

2014

A visceral kind of understanding

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: McKenzie, V. (2014). A visceral kind of understanding, *dancewest*, pp.18-19. Access information on publisher [here](#).

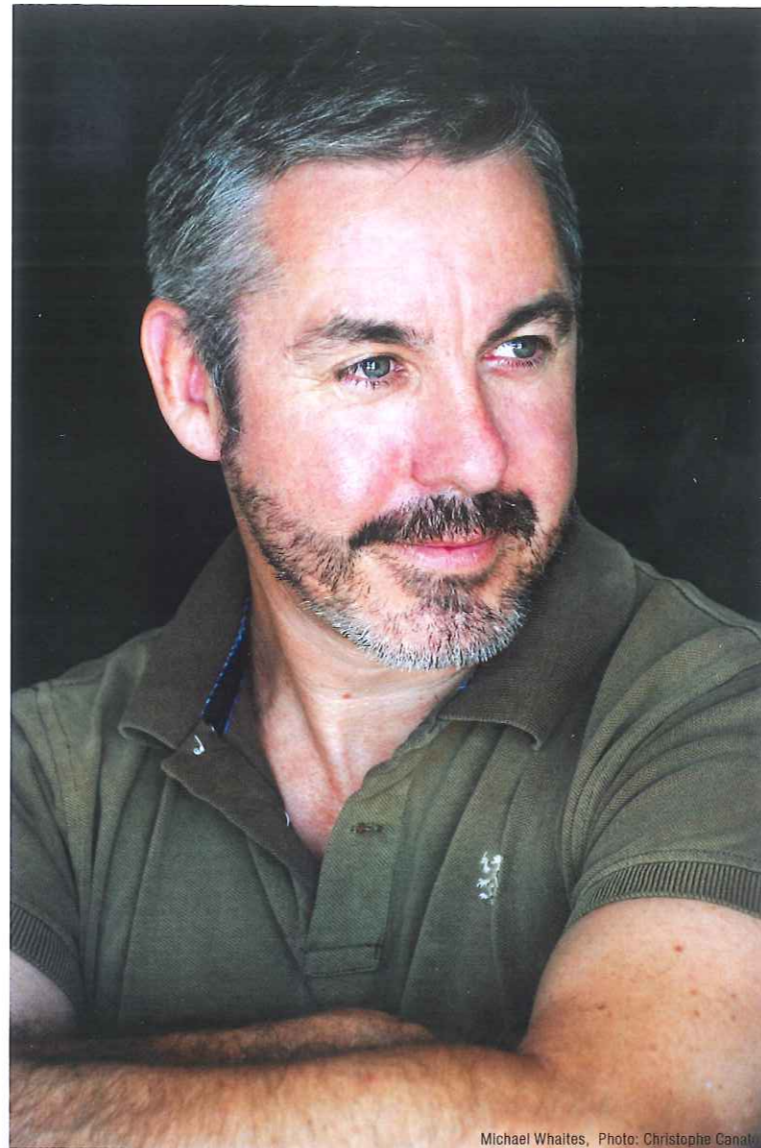
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A Visceral Kind of Understanding

Vahri McKenzie speaks to artist and educator Michael Whaites continuing her series of interviews with key WA dance makers. Vahri's research project, *Moving Knowledge*, explores the creative methods of artists who participated in the *With A Bullet: The Album Project*. The project is the brainchild of Nat Cursio. In it, choreographers are asked to make a work to the first piece of music they ever made a work to.

> Michael Whaites is a name known throughout the WA dance scene, not only for his contributions to teaching but also for his career as an accomplished artist. While these days Whaites is perhaps best known as the Artistic Director of LINK Dance Company and as an influential teacher at the WA Academy of Performing Arts, in previous years he was known primarily for his artistry in the field of contemporary dance. As a younger dancer he worked with international companies including Twyla Tharp and Dancers, Pina Bausch Tanztheater Wuppertal, and has choreographed for notable Australian companies such as Australian Dance Theatre and Leigh Warren and Dancers. I asked Whaites to tell me about his first choreographic experience, which sowed the seed for his musical choice in his *With a Bullet: The Album Project* piece. Whaites grew up in a remote South Australian town and on Friday nights his parents would go to the pub and he would go to a gym class.

"I would be picked up to go to gym and that was about a thirty-mile car ride into the country. I had half an hour at home waiting for my ride. So I would often put on music and dance around the living room. The piece of music wasn't really something that I choreographed, it was just this thing that was stuck in my head." For Whaites, it is the physical aspects of



Michael Whaites, Photo: Christophe Canal

setting and sensation that hold the memory: "being with my body in the music, fitting those two things together."

As a mature choreographer, Whaites usually creates material in silence and then later finds music to support the dancing, rather than allowing the music to dominate the work. But with *The Album Project*, the music (from the first *Hooked on Classics* album) came first, and that music was quite overwhelming, with a driving four-four disco beat. Whaites had to find a way to work with that physically.

"The classical references in the music started me thinking about classical ballet: maybe there's a synergy here between the classical music and using classical gestures?" Whaites looked at his portfolio of works of the last ten years and noticed they all had something about them that was gestural, engaging the upper body and the arms.

