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Jokes aside, Kitson is the best

Daniel Ziffer

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After a succession of fearsomely funny and emotionally touching shows, Daniel Kitson has won the top honour at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

In his third nomination for the Barry, named after Barry Humphries, the British comic's show *It's the Fireworks Talking* beat six other finalists.

"For someone who finds compliments off strangers on the street (difficult) ... this is tricky," he said, accepting the award yesterday.

The best newcomer was 19-year-old Josh Thomas and the festival director's prize went to the breathtaking three-hour "trilogy" show from Justin Hamilton. The Golden Gibbo Award, in memory of Melbourne comic Lynda Gibson, went to

independent act *The Glass Boat* and the Piece Of Wood Award for "good stuff" went to British comic Andy Zaltzman.

The Age Critics' Award for best Australian show went to Lawrence Leung for *Lawrence Leung Learns To Breakdance*.

This year's 21st annual festival grew to 282 acts, up from 233 last year. Despite organisers heading towards their second consecutive deficit - estimated to be \$250,000 this year - director Susan Provan has ruled out changing the event's "open access" nature.

"All that would happen would be that a fringe would spring up, seeking the same sponsors and support," she said.

The festival, which gets a \$630,000 annual grant from the State Government and has cash reserves, needed appropriate support to grow, she said.

Audiences remain largely Melburnians who work in the city, so more is being done to lure country and interstate visitors.

"Anything earlier than a 5.30pm show is difficult to sell mid-week," Ms Provan said.

"With tourists, they don't care when it is. At Edinburgh (festival) 1pm is an excellent time for a play."

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She denied anecdotal evidence that many "middle-band" comics, who have a few years of experience and a growing profile, had poor sales this year.

"We've found in previous years, a lot of people who go to a Ross Noble or a big international act, often that's their gateway to the festival," she said.

International stars Ardal O'Hanlon, Dylan Moran, Mark Watson, *One Man Starwars*, Shappi Khorsandi (*Asylum Speaker*) and sometime Victorian resident Noble sold out huge venues.

Dave Hughes, Wil Anderson and Adam Hills were the strongest locals in big venues, while *Spicks and Specks* star Alan Brough and *Chopper's Harden the F*ck up Australia Tour* were the surprise hits, selling out nightly.

More than 560,000 people visited the festival's website and as ticket sales migrate online, the phenomenon of "flyering" has diminished.

While comedians still tackle pedestrians and work the crowd, many potential audience members are queueing to pick up tickets they have already paid for.

This means they have made up their mind - and spent their cash - before they leave the office or home.

The festival's own ticketing system has been in development for two years.

Indigenous comedy quest *Deadly Funny* was successful in its first year and will be expanded, while Federation Square venues were popular and an excellent size for

child-friendly day-time shows. The Forum sold masses of tickets, with *Il Dago* at Northcote Town Hall showing the pulling power of well-situated themed shows.

Last Saturday week the festival broke the daily record for patrons at the town hall venues, with 12,600 sales.

The Trades Hall precinct, under the eye of original *Keating! The Opera* producer Catherine Woodfield, has blossomed. Its two free-entry bars did huge business, and reportedly pulled international stars, festival staff and large crowds from the Festival Club at Swanston Street's Hi-Fi Bar.

Hot acts such as *Lawrence Leung Learns To Breakdance* and *The Glass Boat* brought crowds to experience a diverse range of shows at Trades Hall, including singer Peter Brocklehurst. "We have a space that's small enough to feel secret and special," Woodfield said.

One area where standards fell across the festival was in adherence to programming times. Fans wanting to see consecutive shows in a night were thwarted by performances that started and finished behind schedule.



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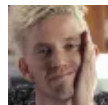
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