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Kitson on Comedy

Perrier award winning Daniel Kitson on the state of British comedy

Sometimes in the middle of the night when I can't sleep I think of Edinburgh. More so at the moment. This is because the reason I'm not asleep in the middle of the night is Edinburgh. I'm writing this at twelve minutes past three in the middle of the night on Thursday. Technically it is the early hours of Friday. It is already tomorrow.

Ordinarily of course the impending dawn would be a thing of beauty, a triumph of nature and a reminder that the world has not stopped spinning. Twenty-seven days away from the first show of this year's festival however, and the coming dawn is nothing but a threatening chorus of birdsong.

The continuity announcers seem to delight in reminding me of this inexorable progress by saying good morning in between late night television, reminding me that a new day has begun before I have finished what I intended to do with the previous one.

That Edinburgh will arrive in under a month and that I genuinely have no idea what my show is going to be. This time last year I had a show. This time two years ago I had a show. This time this year I have some ideas, a poster, an advert in the fringe brochure, a sizable expenditure and mounting expectation.

This year I'm turning down the majority of interviews. I'm writing pieces for various publications but I'm avoiding interviews. My agent thinks this is naïve and foolhardy. I of course think it's a stroke of artistic integrity and that my agent is, as all agents do, missing the point. The truth of the situation is probably that I am being naïve but that I genuinely don't mind dealing with the consequences of my naivety. The consequences of it being a half full room and a perceived lack of success. There is a lot of pressure in Edinburgh, not pressure to produce a good show, a piece of work you are genuinely proud of and that has its own worth and its own reward. The pressure is to sell out. To get press. To be seen as successful. To get bigger gigs. To get access to TV. To be laden with the trappings of a glory defined by bookers and agents and journalists and producers.

This pressure is pointless. It comes from those with the least understanding about why people produce shows. The only pressure that is genuinely worthwhile is the pressure to produce something wonderful.

This pressure comes from a different place. Not from the press or the bookers or the agents or the ticket sales. It comes from a place where fifty tickets sold to people who will love the show is better than one hundred tickets sold to people who will mutter and shout their way through a show that was never written for them.

It comes from a place where a five-star review full of facile, misplaced compliments that betray a total lack of understanding is ignored and derided rather than photocopied and

stuck to flyers and posters. It comes from a place where fame is an utterly repugnant and totally avoidable byproduct of the work. It comes from a place where people like Simon Munnery, David O'Doherty and Boothby Graffoe produce shows of genuine worth that are largely ignored. It comes from a place that not a lot of people reside in. It comes from a place that defines its own success.

There is, of course, another place. A bigger place. A place with comfier chairs and shinier floors. A place where people who come from any small town are surprised and enchanted by modern technology, where people from the South West have six fingers. A place where performers have always just got back from Amsterdam. Where everyone has been nominated for something and is shouting about it. Where there is always some advice for the fellas. Where there is a guy who knows what I'm talking about.

A place where there are always people celebrating something. A place that is always a total sell out. A place where everyone has some TV writing credits. A place where bungalows are unfeasibly expensive. A place where ambition is financial rather than artistic.

From a distance this place looks shiny and new and gleams with jewels and trinkets but when you get close to it you notice the shit on the floor and the walls and the ceiling. The shit on the tables. The shit on the shelves. Then, when you have spent some time in this place you realise that the shelf holding the shit is made of shit. That this whole place is shit. And then you leave and tell people about the shit. Or you stay and pretend you haven't noticed.

Both these places are in Edinburgh.

It's now Friday lunchtime and Edinburgh is still keeping me awake. I'm not awake because I don't think I'll sell out this year. It's a big room and my show is not as accessible as my previous two. Neither do I think I'll get as much press as the last two years, I'm consciously not courting it and I don't think that will sit well with the majority of people. I don't think I will win any awards. I don't think I'll make any contacts. I don't think I'll get a TV deal. None of this is what's keeping me awake. The one thing that is stopping me from sleeping is this:

I want my show to be amazing.