

Culture Comedy

This was published 20 years ago

Reluctant star

April 4, 2003 – 10.00am

Daniel Kitson isn't like other comedians. At the notoriously competitive Edinburgh Festival Fringe last August, he won live comedy's most prestigious award, the Perrier. He didn't want it. So unanimous is his critical acclaim that it's virtually impossible to find a bad review of the British comedian's stand-up. He says he's overrated. When asked on radio the other day to plug his festival show, he refused, saying, "No, no, I don't want people to come and see me, because there's far better people on; you should go and see them."

Kitson's autobiographical comedy is just as idiosyncratic. Emotional candour, sensitivity, rancour and poetry all coalesce to create his complex, relentlessly hilarious comedy.

While the press have lavished him with praise, he's also been depicted as the geek or the loner, which implies that he's somehow a victim of social exclusion.

However, to suggest he's an outsider looking in is to miss his point entirely, and highlights the narcissism of a mainstream obsessed with its own mediocrity that Kitson passionately despises and often rails against on stage.

In other words, Kitson isn't interested in belonging to any club that would have him as a member, thank you very much. He's not excluded from the mainstream; he chooses to avoid it. Yet, ironically, he's massively popular.

So how does one who has such a strong current of misanthropy running through his work cope with the queues that stretch halfway up a city block waiting to get into *Something*, his much-anticipated second Comedy Festival show?

"Yeah, it's weird," he says with a laugh. "I don't really cope with it very well."

On the strength of his first Perrier nomination in 2001, Kitson debuted at last year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival, where he sold out every show except his opening night.

Previously unknown to local audiences, demand was so great that extra shows were scheduled for Kitson's show, which chronicled his progressive loss of innocence as the world increasingly revealed itself to be imperfect and disappointing.

Kitson balks at the suggestion that his seemingly fearless emotional honesty gives voice to universal although often unspoken truths, saying, "I'm fairly wary of all that, 'Oh, he says things

that no one else does'. I just talk".

Instead, he attributes his success to the fact that "I've got a funny face and I'm quite good with words".

Something won Kitson the 2002 Perrier, and although his current Melbourne season shares the same title, he says the content has evolved. The recent death of his grandmother features prominently in this show, and while love is still a theme this year, it's more about familial than romantic love, which is countered by his dark world view.

"All people are c---s and I love my grandma. That's basically it," he says of what the show is saying this time around.

"I don't hate everybody," Kitson clarifies. "When you're just going around you think, 'Well, most people I don't like'. That's basically it. Some people go, 'Well, that's a very cynical point of view', but it's not at all, because I have faith in the humanity of individuals as opposed to humanity as a species. I think humanity as a species is f---ing horrendous; I think the humanity of individuals is wonderful."

Where most comedians are concerned about whether or not the audience like them, the reverse is true of Kitson.

"There's a very small proportion of people who like me, who I go, 'Excellent, they really, really get it'. There are a lot of people who enjoy it who go (adopts a dumb voice), 'Oh, he swears about stuff, he's great'. They sort of miss the point. You get a bit annoyed with idiots liking you."

However, Kitson has faith that there are enough other like-minded people in the world to comprise the type of audience he wants.

"It's just interesting when certain bits, which are innately about feeling fairly disenchanting with most people in the world, do really well on certain nights because clearly the audience is full of people who feel similarly - and on some nights they don't do so well because the audience is full of people that aren't," he says with a chuckle.

That dichotomy is about to become more pronounced, if Kitson has his way.

"Up in Edinburgh this year I'm going to do something that's going to lose me a lot of fans," he says, sounding genuinely delighted at the prospect. "It's going to be fairly multimedia and one long story, and it'll be in the round, so we'll just see how popular I am after doing that for 28 nights," he says with a big grin.

So is he going to actively work against his own popularity?

"I want to get an audience and develop an audience that I like and that I think will come with me when I want to do different sort of stuff, but I don't think that that audience has an infinite size," he says. "I think there's a finite number of people that I want to like me."

And that's about three people, given that everybody is an idiot?

"Yeah, it's about three or four, depending on my mood," he says with a smile.

Daniel Kitson performs at the Melbourne Town Hall, Swanston Street, city, Tuesday to Saturday at 9.45pm and on Sunday at 8.45pm, until April 20.