

He's got life taped

JACKIE MCGLONE

AFTER what seems like an eternity of e-mails, one finally pings up from Daniel Kitson suggesting a time and a place to meet. Ignore the fact that it's the date and venue first suggested and that this game of telephone tag, lost text messages and amusing e-mails headed "Daniel Kitson, me that is" began weeks ago in New York, where he was playing to rave reviews.

Anyway, we're backstage at his new show, C-90, and Kitson is gluing 5,000 cassette tapes onto a monumental wall of ersatz mahogany library shelves. Indeed, he suggested, many e-mails ago, I might like to help him dress the set. "Won't that be cool! Hee hee!"

So I take Kitson dozens of old cassette tapes to stack his shelves. I offer to help, but he insists on buying me a mineral water as thanks. "I'm worried I might be destroying your precious memories," he says, as we sit in the garden of a nearby pub.

"The set for this show is beautiful, I want to keep it forever. It's the first time I've ever had a real set," says 29-year-old Kitson, sounding like a small boy who has just got a train set, rather than the "lover, thinker, artist and prophet" he claims to be on his website, also the title of one of his shows.

His Fringe First-winning show last year, *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted* - teary bedtime stories of loss, love and loneliness shot through with mordant humour - had a set of sorts. But it was only an armchair, a floral-patterned carpet, with lots of lamps and old gramophones. He "designed" it himself because he does everything for his shows and stand-up gigs, doing his own marketing, press releases, the lot.

"Which is why there's no programme - no time to do one - for C-90, so it would be f***ing great if you could mention that the set is by Suzanna Henry," he says, as this will be his only interview.

A Perrier Award-winner at 23 for his show *Something*, which interwove swear words and childhood anecdotes, Kitson has been described as looking like "an Open University lecturer who's been dragged through an Oxfam shop backwards", as well as "one of the greatest comedians the country has to offer".

Certainly, he makes you think as well as laugh. Offstage, he has a pronounced stammer, though it's no longer a problem when he's performing. It was far worse when he was younger, he says, adding that he gave up on speech therapy. He also has a lisp, but the overall effect is endearingly chaotic, although he loathes the notion that he might be remotely loveable, preferring to toss our preconceptions back at us with a vengeance. Stuttering has its benefits anyway, he says. "Your brain has to search for words that you can say, so you have a much, much wider vocabulary than most people - they've done research that proves it." Hence the clever-clogs image? "Well, I do know a lot of words."

His new show is as eloquent as ever, but it's a much more ambitious piece than *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted*. "C-90 is one long story, ostensibly about a man's last day at work. Henry works in a room where discarded compilation tapes are collated. But there's one other main character, a lollipop lady. Their stories are unknowingly intertwined.

"There are four or five other stories, too. Last year's show was really easy to perform so I really enjoyed it. I was in a chair, I told a story, there was a bit of film, then another story. This is harder because it has to work as a whole and it's much more complex, and it's not as obvious what it's about."

So what is it about? "Well, in March, I had to write the usual 40-word blurb for the Fringe programme when the show was still all clouds and butterflies and ideas about feelings. I thought, 'F***! I suppose it'll be about the usual: hope and memory,' although there's a lot of stuff about work

as well. Now, though, it's become a show about the kindness of strangers and people's ideas of their own worth, and how all that can seep away in a lifetime of working.

"When I first started writing, Henry was in awe of the fact that he has all these tapes; then I realised that was me being me, because I was going, 'Wouldn't it be amazing to have 5,000 compilation tapes'; then I decided he needed to be depressed by it all."

If this sounds a tad downbeat, he promises: "It's funny and, hopefully, it's that same thing you said you found with *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted*, because it's sad too. It's the first thing I've written - and that includes my stand-up shows - that has nothing in it about romantic love. You know, that thing I always have? Boy in love with girl, aaah!"

So has he found romance in his own life? "Nah," he says. "I'm still single, still living on my own."

YORKSHIRE-BORN Kitson says he knew at the age of 16 that he wanted to be a stand-up comic, although he still has no desire to be famous or to be on the telly. The son of two academics - his father is a lecturer on business ethics, his mother a head teacher - he moved to London in 1995, taking a drama course at Roehampton Institute, while doing open-mike spots in clubs. He retains a fondness for the esoteric and the avant-garde on stage, as well as in music.

Will he play any of those 5,000 tapes? "No, there's no music in this show at all," he says. "I'm pleased about that in a fairly smug way. I want audiences to hear their own music. I like a very specific music - introspective, melancholy, lyrically ambitious indie stuff, which I find very moving. But there's a lot of people it does absolutely nothing for and I don't want them to think they're watching some teenage, indie pop compilation.

"In every show I've had a little film, with amazing music on it, and that's deeply affected people. But that's cheating, using somebody else's ability to touch people, so in *C-90* Henry talks about music and that's far more satisfying.

"*C-90*'s a much more substantial show than *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted*. It's still my voice - and again it's about overlooked people. Although a bit of me is going, 'At 29, I shouldn't be writing about how people feel at the end of their working life, that mixture of freedom and regret, boredom and loneliness'. I mean, I haven't a f***ing clue, have I?"

"However, I love writing old people. I've always felt an affinity toward them, they have an inherent level of humanity. There's a dignity in them. I've always been older than I am - I was a middle-aged adolescent in tweed trousers. The older I get the more I realise how important everything is and how little it actually means."

- *C-90*, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, until August 28, 10.30pm