

It's all geek to him - Arts

Times, The (London, England) - Friday, July 13, 2001

Author: Clive Davis

He looks like a shambolic wreck, but comic Daniel Kitson has a sharp take on the world, finds Clive Davis

At best, Daniel Kitson looks like an absent-minded roadie. Catch him in the wrong light, and he could be mistaken for the dysfunctional loner who always has a seat to himself on the top deck of a bus. He shambles and stammers; he peers out from behind a pair of Coke bottle spectacles and he has a beard which resembles a species of woodland fungus.

Not surprisingly, he has been known to provoke laughter just by stepping on to a stage. Appearances, however, are deceptive. While it may be true that Kitson will never win awards for grooming, the Yorkshire-born performer already has the makings of a rare comic talent.

This month he has been trying out material for his forthcoming run at the Edinburgh Festival. At the Comedy Store in London he effortlessly lifted a blasé West End audience on to another level. The classically geekish features and the apparently random monologues conceal an astute mind and a sharp eye for whimsy.

Is he turning low self-esteem into an art form? He thinks not. "I like throwing people's preconceptions back in their faces," says Kitson, 23, over a drink in Soho. "I don't really make fun of myself, and I'm certainly not working out any of my insecurities on-stage. It's just that I'm aware of how people see me when I walk down the street. It's drawn from my experience of people shouting at me in the street or bullying me at school."

He walks close to the edge at times. One of his running jokes turns on his supposed resemblance to everyone's idea of what a paedophile looks like. Even Comedy Store audiences have their taboos, thank goodness, and Kitson's banter had a few people fidgeting in their seats. Yet again, though, he was trying to smuggle in a worthwhile observation on how we see the world - a point, what is more, based on experience.

"I was on a train when I noticed a little girl of seven or eight," he explains. "The bloke sitting next to her, whom I assumed was looking after her, was smoking a gigantic spliff and had a big bottle of cider in his hand. I was thinking, 'Oh, God, surely he can't be looking after her? What a horrible situation for her. Then he saw me looking at her and said, 'You pervert. Why are you looking at her?' " It should be said that Kitson was not even sporting That Beard when all this happened. His face, he says, is eccentric and comical enough in its own right: on the street people laugh at him; in a club they find themselves laughing with him.

His stand-up ambitions took hold when he was still a schoolboy, growing up in the Yorkshire village of Denby Dale. Although strangers often take him to be that rare phenomenon, a working-class comic, he actually comes from an academic household: his father lectures on business ethics, his mother is head teacher of an infants' school.

As for the stammer, that no longer causes him any major grief when he is performing. It was, he points out, much worse when he was a young boy. He did try speech therapy - he has a lisp as well - but eventually gave up.

He moved to London in 1995, taking a drama course at Roehampton Institute while also trying his hand at open-mike spots in clubs. As a student he acquired a taste for the more esoteric end of avant-garde stage theory.

When he explains his reluctance to do stand-up on television, he puts it down to his dislike of "the objectification of a subjective experience". He is fascinated by the mysterious alchemy of performer and audience.

Fortunately, he never pushes the jargon too far. He may know his way around the latest theories, yet his favourite play is that old-fashioned study, Trevor Griffiths's drama *Comedians*. In the past few months Kitson has been rethinking his whole approach.

"About four months ago my definition of a great gig would have been not to have done a single bit of material. Now, my definition of a great gig is to have it as all material. I still like doing shows where I just mess about. But I'm not proud of that. What makes me feel good is having an hour and 20 minutes of stuff that's thoughtful and slower."

His "stuff" includes references to bodily functions that will not appeal to everybody. He sometimes risks being mistaken for just another smut merchant, when he sees himself as playing with our perception of words. Fair enough, although I'm not sure his act would suffer if he cut back on body jokes. He has plenty of other things to say, after all. The man has a true comedy gift.

* Daniel Kitson can be seen at the Canal Cafe Theatre, London W2 (020-7289 6054) on July 17 and 24