

Does Comedian Daniel Kitson Even Exist?

by TOM COWELL

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Daniel Kitson appears at the Brooklyn Masonic Temple this Friday at 8 p.m.

English comedian Daniel Kitson takes every rule of modern show business, and breaks it. The UK-based performer doesn't talk to journalists. He has no Twitter account, no YouTube channel, no social media presence of any discernible kind. And after a brief sitcom gig over a decade ago, he refuses even to appear on television. According to 21st century entertainment lore, Kitson should be a nobody: just another unknown and unknowable white dude, clowning in obscurity. So why is he playing Brooklyn's 1,200 seat Masonic Temple Theater this Friday? And why should you care?

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The answer starts with his act. Blending traditional stand-up and storytelling with experimental theatre, Kitson's fans don't just laugh at his shows. They claim him more as poet-philosopher than as entertainer. The phrase "life-changing" gets thrown around a lot. And if that sounds douchey, observe who's giving the compliments. David Cross called Kitson "honestly the funniest comic I've ever seen in my life". Stewart Lee (a path-breaking talent in his own right) called Kitson's stand-up "about as good as it could get." He's lionized by his friend (and tour-mate) Eugene Mirman, himself one of the best alt comics in the country. Kitson and small praise rarely seem to appear together.

Since winning the Edinburgh and Melbourne comedy festivals in the 2000s, Kitson has built a sufficiently rabid fan-base to tour entirely on his own terms. He puts out work with monkish routine, but disseminates very little of it as buyable "content." That means no tapings for DVDs, album releases, HBO specials or the like. Just stand-alone, set piece theatre shows, before audiences filled almost entirely through his email list. Like a camera-shy Louis C.K., he produces one large piece a year, and sometimes more. How popular are they? Demand for tickets in England was once so fervid, it broke Britain's National Theatre website. For a performer with near-zero media exposure, the buzz was unheard of. Friday's show in Brooklyn is the last stop on his first ever multi-city US tour.

If this whole tone ("British guy comes to America and re-invents comedy") is starting to piss you off, that's understandable. UK comics can get obsessed with "big ideas" and high concept entertainment, viewed with some bafflement by the sharp, joke-centric comedy culture of the US. It's an affectation, heavily influenced by the Edinburgh Festival, which is the focal point of Britain's comedy calendar. Edinburgh favors structured, thinky shows over the punchy, American, "best hour of any material" approach. In naïve hands, the result can be maddeningly artsy: too much aesthetic commitment, not enough laughs.

But Kitson is a cut above. His attitude is different, even from his UK peers. The weirdness is utterly unpretentious. And he's not just talking the "uncompromising artist" talk. He's walking it. It's a genuine attempt to stretch the boundaries of stand-up as an art form, without becoming a poseur. Also, for anglophile comedy fans, this is a rare chance to see a different kind of British talent, about as far from the brash Gervais/Brand confidence that can take root in America as you can possibly get. Plus it's an odd glimpse at one potential future of entertainment. Comedy and music business models are in constant flux, but maybe Kitson points the way to how we'll consume the work of our favorite bands and comedians in years to come. He's the comic equivalent of Phish or the Grateful Dead: a virtuoso performer, uninterested in anything but the live experience of creative work, and inspiring a die-hard fan base who happily buy in to the same concept. You're either at the show, or you're not. There is no capturing that feeling in another medium. You can't DVR a Kitson moment. And the man is hanging his entire career upon that idea. Will you love him, or not? You have to buy a ticket. And take a chance.

Pretty Good Friends with Eugene Mirman and Daniel Kitson is at the Brooklyn Masonic Temple Friday May 16th at 8 p.m.