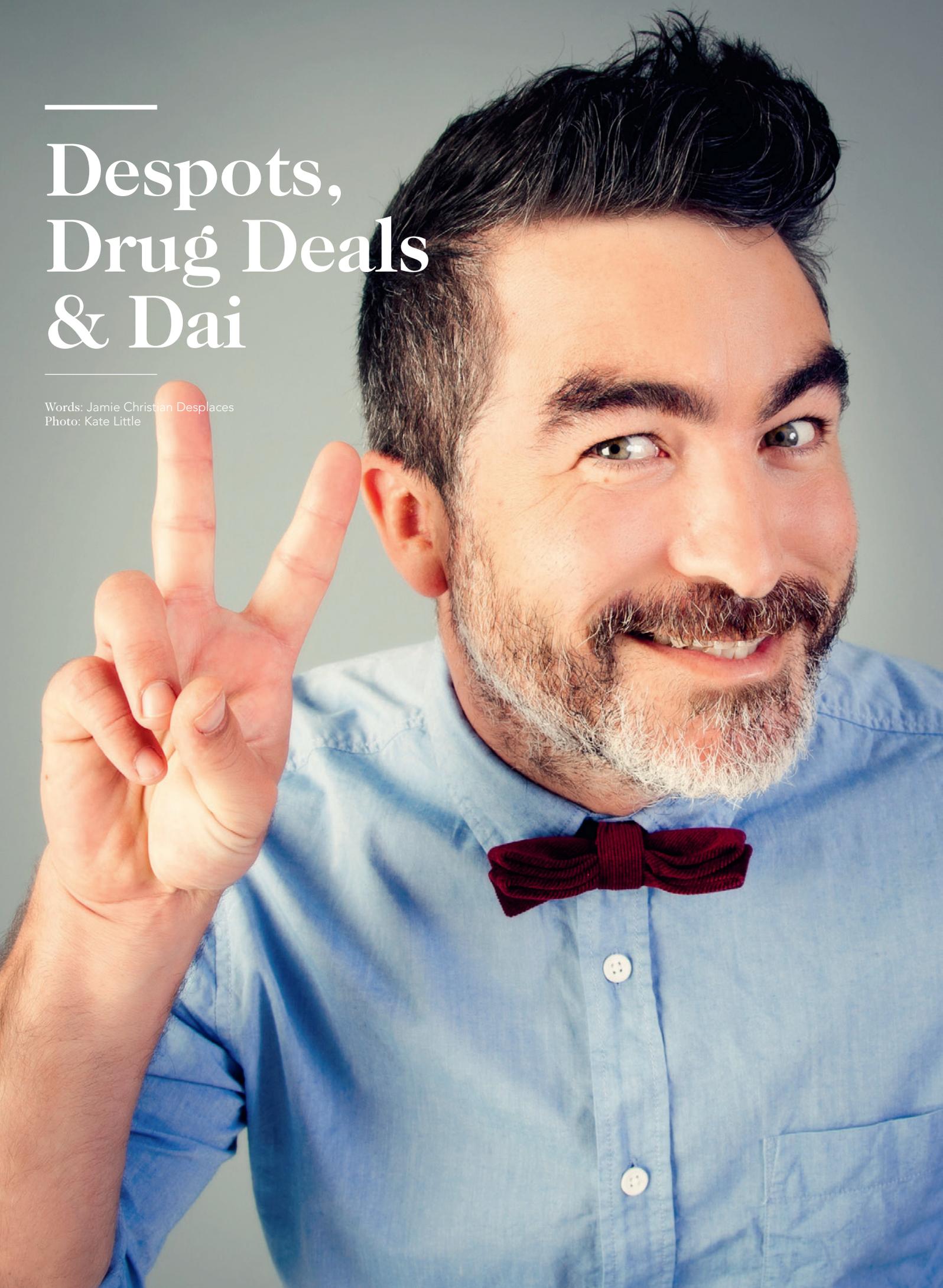

Despots, Drug Deals & Dai

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces
Photo: Kate Little



In July it was revealed that, according to the Human Rights Foundation, Jenifer Lopez had earned US\$10 million performing for, “some of the world’s worst thugs”. A real rogues’ gallery, it boasted dictators from Chechnya, Turkmenistan and a corrupt Uzbek industrialist. Dai Henwood would never prostitute himself to such characters. He prefers despots with a little more class.

