

Daniel Kitson is wary
of careerist ambition.
Photograph: Phil
Wilkinson



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Kitson uncovered

ANNA MILLAR

AS A self-confessed hater of the press, Daniel Kitson's gripe is a small one: last night's pre-show cuppa at the Traverse theatre arrived without the free chocolate slab he's happily munching on now. The Yorkshire-born comic may be a maverick but Kitson's choice of rebellion has been charmingly childlike ever since his solo Fringe debut, *Love, Innocence and the Word Cock*, in 2001. In 2002 - the year he grudgingly won the Perrier - Kitson cut off his trademark bushy beard, making his publicity material instantly defunct.

"It was unfair," says Kitson. "No one asks you if you want to enter the Perrier Awards. Every step of the way, I was saying, I don't want to do a photo shoot, they make me itch, I find them upsetting. I don't want to do press. I don't want any of it."

Kitson would later boycott the glitzy aftershow bash in lieu of takeaway and PlayStation. Since the award, he says he's been "fighting a battle against a burgeoning popularity" that only now he feels he is winning. A packed theatre last week for the opening night of his new storytelling show, *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted*, would suggest otherwise.

"In the world of stand-up people book me on my name and because I've won awards," Kitson says. That the Traverse - who didn't want a comedy act - asked to see copies of his storytelling script before opting to programme him, gave Kitson a renewed bravery in his work. "It was a real vote of confidence for them to believe in the writing. It made me believe I could fill the space."

Alluding to an emotional depth far beyond his years, *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted* could be interpreted as Daniel Kitson: uncovered. Kitson may argue otherwise, but his off-stage and on-stage personas seem entirely consistent. The show revolves, for the main part, around five different stories looking at love, romance, family, desire, loss and a Kitson favourite: loneliness. Interspersed with images transposed on a massive screen behind him, it far outshines his 2003 show, *A Made Up Story*. It is finely tuned, and beautifully articulated. And while the gags are there, they play a secondary role to the velocity of Kitson's well-spun yarns.

"I want there to be a bleakness to the stories, but I also want there to be an optimism," he says. "I want these lonely people not to be seen as figures of pity but rather as brave and heroic."

If this is how Kitson feels, then he is reluctant to admit it. "It's not about me. As a human being it's massively unlikely that your viewpoint is going to be unique; people will relate to it and take their own emotions to the piece."

AND SO IT IS that Kitson inadvertently pinpoints what makes him so successful. For all his intellect and misfit demeanour, there is something utterly normal at his core. And if his unique oratory style captivates his audience, his appearance adds its own dimension. Anyone claiming they look like a paedophile should surely be on to a loser; not Kitson. "I'm a naturally funny person; I've got a naturally funny face."

When asked in 2003 where he would ideally perform his shows, Kitson answered: "In a clearing in a forest at midnight." Two years on, he manages to talk about his expansive fanbase - those who really "get" his work - without flinching.

"If you laugh at everything, you miss something. You have to appreciate the sadness so you can see the humour in it all," he says. Not that he is in any great rush to give up his roots; every night after his storytelling show at the Traverse, he heads to The Stand to do 90 minutes of stand-up.

"The thing with stories is that they are quite fragile; they cannot really exist in the same world as stand-up. Comedy lives on undermining things; it's instantly accessible and instantly funny. It's worked out really well that I can do both this year."

Asked what the future holds, Kitson rolls his eyes in annoyance. Television has little appeal. His stint, a couple of years ago, as a geeky barman was one of the standout moments of Peter Kay's *Phoenix Nights*. Kitson would prefer to forget it.

"With television you lose control of the creative process. Besides, I'm distrustful of any level of careerist ambition," he says. "I would much rather sit and make short movies on my computer with friends and have 10 people see it, than do something I'm not proud of and millions of people see it."

"It's about the work, giving people that goose-pimplly feeling. Melancholy is lovely, it stays with you longer; it's a more substantial meal than just laughs."

When time is called, Kitson gets up, takes a pack of jelly sweets out of his rucksack - Haribo, his favourite - and thrusts them at me with a goofy smile. "I rather enjoyed our chat," he says. "I was erudite and charming: you were all right too."

• *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted*, Traverse Theatre (0131-228 1404), until Aug 28, 10pm; Daniel Kitson, Stand Comedy Club (0131-558 7272), until Aug 28, 11.30pm