

# SHORT TAKES



Photo by Ryan Capstick.

## Splish Splash

By Patricia Thomson

A toilet plunger, a child's scooter and bendable selfie sticks were among the filmmaking tools used on *Swan Lake Bath Ballet*. They were unusual means for an equally unconventional three-minute short — take Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* ballet, place it in the bathtubs of dancers around the world, and shoot it remotely during Covid-19 lockdown.

"Corey Baker definitely loves a challenge," says bicontinental British-Australian cinematographer Nicola Daley, ACS, about the project's director/choreographer. "He's done a dance piece in Antarctica and one on the rooftops of Hong Kong. He likes to set big goals."

Baker, founder of Corey Baker Dance in Birmingham, England, pitched the concept to BBC Arts for their *Culture in Quarantine* series and landed a commission. He recruited 27 elite dancers from 18 ballet troupes in a dozen countries, including his native New Zealand and adopted home of England.

Hungry for a break from the inertia of lockdown life, the cinematographer quickly said yes when producer Anne Beresford introduced

her to Baker. Daley was up for the creative challenge, but she notes that the bathrooms gave her pause. "Bathrooms are renowned for being bad locations," she says. "They are tight spaces with terrible harsh overhead lighting. When he said we're going to do a whole film there, I thought, 'Gosh, how are we going to make this look good?'"

The filmmakers' success is reflected in *Swan Lake Bath Ballet's* viral numbers — with 4.9 million views on the BBC Arts Facebook page at the time of this writing, and more still on YouTube and the U.K.-only BBC iPlayer.

"Corey and I wanted this film to have a very cinematic look," Daley says. "We discussed Busby Berkeley-choreographed top shots as references, as well as the classic film *The Red Shoes*. I did not want the film to look homemade, but to push the boundaries — and for people to say, 'Wow, did they really shoot that all remotely?' When we saw Vika Kapitonova, from Boston Ballet, in her mirrored living room wearing her beautiful tutu, I knew we had to surround her with candles. Her images give a gorgeous bookend to the opening and closing of the film."

Baker's choreography is playful and inspired — an amalgam of swan-like fluttering limbs, dramatic wet-hair-whips, and bits inspired



Shot during lockdown, the short *Swan Lake Bath Ballet* features dancers including Viktorina Kapitonova (opposite), Benjamin Freemantle (top) and Donnie Duncan (above).

by Esther Williams in addition to Busby Berkeley. It's colorful, with the dancers performing in water pigmented by bath bombs, and it's fun, with props that include swan bath toys, inflatable swan pool-floats, and bucket-loads of feathers.

In prep, the first step was to remotely scout bathrooms. They sent the dancers a questionnaire: Did their bathroom have a window and, if so, what time of day had the best light? What additional lights did they have on hand? (Some Instagram-savvy dancers owned soft boxes, while another had an LED with adjustable color. "For dancers who didn't have prosumer lights, we used desk lamps and standing lamps bounced off the often white bathroom walls," Daley says.) Did they have a pool? (Yes, in the Hamptons and South Africa.) What kind of smartphone did they own? (The ratio was 70/30 Apple/Android, with the majority of iPhones being Xs and 11s.) Did they have a second device to Zoom on?

They requested photos, and then a further bathroom scout was conducted via Zoom. The whole process "was strangely intimate," the cinematographer says.

All those phones were outfitted with Filmic Pro V6, compliments of the company. "Filmic Pro really helped us out," Daley says with gratitude. Not wanting to impose, and with a tiny budget for the film, they didn't request Filmic Pro's supplementary app, Cinematographer Kit, though this would have offered LogV2 with 2.5 extra stops of latitude.

Baker sent the dancers video tutorials to teach them the choreography, while Daley sent instructions for setting up the basics on Filmic Pro: 25 fps at 4K — when possible, as some Androids could only accommodate 3K — and framing for 16:9. Other settings, like



Top: A Zoom session with dancer Skylar Brandt, in collaboration with (from top) line producer Guy Trevellyan, director/choreographer Corey Baker and cinematographer Nicola Daley, ACS. Above: The production works with Kapitonova.

white balance and exposure, would wait until the cinematographer could actually see each smartphone screen and give verbal instructions on Zoom.

When it came time to shoot, line producer Guy Trevellyan would use TeamViewer remote-desktop software to gain access to each dancer's screen. (To assure privacy, production could see the screen but not take command of the phone.) That TeamViewer feed became the dominant panel on Zoom, flanked by the director, cinematographer, line producer, and dancer or their assisting partner or family member. In a careful process that could take a bit of time, Daley would coach each dancer as they got the phone into position for the desired framing. During their performances, dancers would play the music on their end, given Zoom's slight time lag. "Every dancer was shot at a different time," the cinematographer notes, "and often we would be on Zoom at 10 p.m., talking to a dancer in New Zealand or Australia."

