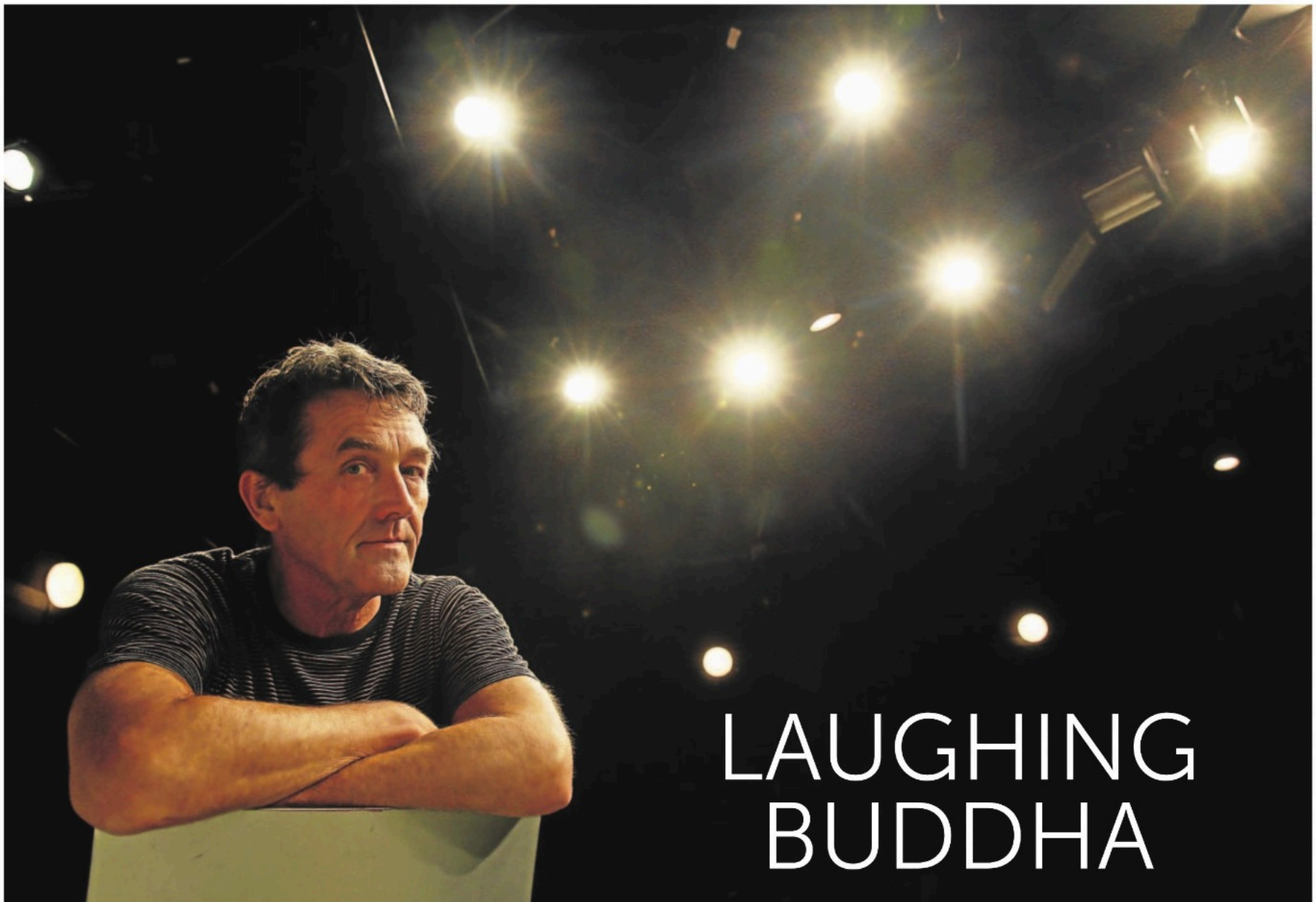




LAUGHING BUDDHA

POWER OF NOW: The acclaimed actor finds the concentration he attains during a live performance is what keeps him sane

AS Andrew Buckland roared towards earth, parachute as yet unpulled, he realised something — even though it was his first time in freefall, he had been here before. Not actually *here*, a few thousand metres up in the cold rushing air, but inside, in his head, he was settling into a place he recognised as home.

"You're absolutely focused, otherwise you're dead," he says. "And the beauty and the freedom of freefall and controlling freefall at the same time is knowing what the drill is, having the discipline you need to survive. I love coming to that needlepoint focus."

Buckland will make you think about theatre in ways you never imagined. He'll talk about performance as a way of being. He'll compare the sensations of existing on stage to *vipassana* meditation. He'll philosophise about the magic and mystery of laughter. He'll talk about body movements and gesture and say things like, "The embodied idea is often a quicker way to get to the visceral response that's not describable in words."

