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Democracy Dies in Darkness

THEATER & DANCE

Media-shy comic Kitson has a show in D.C., but no one really knows what it's about



By [Nelson Pressley](#)

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“If there’s one thing you have to know,” an under-the-weather Daniel Kitson said to a 2004 Edinburgh Fringe festival audience egging him on to swig sherry so he could keep his voice through a stand-up set, “it’s that peer pressure doesn’t work.”

And how. The dry, 40-year-old British stand-up comic and theater soloist shuns media in an age when media is oxygen and at his fingertips. In his first U.S. foray beyond New York, cult fave Kitson’s newest show, created specifically for Washington, began this week at Studio Theatre. It’s called “A Short Series of Disagreements Presented Here in Chronological Order.”

“I know as little about it as anyone,” Studio Artistic Director David Muse said.

“I would be surprised if it’s dogmatically political,” said Jason Zinoman, who covers theater and comedy for the New York Times and scored a [rare Kitson interview](#) in 2011.

“My guess,” said Kitson’s friend and fellow comedian Eugene Mirman of the mysterious show, “is that the title will be accurate.”

Not that Kitson is actually reclusive, although he has been called the J.D. Salinger of British standup and has been compared to both the icy Samuel Beckett and the warm Alan Bennett for his theater projects, which “tend to center on the forlorn and neglected,” London’s Guardian newspaper judged last year. His humor is often philosophical: He wryly contemplates whether he’s a bad person (using a saltier term) in “After the Beginning, Before the End.” He can be an elegant spinner of words; London’s Observer isolated a juicy phrase from Kitson’s “Something Other Than Everything” a few months ago, noting that getting gender bias out of language is “like trying to get salt out of soup with a sieve made of salt.”

And not that Kitson’s difficult. Unless you want him to publicize his show at your theater.

“He was charming,” said Zinoman, who got Kitson in a soft moment as the comic began building a New York niche at the experimental St. Ann’s Warehouse.

“It’s been a wild ride,” said Muse, who describes himself as a Kitson fanboy. “He is delightful and self-deprecating — all while he’s asking you to do things you don’t normally do.”

Avoiding television, Twitter and the usual levers of attention has been as elemental to Kitson’s persona as his glasses and beard since he became famous more than a decade ago. About that persona: “A pale, bespectacled man who suggests a nerdier variation on the poet Allen Ginsberg,” New York Times critic Ben Brantley ventured in 2011, the next year adding, “a soft, rumpled, bearded man who suggests a human-size hobbit.” The YouTube non-trove shows Kitson, who has a slight stammer, in 2004 [at the Melbourne Comedy festival](#) in baggy jeans, big glasses and a ball cap with the logo area aggressively covered by shiny black tape.

The Melbourne bit involves why pigeons are funny — “I can’t be cross, angry, depressed, f---ed off with the world and watching a pigeon walk at the same time” — and it eventually spirals into a physical impersonation of a bird striking out at love in front of a gawking group of humans. The touch is deft, especially as Kitson lands punchlines about audience expectations and — stepping up a level — punchlines about how punchlines work.

As for Kitson being “famous” — of course, we’re talking about celebrity in an underground, *omg-you-have-to-see-him-at-Edinburgh-Fringe* kind of way. In Britain, Kitson emails fans that he’ll be doing an informal tryout set in a couple of days, and in a blink, the tickets are gone.

“In certain circles, he’s as big as it gets,” said Zinoman, who once told his mother, [Joy Zinoman](#) (Studio’s retired founding artistic director), that booking Kitson would be a coup. He describes a female comedian doing a Kitson impersonation and slaying the room full of comedy cognoscenti.

But Kitson does things his own way, because his goals just aren’t that big. “I don’t know that he should or shouldn’t be more famous,” Mirman said. “He plays the spaces he would like to play and puts on the shows he wants to put on. He enjoys making the shows. The Edinburgh shows sell out the day tickets go on sale. So what’s the reason you want him to be on Facebook?”

Kitson grew up in Denby Dale, Yorkshire, the son of teachers, and has been onstage since 16. He studied drama at London’s University of Roehampton and had a brief stint on the U.K. television show “Phoenix Nights.” Winning a comic prize at Edinburgh in 2002 set Kitson on his idiosyncratic path, though he has hacked his lane wider at the edges by toggling comedy festivals with more formal theatrical projects.

“One of the cool things about not doing press is that usually you already know so much of what you’re going to get,” Zinoman said. “At Edinburgh, you had no idea about what the show would be. And it was often surprising.”

Muse originally suggested that Kitson bring to Studio “Mouse: The Persistence of an Unlikely Thought,” which appeared last year at St. Ann’s. (“As ever,” a London critic wrote of “Mouse,” “it’s easy to submit to Kitson’s playfully showy writing and his spirit of romantic melancholy that steers for the heart of what being alive is all about.”) Muse said, “Post-Brexit and post-Trump, ‘Mouse’ started to feel to him a little bit frivolous. He wanted to do something else.”

Trying a new act at Studio is a test of Kitson's cult power, Zinoman suggested. Muse acknowledged as much but also sees a different kind of trial. Is D.C. hip enough for Kitson? As Muse spoke by phone on a train, the connection was so bad that it took three calls to complete the conversation. Muse got the joke: Kitson sabotage.

"It's almost like he tries to erase any record of his performances," Muse said of Kitson's media aversion. "He doesn't do film. He doesn't send out scripts. He won't do a program. He loves that the only way to encounter him is live."

A Short Series of Disagreements Presented Here in Chronological Order, written and performed by Daniel Kitson. Through Nov. 25 at Studio Theatre, 1501 14th St. NW. Tickets: \$25. Call 202-332-3300 or visit studiotheatre.org.