In addition to Filmic Pro, every dancer with sufficient access to Amazon's inventory received a care package. (Dancers in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were out of luck.) That package included a bendable selfie stick, which was critical for getting a bird's-eye perspective over the tub. The brand varied by country, but all had a gooseneck of at least 3', and could thus be clamped to the showerhead or bathroom door and reach the center of the tub. "That was really useful," Daley says. Alignment had to be just right, especially for

Top-left photo by Madison Keesler/FreelyMad. Bottom-left photo by Marnie van Opstal. Screenshots courtesy of Nicola Daley, ACS.





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the Berkeley-style flourishes and for sections that would be edited to appear as a virtual ballet corps in multiple panels.

Those dancers who did not receive a selfie stick had to wing it. “People were very innovative,” Daley says. She mentions one South African who suctioned a toilet plunger to the side of the shower. Then there was “Joshua Guillemot-Rodgers from New Zealand, bless him, who had a laundry basket, two stools on top of each other, a box, then a broom handle,” Daley recalls. “He gaffer-taped the phone to the end of the broom handle. He went above and beyond.”

The care packages sent by production also contained bath bombs. “I don’t normally do art-department duties,” the cinematographer says, “but I was at home testing colors of bath bombs and filming them on my phone, so we could work out what colors looked good and what didn’t dye their clothes or cause any harm, which is why we used kids’ products. We used mainly blue bath bombs, but also orange, red and purple for our overhead rainbow image.” Some dancers also got a shipment of feather pillows, or little swan lights. One even got an inflatable wading pool.

The opening shot required a slow push-in on a tub surrounded by candles, so Kapitonova in Boston was shipped a gimbal. But when it came time to shoot, Daley says, “her husband, Ryan, said, ‘I don’t like it. I’m not very good at it. But I’ve done *this*.’ He turned the laptop around and we saw that he’d gaffer-taped the gimbal to his kid’s scooter. He said, ‘Look, I can do it much smoother on this,’ then showed us. It was a brilliant trick, and he was right.”

That Boston couple went the extra mile in art direction, too, when working with their floor-to-ceiling mirrors in the fireplace niche of their living room. “On their own volition, they went to a local plumber and said, ‘Can we borrow a bath?’ He delivered it and donated it to them for two days free,” Daley says. Without a showerhead, the selfie stick wouldn’t work, so Ryan Velcroed a small box to the ceiling to hold the smartphone. It was the dancer’s idea to dress in the classic white tutu and feather headpiece. “Corey wanted it to be very modern, but when he saw her in her full regalia, he’s like, ‘Right, she can open and close the film in that location.’”

After each shoot, the dancers would deliver the clips and also keep them on their phone for backup. “The line producer worked out that Dropbox was the best lossless way to send everything,” says Daley. The edit was performed by Travis Moore at Exile in New York, and the color grade at Technicolor London.

This Boston shoot was one of the few times Daley felt the smartphones’ dynamic-range shortcomings. During the grade, she says, “You could tell with the highlights of those candles. They clipped easily, whereas with an Arri camera or something similar, all those highlights would roll off beautifully. But in general, I was really surprised by how great the footage was.”

Shooting remotely meant that Daley couldn’t be there to shape the light, “which was frustrating,” she says. “So a lot of that happened in grade.” For instance, two doorways flanking the fireplace niche were distracting in their whiteness. “We took them right down in the grade, because obviously we just didn’t have the resources to flag them off on the day.” In fact, she notes, “There were no flags used in the production. It was sometimes hard enough for the dancers to light themselves with a bounced desk light and film themselves without having to shape the light, too.”

Working from home in the coastal town of Margate, about 70 miles east of London, Daley collaborated with colorist Jodie Davidson, who was in a proper suite at Technicolor London and grading with FilmLight Baselight. They used Technicolor’s new proprietary TechStream app to connect, which allowed Daley to watch the grade live on her iPad. “TechStream was in the process of being developed, then when lockdown happened, they accelerated it,” she says. The cinematographer had previously done live remote grading for the episodic series *Paradise Lost* (AC July ’20), but that pipeline was from a suite in Technicolor London to Technicolor in New York. “If the app had been working then, I wouldn’t have had to go on the train for 90 minutes to London,” she says. “I could have stayed in my house!”

Looking back at the project, Daley says, “I’m really, really proud of it. I needed a chiropractor after sitting down for three weeks on Zoom for 10 hours a day, but it was definitely something very creative to do.”

She adds, “It taught me that naturally having an eye for something that looks good — not everybody has that. Some people are really good at it, and for others it was a real struggle.” The time it took to explain the desired frame — “Go up; no, too much; now a smidgen to your left” — helps explain why a three-minute short took three weeks to capture. “After one particularly frustrating shoot,” Daley says with a satisfied laugh, “I said to the director, ‘I think camera operators’ and cinematographers’ jobs are **safe!**!” ♦