

Freedom in surrender

Dr. Vahri McKenzie is an arts lecturer, based at the Bunbury campus of Edith Cowan University. This year she is running a research project, with Shona Erskine, called Moving Knowledge. Vahri has interviewed a number of significant WA-based choreographers to explore their creative methods. Over the next few issues of *dancewest*, we'll be publishing some of these insightful interviews. The first cab off the rank is a WA choreographer whose career has been as diverse as it has been successful, Claudia Alessi.

► Claudia Alessi is renowned in Australia for her work in contemporary performance and dance education. Over the last 27 years her celebrated work has spanned the worlds of dance, acrobatics, circus, puppetry and film. Claudia has performed with many of Australia's leading companies including Chrissie Parrott Dance Company & Performance Company, Leigh Warren's ADT & CPDC, Co Loaded and Legs On The Wall. She's become one of the leading dance educators in WA, working closely with Buzz, STEPS and now WAAPA. Regarded as something of a dynamo in the WA dance community, Claudia was a natural choice for the curators of the Perth Edition of *With a Bullet: The Album Project*. The project challenges choreographers to create original choreography to the first piece of music for which they ever 'made up a dance'. Claudia was five.

"I led my best friend from across the road into this idea of dancing with me in the lounge room to *Waterloo* by ABBA. That flood of excitement, emotion, bossiness; the bossiness of a five year old not understanding why her step-ball-change, step, click, looked different to my step-ball-change, step, click, and not really getting that I had been doing dancing in a Scout Hall up the road and she'd been doing tennis." For *The Album Project*, Claudia returned to those first impulses and asked, do you come up with a step because you like it and it feels good? Or is it something that you've seen and you've been influenced by? Her answer is, both.

Early in the rehearsal process, Claudia put her dancers in platform boots and was fascinated by how their posture shifted and how this changed the way their feet and legs looked, almost like soldiers marching. "I try not to allow the external



Claudia Alessi, Photos: Chris Herzfeld

features to inform too much. But I found the boots were such instrumental parts of the final aesthetic that they started to inform my form directly. Having the dancers in platform white boots also allowed you to get an education about where the style had come from directly. Oh, that's the seventies jazz movement!"

'At Waterloo Napoleon did surrender', the song tells us: physicalising aspects of surrender became the major theme of the work, and Claudia found elegant connections between the song and her life, then and now. Educated by nuns at a Dominican Roman Catholic school, Claudia acknowledged the immense sacrifice those women made to fulfil their calling. And she'd just become a mother, 'having to surrender everything right from pregnancy through to birth through to everyday happenings.' Rather than negative experiences, she found freedom in surrender.

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These neat workings of memory and form were unique to her work for *The Album Project*, but other aspects of the process are typical for this choreographer. "I like to work with that element of chance. You make the work and then you place the music on top of that as a second layer and then find the gentle accidents that happen."

Claudia utilises William Forsythe's grid task to generate material, where different parts of the space represent different numbers and the dancers are given a topic, like a birthdate, to 'spell out'. "It creates this instantaneous phrase that the dancer refers back to and uses to find their patterning. We each came up with a phrase like that, four bulky phrases that we just spliced and changed along the way."

Going into the studio, Claudia prepares a phrase or two, but enjoys this improvisational work as a starting point to entice movement from a dancer. "My best work as a choreographer is very collaborative. I enjoy working in that way because I like the many voices and the many eyes in the room. There's one train of thought that suggests you can go in as a choreographer and dictate and arrive at where you want to be, but if you're going to bring the dancer to you I think initiating the way they move and allowing them to come back to you with information is also a really beautiful way to reciprocate information."

This inclusive spirit is another kind of 'freedom in surrender' that captures the creative energy of this artist at the height of her career. "I'm learning about how to look for indicators and then to be able to guide the dancer in that next doorway or pathway. I'm still learning how to be that architect of movement. *The Album Project* offered a way for me to engage in a process of reflecting on my history as a choreographer, articulate my own process, and hone my skills as a choreographer."

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