

There's a lovely story about Daniel Kitson, about how, during the 2005 Edinburgh Fringe, his one-man shaggy dog tale, *Stories For The Wobbly-Hearted*, started an hour late. It was the last show of the day in The Traverse Theatre's main space, and, with the theatre's entire programme being only a few days into the first week of its run, not quite up to speed between-show set-changes had resulted in accrued delays all round. No matter, though, as Kitson, unphased, turned in a beautiful performance of an extended, round-the-houses love story delivered in a manner somewhere between *Jackanory* and *Our Tune*.

Only trouble was, the delay had meant that his late-night stand-up show over at The Stand comedy club, scheduled to start shortly *Stories For The Wobbly Hearted* had finished, with just enough time for Kitson to bike his way across town, was also now running an hour behind schedule. Not knowing what to expect, Kitson, bearded, bespectacled and with the appearance of a 1970s Open University lecturer, unchained his bicycle, and peddled off as fast as he could. When he arrived at The Stand, rather than an irate, drink-fuelled audience baying after his blood, Kitson found a packed house waiting patiently for his delayed arrival. Noneplussed, the placid yarn-spinner of *Stories For The Wobbly-Hearted* proceeded to deliver an act of contrasting hilarity and bile. At the end of an even longer night than anyone had intended, everyone went home happy, and, if it had ever even mattered, that lost hour between shows was forgotten.

That, in a nutshell, is how much people love Daniel Kitson. The sheer humanity of *Stories For The Wobbly-Hearted* helped, of course. Its follow-up, *C-90*, which played the same slot at The Traverse in 2006, capitalised on his appeal. Where *Stories For The Wobbly-Hearted* wrapped up its central love story with several stand-alone strands, *C-90*, which visits Glasgow's Arches next week in the opening dates of an extensive UK tour, was more of a tangential narrative, in which a solitary keeper of a library of discarded compilation tapes spent his last day finally facing the music. For Kitson, with gooey epithets of the lovelorn and lonely variety hanging round his neck for previous work, it was the gentlest of sidesteps.

"It's about worth and kindness," Kitson is at pains to point out. "There isn't a single instance of romantic love in it. Which I'm very pleased with. I'm pleased with the absence of traditional, romantic love, and yet it still being about our ideas of our own worth and unheralded acts of kindness and compassion."

The creation of *C-90* too, differed radically from its predecessor.

"I was thinking about how I could fill the Traverse performance space with some manner of set with an audacity of scale," Kitson recalls, "and I had the idea of having a wall of shelves full of compilation tapes, with a ladder that would slide along. Then I had to think of a story that would justify having a slidey ladder. *Stories For The Wobbly Hearted* was infinitely easier to write, not least because I wrote it and tweaked it over about 5 months in total, and the stories were separate little short things. With *C-90*, due to scheduling I had known since March that I would have to write it in three to four weeks in July, because that was my only gap. But there was something of a heat

wave in London in July, and I was writing it, in my kitchen, in my underpants, with three fans pointing at me. It was undoubtedly the hardest thing I've done. I was making major structural changes up until the last preview.”

Such unforced candour too sums up Kitson, whose reputation as an off-kilter oddball is only partly deserved. Nevertheless, despite single-mindedly opting to manage himself without recourse to the unnecessary trappings of a corporate PR machine, and in full possession of a charmingly geeky demeanour masking a fierce intelligence, Kitson has become a major draw.

On the stand-up circuit where he cut his teeth, Kitson's eccentricities have left him emotionally bare without ever being cloying, resembling the left-field antics of the late Andy Kaufman if he'd been brought up in Huddersfield and looked like Jarvis Cocker's socially anxious big brother. Even when he scooped The Perrier Award in 2002, Kitson shunned the hideous showbiz circus that some believe justifies comedy as the new rock n' roll or something equally ridiculous. Rather, and increasingly rare in the often self-congratulatory and puerile careerist world of stand-up, Kitson's presence onstage, mild stammer and all, was born out of a genuine creative need to express himself honestly, freely, and – crucially – on his own terms. Here was a performer in full possession of the attributes to prove himself what every other comic was so desperate to be – a serious artist.

