

HIS DARK MATERIAL

John Vlismas has survived drug addiction and death threats to reach the age of 40. He talks to **Oliver Roberts** about constructive comedy, spirituality, art, truth and the Zen of scuba diving

Photographs: **Waldo Swiegors**

JOHN Vlismas saves his life by breathing underwater. He'll tell you this quite soon after meeting you. He'll tell you that scuba diving, pushing wordlessly through a mass of water with a tank on his back and a regulator in his mouth, refocuses his compulsion for the excess and intensity that has been the seal of his career, and life, for a very long time.

I tried to give up drinking and just do cocaine, and that was a "f*kin' disaster," he says of his addictions. "I was going to die, basically. I ended up in hospital a few times. I started diving when I finished rehab. I thought, 'What can I do to reassert my ability to calm myself?'" He is now an instructor.

Vlismas has been sober for eight years, but the calmness he speaks of is not all that apparent, at least not on dry land. It's easy to see why a drug like cocaine so easily seduced him, and how it could have so easily have killed him — he is manic, verbally and physically. Thoughts, concepts and profane profanity shoot from his mouth with a rapidity matched only by the movement of his prominent half-Greek eyebrows, which arch and twitch in a kind of bizarre mating ritual.

"I'm very interested in making my comedy a little more constructive now," he says at one point, then he starts reeling off reflections without using any commas or full stops.

"When I was younger and not sober I needed approval. It's one of the reasons I drank so much. I was much more approved of and could live with the situation a lot better when I was drinking and of course when I discovered cocaine and realised I could drink even longer... then I joined that whole clique of Johannesburg people who believe that doing cocaine is somehow a higher calling."

Vlismas had been with his partner Taiffa Keight for a year or so when he decided to book himself into rehab.

"Before that, I think she tolerated my addictions, but would have preferred it to be different," he says. "I'm quite stubborn, so I started off being excellent at managing my addictions, but then it all started falling apart, and Taiffa ended up taking over the job. I think it's unfair to have any expectation of a partner in that way — whether they're going to keep helping you hide your shit or fix it — it's not their problem."

While in rehab, Vlismas completed his first painting. He also swam in a freezing cold river near the rehab centre one bitter winter morning to perpetuate the suffering and healing. He describes his whole rehabilitation process as "positive and spiritual."

But enough about the drug talk. He isn't Russell Brand. We're on our way to Melville to buy a tailcoat for his next show.

Vlismas is a performer so he likes to dress up, and, although he turned 40 this year, he is still, rather impressively, able to wear black leather, be tattooed, and have piercings in both ears, without looking like a middle-aged radio DJ who

only plays heavy metal. Even his pointy goatee and hair — a sort of floppy Mohawk — look all right. It's a familiar guise, the gothic comedian we've known for many years, but the man ensconced beneath the dark accessories has become somewhat lighter — yes, even buoyant — since passing through his jos.

He's busier, too. Among other projects, there's the production company he runs with Keight, and there's his art, which was recently exhibited at the Yuill Damaso Artists' Studio in Craighall Park. The paintings — oil on canvas — are predictably unsettling.

You would not expect bucolic landscapes dotted with interested sheep, or flowers in a vase. In terms of their expression, I mention Francis Bacon and Edward Munch. Vlismas says I'm not the first. But what the paintings, with their distorted, claustrophobic figures, really resemble is the work of Robert Hodgins.

And this is because the veteran artist was so

impressed by what he saw at one of Vlismas's earlier exhibitions that he offered to tutor him. Vlismas met with Hodgins every two weeks for the next two years. When Hodgins died in 2010, aged 89, Vlismas cried for a week.

"I have this thing about intensely original human beings; it's terrible when we lose them," he says.

"It's like that Pink Floyd video with the people marching into the miner. It's fine, but not with people like Robert. There's no point in meeting cookie-cutter human beings." "F*kin' chins and F*lk off."

Vlismas finds the display of his art daunting ("It's a different vulnerability — I sh*t myself"), but he says a lot of the grotesque faces that appear in his paintings are ones he has seen in real life, either in coffee shops, or staring back at him while he's on stage.

"With my job, I spend an enormous amount of time staring at people," he says. "I have a really big fascination with humans, and I think that all great comedy is from a voyeur's point of view, because a voyeur is not just an observer; it's a different kind of perverse thing, the intercourse between people — that's the real thrill, and that's what interests me."

