

Daniel Kitson was such a happy young boy

SERIOUS BUSINESS

Mark Blacklock looks at the Edinburgh Festival and the UK comedy scene and finds some hecklers in the audience

For three weeks every August, the ancient city of Edinburgh is transformed by the Edinburgh Festival. The Festival wears several faces – film, TV, art and music – but by far the most popular and significant of these is the comedy element of the Fringe Festival, which in its 57th incarnation will feature 20,342 performances from assorted stand-up comedians, street performers and the occasional church-hall theatre troupe.

There are no surprises that the Fringe is so popular. Nowhere else can you see the cream of British live comedy collected into one place. According to award-winning stand-up Chris

Addison, who will be performing at the festival for the fifth time this year with a show entitled *The Ape Who Got Lucky*, the fringe is a place where, "Comedians can try out longer shows. When you perform in a club, your show is condensed into 20 minutes of your most barnstorming material. At Edinburgh you have an hour to play with so you have the chance to expand on ideas. I'd happily talk for an hour anyway. The trick is to keep it funny."

Funny is what the audience in Edinburgh wants and funny is what it generally gets. From *Monty Python's* John Cleese and Graham Chapman, who came to the Fringe with the *Cambridge Footlights* in the early 60s, to the *League of Gentlemen*, who performed their sketch show at Edinburgh for two years before making it into a TV programme, the fringe festival has always been a testing ground for the UK's most feted funny-men.

One recent Edinburgh star is Daniel Kitson, who was nominated for the festival's version of the *Palme D'Or*, the *Perrier Award*, for his 2001 show *Love, Innocence and the Word Cock*, and is returning this year with "more whimsy and swearing." Daniel, who also starred on TV screens in the second series of fellow stand-up Peter Kay's *Phoenix Nights*, says that the main difference between Edinburgh shows and comedy club shows are that at Edinburgh, "You don't get people shouting 'That's Suzannah!'"

"At Edinburgh, You don't get people shouting 'That's Suzannah! It's Suzannah's birthday! Tell her she's a wanker!'"

Chris Addison gets to the fundamentals of the issue





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It's Suzannah's birthday! Tell her she's a wanker!"

Both Chris and Daniel are fans of Edinburgh for this reason. "There is a general dumbing down of the club audience," says Daniel. "I don't think that the comedy audience is becoming more thick. I think that what's happening is that the sort of people who were going to club gigs when they were a subversive, underground thing. I think they now go to very specific sort of gigs and one man shows. The vast majority of club gigs have become a part of mainstream culture with all the vagaries that that implies." Chris Addison also notes that, "Edinburgh audiences are more open-minded and a bit older."

Given this space to perform, acts which would not work on the club circuit do well at Edinburgh. Chris draws attention to Noel Fielding and Julian Barrett, who perform a freeform and surreal act under the name of *The Boosh*, and whom he describes as a "classic double act." When I ask Daniel what he gets excited about, he chuckles. "Do you mean in terms of comedy? People like Tommy Turner and Johnny Vegas. Johnny Vegas is the finest comedian the world's ever seen, and this year people like David O'Docherty, who I really like. I like stuff which wears its humanity on its sleeve. It doesn't really matter what they talk about, it's how they do it."

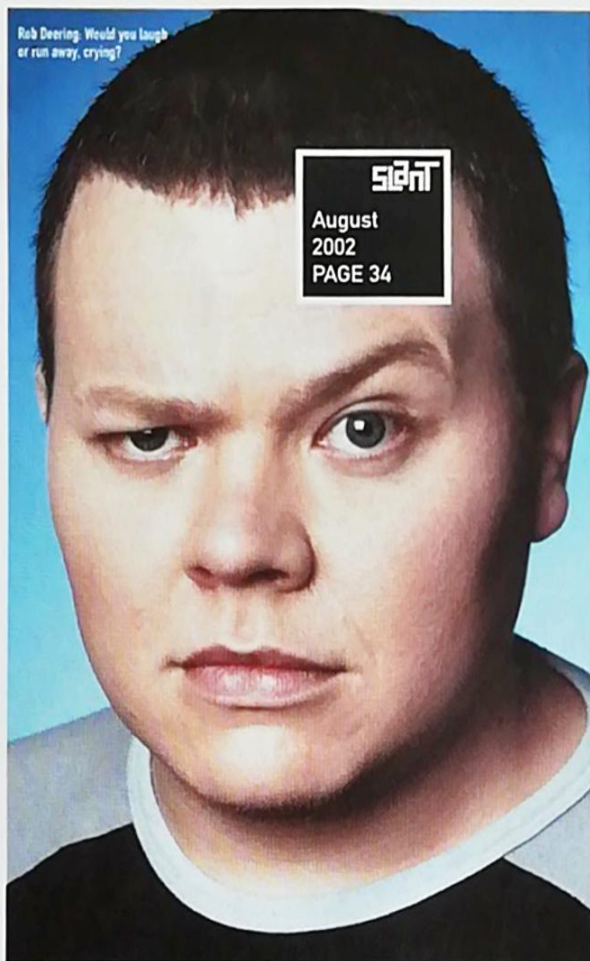
Rob Deering, a stand-up who, like Daniel, made waves with his first show in 2001, namechecks *The Men in Coats*. "I'm always most impressed by someone I feel can go anywhere with comedy," Rob says, "or is like Al Murray or Ross Noble and takes it all from the audience, going where the audience takes them. Or someone like Simon Munnery, coming completely out of leftfield and saying 'Have a go on this!' You feel those people are never going to stop, they'll keep on exploring and going off in different directions. And they'll never stop being inspired. I like acts to be universal, to go off in a billion different directions so that you can see them twice and even if they're doing the same show, you'll see a different show."

