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# Dan is the man

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**After three years of making people laugh at his jokes, Daniel Kitson is desperate to try something different. He spoke with Stephanie Bunbury.**

When I see it, the show Daniel Kitson is bringing to Melbourne is in a state of becoming. "This is a story show," he says, with a faint hint of warning, as he sits down in front of a small pub audience to begin. There are some old table lamps on the stage that he will turn on and off, a portable record player for musical interludes, and a crumpled sheet pinned behind him where one of the stories will be shown, snippet by snippet, on film. He shuffles papers. He doesn't know all his stories by heart yet. One isn't even finished. He warns the audience about this, too. And about the fact that all the stories, in one way or another, are to do with loneliness.

But Kitson is so genial and genuine that you are willingly drawn into anything he wants to tell you. You feel as if you're sitting in his lounge room, especially with all that old tat on stage. He tells us about a man who watches five minutes on every cable channel in sequence and, on a second sleepless night, finds a channel

with nothing on it except a man at a desk full of phones, waiting for some other lonely soul to ring. He talks about a woman who pursues her ex through a supermarket, desperate to say something after all these sad years that will charm him. There is a busker who plays guitar facing a wall, unaware that his father comes to watch him every day.

I watch Kitson pack up his lamps after everyone has gone. It was good, I say, but terribly bleak. "Excellent!" he says, laughing. Melancholy, he thinks, is the stuff of a more lasting show than jokes, though he admits he's worried about being so bleak that nobody will laugh at all. "I've had to keep telling myself to put funny bits into it. Because I do want there to be a certain bleakness, but I don't want people to go, 'Oh, f---ing Jesus', you know."

What he wants, he says, is the room to feel "nice and twinkly". That there is a sense of possibility in these little lives. "The thing about the busker, him facing the wall, I quite like that." Perhaps he would have been better as a secondary character in someone else's story, he muses. "But then the point of it is that it's lots of stories about people who are bit-parts in things. That is sort of the idea, really. People who are left out of the world at large or who have opted out of the world at large."

And their loneliness, Kitson insists, is not necessarily so bad. His last story show, which he developed in Edinburgh and brought to Melbourne last year, was *A Made-Up Story*. It was all about misfits who find true love, joy and magic. He sees this show as quite similar in spirit, despite appearances. "It's going, 'There's a lot of loneliness around and it's not necessarily the most horrific thing you could imagine'. These are people who are sort of all right, you know, just waiting for something."

Daniel Kitson is the stand-up comedian's stand-up. He is contrary, of course; when he won the Perrier, the Edinburgh Fringe's top comedy award, in 2003, he

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was so aghast at the people who started coming to see him that he immediately devised A Made-Up Story in the firm belief it was the sort of show only his true soulmates would like. Still, the most unlikely troupers beam at his name and say, 'Yeah, he's the best'. He commands a particular kind of loyalty, perhaps because there is no guile to his performance. What you see is what he is.

Last year, he caused something of a ruckus in Melbourne when he went on stage and gave the audience an unmediated experience of how it felt to be Daniel Kitson in the middle of a relationship break-up. "I was in a bit of a mess," he says. "I had literally had this horrible conversation with her just beforehand, a f---ing heartbreaking conversation, and then walked on stage."

According to him, the festival organisers thought he "went mental". A lot of people demanded their money back, but he is unrepentant in his own shuffling, giggly but quite stubborn way.

"Of course it was uncomfortable, he says, "but I was still being funny. And that is just an extension of what I've always done. People were saying at the time that you have a responsibility to the audience. And you do. But I think, first and foremost, I have a responsibility to the people who have seen me before and liked me. If I just go on and do stuff I don't mean, it's going to let them down." And it was the first time his heart had been broken, he says, so of course he had to talk about it.

But it wasn't just the heartbreak. After three years of constant giggling, every joke - even new jokes - bored him. "I was just trying to find something interesting to sort of not just trot out some shit and take the money, to find something genuinely exciting and good even if you wade through 10 minutes of shite to get there."

One reason he has chosen to tell stories this time around, he says, is because it is a challenge. "Without being terribly arrogant," he says, dissolving into an

embarrassed giggle, "I find stand-up really easy. I don't think about any gig, you know, I just go on and do them and it's fine. And it sounds quite wanky to say this, but it's that thing of caring slightly too much about the form of stand-up to do it in a half-arsed, pissing-it-away-type fashion."

We both catch the train towards Brixton, where Kitson will spend the next two weeks writing and rewriting this show. He has, he says excitedly, just bought a Victorian desk with stacks of little drawers across the top, pigeonholes under the lid, the lot. "I can show it to you. I've got a picture of it. It's a bit like it's a baby," he chuckles, producing a silver flip-top device so newfangled I don't actually know what it is. A phone? A palm pilot? A machine to rule the world?

"I love gadgets, as well as that old tat," he admits. "Look at this," he says, showing me the photograph that serves as a screensaver. "That's my dad, that's my mum, getting married, it's pretty nice, isn't it?"

And then there's the desk. "Look at that that bad boy, eh? Look at that! Drawers on the top, mother-f---er! That's where it's at!"

He's working up to some very serious writing on that desk. He expects it to help. This show is scaring him in a way that stand-up can't any more, which, he ruefully remembers, was the whole idea of it.

"But it's all well and good having this idea of thinking I'm going to do something especially for Melbourne and it's going to be brilliant and it's going to be different and blah blah blah! But then you get to this point and you think, 'F---ing do some f---ing stand-up, you self-important wanker'."

And so we get to Brixton station, and he shuffles off into the night. When I get home I am still thinking of Dan Kitson and his lonely, eccentric characters, his Belle and Sebastian record on the turntable, the lamps and the desk with its pigeonholes, and his self-importance. And quite inexplicably, I am still laughing.