

Where Egos Dare

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Paul Ego needs 'a thing'. He once harboured dreams of becoming a rock star. Now, he's glad he took the comedy route. But something is still missing. "One of the great things about comedy is that you don't have to look like a rock god on stage," he says. "In fact, the odder looking you are, the better. Maybe if I had a stroke or something. Just partially paralysed, you know? Or maybe even if I was burned, just a little bit. Some gimmick. I don't really have anything other than being tall. I don't have 'a thing'."

Until some dreadful accident befalls Ego, he'll just have to make do with having funny bones. The stand-up and *7 Days* star is performing his Amazingballs show at New Zealand's International Comedy Festival and no-one, he jokes, is safe. Not even his family. "My eldest son is fourteen and will be coming to watch me for the first time," grins the comic. "So I'm wondering how much I should talk about him. I guess I could just change his name from Gabriel to Graybiel. He won't know. He'll just be thinking, 'man, that boy's name is just like mine.' Boys are so dumb."

Will he heckle?

"Ha, probably!" Ego cups his hands around his mouth, adopts a mock teenage tone and shouts up to a phantom stage, "It was funnier at home dad! Do that voice you do after school!"

Did parenthood change your comedic perspective?

"A lot of comics who don't have kids think they won't go down that road, but once you've had them, you don't actually do anything else for a very long period of time. You can't get on stage and say 'I'm a new dad, I went to the movies the other day,' because any new parents will know you're lying. They'll know that what you've actually been trying to do is sneak in some sleep between wiping shit from the walls. So why not talk about it? Everyone goes through it, there's no stigma. Either you've got a kid or you've been one."



Ego says parenthood is the best — and hardest — thing he's ever done, comparing it even to stand-up: "Just when you think you've nailed it, you wake up the next day and it's like someone's swapped your kids. It doesn't work anymore." The comic's prone to making the odd wife joke too — all made-up gags, he stresses — but admits he occasionally goes too far: "I have been known to step over the line. I can tell from her reaction if I'm not to do one again."

The festival will also see Paul take on some hosting duties, which he relishes: "There's less pressure because the audience don't expect the host to be as funny as the comedians. Sometimes there's genuine surprise. They're like, 'wow, this guy's funny as well. It's like having another comedian on the bill!'"

You enjoy interacting with the crowd?

"Riffing with the audience is one of my favourite things about comedy. A lot of my writing comes from ad-libbing with them." A lot comes from mucking around with his mates on *7 Days* too. "We know each other so well," adds the comic. "They're a great sounding board." Especially when struck by déjà vu. Ego tells me sometimes a joke seems so solid he's sure it's been done before. He'll convince himself he must have heard it elsewhere and stored it away in the dusty backrooms of his subconscious. "It happened the other day when I was round my friends' house," he says. "They have French Bulldogs. I mean, what is it with them? They're an ugly, ugly animal, as

though Yoda has had sex with a bat, just so unattractive. I came up with this idea of them having an outrageously camp French accent, the way they bark, demand their food and sniff their brandy." The comic swirls an imaginary crystal tumbler in his palm and contorts his face into a Gallic scowl.

Though born in England, within Ego there beats a strictly Kiwi heart, but, he admits much of his comedy is British influenced, having grown up listening to records of Peter Sellers and the Goons. His mother is from Liverpool, his father from London's East End. They too have funny bones. "They both have a great sense of humour," says Paul, fondly. "Hearing them tell a joke is hilarious because dad never remembers it properly and my mum will be sitting there, frustrated, as she corrects him. It can take anywhere up to half an hour. It's like a sketch."

You've been married for 25 years, a comic for 20, which has been the tougher gig?

"Stand-up without doubt, but I've been blessed in both areas. I'm very lucky." The secret to a successful marriage, he says, is to be open to new things and to retain the ability to laugh at yourself. "Which is in fact, the same with comedy! But my wife and I travelled together for a long time and they say if you can survive that, then you really can survive anything."

The New Zealand International Comedy Festival runs until 18 May. Check out www.comedyfestival.co.nz for details.