Paul Knobloch: "I know I can keep pushing the boundaries, keep going forward."
Photo: Silas Brown

Canberra-born dancer Paul Knobloch is about to step into a new phase in his career. He recently relinquished his contract with Bejart Ballet Lausanne, where he had been working since 2009, to take up a three-year contract with Alonzo King LINES Ballet in San Francisco. He begins work with the company in February. "I loved working in Lausanne," he says. "I travelled the world with Bejart Ballet Lausanne and danced major roles in all the most significant works by the company's founder, Maurice Bejart. But I felt I was missing out a little as the company was no longer creating so many new works. I thought I had more to offer."

The Frenchman Maurice Bejart, one of the 20th century's most daring and controversial choreographers, died in 2007 and since his death the company he founded in the 1980s has been largely dedicated to restaging and touring the works he created. Just a few outside choreographers have been invited to Lausanne to work with the company. One was Alonzo King, director of Alonzo King LINES Ballet. King created *Figures of Thought* for Bejart Ballet Lausanne in 2011 and chose Knobloch to take a major role in the work. It changed the course of Knobloch's life.

"Alonzo is a visionary. I felt inspired by the way he nurtured the dancers and by his creative philosophy. He collaborates with visual artists, actors, composers and many people that you would not normally associate with dance. He commissions original music and he is a very active choreographer. It is every dancer's dream to be part of that kind of creative process."

King does indeed collaborate in unusual ways. In 2007, for example, he collaborated with a group of Shaolin monks on a work called *Long River High Sky* in which he contrasted the classical ballet background of his dancers with the martial arts practices of the monks. In 2009 he collaborated with jazz pianist Jason Moran and in 2007 and again in 2009 with Indian virtuoso tabla player Zakir Hussain. Last year California-based architect Christopher Haas created a "kinetic" set for LINES for a new work, *Triangle of the Squinches*. It had music composed by drummer Mickey Hart, formerly of the famed Grateful Dead rock band. Most recently King used the music of the Sephardic Jews, including archival field recordings, for a work called *Resin*. Nothing seems beyond his field of interest when it comes to collaboration.

LINES, despite its somewhat unusual collaborative approach, is essentially a classically based company and Knobloch's technical strengths come from the training he received, initially at the Canberra Dance Development Centre and then at the Australian Ballet School. His early professional experience as a dancer was with West Australian Ballet, the English National Ballet and then the Australian Ballet, which he joined in 2002.

But last time I spoke to Knobloch for *The Canberra Times* he was nursing an injured foot. Has it improved?

''It's an arthritic condition," he says. "I'll always have to manage it. It's not going to go away I'm afraid and I may have to have an operation one day. I know I can't dance the big three act ballets any more. I can't manage the jumps and turns they require. But I know I can keep pushing the boundaries, keep going forward. This is what I hope to do with LINES."

