



face2face Graeme Blundell

Graeme's purple patch

Alvin Purple made Graeme Blundell a star. But, as he writes in his new autobiography, his life is much more than the role he is most remembered for. He talks to

Christopher Bantick.

Picture: Phil Hearne

Graeme Blundell riding on a bicycle into a shut garage door is an enduring image of Australian movie slapstick.

As Alvin Purple, Blundell became a hero and a cult figure simultaneously. Many blazered schoolboys doubtless lived vicariously through his sexual conquests.

Blundell is synonymous with the renaissance of three home-grown industries in Australia: film, television and drama. While he used to tread the boards in Melbourne, home is now Sydney. So has he been lucky over the 63 years of his life? "I wouldn't say luck so much. I've worked pretty hard. But I guess I have put myself in the way of things as well. I was there when things changed and when things were going on," he says with a mix of nostalgia and realism.

Working "pretty hard" is one of the traits that comes through his new confessional autobiography, *The Naked Truth: A Life in Parts*. Cheap hotel rooms and cheap wine were de rigueur while maintaining versatility and enviable performing standards. It was a tough gig

Blundell has done the hard yards in the often unforgiving and fickle world of theatre and film.

But even so, Australia's sense of itself through film, television and stage has in part been animated by Blundell. "Being there" for Blundell was in the roaring days of the Melbourne University theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, the Pram Factory, La Mamma and then Hoopla.

Although Blundell is well respected for acting, it is worth remembering that apart from performing in about 100 plays he has also directed as many, not to mention being director of the National Playwrights' Conference and artistic director of Kinsella's in Sydney. But Alvin Purple, the boy who got lucky, is the role he is mostly remembered for.

"The Alvin Purple creation was important to my career. But not a lot of people thought it was going to work," he recalls. "Tim Burstall thought it might and the way I played it was to highlight the character and the dilemmas between men and women forming relationships."

It would be wrong to say that Alvin Purple was necessarily a highlight of Blundell's extensive career. Still, it did make him a household name. Notwithstanding this film role and many others, does he have a preference? "I don't think I could say that film was more enjoyable than the theatre. What I do not want now is the theatre six days a week. There was more money in film and TV. I loved doing TV and film and now I think TV has taken over as the thinking person's art form."

Blundell is now a television critic and an award-winning writer. He says that his book, *King: The Life and Comedy of Graeme Kennedy*, was a significant moment in his development, not only as a writer but also his understanding

of comedy. "As a performer, Kennedy was infusive," he says. "It was the freewheeling comedy that he was able to produce which was new. He was an important influence as well on the TV broadly. But for me, the book was important for another reason. It freed me."

"I could become a professional writer and always be an actor. I like Kennedy enormously. As



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a person he carried with him a knapsack of ideas. He wouldn't stop telling jokes and he showed me that you could take control of your career. He did his own negotiations and showed all of us that this was possible. He had fierce control over his own work and this was important to me as a young actor."

While *A Life in Parts* is both biography and a survey of the emergence of the performing arts in Australia from the 60s to the present, there are also some costly admissions. These relate to his own personal relationships and the impact that being an actor on the road and working in film had on family stability. He is pensive when this is raised and does not conceal his disappointment.

"Up to a point, travelling all the time and, as someone said to me, telling lies for a living, left its mark," he says. "This kind of life inevitably meant that there was straying into other relationships. It was not an easy life. I don't think I have any real regrets on the way life so far has turned out. It has been hard on my four children. Still, I think they have become independent people in a way through it. I'm regretful of elements of my life with them and that's been tough."

The Naked Truth: *A Life in Parts*, by Graeme Blundell (Hachette Livre, \$35). Blundell is a guest of the 2009 Perth Writers Festival from February 28-March 2.

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