

ON COMEDY

Can Daniel Kitson Redefine the Relationship Between Comic and Audience?

The elusive stand-up seems to believe in making his listeners work. But it's not out of contempt. Instead, he's trying to forge an intimate human bond.



By Jason Zinoman

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STILLINGTON, England — Under a tent by a mill on an August night, the stand-up comic Daniel Kitson found the most apt rustic setting to poke fun at comics leaning on modern technology. He described performers' postshow tweets of gratitude to ticket-buyers as another way to say: "Give me your compliments."

He groused about podcasts, singling out the worst of the genre as "great guys chatting," shows he termed "for wankers by wankers." Offering the opposing viewpoint, he said they *are* easy to listen to before rebutting himself: "Should be hard."

Daniel Kitson — whose last two decades of stand-up performances and ambitious theater works put him in contention for greatest comedian working today — believes in making the audience work. Not just because his rapid-fire monologues can be dense and elusive. Just finding him can be a challenge, since he's not on social media and doesn't do interviews, talk shows or podcasts. Most of all: Despite being prolific, his new work is not on any streaming service and only a few recorded shows can be bought on his site. This has made him an unknown quantity to vast swaths of comedy fans, but also a figure of some mystique inspiring committed admirers who will go to great lengths to see him. Which is how I found myself in the British countryside over the summer.

His stand-up focused on the pandemic and the fear it inspired. His jokes quickly veered from aggressive to ruminative, dirty to philosophical, but he punctuated them with ideas that stuck in the brain, like the one that suggested people who add a yell to their sneeze are, on some level, "letting a little terror out." He found the early pandemic oddly unifying: Everyone in the world was stuck at home at the same time. Kitson stopped taking trips to the United States and Edinburgh (he has die-hard followings Off Broadway and at the Fringe Festival in Scotland), but in some ways the pandemic made him a more accessible artist.

I was grateful that in the most fearful moments of 2020, he started a radio show from his home that I listened to every day, providing some quiet charm to interrupt the steady bass line of sirens outside my Brooklyn window. More significantly, he taped a new show, an audio play named "Shenanigan" that he sold on his site. But, consistent with his ethos, he kept distribution small, just 2,000 copies, available only in record, CD or cassette tape formats. (None are currently for sale.)

An intricate, layered narrative told with literary precision and propulsive sound effects, "Shenanigan" feels less like his stand-up or solo shows than something entirely new. Its premise, reminiscent of "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," turns the romantic comedy inside out. Darting back and forth in time to chronicle the dissolution of the relationship between a couple, Bob and Poppy, Kitson introduces each section he narrates by the number of weeks, days or hours before the breakup.

This structure creates suspense but also draws attention to its own artifice, as does the science-fiction conceit at its center: A dystopian company called A Better Beginning erases memories of couples' first meetings and implants a more romantic version. It was founded by a heartbroken man who believes art has ruined relationships by setting up unrealistic expectations for love.

Kitson periodically interrupts the narrative to give us scenes of him making the show, a spoof of himself as pretentious and obsessive but also a running commentary on the themes he's exploring, especially in conversations with a female friend. She wants to know if the show is really about his own aversion to long-term relationships. Kitson balks, not just offering the dodge that it's all made up, but going further, adding that there is no such thing as a true story. "It's like a wood fire," he says. "The story-ness affects the truthiness."

He's right, in a way, and in focusing on the origin story of a relationship, he found a resonant metaphor to illustrate and expand his point. For many people, telling this tale is as close as they will get to understanding how a comedian's set, refined through repetition, can't help but blur the line between truth and fiction. To take one example, after so much retelling, the memory of the story of how your parents met tends to crowd out the actual events in their minds.

Kitson displays a skepticism about romantic love but a more subtle and fascinating kind about stories. Our cultural faith in stories has never been greater and more unquestioned, what a recent book by the literary theorist Peter Brooks described as "our mindless valorization of storytelling." Kitson did not write a didactic show, but he seems to be suggesting that the power of stories is more limited than we think. A good story can evoke real emotions, but it can't replace them.

Seeming to spoof himself, Kitson sounds self-important notes, telling his friend that his goal as an artist is to show, not tell, leaving it up to the audience to put it together. One of the nice things about the audio play is that its narrative is so fractured that it benefits from multiple listens. I have occasionally felt this with his plays, that the ephemerality of theater doesn't always suit them. Ultimately, Kitson is a comic who likes the sound of laughter. He isn't trying to be esoteric for its own sake. His insistence on producing his work his own way is not a rejection of the crowd, but it does reflect an interest in reinventing his relationship with them.

His goal appears to be to forge a more intimate, human bond, a point he made implicitly in the live show I saw in Yorkshire. At various points he singled out audience members, gently explaining a joke to one who didn't get it; urging another who looked sleepy and struggling to stay awake, not to feel bad, to close their eyes and rest; and telling a person in the front row that if he wanted to put his foot onstage, he should go ahead.

This appeared to me to be a demonstration that he was paying as much attention to us as we were to him, modeling a relationship between performer and patron as peers, each deserving attention and care. But maybe that's just a story I am straining to tell to make sense of disparate comments. That's the tricky thing about art. Once you put it in the world, it's out of your hands. Maybe forgotten or reshaped by memory. This can happen in life, too, even the most major events.

Kitson himself said that he hadn't processed the events of the pandemic, before pausing to speculate that maybe we never process anything. "Maybe we just forget stuff and the rest becomes the narrative."

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