

Culture Comedy

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## Daniel Kitson returns to Australia for 'Not Yet but Soon'

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In 2011, more than a hundred of England's funniest people were asked to name their favourite comedian. The winner wasn't Ricky Gervais, Jennifer Saunders, Billy Connolly, Dawn French, Steve Coogan or Eddie Izzard. It was Daniel Kitson. The mainstream scratched its collective head, but those who knew his work nodded sagely.

Kitson won the coveted Perrier Comedy Award in 2002 at the age of 25, but ever since he has steadfastly refused to translate that accolade into a high-profile commercial enterprise. In 2007 he outlined how he planned to put distance between himself and mass appeal: "If you make it slightly harder for people to approve of you, then you know that the people who give you their approval really like you. I don't want to have an audience of millions who can take or leave it. I want a small audience of people who like it and who understand it in the way that I want them to understand it."



Daniel Kitson's stand-up show *Not Yet but Soon* is at Giant Dwarf, March 20-27.

He wasn't just talking the talk. Kitson, who turns 40 in July, has no manager. He has no agent. He has no social media presence. He says no to TV opportunities. He keeps his ticket prices as cheap as possible. His sole connection to his public is a mailing list he oversees himself to let fans know what he's doing and when and where he's doing it.

He rarely gives interviews – requests for this story were not refused; they were ignored. Fortunately it's not hard to find peers who are more than willing to talk. Bruce Dessau, editor of comedy website Beyond the Joke and comedy critic for London's Evening Standard – and the man who ran that 2011 poll – is unequivocal when asked to rate him.



Kitson's sole connection to his public is a mailing list he oversees himself. Illustration by John Shakespeare

"I haven't seen a better comedian since Kitson," he says. "He just seems so naturally funny. It's partly a gift and partly hard work and experience. He has been doing this since he was a teenager and can turn anything into an insightful, funny story."

Dessau vividly recalls the first time he saw Kitson perform. It was 2001 in a small pub near London Bridge. "I was immediately blown away by this unique, individual performer, who carried on talking way after drinks had stopped being served, treating the pub as his own experimental theatre, spinning out stories off the top his head, making brilliant things up as he went along. At one point I went to the toilet and when I returned he was wearing my overcoat. It was that kind of gig."

Australian comedian Sam Simmons clearly remembers his first time too. It was an infamous show at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival when Kitson had been dumped by his girlfriend not long before going on stage. He proceeded to ditch his regular set and have a public debrief about what went wrong in the relationship.

"He just lay down on the floor eating a Golden Gaytime in disgust at his relationship breakdown," remembers Simmons. "I was sold. It felt kind of punk. I didn't want to love him from all the indie hype I'd heard beforehand. But I totally did."

Kitson's shows roughly divide into two types. There's the stand-up, where his gift for rapid-fire language, off-kilter observations, intellectual riffing and self-aggrandisement offset with self-criticism can make your head spin. He also has the most famous stutter in comedy and has been known to stop a show and dissect what's going on in his head when the stammer interrupts his flow.

"It was catnip for a comedy nerd like me to hear him analyse his routine as he was doing it," says Chris Taylor from *The Chaser*. "At a time when a lot of comedians were talking about airline food and the differences between men and women, it was refreshing to see someone so unapologetically intelligent."

And then there are the "story" shows, such as *C-90*, *The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church* and *It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later*. These shows are more likely to elicit wry smiles, reflection and even tears rather than belly laughs. His gift for telling rich and touching tales about humanity, loneliness and the absurdities of existence have earned comparisons with everyone from Alan Bennett to Samuel Beckett.

"He's the sustainable wagyu beef of comedy," says Simmons. "He created his own thing and he's peerless in what he does. He's so nasty and so gentle at the same time."

That last point alludes to Kitson's thornier side. During a 2012 performance in Brooklyn he advised audience members to go up and punch any critics who were taking notes during the show. His harsh treatment of hecklers is legendary and his attitude towards audience members who he feels are not with him can be brutal.

"The most tense Daniel Kitson gig I ever saw was in Adelaide," says Taylor. "There was a woman in the front row who would not crack a smile. It really started irritating him. He abandoned his material and started trying to figure out her story to explain why she wasn't laughing. It started out funny and then it got really awkward. It got so uncomfortable that she got up and left. It was a hard moment to sit through as an audience member. On one hand you're a fan and you want his gig to work but, at the same time, that felt like it was tipping over into harassment."

Comedian Fiona O'Loughlin, who counts herself as a friend of Kitson's, has seen similar interactions and says, "To me, there's no malevolence in what he does. It's just mischief. He's a deep-thinking person with a massive heart and he's highly intelligent. I believe he's quite possibly the greatest stand-up of our time."

Taylor places Kitson among his top three comedians (the other two are Stewart Lee and Doug Stanhope) and is especially in awe of his maverick nature.

"He's very happy to lose his audience," he says. "This makes him unique among comedians. Comedians will do anything for an audience. He doesn't do media, he'll deliberately put on esoteric work, he'll stage it in less-than-convenient locations and he'll talk about very niche things."

"He does everything against the rule book of comedy. At the same time he is so ungreedy when it comes to ticket prices. He's adamant about this. He talked about it in one show I saw, where his then-agent was saying that he could charge 80 dollars for tickets and people would pay it and he'd be a millionaire. And he said, 'Yes, but I'd also be a c---'."

"That's admirable, but the bargain you enter into when you buy a Kitson ticket is you have to be prepared that if you give him the shits, he doesn't care what he says."

**Daniel Kitson's stand-up show Not Yet but Soon is at Giant Dwarf, March 20-27; screenings of It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later are at Golden Age Cinema on March 22 and 26.**