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Comedy without compromise

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The real point about Daniel Kitson, I've decided, is that at some point in his apparently rambling stand-up delivery he will say something that you could swear came straight off the front of your brain. "It was what you said about Radio 4," I say to him afterwards. Radio 4 is the BBC talk station. It has gardeners' shows, where they discuss mulching, and wildlife shows, even though you can't see the animals, and odd quiz shows about arcane subjects - British history between 1310 and 1335, that kind of thing - with utterly impenetrable scoring

systems and no prizes. It is nutty and terribly English. "What?" he says. "That was only one f---ing line!"

Kitson was saying how horrified he was to hear someone on Radio 4 mention reality TV. "Radio 4," he said, shuffling down stage, "shouldn't know reality television exists. Radio 4 should barely know television exists! I've heard there is a magic picture box in the corner!" he says, suddenly sounding like Peter Ustinov. "But it doesn't look as if it will come to anything. Now, here are some more words pronounced perfectly!"

That's me, I tell him. The line about the magic picture box; that's exactly what a particular friend says when he's parodying me, those precise words delivered in a pretend-posh voice! So it was one line, but it was exactly the right line. That's what happens in a Kitson show. Which is not to detract from the hitting-home perspicacity of any of his other lines. His suspicion of big groups of friends in pubs, for example, who can't possibly all like each other: exactly. Or this on his masterclass subject, loneliness. "What I want, more than anything," Kitson says suddenly, "is to be able to turn to someone and say 'can you keep stirring this while I go to the toilet?'"

What is important in stand-up, he says, is to speak entirely as yourself. "Because not to do so is not only to miss an amazing opportunity, but it is also a discourtesy to the privilege of having other people listen to you."

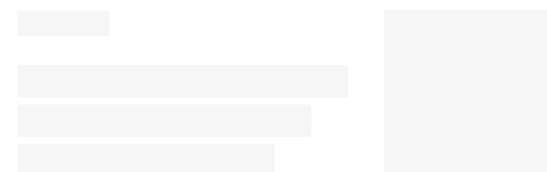
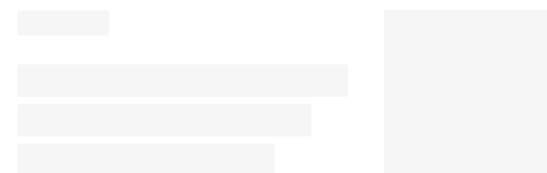
He cannot bear the sort of stand-up that herds the audience into sharing laughs at a view of the world none of them actually holds. "They say 'you know what I mean?' and you think 'no'. I don't look at things that way and I don't think you do

either. It's a waste of everyone's time. Whereas if you are entirely honest - or not even entirely honest, but just specific about your feelings without presuming to know theirs - then it's really good."

Kitson is 29, but his long hair, beard and old man's cardie seem to hail from some other era. His latest show is about fireworks night, which means that it is about childhood, splendour, wonder and disappointment. His parents hover as a presence in it, cosy and permanent and, in my head at least, like characters from *Wallace and Gromit*. As usual on fireworks night, they produce a traditional Yorkshire cake and, also as usual, "every mouthful is a sandy disappointment". Young Daniel still wants to eat it, though. "It's nostalgic. I don't like it, but it reminds me of how I didn't like it years ago."

But Kitson isn't really nostalgic, he says later. He just doesn't think silly nonsense about being cool should get in the way of respecting old things when they mean something worthwhile. Like Radio 4, in fact; it may only have been one line, but we keep coming back to it. The amazing thing, according to Kitson, is that anyone could fail to see "that it is wonderful and important, fusty, intellectual and totally out of touch and that that is incredible". That isn't

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nostalgia talking. "You know, it's not 'do you remember when we used to wear silly trousers?' It's more about picking out examples of integrity or humanity or compassion and saying, you know, these should be models for us."

It's not cosiness, either. Anyone really funny, as Kitson is, is constantly starting you out of your mental seat. That is not necessarily a comfortable feeling. Then there's the potty mouth; a real friend, for example, is "the person you would call if your cock dropped off". There are his uncompromising, unpredictable likes and dislikes, which can sideswipe you so suddenly you feel like a fur-wearer hit by a spray can on the bus. Why, for example, should he despise people in dangly earrings? That's me! That's still me!

And there are his equally firm ideas about the people he wants to see him. I once saw him pay a punter £20 to leave because he was texting during the performance. Actually he offered to pay the price of the ticket, which was £8, but the bloke only had a 20 and Kitson didn't have change. It was worth it, he said afterwards, to get rid of him.

Kitson won the Perrier Award, the top prize for comedy on the Edinburgh Fringe, four years ago and has been battling to keep out "c---", a population category in Kitson parlance, ever since. He doesn't do Friday or Saturday nights at festivals any more for that reason. You earn a lot less, obviously, but you eliminate a lot of trouble.

Kitson does have his ornery side. He doesn't have an agent, does his own publicity and won't do television. He has been coming to Melbourne for years under the auspices of the Comedy Festival but has decided to go it alone this

year. He has rented the Athenaeum, a space about three times the size of the venues he has been allotted before. "I've always loved the Ath as a theatre," he says. "It feels really nice, f---ed and lovely, you know."

But there is no way, he says flatly, that he can fill it. Especially as he is on late - 10.30pm - and, as in Edinburgh, only on weeknights, from April 4-29. I know he's nervous about it because his stammer, hardly noticeable when he is on stage, kicks in as he talks about it, but he says the same sort of thing before every new show. It will be a disaster; it will be fine on the night. It's madness; no, why not have a crack at it. The crucial thing, he says in the middle of all this, is that this stand-up show should have "that intangible moving thing that makes it very good". The moments that speak to what it is like to be human. "That's what I like best in things."



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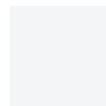


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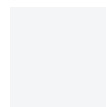
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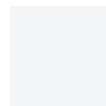
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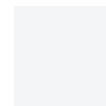
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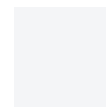
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