“She’s got far more than ten million bucks already, whereas for me it’s a big call,” he laughs. “I’d love to do a uniquely New Zealand comedy routine to some obscure North Korean leader. The one thing I really enjoy about massive dictators, is their madness.”

The comic has a love for vintage watches. He tells me about Saddam Hussein’s bespoke collection of diamond-encrusted Rolexes which sport so much bling they look like knock-offs from Thailand. “If I came back from a gig with a Saddam Hussein timepiece and a cheque for ten million, not too many people could argue,” chuckles Dai. “It’d be an epic story for the grand-kids.”

He’s currently promoting his latest DVD, *Adapt or Dai – Humans are Awesome, Let’s Celebrate*, a recording of his hilarious turn during this year’s New Zealand International Comedy Festival. He’s very happy with the result. The armchair psychologist in me suspected Dai perhaps developed his humour from an early age, a deflection mechanism against quips about his relatively short stature. While some smaller guys want to fight the world, Dai decided to make it laugh. Although nothing could be further from the truth. His childhood was “awesome.” He tells me he’s the same height and weight as when he was 12, as a youth, he was a giant. He was popular and excelled at both sport and the arts. The son of a renowned thespian father and lawyer mother (now a judge) he discovered his gift of entertainment aged five. Dai is gracious and sincere, his warmth and innocent charm, effortless. “I was the class clown, but I never really got into trouble,” he says. “I took the piss, but I’ve always had the luck of doing it in a good-natured way so the teachers cut me some slack.”

He still gets nervous, but not as much as when he first started out. Stand-up terrified him to the point of physical sickness. Dai toured the world, knowing he had to perform next to better comedians if he was to fulfil his potential.

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He gigged in Canada, Australia, Japan and the UK. The Edinburgh Festival, he says, could be especially gruelling, with punters hell bent on heckling. The first night he played the Scottish capital, Dai received a standing ovation from a hundred-strong crowd. By the third night, there were 36 watching and halfway through his set, 34 walked out. “I was left with two people,” he says. “One was a friend of the promoter. I asked the other what he was doing there. He told me he went to school with my mum in New Plymouth.”

Dai recounts his first-hand experience of New Zealand’s underworld in Palmerston North. “I’d done a gig at the Regent Theatre, which is a beautiful old building with a bar down the back of a lane,” he says. “I was having a drink afterwards and witnessed the worst drug deal I have ever seen. This guy turned up with a rubbish bag filled with PCP and swapped it for a second-hand Mercedes! They were both quite stoked about it. It was a very rural New Zealand drug deal.”

The Kiwi rural life in fact appeals to the comic. “I’m obsessed with being a rural postman,” he tells me. “There’s something I like about the idea of cycling around, nosing through people’s mail and knowing a bit too much about everyone’s

affairs. It’s definitely a job for the future.” As amusing as that would be, thankfully Dai Henwood has no plans to vacate the stage just yet. “Comedy is the most honest art-form there is,” he says. “An audience can fake the odd laugh, but they can’t fake it for an hour. When you come off stage, you know exactly how your night has gone.”

Do you believe any subjects are off-limits for a comic?

“Every topic is fine so long as it’s handled correctly. There has to be a twist to the story, the subject can never be the punch-line. A racist joke, for example, should get a laugh at the expense of the racist, not the victim. That’s the problem with camera phones and social media, things can be taken out of context.”

Dai has an eight-month-old son by his wife, Joanna. I ask if fatherhood has softened his outlook. “It’s definitely made me more aware,” he says. “It’s put me in a new zone and I’m learning new things. It’s also great for material that appeals to a broader section of the crowd. Fatherhood makes all your experiences rewarding.” He was ready to make the leap after a career of hard-partying, constant exposure to a culture of drinking and good times. “Being on the touring comedy scene, I’m lucky to come out with no brain damage or convictions,” he reflects, “let alone retaining the ability to make a baby.” Dai never considered himself to be an outright alcoholic but realised he had a problem. He entered himself into a program called Hello Sunday Morning which encourages three-month abstinence blocks to develop a healthy relationship with the booze. It is a practice he still adheres to. “Plus, I’m a very involved dad,” he adds. “It’s pretty hard to deal with a kid and simultaneously nurse a hangover. Fatherhood is certainly relentless, but it’s amazing. I love it.”

Dai Henwood’s DVD, *Adapt or Dai*, is in shops now or available to download from www.daispace.com. Verve is giving away copies of *Adapt or Dai*! See below for more details.

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