



Daniel Kitson

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Daniel Kitson: the Salinger of standup

Daniel Kitson doesn't do tours, interviews, TV or DVDs. So how did a reclusive enigma become the most sought after standup of his generation? As the comic prepares to appear at Edinburgh, Brian Logan talks to his peers



Brian Logan

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It's a Tuesday night, and I am sitting among the privileged few. Tickets for Daniel Kitson's new one-man storytelling show sold out in six minutes flat, or at a rate of 2.6 tickets per second. After this preview run at Battersea Arts Centre in London, the next stop is the Edinburgh festival, where Kitson will also perform a second, standup show. His first for three years, the standup set is [estimated to be the fastest-selling ticket in fringe history](#).

Ten years after winning the [Perrier award for comedy](#), Kitson - bearded, stammering, northern and little known beyond the live comedy and theatre circuits - is routinely cited as "the best comic of his generation" and lionised by other comics. "He makes you feel bad," says fringe veteran [Stewart Lee](#), "because he's doing what you ought to be doing, and doing it brilliantly." [Tim Key](#), who won the Edinburgh Comedy award in 2009, admits that "comedians go and have a look at [Kitson] to check how far away we are from where we want to be". He is loved by critics, too. Kitson's 2010 theatre piece [It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later](#), about tiny moments in the lives of two people, was (according to research undertaken by someone with a lot of time on their hands) the best-reviewed show of that year's fringe.

What makes this all the more impressive is that Kitson has done it his own bloody-minded way. As a comedy critic, I haven't been granted a press ticket to a Kitson show for years: he shuns reviews, doesn't give interviews, manages and markets himself, and refuses to appear on TV. At a time when [the comedy industry is so booming it resembles the 19th-century Klondike](#), he doesn't do arena tours or release DVDs. He simply makes intimate one-person theatre shows - not the sexiest artform - and takes them on tour. "He does what he does with complete purity," says [Nica Burns](#), who runs the comedy award. "He has total and absolute integrity."

Kitson, a native of Denby Dale in Yorkshire, made his Edinburgh debut in 2001, aged 24. [I found his early shows promising rather than electrifying](#). The humour was sometimes juvenile, and the shows lacked structure, but he was already a great phrasemaker and his outsider, bruised-idealist worldview was compelling. (Off stage, he is like [JD Salinger](#); on stage, he is like Holden Caulfield.)

He has certainly never been an ingratiating comedian, anxious to find common cause with his audience. "To a large extent," says comic [Mark Thomas](#), "comedy is about instantly recognisable short-hand signals and images. But Daniel will not go down that

road. He creates worlds composed entirely of his own ideas, and is supremely confident with himself and his comedic voice. There is nothing he says that is without thought, without originality."

Kitson has had two career-defining experiences: starring as the recurring character Spencer the barman in [the Peter Kay sitcom Phoenix Nights](#), and winning that 2002 Perrier. He is comfortable with neither, and has publicly disowned Phoenix Nights, branding it "lazy and racist". Kay, for his part, has pixellated Kitson out of the series DVD, and refers to him as a "bastard" on the commentary. The Perrier award, meanwhile, prompted a personal crisis: for several years, Kitson seemed ashamed of having won it and afraid of the mainstream success that it, and Phoenix Nights, promised. The following year he returned to Edinburgh with his first experiment in storytelling theatre. It wasn't a total success, but his stand against traditional comedy stardom had begun.

Kitson is now as well known for these ruminative, narrative-based theatre shows as for his looser, more combative standup - although the distinction is often thin. ("Daniel likes to say that the only difference is that, in the theatre shows, he wears a hat," says Thomas.) Kitson can be hilarious in both, but in neither is that entirely the point. "Yes, he's funny," says Burns, "but he's also a poet and a philosopher. He completely expresses humanity. The fact that we are all alone, the experiences and emotions we all share - being happy or sad, falling in love, falling out of love - he manages to catch it." Burns compares Kitson to [Alan Bennett](#), but there is a dash of Eric Morecambe about him, too - and not just in the restless shoving-up of those thick black specs.

For me, Kitson is at his best when (as [the New York Times said](#) of *It's Always Right Now*) "he seasons the treacle with grit". His 2008 theatre show *66a Church Road*, (about his relationship with his house, from the estate agent who showed him around it, to his enforced departure six years later) was characteristic in its efforts to re-mystify the everyday, but I found it a little too saccharine and overwrought. Kitson inspires fervid devotion in his fans, however, and when I [posted my review](#), they took it as a personal affront.

"When he comes out on stage, that connection he makes with the crowds is genuine," says comic [Josie Long](#), "because his shows are the only access people have to him. He hasn't diluted that with doing other stuff - telly, acting, whatever. It makes each show really special. People's actions long-term betray their motivation - and it's been clear from Daniel's that he's not up for selling out. Because of that, people trust him - which is rare. He's also a very charismatic and unusual man, which people are drawn to."

Kitson recently shaved off his trademark beard because the look had become hipster chic. I suspect he's happy to be cult, but would hate to be seen as cool. It's hard not to see Kitson's success as a reaction against the boom in mainstream comedy over the last five years, an antidote to [the TV-friendly, corporate slickness of Michael McIntyre and John Bishop](#). His popularity may also feed into [the folk revival](#) of the noughties, which answered an appetite for authenticity and lo-fi DIY directness.

What sets Kitson apart from his indie contemporaries is an ability to combine such folksy virtues with classic standup skills. "What's remarkable," says Steve Bennett of the comedy website [Chortle](#), "is that he's a storyteller, and he can do Late'n'Live as well as anyone." Late'n'Live is a famous late-night Edinburgh bearpit: a roughhouse environment in which you cross Kitson at your peril.

But it is with the indie scene that he is most associated; he may not have invented it, but he now undoubtedly spearheads it. "Daniel has returned us to a vision of what I would call alternative comedy," says Thomas, "to an idea of - and we must whisper it in hushed tones - art. He revived the idea that comedians can create things that the audience don't know they're going to get."

Kitson may see things a little differently, if the show I saw is any guide. In this highly self-conscious (and highly entertaining) one-man play-about-a-play, he mocks his own interest in "the quiet dignity of un-witnessed lives", teases his audience for wishing to be "moved", and presents himself as an artist desperate but unable to change the record. "With the originality of his thought," says Thomas, "the honesty of expression, his refusal to pander, his insistence on giving audiences his unique vision, there's a wonderful feeling that Daniel could go anywhere."

Where Once Was Wonder is at the Stand [Comedy Club](#), Edinburgh (0131-558 7272), 5-26 August; As of 1.52pm GMT on Friday April 27th 2012, This Show Has No Title is at the Traverse (0131-228 1404), 7-26 August.

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