

SPOTLIGHT



Roy VanDerVegt

Choreographer **LEWIS MAJOR**, 32, left the family sheep farm to pursue a career as a dancer. Then he broke his back. His new work is part of Adelaide Festival

INTERVIEW BY Nicholas Adams-Dzierzba

Your dad taught you how to shear sheep when you were a boy on the family farm in South Australia. How did you feel about shearing back then?

I was born on a sheep farm in between Beachport and Penola in the southeast of South Australia. The farm is about 11,000 acres (4450ha) and we have sheep, cattle and crops – and a huge amount of natural bushland. I think I probably had my first go at shearing at like, five or six. I was crap at it then, and I'm not exactly much better now. The one thing I remember about it is that it was incredibly hard work.

What makes a good sheep shearer?

A strong back.

What makes a good dancer?

A strong back.

Do you have a strong back?

Ten years ago, I fractured my back. That's why I don't really perform any more. I've got a bit of an underlying condition that became apparent when I went to New Zealand School of Dance to study ballet. In a performance I picked up a girl and I threw her over my head and came down and fractured my back in two places. I've managed to keep it relatively okay but it put an end to my performance career really early. I have to stay on top of everything; a lot of yoga, a lot of rehab, I see an osteo nearly once a week, and I've had a couple of surgeries to keep me a little bit more mobile. Eventually I'll have to have my spine completely fused. I wear a back brace most

days. So my dancers will tell you, it's not much fun when I'm in a really bad place and I'm choreographing from the chair and having to scream and point at them because I can't do the movement properly.

Did your injury prompt you to pirouette from dancer to choreographer?

I always thought I was going to be a maker. I love the art of choreographing. I love the art of storytelling. There's not a lot of performance in the regions, especially when I was growing up [although] it's gotten a lot better. I saw my first dance show when I was 16 by Australian Dance Theatre. The quite spectacular virtuosic movements really appealed to me. I was 18 by the time I did my first ballet class.

Your double bill *S/WORDS* and

***Unfolding* is having its world premiere at the Adelaide Festival. Are there swords involved?**

The title is *S/WORDS*. Words are what keep society running; the ability to talk to each other rather than fight with each other. But if you add one little "S" the word becomes swords. It's sort of a metaphor about that inability to speak to each other. And we see that happening all over the world. When the conversation stops, it's really only a matter of time before the violence starts. [*S/WORDS* is a] bit of a plea not to let that happen.

What song would you most like to dance to when dance floors eventually return with full force?

Don't Stop Me Now by Queen. I know, that's kind of lame. But get a couple of glasses of wine and I could make it something, even with a broken back.

S/WORDS and *Unfolding*, a double bill, is showing at Adelaide Festival Centre as part of Adelaide Festival, March 11-14