

Exploring That Old Knee-Slapper, Suicide

By Jason Zinoman

Jan. 6, 2011

When Daniel Kitson was about 9, he told his teacher that he was thinking of killing himself. At some point over the next few decades, he forgot this had ever happened, until just over a week ago when his mother reminded him. Asked in an interview if he really was suicidal or if it was just a plea for attention, he said with a merry chuckle, “I have no idea.”

It’s the kind of odd, intriguing story that Mr. Kitson specializes in: disturbing, willfully open-ended and its content incongruously matched with its tone. In his acclaimed shows Mr. Kitson, a 33-year-old British comic with a bushy beard and a stutter, explores questions about loss and love and the pursuit of meaning that are too complicated to answer completely.

His solo theater work — his show is playing at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn as part of the Under the Radar festival — deserves comparison to the best storytelling of Spalding Gray and Mike Daisey, partly because of this elusive quality.

“I was having trouble coming to a conclusion in writing a show in 2006,” he said on Monday, recalling an artistic epiphany. “There was a point when I realized I could articulate those contradictions and misgivings, that lack of certainty. That became more interesting.”

Despite their simplicity and stylistic integrity, his shows can seem a mass of contradictions. They maintain ironic distance without sacrificing emotional engagement and feature strong opinions before subverting them. His darkest stories come with laughs, and his jokes can choke you up. The New York comic Eugene Mirman, who learned about him through glowing praise from peers like David Cross and Demetri Martin, said Mr. Kitson was “the perfect blend of cuttingly sharp and adorable.” That has led to a cult following, rave reviews and many awards, especially at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where his shows annually sell out faster than any others at the Traverse Theater, the premier home of new drama at that summer event. His success, however, has created another seeming tension. Mr. Kitson doesn’t just dislike fame. He works strenuously against it.

In 2005 he stopped using an agent; he also refuses almost all television requests, puts out no albums and almost never does interviews. His avoidance of the media has become legendary, spawning various legends that he laughs at.

“If you have a modicum of principle,” he said, “they’re like: ‘Do you hear what he did? He killed a man to keep his ticket prices down.’ ”

When Susan Feldman, artistic director of St. Ann’s, broached the subject of an opening party for the show, “The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church,” which tells a story about the previous occupant of Mr. Kitson’s house, he said he would not attend.

“I think it’s increasingly important to have an audience that is your audience,” he said. “It’s better to have 50 people who are into the thing than 200 who aren’t.”

That philosophy works in Edinburgh, London and Melbourne, where he has an intense following. But since he’s seeking to move into New York theater, where he remains largely unknown, Mr. Kitson must make allowances like this interview.

“When I come somewhere new, you feel slightly obliged to look at how you’re going to get people in,” he said, explaining that while he has strong feelings, he also doesn’t want to be rude. Asked why he decided to try New York, he responded with understatement. “They got in touch and were very nice,” he said.

Mr. Kitson, who grew up in West Yorkshire obsessed with comedy, knew early on that he wanted to perform, delivering his first stand-up routine at 16 at the National Student Drama Festival. He still has it on video. “It is strong,” he said with a boastful swagger, a joke that might mask something real. “I did a bit of topical, bit of local stuff about the festival, some shaggy dog stories, call-back. Boom.”

In his early comedy he was interested in puns and then went through an improvisational stage, but his work would become marked by meta-humor, fierce intelligence and sensitivity to language. He might pause in the middle of a riff to admire the sound of a word — “saying bullion is one of the most fun things you can do with your voice” — or to reveal that a joke that seemed offhand actually was not.

“In my stand-up, I don’t embellish,” he said. “I am quite strict with telling the truth. I am interested in engaging people emotionally, and I don’t want that to be duplicitous.”

Minutes later, Mr. Kitson, perhaps uncomfortable with sounding pious, added: “It’s not like I am like: ‘I demand truth in all aspects of my life. I am the truth bomb.’ ” Then he laughed, looking exasperated with himself.

Over the last decade his material has gradually shifted away from a series of jokes toward personal reflections and intricately told fictions rooted in a strong sense of narrative. It’s an evolution apparent even in the titles, like “A Made Up Story” and “Stories for the Wobbly Hearted,” his one theater show to play here, at the 2006 Brits Off Broadway festival. (He also did stand-up in September at Union Hall in Brooklyn but insisted on being paid only in “unique sandwiches”).

As with many of his new shows, Mr. Kitson describes “Gregory Church,” a fictional piece (although that is too simple a description), as a reaction to his previous work, “66A Church Road.” That Edinburgh Fringe hit ruminated on his relationship with real estate, describing the look and feel of his home with a literary detail that approached the romantic. The language of that piece was florid, even lyrical, so the new one is far more conversational.

It begins with his telling the story of visiting a home and finding a cache of letters that tell an extraordinary story about a man who decided to kill himself. He wrote several suicide notes and sent them to people he cared about, but since he took his time in killing himself, he received responses to his first suicide note, which he then needed to respond to. The resulting exchanges postponed his death.

While the style of writing is a departure, there is continuity as well. “The whole story is told conversationally, but the letters are in a pompous, heightened style,” Mr. Kitson said. “It sneaks in there.” He added later, “It’s a sort of joke, but when you extrapolate it, it can become a very human thing.”

A correction was made on Jan. 21, 2011: An article on Jan. 8 about the British comic Daniel Kitson and his solo show “The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church,” at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, misstated a detail of the show. He tells of finding a cache of letters at a house he is shown but does not buy, not a house he moves into.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

“The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church” runs through Jan. 30 at St. Ann’s Warehouse, 38 Water Street, at Dock Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn; stannwarehouse.org.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Exploring That Perennial Knee-Slapper, Suicide