Knobloch has never worked in the United States and the prospect of doing so was another reason for making the move from Lausanne, especially as LINES has just announced a collaborative program with Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. This collaboration will expose Knobloch to the various contemporary dance influences that the Hubbard Street company can offer. He does, however, wince a little when he explains the difficulties he faced getting a work visa.
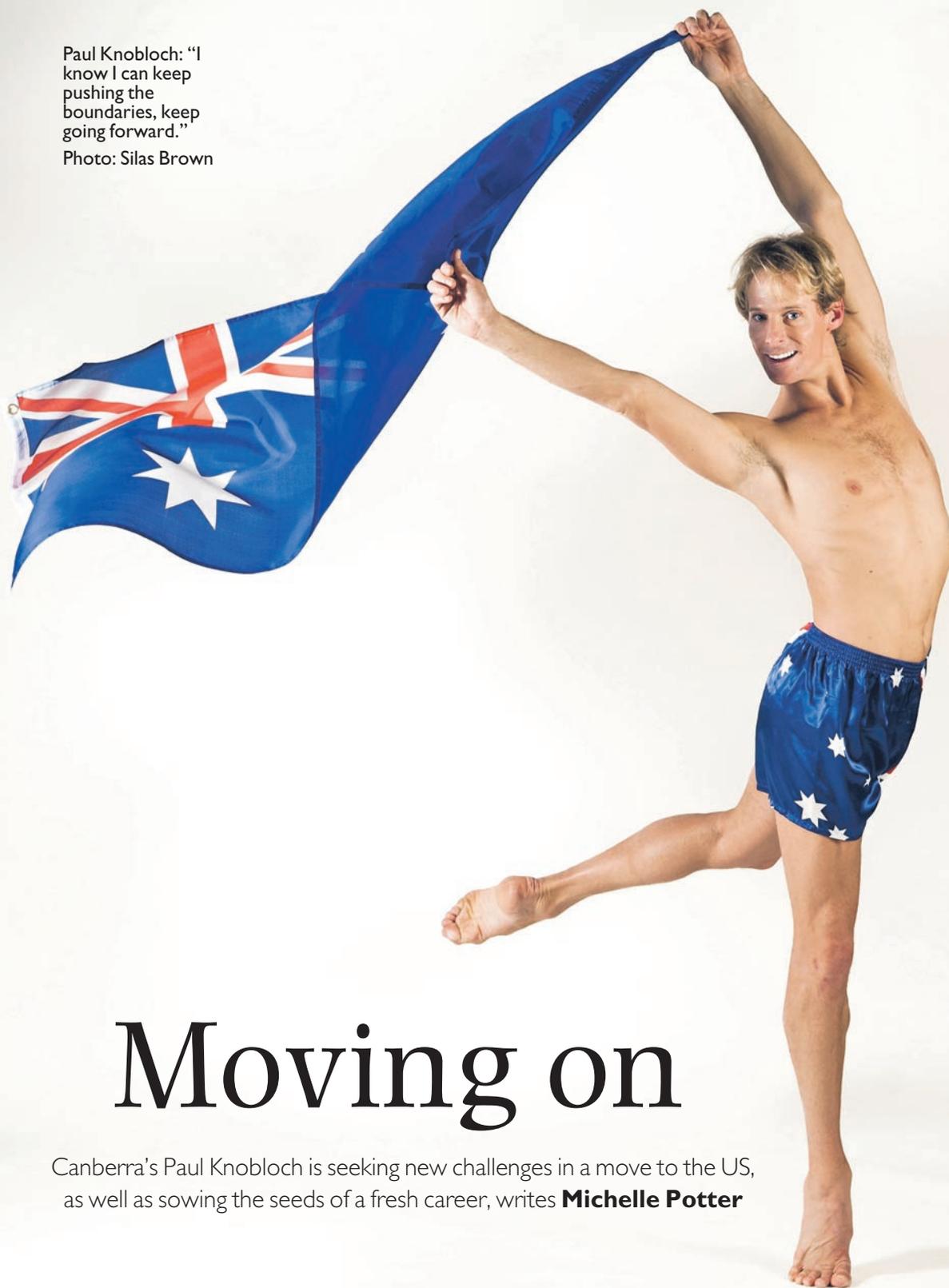
Moving on

Canberra's Paul Knobloch is seeking new challenges in a move to the US, as well as sowing the seeds of a fresh career, writes **Michelle Potter**

"It was a very long process. There were so many references I needed, so much evidence I had to put together, so many reviews to send," he says. "We had to prove that I had an extraordinary ability as a dancer and that the position could not be filled by an American."

As he packed his bags to leave on New Year's Day he was still anxious that he would arrive and not be admitted. He also says he feels very lucky to be offered a new job, and this job in particular, at his age. He's 34 and knows that artistic directors often look for younger people when taking on new company members.

It is not surprising that Knobloch is looking for ever more exciting possibilities for himself and his career. There is not just the age factor – a dancer's life is short at the best of time, even without an arthritic foot. As well, there is the fact that Knobloch is proudly Australian and wants eventually to return home and inspire young artists at home with the knowledge and experience he has gained overseas. To fulfill the wish to give back, the broader his experiences the better.

He also hankers after a second career for himself as a choreographer. He has made several works for the Australian Ballet's choreographic programs, in which company members are given the opportunity and the facilities to choreograph for an audience. In addition, he has made a work for the main company, which was later restaged for the Australian Ballet School. But more recently he created *Facets of Light* for Ballet Victoria, a Canadian company located in Victoria, British Columbia. The work was part of a triple bill that played in Victoria but which is touring elsewhere in Canada, to Knobloch's pleasure.

Alonzo King comes from a long family line of activists fighting for the rights of the African-American population. His ballets, however, are not overtly political but are more about the possibilities for dance. How can it grow and change? LINES Ballet might just be the place to nurture Knobloch's creativity and enhance his own prospects for the future. Knobloch is as determined as King to open himself up to new situations.