Like any true master, it is apparent that Buckland's talent is innate, encoded into his DNA by Dionysus at the moment of conception. After fleeing to Rhodes University in 1972 to avoid the army, all it took was a single, almost flippant audition in the drama department (Buckland was studying physical education at the time) for his gift to surface.

"I got a laugh from these people and it was a revelation," he says. "The head of department sat me down and asked me what I was doing here. I thought the question was, 'What the fuck are you doing here?' I got taken aback, but two

Andrew Buckland has perfected the art of performance. He chats to **Oliver Roberts** about the intricacies of gesture and acting as a way of being

Picture: Esa Alexander

days later I had changed courses, I began studying theatre and drama."

Under the tutorship of Gary Gordon, now head of the drama department at Rhodes (and Buckland's close friend and collaborator), he began to understand how to use his body to express emotions. He learned mime techniques. He spent mornings in the gym, "with the okes", and afternoons in the ballet studio. It was, he says, "about finding a way of being expressive with your body without trying to manufacture it, allowing the connection between impulse and expression to be there so that you find relaxation but at the same time flexibility and strength".

Buckland has performed as Hamlet for SABC. He has three Fringe First Awards from the Edinburgh Festival as well as more than 20 national and international theatre awards. He is one of the few South Africans selected to join Cirque du Soleil. But it's laughter that captivates him most profoundly. He describes *The Ugly Noo-Noo*, the one-man show he wrote and first performed in 1988, as a watershed moment. The play, a kind of political satire involving Parktown prawns, has won multiple awards and was shown as recently as 2012.

"I'm drawn to comedy... and the phenomenon of laughter because eventually it's an involuntary

thing," Buckland says. "You don't sit and think, 'Oh, that's funny,' and then choose to laugh. Because of a visceral response to an idea your diaphragm does *this* (he places his hands at the base of his ribcage and jerks them up and down). This is amazing, you know? And in that moment when your body has responded you're open to really bizarre or uncomfortable ideas, hateful and scary ideas, but the laughter turns it in a way that somehow you're able to consider it, even if it's for a second, even if you think, 'Oh shit, I shouldn't be laughing at that.'"

The night before this interview I watch Buckland perform in *Blue/Orange* at the Baxter. The play

'Out of the mistake is where you normally find truth. Expression happens when you fail'

is about two psychiatrists at odds over the diagnosis of a young black man. Running with themes of racism and mental health — the question of what it means to be "normal" — *Blue/Orange* is an unsettling ride, occasionally tinged with the kind of tense, self-revealing humour that Buckland is so stirred by. Though I am unaware at the time, Buckland tells me the fol-

lowing morning that he stuffed up his second line. After 40 years in the game he walked onto stage and got it wrong. Buckland doesn't go to pieces when this happens. Instead, he gets all Buddhist.

"Being an actor is like being an acrobat of error," he says. "You're looking for mistakes, especially in rehearsal and in teaching and learning. You are given exercises for you to fuck up. With mime for instance, nobody can ever perfect the technique. But you attempt to get it right and every time you fail, every time you don't hit the mark, each time you do that you learn more about your body. Out of the mistake is where you normally find truth. Expression happens when you fail. And unlike on film, you've got to deal with the mistake in character, in the moment, and that's beautiful. *Beautiful*."

Plays can run for months. You're performing the same things every night, reeling out the lines. In the end, it's robotic isn't it? Sure, there's the thrill of walking onto stage, the applause, but how much repetition can one take? Or is every performance, *every single performance*, subtly modified?

"Ya, ya. If you're not listening to the audience you're not going to find truth with each other," Buckland says. "You've got to be really listening to your partner and at the same time listening to the audience to see what's coming back. If some-

body coughed and missed a really important thing, they're not going to get the joke in, say, three lines time, so you have to find a way to get the set-up in another way. What I love about performance is the concentration you have to have because you need to be absolutely in the character, in the moment, so that when things do change you can respond authentically. It's a heightened state of concentration. I'd go mad if I didn't do it."

Truth. Heightened state of concentration. This is where *vipassana* comes in. It's an ancient form of meditation, which, loosely translated, means "to see things as they really are". For Buckland, *vipassana* means silencing "the chit-chat" of the mind when he's on stage. The chit-chat of the self that ate breakfast that morning, drove to the theatre and thinks about who's in the audience. That's one reality. The other is the reality of his existence on a stage, under lights, pretending to be another person, *believing* he is another person, *feeling* what they feel right to the very surface of their skin. Being. Actually being. Allowing himself to plummet through that atmosphere, focusing on the gauge which tells him when to pull the cord so he can float safely back to ground.

"Coming off stage at the end of the performance... the only way I can describe it is that it's like a physical sensation," Buckland says. "It's quiet *here* (he places his hands on his chest). So driving home it's just quiet, it's like you're in a meditation. Your thoughts are not going ka-ka-ka-ka anymore. It's just quiet. It's beautiful." **LS**

• *Blue/Orange* runs at the Baxter Theatre until March 14.