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## Undue North

Comic Daniel Kitson aims to be funny - whether you like it or not.

By Ben Carlish

To paraphrase Groucho Marx, Daniel Kitson definitely wouldn't want to be in a club that would have him as a member. But he might wear the lapel badge after scrawling a picture of a penis on it as an ironic gesture.

In a multi-million pound industry churning out svelte career comics like so many china dolls off a production line, the bearded, bespectacled figure of 25-year-old Kitson is one of a few who resolutely breaks the mould.

Dubbed by some of the more gormless sections of the media as the comic champion of the misfit, Kitson deservedly won this year's Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Festival, an accolade most comedians would give their right arm for. However, he's gone on record saying he didn't want it. Why not?

"Because it's a nonsense," he splutters from his Karl Marx-issue beard. "It's a divisive thing, in the middle of an art festival. For lots of people, Edinburgh's a trade fair, an opportunity to get noticed by the telly but for me it's an art festival and I like to think of what I do in artistic terms. You just start to resent it, because it hijacks everything."

Looking like a cross between a young Jack Duckworth and a young Grizzly Adams in Oxfam clobber, he's pretty hard to miss, yet few people outside of the stand-up scene recognise him. This is partly because, despite making audiences wet themselves since he was 16, he has eschewed the pull of TV and has gone out of his way not to court the media. Recently, though, he made a much vaunted cameo appearance in Channel Four's Phoenix Nights as seedy Spencer, the socially challenged and hopelessly inept barman. Yet, he says it's a role he wasn't particularly proud of.

He hails from Denby Dale near Barnsley but woe betide anyone who makes the mistake of describing him as a northern comic. At every turn, whenever observers try to bracket him he deliberately goes the other way.

It seems strange somehow to meet this shambling non-conformist in a very chic side street in London's Chalk Farm, lined with well-to-do eateries and posh specialist shops. Although the venue, a Russian tearoom decked out with Russian dolls, fine Eastern European paintings and copper samovars, is hardly run-of-the-mill. And it does do a lovely borscht.

Given his mistrust of mass media exposure, it's hardly surprising he hasn't been overly enamoured with the success of Phoenix Nights.

"I don't think it's that good," he says with a shrug. "And this thing, it's northern and it's one of 'ours' – I fucking hate that. It's so lazy and so parochial. I try really hard to avoid the 'northern lad' tag because to me it's an irrelevance. I'm a comedian first and a person

second and way down the line I happen to be northern. It's not that I am ashamed of being from the north; it's just that it's a fluke."

"But I really liked the first series of Phoenix Nights," he admits, "and it's hard for me to know if I didn't like the second series just because it's become part of the mainstream and I find the idea of being part of it fairly repulsive."

Is he then on a deliberate mission to subvert the "new conventions of comedy" as one critic has suggested?

"Yeah, alternative comedy – such as it was – has become a new mainstream and it's just as dull, tedious and as parochial as the old mainstream had become in the Eighties."

So are there any good comics out there except him?

"No, no it's all about me," he guffaws. "There are people like Ross Noble, David O'Doherty, Simon Munnery, Tommy Tiernan, Boothby Graffoe. And Johnny Vegas. They're not people who want to be famous, they're not people who want to be actors. They're brilliant comedians."

"And if you watch something on TV with Johnny, it may be better than the majority of other stuff on TV, but there's no comparison to him live, destroying the room and making you piss yourself, then feel a bit sick, then being on the verge of crying and then pissing yourself again. That's phenomenal. It's about winning the hearts and minds of the people, it's that real 'this is us together, in here, right now' feeling."

And this is something Kitson himself has an enduring gift for – often holding an audience for up to three hours, sometimes with just three or four gags. Even appearing on Blockbusters as a teenager he had the whole studio, his fellow contestants and Bob Holness practically crying with laughter – as his website ([www.danielkitson.com](http://www.danielkitson.com)) proves.

But, not content to dine out on his trademark raucous ribaldry for ever, Kitson sat down to write his first structured show bathetically called, Love, Innocence and the Word Cock, which was as sweet a piece of comic reflection on childhood as you'll ever hear.

"I was becoming fairly well known on the circuit," he reflects, "but all I'd do is fuck about with the audience and I got really bored with that. Because despite it being off the cuff you'd always know what would happen next, because there's fairly standard improvisational structures you end up falling in to."

In Love, Innocence and the Word Cock, Kitson stabbed warm recollections of childhood adventure ("School trips were great. Where you were going was immaterial, it was the two hours sat on a coach pointlessly waving at people in cars that really got you going...") with darts of self-deprecation ("No one waves back now I look slightly like a paedophile").

And just when everyone started hailing him as a "romantic comic" practically likening his comedy to poetry, he changed the tone of his show again.

“I thought I’d like to be really funny but not necessarily have people really like me.”

“I got fucked off with the way people said, ‘Isn’t he lovely, lovely, la-la-la, really engaging, lovely, lovely’,” he spits. “And I was thinking, ‘I don’t want to be seen like that.’ But, in my most recent show, it’s essentially how I don’t like much of the world.

“I thought I’d like to be really funny but not necessarily have people really like me.”

But try as he might, people do like him. When I ask him if being teetotal gets him into bother when he goes back home to South Yorkshire, he just looks at me, pats me on the shoulder and says, “Come on, you’re better than that.”

As we are leaving the tearoom a dour-faced business suit barges past me, almost knocking me flying, without so much as a pardon.

“I hate it down here sometimes,” I say to Kitson, “it makes me feel so…”

“Northern?” he suggests.

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Daniel Kitson appears at the Alhambra Studio Theatre – February 28 (Tel: 01274 443 2000); the Dancehouse Theatre, Manchester – March 1 (Tel: 0161 237 9753); the Nuffield Theatre, Lancaster University – March 5 (Tel: 0800 609 1110); and the Theatre Royal, Wakefield – March 11 (Tel: 01924 211 311).