



Daniel Kitson: the reluctant hero of British comedy

Daniel Kitson - winner of the Perrier, shunner of the press, and these days an accomplished writer and performer of narrative dramas - is fast becoming a national institution. Dominic Cavendish explains why

By Dominic Cavendish

24 February 2014 • 7:00am



At a time when British comedians are falling over themselves to appear on panel shows, get their own radio and TV series, and generally court fame and fortune, the brightest and best of his generation also ranks as its biggest odd-man-out.

Hailed as one of the funniest, most intelligent and perceptive comics ever to pick up a mic, **Daniel Kitson**, 36, avoids celebrity and publicity like the plague. You'd be forgiven for

knowing nothing about him, though if you've seen a picture of him – balding, bespectacled, usually bearded – you'll have a sense of his personality.

The scruffy, stuttering antidote to the slick and suited professional gagsmith, he was once memorably described as looking “like an Open University lecturer who's been dragged through an Oxfam shop backwards”. That was at a time when he still talked to journalists. He seldom, if ever, talks to the press these days, and doesn't invite them to review his stand-up gigs. Arenas are anathema to him. He has spurned offers to perform in the West End. You won't see him on the box. Critics often try to cover his “story-telling” shows – a distinct and sophisticated strand of his prolific output – but he seems indifferent to their response, although they usually lavish five-star plaudits on him and make abundant use of the word “genius”.

When I requested an interview with Kitson ahead of the imminent UK premiere of his latest story-based show, *Analog.Ue*, at the National Theatre, sure enough the response that came back was blunt and to the point: “He's declined it.”

If he weren't so good, so outstanding in his field, this form of non-compliance would be career suicide. Yet by absenting himself from the media fray not long after he accepted **the Perrier Award in 2002** (with little obvious enthusiasm), if anything he has accentuated his appeal. About six months or so younger than Michael McIntyre, he's the polar opposite in terms of his style and profile, and he hails from the north (Denby Dale in West Yorkshire) whereas McIntyre embodies the middle-class spirit of the south. Yet he's no less a cultural phenomenon of the past decade.

His rejectionist stance, his refusal to have any truck with the herd mentality, which extends from the individualistic outlook he expresses in much of his material to the way he conducts his business on a DIY basis, inspires a fierce cultish devotion. He doesn't charge much for his shows and his handful of downloads come cheap – but it's enough for him to get by. He keeps his fans in the loop by email. It would be easy to lump his lo-fi approach in with the recent guerrilla stunts of pop stars like Bowie or Prince, but it's not as commercially tactical as that. He hates headline-grabbing, will do whatever it takes to create work on his own terms. In short, yup, he's an artist.

Some two years after he performed his most accomplished narrative show to date there (“It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later”), his return to the National Theatre – the announcement of which crashed its website, such was the demand for tickets – creates a welcome opportunity to reflect on just how far he has come.

The fact that he won the Perrier (now the Foster's) at the age of 25 attests to an early start in comedy. His parents were both in education – his father a lecturer, his mother a primary school head – and he has said he knew by the age of 16 that he wanted to be a

stand-up comedian. The Financial Times critic Ian Shuttleworth saw him as a teenager “storming” a student drama festival cabaret: “For someone so young, his sense of his own personality and the craft of his material were incredible.”

Kitson came to London in 1995, studying drama at the Roehampton Institute while picking up gigs where he could. Within five years there was a huge buzz about him but to be honest, while early sightings suggested that he had a natural talent to amuse, there was little indication he would go on to tread such a distinctive path. The title of his 2003 show “Lover, Thinker, Artist and Prophet” was obviously tongue-in-cheek but the attendant sense of look-at-me arrogance obscured his sensitivity.

Over time, particularly with the burgeoning quality of his storytelling shows – which have brought him a following in New York too now – he has moved into a league of his own. He has become the voice of lonely souls and awkward, pedantic sods, his characters the sort of people who get easily overlooked. His observations dwell on small details, passing moments, throwing up profound aperçus in a spellbinding flow of lyricism and light-heartedness.

In a corporate age, Kitson serves up old-fashioned romance and wonder, philosophy and nuance. Sometimes this hermit-like figure gets too hermetic – **his 2012 show at the Traverse in Edinburgh** was clever-clever self-referencing in a way that felt too showily self-regarding. But he’s always pushing at boundaries, testing himself, whether it be examining his own early midlife solitude in his recent sit-down stand-up show “After the Beginning. Before the End” or rush-writing a gem of a two-hander for the Royal Exchange, Manchester last autumn, *Tree*, in which he starred with Tim Key.

That play earned comparisons with Beckett and I suspect the latter’s name will be invoked again in the discussions about *Analog.Ue*, in which Kitson will take to the stage without speaking, using multiple non-digital recorders to tell the story of an old man who decides to record his memories once he begins to forget them. I wonder though, given that this is the National, whether we shouldn’t start talking about him as the successor to someone closer to home – Alan Bennett, who grew up 20 miles or so away from Denby Dale in Leeds.

“I’ve always been older than I am,” he has said. “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.” There’s a touch of Bennett in that and whether he likes it or not, and whatever he does to try to stop it happening, Daniel Kitson looks increasingly like becoming a national institution too.

Analog.Ue runs at the National’s Lyttelton Theatre, from Feb 25 to Mar 30. Tickets: 020 7452 3000; nationaltheatre.org.uk. Limited availability