There is also the thrill that comes with using your intellectual voyeurism to shock an audience. That is what Vlismas has always been best, or worst, at: depending on your point of view. For him, there is no taboo, no subject too sticky to breach. Vlismas is hilariously cucking and utterly offensive, and it's the way he so deftly straddles the squamy place between that makes him so watchable. However, he is quick to assert that he doesn't affront purely for the sake of mirth and disgust — he does it to expose important realities.

"I've always believed that it's not

funny unless it's true," he says. "It has to have an element of truth, otherwise it makes for sh*t comedy. I hate those F*kin' old-school, ignorant approaches." Vlismas's first memories of comedy are of him performing for his paternal grandfather when he was about 11 years old.

"I was a huge Pieter Dirk Uys fan," he says. "My parents watched his videos a lot and I just loved the man who dressed as a woman. Eventually my mother got a nose and those Groucho Marx glasses, and I would copy Uys as he did his little changes into PW Botha and Pik Botha; those were my first memories of goofing around."

He is still close to his parents, who live in Durban, but Vlismas credits his paternal grandfather — who ran a bottle store in a small Zimshabwe town and was known as "Honest John Vlismas" — as having perhaps the heaviest influence on his comedy. "He used to say some devastating things," Vlismas says. "He was

afterwards and say 'F*kk, I've never thought about it like that before; but that gushy F*kin'... I get that all the time. I know what I'm doing and I know why I'm doing it — you don't have to tell me."

Although it may sound like it, Vlismas is really not some black hole of scorn intent on upsetting people. While he makes it clear that he doesn't seek endorsement from his audience, he definitely wants their understanding. And whether it's something to do with him, or just the way the mindst is changing, Vlismas is getting more and more of those faces staring back at him to have a little trust in their eyes.

"What I'm excited about is that there are more people now than before who think along the same ways that I do and understand that I don't mean them any harm,"

he says. "I just want to take them somewhere then put them back where I do it. I don't want to worship the devil."

It seems outrageous to suggest, but Vlismas, with all his leathery posturing and past-life mysticism, is actually vebemently moral. He is also very serious. While shopping for the tailcoat and eating pizza, Vlismas is ponderous and troubled about the absurdities of the world, and is very concerned about guiding his 12-year-old daughter, from a previous relationship, towards a sanctified life.

"I have to provide a spiritual compass for my daughter, I think that's my duty," he says. It's a statement that seems crazily dichotomous with a man who has offended so many people, but you see then that Vlismas's angst is not with morals; it's how the world so stubbornly interprets and presents what's right and wrong that riles him.

"Ultimately, all you can pass on to your kids is the option to be better. To behave better, to be treated better and achieve a better state of grace. I don't know if I'll ever get there, but I do believe in a state of grace and we should all aim for it. It's not about whether you're going to heaven for being a good boy, or hell for being naughty and wanking or something; if you live with grace, you've lived a better life — that's the juice. Just because you're going to die and that's the end of it, doesn't mean you have to be a c***."

Then Vlismas talks about diving again. About how meditative it is, about how there's, suspended in thick silence, that he comes up with most of his ideas. He's also learnt a technique to stop himself plunging into fear and panic when the realisation that he's deep underwater, with no chance of a quick escape if something should go wrong, gets too much.

"You start focusing on something, it doesn't matter, it can be a F*kin' crab," he says. "One time I was having a bit of a moment and I looked around and I saw a hole in the sand and every now and then this little fountain of sand would shoot out of it and I just thought, 'That's f*cking amazing! All you're doing is giving your brain that distraction to let your body re-adjust. Then it's all fine.'"

'There's no point in meeting cookie-cutter human beings'



quite abrupt with people. Very funny, very intellectual, but incredibly blunt. He didn't shield the truth or censor himself. He's quite present in my work."

It's because of this infamous, hereditary

bluntness that Vlismas has received death threats. There was a bomb scare at a theatre he performed at. He's been accompanied on and off stage by a bodyguard. He's only worried about 1% of those hazards, though: the right wing, who he's raised a number of times. The rest he doesn't care about, nor does he seek assurance for his provocative emissions.

"If you're pointing things out, how the public react is their thing," he says. "But what I love about being sober is the absolute clarity of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I'm not big on feedback because I no longer want approval. Look, I love it when people come up to me