

# Tracking the K-Dog: A non-encounter with Daniel Kitson

*The comedians' comedian and acclaimed theatre maker may not do interviews or invite reviews of his work, but it won't stop us writing about him. Stewart Pringle takes a 10-year retrospective*

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Daniel Kitson is late for our interview. In fact, I'm not sure he's going to turn up at all. For one thing, he's notoriously anti-publicity, and hasn't done a full interview for a decade or so. And for another, I haven't invited him for an interview or spoken to him about it in any way. Waste of time, is what I figured. He'll just ignore me or tell me to fuck off. But that's fine, because it feels strangely appropriate to be discussing an absent Kitson, as his recent theatre shows have been a series of experiments in vanishing away, in ceding control of his storytelling to his audience, or to technology.

When Kitson began creating theatre, back in 2005 when he was already an established and adored cult figure of the standup circuit, it was just him, a lamp, a rug and a chair. *Stories for the Wobbly Hearted* was an Ur version of what would eventually become "classic Kitson" – a mixture of the gentle and the tragic, that love of "the fucking dignity of unwitnessed lives", as he'd later come to term it. Ten years and a metric tonne of awards and accolades later, his new show *Polyphony* sees him unwind his story from a clutch of iPods distributed among his audience.

*Polyphony* digs into the recurring central concerns of whatever period of Kitson's career we're all enjoying (late-early? Early-middle? As if it matters), namely his paradoxical relationship to his audience and his reputation. It all kicked off in *As of 1.52pm GMT on Friday April 27th 2012, This Show Has No Title*, which he performed at the Traverse in (surprisingly enough) 2012. It was a thrice-framed show of meta-theatrical brilliance, as Kitson described the struggle of a fictionalised version of himself writing a typical Kitson show. That show within a show had all the hallmarks of his theatre work: an idiosyncratic male protagonist, a conceit that sat just the right side of whimsy, but presented as the result of nights of Kitson sweating at a keyboard, desperate not to let down his fans or fuck his rep as the K-Dog, unassuming master of all he surveys.

It continued in *After the Beginning, Before the End*, which saw Kitson trying his hand as low-fi musical legend by including a looping synth accompaniment to its story of Kitson the man considering his position as a financially secure artist with a thundering reputation built—more or less—on word-of-mouth alone. It excavated the idea of hype and reputation, as Kitson baited his loving audience with brags about his pool table and considered the potential of the orally transmitted anecdote – its power to spread in mutated forms, to give birth to wild, unpleasant myths.

If *As of 1.52pm...* addressed Kitson the artist, and *After the Beginning* Kitson the man, it was easy to diagnose something of an artistic crisis in his work. He was fully aware of this, of course, throwing it out there in one of the occasional emailed newsletters he shoots out to his subscribers as practically his sole form of marketing support (it works – he sells shows out at the drop of a MailChimp e-shot). But when new show *Analog.Ue* hit New York with more of a whimper than a bang, with audiences and critics alienated by his replacement of his own voice with a bank of reel-to-reel tape recorders, it looked like the first visible flop in anti-brand Kitson's ascent to the quiet domination of his craft.

*Analog.Ue* was already booked into a run on the Lyttelton stage of the National Theatre before this minor fudge in New York. Kitson took it apart and put it back together, adding a little more of himself and returning to the same anxieties about repetition and reputation that haunted his previous two shows.

The result was one of the strongest shows he'd built in years. The slight obscurity and austerity of the core story was cushioned in the kind of self-reflexive material that had served him so well in the past. It may have been a bit of sleight-of-hand, maybe even a climb-down from his ambitions for a totally isolated recorded story. But he won the day, and critics and audiences left happy and broken and a little bit fixed, just as it should be.

The idea of a climb-down turned out to be nonsense, of course, as he was simultaneously unleashing his stunning *Tree*, a two-hander with Tim Key that opened at Manchester's Royal Exchange before spreading its branches across the Old Vic in January this year. As far as slaps to the chops of his naysayers go, it couldn't have been more perfect. Elegantly structured, stunningly performed and with a life-sized tree as its set, it shone a light on a whole new dimension of potential work. It showed that Kitson could bring his take on heartbreak, politics and all that "fucking dignity" into a full-on theatre show. If it had looked like Kitson had painted himself into a corner, *Tree* saw him smashing his way out of it, and bringing the whole building down for good measure.

He's hardly been idle since then, with a pair of scrappily awesome shows at The Stand last Fringe, a Christmas show at the Battersea Arts Centre, and a string of previews and try-outs for what would become *Polyphony*. There are obviously no tickets left for its run at Summerhall's Roundabout (you snooze: you lose – you have less than five browser windows open to attempt to book tickets: you lose), but if you can manage a good clean murder of a ticket-holder then it's strongly advised.

*Polyphony* is further proof of what should have been obvious all along: that Kitson is an artist as interested in experimentation as he is in perfection. As his career progresses and his reputation continues to swell, he's able to take a few risks and throw a few ideas at the wall. Maybe they'll stick, maybe they won't. But it's going to be a blast finding out.