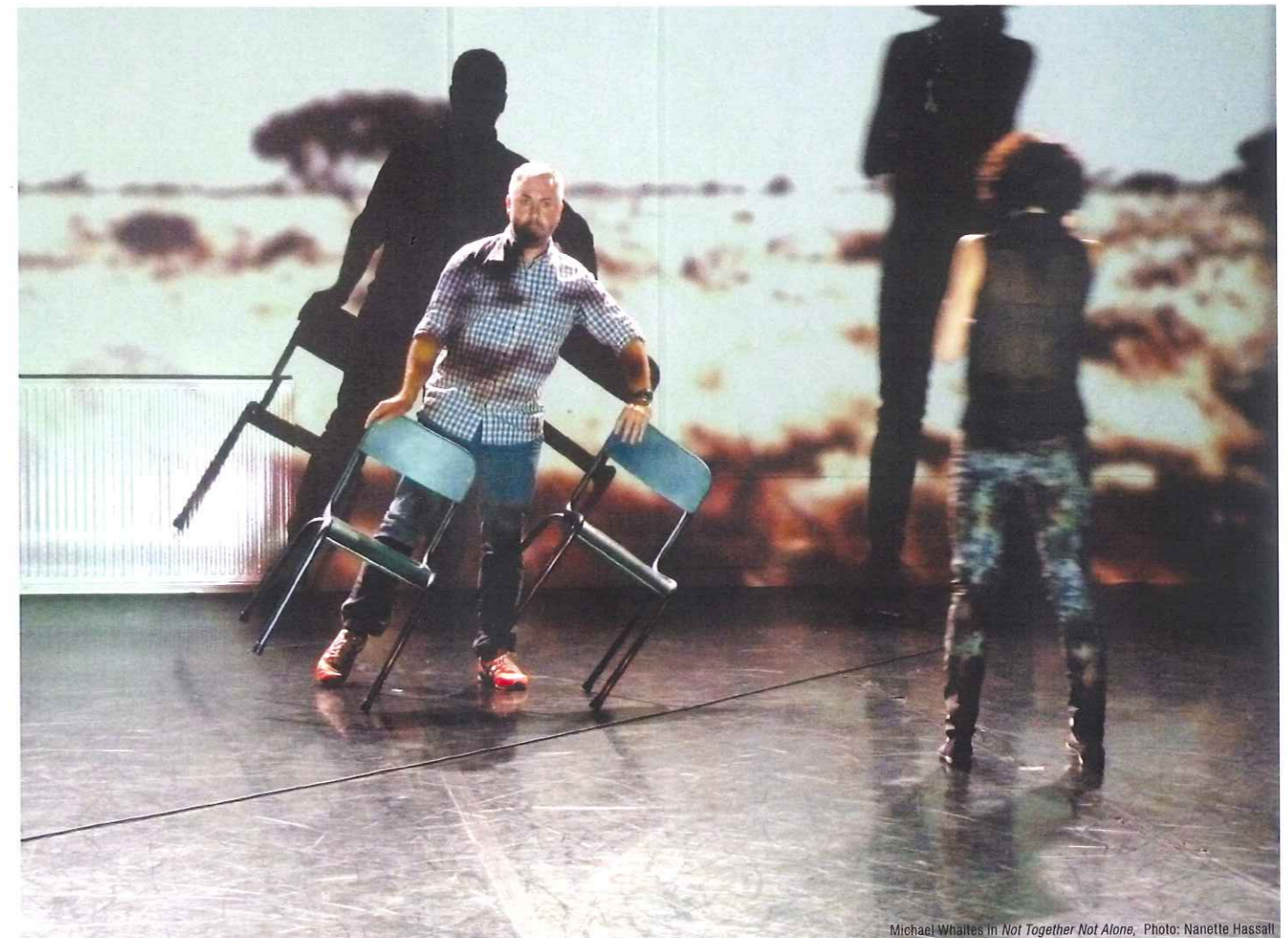
To prepare for *The Album Project*, Whaites asked his dancers, Joel Small and Kynan Hughes, to research a number of canonical ballets and look for the repertoire of gestures in them, gestures that can typically be translated as 'Wait, fair beauty', or 'I sleep'. Then the three brought some sequences into the studio and learned from each other, followed by a process of discarding and rearranging and putting back together. "Ultimately I wanted it to be about two people having a conversation."

Whaites talks at length about working with Pina Bausch and how working with this legendary German artist influenced him as a choreographer.

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Aesthetically he is interested in the internal experience, in how the body is affected through experience. "Before I was in the Pina Bausch Company, I remember watching their works performed on stage and feeling an immediate connection with the performers and understanding what was going on, on an almost unconscious level, a visceral kind of understanding that is more about feeling."

As a dance educator, Whaites can't always choose his dancers. But when he can, he's looking for an individual with the ability to see beyond the dance studio, to be inspired by daily life: "bring that into the studio and let that sing through your physicality." Whaites has found that, in the past, Australian dancers he's worked with favour abstraction in their work rather than a visceral response. But



Michael Whaites in *Not Together Not Alone*, Photo: Nanette Hassall

"I'm interested in how dancers move but it has to be in relation to how they feel. Humanity is what I'm really interested in."

his interest as a choreographer is in the whole person, and that person as a body. "For me it's been a process of finding ways for them to articulate those things inside themselves where the primary focus is not necessarily abstraction. Pina Bausch used to say she was interested in what moves people, not how they move. I'm interested in how dancers move but it has to be in relation to how they feel. Humanity is what I'm really interested in."

Michael Whaites is an independent artist, lecturer in dance at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts and the Director of LINK Dance Company.

Dr Vahri McKenzie is a Lecturer in the Arts Program at Edith Cowan University's South West campus, in Bunbury.