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This tape will deconstruct . . .

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He's been making Melburnians laugh for years, but in October, Daniel Kitson returns with a study on ageing and loss. Stephanie Bunbury still finds room for a chuckle.

DANIEL KITSON lets me in the door from the street, then up the stairs past a volcanic hallway deposit of gym shoes and footballs, warning me over his shoulder that he has to finish something. He's playing online Scrabble.

Obviously, I have to peer over his shoulder and yes, there is a nest of those unknown, impossibly short words you get from Scrabble dictionaries. Skep. What's a skep? I yelp. Nobody knows that! That's cheating!

Kitson giggles. For a performer whose chosen subjects are melancholy and loneliness, he is a surprisingly compulsive giggler. No, he says eventually without rancour. It means a kind of woven basket; that's the kind of thing he knows. He hits a key so I can study engravings of the long-destroyed Crystal Palace, the ruins of which are a block away, while he makes breakfast. His laptop is very fast and strikingly unconnected to anything. "Oh, yes, all wi-fied here," he says, with more of a chuckle this time. "I'm living in the future."

Nobody who saw one of Daniel Kitson's story shows, which he alternates with brilliant stand-up comedy gigs, would imagine he lived anywhere forward of about 1950, back when England was all about austerity, radio serials and milk chocolate as a Sunday treat. At one point this morning he will explain to me, quite earnestly, the etiquette surrounding a game of conkers, an age-old way of making your own entertainment by swinging horse-chestnuts from pieces of string. This makes him sound like one of the Railway Children. "Exactly! I'm an interesting dialectic!" he cries, starting to giggle again. He puffs out his chest. "I AM a dialectic!"

Kitson, who has been a beloved fixture at the Melbourne Comedy Festival for several years, won a Barry award in April with It's the Fireworks Talking, a stand-up show that was about childhood memory, family and fear as well as being face-achingly funny. In October he returns with a story show, C-90, which weaves the

stories of two elderly people facing the last day of their respective jobs. It is about loneliness, of course, but it is also about the decency of work, about human kindness and the pleasing smallness of everyday life.

Henry works in a mysterious archive where unwanted or forgotten compilation tapes are filed, a job that has been gradually diminished and robbed of resonance by the demise of the tape. Millie is a lollipop lady with a fixation on knowing and using people's whole names. These two solitaries are nodding acquaintances in a small village, but there is an unseen bond between them that is gradually illuminated as Kitson, sitting in a set composed of shelves of cassette tapes, simply tells their tale. Critics in Edinburgh, where it was first shown, hailed it as a masterpiece.

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He loves writing about old people, he told one of the Scottish papers at the time. "I've always felt an affinity towards them," he said. "They have an inherent level of humanity . . . I've always been older than I am. I was a middle-aged adolescent in tweed trousers." At the same time, he feels a trepidation about writing about "how people feel at the end of their working life, that mixture of freedom and regret, boredom and loneliness. I mean, I haven't a f---ing clue, have I?"

Indeed not. Kitson is 30. Almost all of his working life has been spent on stage, performing entirely on his own terms. He doesn't do television; he doesn't do commercials; he no longer has an agent; he doesn't do any press he doesn't like; he is his own producer and his own publicist. His experience of wage slavery can be counted off in days: a couple of weeks washing dishes near home in Yorkshire, something at the golf club near his college and a couple of weeks working for his girlfriend's father, "a self-made millionaire", he says tartly, during the university holidays.

He never saw the point of that. "I didn't have any money," he says, "but I was fine with that. I've always been like that; if I have some money, I'll spend it on stuff. And if I don't have any money, that's all right." Of course, that is a middle-class luxury; his parents gave him an allowance that covered food and the occasional late-night show at the Comedy Store, taking the night bus home. But he had that, his telly and a bed. What more does a lad need?

He worries at his comedy, however, with the passionate doggedness of a Puritan, constantly trying to find something that hasn't already been done, vigilant against any temptation to slip into the standard ploys stand-ups use to work the crowd. "The more stuff you do, the more you realise it's been done. And that's when you go 'all right', stop what you're doing and do something else. And if someone is doing similar material to yours, you just write something new that's better."

What he admires in work - any kind of work - is that striving. He describes watching a middle-aged steward on the train showing a young recruit the ropes.

He wasn't telling him anything, just moving around the carriage with the coffee and tea, setting an example of friendly service. "Increasingly, that's not there: the handing-on of traditions in things and the slightly pointless, archaic pride in things, you know. This older bloke was just doing the job really well in an entirely dignified, not squalid or subservient way."

In C-90, Milly has willingly squandered her qualifications in order to pursue her dream of being a really good lollipop lady. She is diligent and joyful. She is also quite irritating, I find when reading Kitson's script, with her eccentric prejudices; so is Henry, who has grown to hate the basement room where his job has ground to a standstill but does nothing to get himself out of it. Reading that raw text, in fact, brings home how much Kitson's shows are about him.

When he breathes life into his characters, their oddities and failings seem vivid and human rather than maddening. "People have quite often asked if I'm going to publish it," says Kitson. "But I just don't think it's as good if you read it. It's not written to be read. It's like reading the lyrics of a song and saying, 'Oh, this is a bit lame! This is a bit clumsy!' It's not prose. It's a script."

Back when he was refusing to earn anything, Kitson was also studying drama. The great advantage of going to drama school, he says at first, was that it gave him three years to do try-out gigs. "It gave me time to not be shit by the time I needed not to be shit." Then he corrects himself. "No, that's not all. I think everything had an effect. I got quite into the idea of avant-garde performance and sliding scales of ontology" - which, he explains when I ask, is about the constantly shifting balance between the performer as a person and the

performer as a character - "and existing in the moment, all of that. It didn't change what I was doing on stage. It just gave me a way of understanding it."

For a couple of years, he learned to tough it out with audiences as the compere at the weekly new talent night at one of London's top comedy venues. "It was absolutely invaluable, up to a point," he says. "It made me confident on stage; it made me not value any gig too much; it made me feel I could talk to people, but I did it slightly too long." In 1999, he was doing the same thing in Edinburgh. "And somebody said, 'Look, you've got to be careful; not every gig is the Comedy Cafe'. It was genuine advice and I thought, 'f---'.

"I realised I'd gone too far down that road and I was no longer doing the thing I'd originally wanted to do on stage. I remember sitting outside, nearly in tears, saying, 'I'm shit'. And I probably was. I had loads of people saying no, you're brilliant, you're going to be huge and I'd say, 'But this is shit, hateful, bullying shit!' And that was a real turning point. It was after that that I decided right, I'm going to do a show that is material-based, not just me f---ing around."

He still gets angry on stage, but differently.

"It is still quite often talked about: my vitriol, my bile. I can't see it myself. But it's not addressed to completely innocent strangers in the front row. It's addressed to people in the world." There is a pause. "I would say I'm irritated by selfishness," he says.

He has another train story. "People were shouting on the train," he says. "I'm not actually irritated by the shouting. It's the implicit selfishness of the shouters, the

fact they are not considering that it might annoy other people. It's a fine distinction, but there it is." It's the end of our time. He's off to play football. I'm on the bus. It's lovely. Nobody is shouting at all.

C-90 runs from October 12-27. Ticketmaster 1300 136 166 www.melbournefestival.com.au

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