

# Daniel Kitson: The hirsute of happiness

It's just his first year at the Fringe, but Daniel Kitson has now been shortlisted for a Perrier award. Fiona Sturges meets the bearded stand-up

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Let's get one thing out of the way. Daniel Kitson has a stutter. It's not a particularly strong one – you'd probably only notice it five or ten minutes after meeting him. But he is also a stand-up comic, an unusual occupation for someone who finds it difficult to get his words out.

"I didn't think about it when I first did a gig," he explains. "I had wanted to do stand-up from the age of 14. When I finally did it I wasn't thinking about my stutter, I was thinking 'What if I'm not funny?' I'd done a couple of school plays by then and it had never been a major problem before."

Yesterday's nomination for the Perrier Prize took him by surprise – this is, after all, his first appearance at the Edinburgh Festival – although he questions its real value. "The Perrier in itself is an irrelevance. It's lovely that 10 people like what you do but it's more important for me for people like my Mum and Dad to have this tangible thing to latch on to."

Kitson was 16 when he first went on stage, which goes some way in explaining his exceptional assurance as a comic now. At just 24 he has the maturity and world-weariness of a stand-up at least 10 years his senior, though it must be said that his looks add to the illusion.

He's a marketing man's dream, a shambling figure with shoulder-length hair and square, thick-rimmed glasses that magnify his eyes to alarming proportions. Then – and this is the icing on the cake – there's the beard. "It's all things to all people, this beard: Charles Darwin, Prefab Sprout," he ponders. "The comparisons go on forever. One person said it was heroic. I like that."

But he wants it to be known that it isn't just a stratagem to get extra laughs. "Like I'm so strapped for jokes I have to grow a beard," he cackles. "At first it was nothing to do with my show – I was just a bloke with a beard. But so many people have commented on it that now I've got five minutes of material on it. Now people say 'ooh you can't shave the beard off now – it's become a part of your show.' That's rubbish. I suppose if I shaved it off I could keep it in a jar on stage so I could still do my bit."

One of Kitson's running gags revolves around how he resembles an archetypal paedophile. In fact his looks take up a large proportion of his Edinburgh show. On the subject of his facial hair he states: "It makes no difference to the way I look. I'm still unattractive, but at least it's on my terms."

Is it some sort of defence mechanism? "No, it's just funny," he replies dryly. It's true enough, but there's a disparity in his material between Kitson, the man who surfs the Internet for porn and imagines himself casually groping passing women and the softer, more sensitive Kitson who kissed a girl for the first time at 19 and whose world practically caved in when he first bought his own ice cream.

"It's all me," he insists. "All that stuff about feeling up members of the audience may be ironic but it's still me. It's funny because it's coming out of my mouth and not someone else's. If I were drop-dead gorgeous and said those things it wouldn't work. It'd just be obnoxious."

Charm isn't generally a word you'd associate with a comic who does gags about child molesters but it is a word often used in association with Kitson. The other is geek. Does he mind?

"Not at all," he smiles. "I ask for it." But there are other myths that surround him which he would like to set straight, the principal one being that he's working class. "It's just because I'm northern and I swear but I'm middle-class to the core. My mum and dad came from working-class households and were both the first in their families to go to university. When people say I'm a classic working-class comic I get annoyed because that means they haven't got half of what I'm doing. What's more, it suggests I'm pretending to be someone I'm not."

Kitson grew up in the Yorkshire town of Denby Dale which he tells me "is also home to the world's largest meat and potato pie". His father is a professor of business ethics and his mother a head teacher. In 1995 he moved to London to study drama at the Roehampton Institute. He was instantly captivated by acting theory – "all these pretentious-sounding things like the process of mediation and a joke not existing until it's heard."

His show, called *Love, Innocence and the Word Cock*, is rooted in his own passage from childhood to adulthood with much of the material centred round the schoolyard. His observations are universal ones but pin-sharp, drawing us into a semi-familiar world where kids adopt surreal expressions of abuse and invent exciting though ultimately pointless games. One, charmingly entitled *Pissball*, involves getting a brand-new tennis ball, urinating on it, and then kicking it at random children in the playground.

Kitson isn't always the confident man his stage persona would have you believe. He's is curiously self-effacing and still cowers in the shadow of fellow comics – he genuinely believes he will never be as good as his friend Ross Noble, a former Perrier nominee. And, like most stand-ups, he does suffer from nerves. "When I'm on stage I'm fine – whatever happens I think it's my duty to deal with things and find something funny in them. But as soon I'm off stage I'm quite embarrassed. When I say goodnight and people start clapping I can't do that thing of taking a bow. It's like 'That's it. I'm off now and I'm not coming back'."

*Daniel Kitson is at the Pleasance Courtyard and Over the Road, venue 33 (0131-556 6550), to 27 Aug, 22.30 (23.30)*