



Culture

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Coarse work

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If he shaves off the thicket of whiskers described by one paper as "heroic", he looks like "somebody a bit special", says Daniel Kitson. Behind the beard, however, he looks "like a paedophile".

Funny either way, in fact; you could say he was born to be a comedian, at least as long as he is prepared to make fun of himself. Which he is. People should laugh at how he looks; when they think about that, it will undercut all sorts of assumptions they make about appearances. That's his argument, anyway.

I sit with Daniel Kitson outside a cafe in a newly fashionable bit of the East End. Daniel will never, I am happy to say, look newly fashionable.

He is hairy today, but he actually doesn't look like a paedophile's bootlace, even when a girl goes past in high-heeled boots and he gets, just for a moment, rather frisky and frothy and fetishistic. He just looks funny, in a friendly sort of way.

"I'm glad I've got a funny face," he says. "It's the game: I'll take the piss out of you because I take the piss out of myself. It's fine. Let's all relax. But I don't put myself down, particularly. I like looking like this. I don't want to be an overtly attractive person because I think that leads to being fairly vacuous."

And Kitson, for all the bum-level banter he does in the late-night comedy spots, is fairly serious. He won't do advertisements. He says that he hates having his swearing and scatology boiled down to be "politically incorrect comedy", with that implication that he is a yob who is going to have a go. Because he is fairly politically correct, too, in his own way.

"I got a line preview in Edinburgh that said 'if you like your comedy lewd, crude and distinctly non-PC, then go and see Daniel Kitson,'" he remembers. "I hate that. Crude, to start off with, implies clumsiness. And you can be skilful with swear words, even if they are swear words.

"I don't set out to be lewd or crude. It's much more to do with what I'm saying than how many times I say the word 'cock'. And when you say you're going to be politically incorrect, that immediately leads to that sort of 'he says things we all think but none dare say' line. And no, I don't."

Coarseness, now: that's another thing. He certainly does swear a lot, very gleefully. And he is convulsed when someone rushes the stage during a spot in London's rowdy, roistering Comedy Store and pulls his pants down. "I don't see that as pertaining to PC," he says. "I just see that as someone being drunk and saying 'right, here we go, cock out!' Fair enough; it's a rare old sight! Not that I'm inviting that in Melbourne, you understand."

He tries to compose his face into something vaguely like a stern boarding school beak. Despite his glasses, thick as the doors to the Bank of England, a stern Daniel doesn't work. He drops his face and giggles instead.

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It's true, though: he isn't inviting anything like that. Kitson's Melbourne show will be a variation on his Edinburgh one-man reverie *Love, Innocence and the Word Cock*, an hour of rambling round his memories of family life and first loves in front of a completely seduced audience. Away from the beer barn atmosphere of a comedy club, freed from hecklers, he gives a performance so casual that it doesn't seem to be a show at all. Any minute, you think, he's going to ask us all back to his.

This, he says, is what he always wanted to do. "When I'm doing a stand-up gig it is very easy for people who are idiots and obnoxious to see it and enjoy it. They just go 'oh, he's swearing at people, that's really good'. But in Edinburgh this year, I got four burly blokes who walked out when I started talking about falling in love. And that felt really good, because at most gigs you can't control the people who like you."

Coarseness, however, is always with him. Somewhere towards the end of this Mr Softy rave, Boot Girl walks past. Kitson falters, momentarily. His ogling is so incompetently obvious that it, like everything else he serves up, seems very funny although - of course! - he also has a whole theory about the heeled boot's allure. The boot is "a particularly sexy shoe-type garment", he says, "because they imply a certain amount of physical discomfort in order to look sexy, which is always a positive sign."

Because the wearer might do other uncomfortable things? I say. "Yes, yes," he splutters. From a standing start he is now almost groaning with laughter. Of course, it's just so much playground talk, which is why it is funny. It rings much more true to life when, in his show, he describes telling a friend he is in love with her. She responds by kissing him; he is so shocked he has to sit down. That's more like reality.

And reality, in the end, is the best material. There is nothing about himself, he says, that he wouldn't explore on stage; honesty is the key. "Because basically I'm

far more interested in stuff that is introspective, because that's how you become truly universal, I think, by making it absolutely specific."

What does he think Australian audiences will be like? He doesn't know. "I'm presuming they're people," he says, a bit primly, then laughs when I say how PC he sounds.

