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Ill-timed laughter can derail a show

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THE word "showstopper" is, as it implies, a moment when time and action freeze; when whatever happens on stage so galvanises the collective imagination, there can be no other reaction but brief silence, followed by explosive approbation. As with the standing ovation, showstoppers rarely truly happen. And, yes, there is a difference between the manufactured and the spontaneous that audiences, let alone publicists, don't always understand.

Sometimes, though, the showstopper takes a different form - when the performer, not the audience, does the stopping. For example, the English actor Richard Griffiths once halted a performance of *The History Boys*, at the Royal National Theatre, when interrupted for the sixth time by a digital noise and said this: "Could the person whose mobile phone it is, please leave? The 750 people here would be fully justified in suing you for ruining their afternoon." I wish Richard Griffiths travelled on my tram.

Last Friday night at the George Fairfax Studio, I witnessed one such special moment during the English comedian Daniel Kitson's one-man show *66A Church Road*. The show is described as "a lament made of memories and kept in suitcases", and, true to form, Kitson presents it from a chair surrounded by items of luggage containing tiny models of his former flat in the south London suburb of Crystal Palace. It is charming, nostalgic and a moving threnody to rented accommodation.

All was going well for 20 minutes or so. Then someone towards the front of the audience laughed - a bark rather than a laugh, accompanied by a single handclap that sounded like a pistol shot. Kitson stopped the show. Not having a notebook handy, I couldn't take down what he said to the miscreant in the audience, but this is the gist of it: "Look, please don't do that. You're laughing when there's nothing to laugh at and you're not laughing when there is. It is irritating and it's putting me off."

There followed the type of short, dense silence that happens only when preceded by a group intake of breath. During this, Kitson refocused on his monologue, trying to take us from Southbank, 3006, back to Crystal Palace, SE19. He succeeded, but it took a little while.

Was he right to do what he did? From my seat at the back, the offending laughter was not obvious - and, believe me, I am sensitive to audience misbehaviour. In fact, barely had the lights dimmed than I created two small showstoppers of my own: asking the man in front to refrain from leaning forward, so one had the chance to see what was going on (thanks, Tim); and being

slightly less polite to the two women in the next seats who, the moment the show began, started to crinkle their way through two bags of sweets. "Please!" I pleaded, and they stopped.

Just as Basil Fawlty said hotels would be much better places if they didn't have guests, I often believe performances would be better without audiences. It depends on what artform, though. Certainly, the fewer people in cinemas, the better - but this a different type of audience, whose behaviour, unable to be criticised precisely because the actors can't answer back, is intensified: the popcorn-scrapers, plot-whisperers, latecomers who sit in front of you, early leavers who block your view of the credits, mobile users who text or play games during the film ... they make the movies a fresh hell at every visit.

Live performances demand interaction, which is why they exist. But they also require commitment from audiences: to each other and to those on stage. It's a fine line between approval and distraction - whoopers and whistlers, do you hear me? - and it is one that can be crossed almost without realising it. The person who laughed at Daniel Kitson must have crossed it as far as Kitson was concerned. But he is a sensitive man who forbids latecomers (it didn't stop a few being sneaked in between his monologues) and will not do comedy on Friday or Saturday nights because of the type of crowd it attracts.

In the end, if his idea of a hyena was genuinely disruptive to him, Kitson had every right to react as he did. But the risk in doing so was losing face with the rest of his audience. Certainly, even from the back row, I felt a little nervous about laughing, in case it was not the right moment. I also checked my mobile. Thank God it was off.