldn't dance?

I think everyone has the ability to move and to dance. More than half of my job is to make people feel comfortable and when people feel comfortable they let go. They engage. They laugh. They show humility and if you get them there, then you're golden. That's my job. To make people feel comfortable with themselves.

Music videos that have influenced Ryan Heffington:

["Stand Back"](#) by Stevie Nicks.

["Love is a Battlefield"](#) by Pat Benatar: "I copied that a lot."

"Rhythm Nation" by Janet Jackson: "Very military and that was very influential."

"I was a huge fan of Solid Gold. It wasn't per say, a music video. It was Darcel specifically that I wanted to be. She had a way of moving that was so natural and unique and she wasn't trained. I didn't know that until later in life. I ended up meeting her and dancing with her. We did a duet together which was amazing."

"Movies like West Side Story, and the lines. Jerome Robbins, those lines were exceptional. That's the other thing. Those were all ballet dancers. They were all so technical but he turned it and it became ... It was jazz based but it was story driven. It was passionate and it was much more than form."

In my classes, I don't give corrections. I want you to dance like you, I'll dance like me. Let's celebrate that. Unless someone is going to injure themselves, I don't give them corrections. It's such a beautiful gift, how we move as individuals and express ourselves. It's very liberating, very magical. It's just tapping into self-love and respect and liberation. It's a very powerful sense you can get from believing in yourself and being free. I think I'm just facilitating that through this art form.

Is everything you choreograph narrative? Is there ever a time when it's "here are a couple of moves, let's fit them into this"? Or in order for it to work for you do you need to be telling a story?

No, it doesn't always need to. Even with "Chandelier," I'm very conscious of what's entertaining. What is visually pleasing. What someone can access fairly easily on an emotional level. What configuration creates emotion. Like if you have someone solo in a room, or if you have 50 people crammed into a room, that emits different emotional and sensory details. I'm drawn to the heartbeat in art. When passion is genuine and personal, I fall for it. With a lot of the artists I get to work with, that's the initial attraction for me.

I take this all into consideration. My work is story driven, but, as you can see in Sia's video for "The Greatest," there are moments where it's hardcore dance video choreography. The emotions are still there, but it's group choreography, which I don't do a lot of. Though it looks really impressive! It looks great, and you get the force of it when there are 12 dancers killing it in sync with these surges of emotion and power. I love a good story, and I love emotion, but I'm also very visual, so I know how to fill negative space. I know how to interlock bodies. I feel like a true painter. I know that's so cliché, but I feel like a painter with these bodies. It's that simple.

Name

Ryan Heffington

Vocation

Choreographer, Dancer, Teacher

Fact

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Photo: Justin Tyler Close