While I am talking to him, his phone rings. "F--- off," he says as soon as he answers. The person on the other end, he says afterwards, said, "Oh, it's you! I wasn't sure which number it was, but it's you!" He grins. "So there you go. It's all part of my clever charm." Charm? was that going too far? He looks at the ground and giggles shyly.

A lot of performers are shy in person. Not many, it must be said, stammer. Kitson's stammer is more cumbersome in person than on stage, admittedly, but you would think it would put you off a career in oral entertainment. Even at 13, though, he knew he wanted to be a comedian, inspired by his friend Big Jake, "a very funny man" from just down the road. "I saw Paul Merton on *Have I Got News For You* and he was just talking about nothing, being funny. So me and Jake started to make these tapes in my bedroom, making each other laugh."

The Kitsons lived in a village near Barnsley, in Yorkshire; Daniel's filial rebellion expressed itself through intense competition with his father, an academic, at Scrabble. He was never the class clown; he was more inclined to ask difficult questions. "I used to ask a lot. Certain teachers really liked that and certain teachers really held it against me. I'd ask the sort of things you do when you're brought up by a middle-class left-wing family; I was the one saying, 'I don't agree with that.'" The sort of confident scepticism, in fact, that usually underpins successful comedy.

And he already had, then, what he calls his "potty mouth". He was always being punished for swearing. Then, in naughty boy scout fashion, he would go home

and confess to his parents. "I'd say mum, I got in trouble for swearing again; I'd feel really guilty about it and that I had to tell her. My mum and dad don't swear at all, really." He refers quite often to his parents, on and off stage. They collect all his press cuttings and he is proud of making them proud, readily accepting that this does not mean they have to see him perform. "They wouldn't enjoy it, really. Not just that they wouldn't enjoy me, but the whole atmosphere. I don't think they'd like seeing someone on stage and people slagging him off. And him being rude about their mothers back to them."

At university he studied drama. Performing, he says, doesn't seem very far from swearing at Big Jake. "You just have to be as good as you are in your bedroom." And, indeed, it is obvious that he is far more nervous right now, outside the cafe with buses roaring past, than he is alone in front of an audience. That is because, he says - and his stammer intrudes suddenly as he says it - he doesn't know me.

He doesn't know his audiences either, surely. "No, I don't know them. And yet, I sort of do, because they are an audience and I know audiences. I get quite annoyed by people who say that on stage it's just an act. It's not an act. It's just me in a different situation." His show actually does feel like banter (or "f---ing about", in Daniel-speak) with your mates, so it never occurred to him that his stammer might get in the way. He shrugs. "It was never an issue whether I could do it or not. I just did."

Since he is playing himself, doing advertisements or corporate gigs - which is where circuit comedians can really coin it - is out of the question. "I'm a comedian, not a salesman. It's wrong. It invalidates everything you say on stage." For Kitson, stand-up is an art form; art's rules apply.

"Although, having said all that, it's easy for me to have high-falutin' artistic principles because I'm 25 and I've got no one relying on me. I think it's a different story if you're 38, have two kids and a mortgage and you're stuck doing four gigs a week." And he gets excited when he sees his mates on the telly, same as anyone.

Not that regular television interests him, either. "The vast majority of stuff is bad and you have to compromise - in fact no, you lose control totally." And televised stand-up cannot work, because the experience of a live gig cannot be filtered into objective observation.

It's a serious subject, humour. Until, suddenly, Daniel is looking intently through his prismatic specs at a woman on the other side of the street. Her hair has been dyed blonde on the upper layer and middling brown underneath; it is showy without actually being tribal. "Look at that girl's hair!" says Dan, amazed. "That's bad! Really bad!" He seems to have forgotten about how appearances can challenge people's assumptions: she just looks awful.

But that's all the go, I protest; you see people with hair like that all over London. "I don't," he says, grinning cheekily at a crack in the table again. "I don't look up. I just stare at the floor, then get on stage and then I look up, and then I look at the floor until I get home and then look up to watch me telly. That's basically it."

I just laugh. That can't be true, because the "f--- off" phone call was some famous comedian off the telly looking for a tennis game and, I suspect, this is just the visible peak of Kitson's social whirl of slacking funny men. Besides, Dan's so likeable. Miseries are tiresome in real life. He makes a good riff out of pretending to be one, though, I give you that. It works. That's comedy.



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