

# Comedy: Out on his own

The sharp-tongued Perrier winner Daniel Kitson wants laughs, not love.

By Stephen Armstrong

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Kitson was 24. He'd only been out of college four years. It was too soon. "If he gets it in his first year, he really will just implode," one of his peers told me on the night before the award. And then, this year, he was nominated again. "I can't see how he's going to handle it if he wins," another comedian said, five hours before Kitson actually picked up the gong. Everyone laughed when, for his acceptance speech, he read out a letter explaining why he wasn't there that night. If only they knew.

"I wrote the speech because I didn't want to go and get the award," Kitson, now 25, explains. "I didn't want anything to do with it. I said at the start of the festival to my agent, Hannah Chambers: 'I'd quite like to be ruled out of it.' And she said: 'You can't.' Why not? 'Because I've got a new dress, and if you say you don't want to be considered, then everyone will see it as a publicity stunt.'

"In retrospect, that would have been the best thing. The whole process is innately dividing. I've met people who I couldn't speak to because they thought they should have been nominated. These are, if not my friends, then my workmates, and now it's really awkward."

Kitson's background handily fits the media shorthand for truculent rebel. He comes from the north of England, for a start, and his father, a lecturer, was once Labour councillor for Cudworth. He moved to London in 1995, taking a drama course at Roehampton Institute, laced with avant-garde theatre theory, and at the same time pursuing his dream of stand-up with open-mike spots in clubs. His material is no standard-issue cynical rant, however. With a mighty intelligence, he takes an idea and bends it every which way, making observations that may be universal, but are still pin-sharp and related with a palpable sense of astonishment.

His award-winning show still jarred with some, especially those who first encountered him in 2001. Love, Innocence and the Word Cock was, in the main, about his belief in true love. This year's Something, which starts a run at London's Soho Theatre tomorrow night, is more abrasive, taking to task sponsors, soldiers and those who follow the crowd. It still has typical moments of self-mockery, however. "My life is exactly as my appearance would have you believe," he says. "Though I probably don't masturbate as much as you think."

"I really liked last year's show," he reflects, "but I got f\*\*\*ed off with everyone going: 'Oh, he's so lovely and likeable — everything about this nerd shouts out "Love me".' So I was interested in being less likeable on stage, but as funny. That was subconscious, I think, until someone pointed out that people were leaving my show saying: 'That was really funny, but I don't really like him very much.'

And I thought: 'Excellent.'"

But, I say, pulling out my A-Z of Psychology, surely the defining characteristic of a comedian is that they want to be liked. "I'd like to be liked by the people that I want to like me," he says. "Stuart David from Belle and Sebastian came and saw the show, and the play-in music was two tracks by Looper. On my website, he left a message saying that coming to see the show made him feel a bit less lonely, and that was great. I don't want everyone to like me. I don't even want the majority of people to like me, because the majority of people

tend to be a bit stupid.”

But how will this edgy, outsider perspective stand up to mainstream success? “I do think of it as my duty to remain an outsider as best I can, without it becoming an affectation,” he says thoughtfully. “And I do intend to actively resist mainstream success, which is unappealing to me, because I think genuinely wonderful things aren’t liked by that many people.”

“I am more interested in music than comedy,” he continues. “When people ask who my comedy idols are, it’s Ben Folds and Neil Hannon. I saw Ben Folds’s band in Bristol, and he renders comedy pretty much obsolete. He’s writing these wonderful, wise, incredibly powerful songs that are also really funny, and he’s incredibly amusing between songs.”

If music inspires him so much, why did he choose to become a comedian? “Because it’s me talking. What I mean is that, in stand-up, you have complete control. That’s incredibly important in stuff you see in terms of art. In fact, it’s the only area where you can have total editorial control.”

This freedom allows the cynical stand-up to pursue that least cynical of all subjects, true love. It dominated Kitson’s show in 2001, and has a cameo in 2002. “It’s something that I find really interesting, and it’s what I think the whole point of being alive is,” he says. “Now that I’ve spoken about it onstage, when I meet a girl and really like her, but I know she’s not the one, I’ve always got this thing in my head: if it isn’t true love and it’s clearly a lie, then I will be held accountable.” But isn’t that daunting? What if you don’t find true love? “Well, it is, but it’s not. You can find comfort in the belief that you’re doing the right thing. I’m on my own, but I’m on my own for entirely the right reasons. It’s not particularly lonely to be on your own. It’s far more lonely to be in a relationship that you know is f\*\*\*ed.” It’s unusual to find such honesty in a comic, but there are others like him — Omid Djalili, John Oliver and Reginald D Hunter all favour similar sincerity. Maybe comedy is now finding its soul.

Daniel Kitson, Soho Theatre, W1, Nov 4-23

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