In this respect, Kitson's literary and performing ancestors are many. One is reminded of the late Peter Tinniswood's one-woman Edinburgh Fringe play, *The Last Obit*, which similarly looked at an obituary writer's last day at work. Lives criss-cross in an approach reminiscent of Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*, a film inspired by short story writer Raymond Carver's super-realist meat-and-veg vignettes by way of Dan Rhodes' bite-size romances. Then there are the discursive, pop-eyed monologues of Ken Campbell. His closest kin, though, is the work of Ben Moor, who similarly moved out of stand-up with his own story-telling show, *Coelacanth*.

Kitson either isn't aware of or can't see any comparison with most of the above, claiming, with some justification that, “It's a different thing. I tell my anecdotes in stand up. My story stuff is a fiction.”

The mention of Moor, however, prompts a considerable degree of humility.

“I've never seen a Ben Moor show,” Kitson hangdogs. “To my eternal shame and regret. I have a feeling his work would very much put me in my place. But I've not been avoiding his shows. Far from it. I've wanted to see one for years, and for various reasons it's just never happened. There were a couple of reviews of his show in Edinburgh, saying he occupied similar territory to me, and I think he would have been well within his rights to be a little miffed at that. It's his territory. He's been there for years. If anything, I'm like him, not vice versa.”

C-90 arrived onstage coincidentally around about the same time it was announced that the production of cassette tapes was being phased out. Thus, a once booming industry

of home taping turned emotional totem of personal history looks set to close. As poignantly prescient to the piece as this may have been, Kitson insists that C-90 is “much less about compilation tapes than it is about the people. It’s more about the melancholy obsolescence of people than it is the obsolescence of a technology.”

Without betraying details of content and running order, Kitson does concede, however, to having made “a few” compilation tapes. “Here and there. And I’ve been made a few. Here and there.”

If home-taping enthusiasts have been responsible for one misinterpretation of C-90, many critics have, according to Kitson, seriously missed the point.

“There were a lot of people who hadn’t seen *Stories For The Wobbly Hearted*,” he says, “who were reviewing C-90 like it was a brave new departure for the laugh a minute funny man. Which is a bit frustrating when you feel like that line of fairly tedious enquiry should surely have been exhausted by now. Reviews saying things like ‘the audience weren’t expecting this,’ or things to that effect. I suppose I just got annoyed by the lack of informed takes on the work by people who, even if they hadn’t seen the earlier story stuff, were aware that the stage at which the audience didn’t know what they were coming to had been and gone a couple of years ago.”

The enlightened cross-traffic between audiences is something Kitson takes a particular delight in.

”These shows have been lovely in terms of mixing the crowd,” he says. “I love doing shows with a mix of ages in the audience and these shows cross pollinate with the stand up stuff really nicely. I see old couples in the stand up shows that I recognise from the story shows and hipsters in the story shows that I recognise from the stand up shows. And that’s pretty lovely. Old folk and hipsters side by side. All thanks to me.”

With plans afoot for at least two more story-based shows, long term plans for a big-scale work and an audience-free film of C-90 in the offing following this current tour, Kitson isn’t shy of work. Given such ongoing commitments, one wonders whether he could ever envisage a time when his solo works could be produced and performed by other actors, effectively entering the small-scale repertoire.

“That won’t happen. I’m very uncomfortable with that,” he says flatly, before going on to contradict his earlier disclaimer that C-90 is strictly fiction. “The thing is, I suppose, they are still very personal pieces of work. They aren’t plays. They are my stories. There have been approaches to licence the texts, but I have no interest in that. There is lots of stuff in the show about my Dad and Mum and brother and niece and so on. It’s just full of my love and admiration for my family. So I wouldn’t want someone else,” says Kitson, “especially not an actor speaking my words. They can Nelly off.”

C-90, The Arches, Glasgow, Jan 23-28

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