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## Let's Make a Mess

Vahri McKenzie  
*Edith Cowan University, v.mckenzie@ecu.edu.au*

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## Let's Make a Mess

Jacob Lehrer ran away from home at sixteen to join a touring ballet company. After this reality-check he entered VCA's School of Dance and has since worked with leading lights such as Strange Fruit, Deborah Hay, DV8, Legs on the Wall, Lucy Guerin, Sue Healey, State of Flux, Nancy Stark-Smith and Royal de Luxe. Most recently we've seen him in his long-time collaborative duo David and Jacob, when they offered two works for 2014's *Move Me Improvisation Festival*. So what does a dancer known for his work in real-time choreography do when he's asked to make up steps to the first piece of music he ever choreographed to? Edith Cowan University's Dr Vahri McKenzie spoke with Lehrer as part of her Moving Knowledge research project, which was inspired by Nat Cursio's *With a Bullet: The Album Project*. Sections of *With A Bullet* were performed as part of Fringe World 2013, including Lehrer's contribution.



You can't help but worry.

➤ Lehrer claims he's drawn to trying something new every time he creates a dance work, but he also admits to being schooled in irreverence.

"I went into that using all the things you don't do in contemporary dance. I got the dancers to pick their worst. I remember being young and doing preparation for the jump or lift. And then as you get older you learn not to reveal the preparation. So I got the dancers to telegraph everything they were about to do. I wanted to make *good* bad choreography, because I'd never done it before."

The second stage development of *The Album Project* offered more space for process without the pressure of a performance outcome, so Lehrer was able to drill down below the coolly deadpan Rock Eisteddfod memories that informed his first version of The Orb's *Little fluffy clouds*. It's fair to say the Jacob Lehrer of 1990 was quite an angry young man.

"It took me looking backwards to see where the first version of the work had come from. I'd hit a period of my life which wasn't particularly happy, wasn't particularly clear and I had disappeared a little bit. I found myself revisiting that in the studio process."

Out of that intensity emerged three grotesque characters. "They were three aspects of myself, but also they weren't, because they were characters we were playing with in space. I've used characters in my work before, but never actually created the character and then let that character dictate what's going to happen."

Creating character-based contemporary dance was new for Lehrer but the process behind it is the same as in any of his works. It starts with something he calls 'let's make a mess'. "Let's just start and

make stuff up and not worry about whether it's right or wrong or whether it fits the music or doesn't fit the music. It's a way of doing everything at once. We don't get too precious, there's a little bit of irreverence in it. We make material that we're never going to use again. It's confusing and disorientating. Often the dancers have no idea what's going on, I have no idea what's going on, but I'm comfortable in that because of my time in improvisation research and understanding those cycles."

After an early career developing expertise in improvisation and task-based choreography, Lehrer now finds himself swinging towards inventing movement for dancers to learn. But his studio methods still rely on a sense of shared ownership. "For the first run of *The Album Project* I choreographed to the music. The second time I didn't really care about the music, I was much more interested in the characters. In the end the dancers set the timing, which for me is good because then they have a sense of ownership of it. That internal building is their business."

It is fitting for this irreverent choreographer that the premise of *The Album Project* was interpreted as a provocation. "For years I stopped using music, and was even a little bit anti-music. And then this project is, oh, choreographing to music!" But Lehrer is quick to point out that this attitude didn't preclude rhythm. "Rhythm is a part of dance, whether there's music there or not. There's heartbeat, there's breathing, there's a stamp of the feet."

With time comes change, and Lehrer has embraced music as a tool to serve the process. "Just like I'm making movement up I also have reintroduced this, that music is something good. It's great to listen to and it's great to dance to, but for me dance is the primary art form."