But all is not entirely well with the Festival, and particularly if you're not a stand-up comedian. As clearly demonstrated, there are a baffling number of shows. The Fringe has become a massive business. According to the official report on last year's festival, 873,887 tickets were sold for performances.

Rob Deering. Would you laugh
at him away, crying?

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an increase of 138,000 tickets on the previous year. Total ticket income at Fringe 2001 was £6,636,093.

This is most tellingly put into perspective by the organisers' boasts that this number of tickets is more than double the number of attendances in a season for football clubs Hibs and Hearts put together. One instantly thinks of Irvine Welsh, noted Hibs fan and Edinburgh's most celebrated novelist of modern times, who describes the festival as "social apartheid." "The Edinburgh Festival is great because no one in Edinburgh has anything to do with it. It's basically just the arts and culture of London in Edinburgh. The centre has been recolonized for tourists and shoppers, and the schemes out in the periphery – you keep them down the road. The centre's just a playground for quite wealthy people. They're all at the pubs that have been done up and tidied up."

And Welsh is not the only person to question the worth of the festival. Harry Thompson, author of *Peter Cook: A Biography* and Senior

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Producer of Comedy at Talkback Productions, the company behind *Ali G*, *Big Train*, *I'm Alan Partridge*, *Brass Eye* and pretty much everything worth watching on TV over the past ten years, is not so sure that Edinburgh is a good thing.

"I think it's a bit destructive, actually, because it's a festival of stand-up comedy and stand-up comedy is a very limited part of everything that represents comedy. However, because it's a comedy festival and a TV festival and is therefore attended by every TV executive in Britain, it has become a short cut for TV executives to catch up on what there is in comedy. So all the TV execs go up there and check out the acts who are nominated for the Perrier Award and, as far as they're concerned, they then know what's what in comedy. You

therefore see a hugely disproportionate number of Perrier Award-winning stand-ups with their own sitcoms, chat shows and everything else. Comedy actors and writers have no way to get noticed. There are huge pools of talent out there who have no similar window."

Harry also questions one of the other claims made by the Festival organisers that, 'the fringe remains true to its founding principle of open-access for all performers.' "It's become a big money comedy festival," says Thompson. "All the stand-ups in Edinburgh are controlled by about four agents and, if you're not with one of them, you just can't get in because they control the venues. Obviously there are still the church-hall shows and whatever but it's hard for them to compete. If you're a little independent, you'll be in a church-hall out in the sticks and no one will see you."

There are others who share this opinion. Jasper Gibson, who will be distributing the first issue of *The Poke* at Edinburgh, the UK's first humour title to launch in 23 years, which will showcase the writing of "young, twisted British minds," concurs. "Too

caustic and thoroughly independent, the Corpses avowed intent has been to speak their minds on comedy, to refuse to accept second-rate material and to encourage others to view comedy from a historical perspective. Being "old-fashioned" like this means SOTCAA receives a lot of insider information. "We get e-mails from the directors of current comedy shows bemoaning the fact that the writer/performers under their helm refuse to emulate anything other than recent stuff. The only exception we found to this was last year's Footlights team, who at least made a point of trawling the Cambridge video archive to watch previous shows."

The Corpses' take on the current state of the UK comedy nation is typically forthright. "There seems to be a mild panic setting in at the moment. A lot of comedians realise that things are a bit messed up and are happy to aim low in order to gain laughs and contracts. The saddest thing is seeing a budding comedian or writer attempting to justify bad material by intellectualising it, suggesting that the situation as it stands is actually fine and that anyone who doesn't join in is just going to be excluded. They all turn into miniature Peter Bazalgettes [*Big Brother*], spinning the stagnant state of TV into 'an excellent opportunity to get involved'. Anyone who might say, 'Hang on – this is a bit shite', is immediately painted as a 'moaner'."

Debates like this will rage for years. Comedy is a deadly serious business and at Edinburgh it's a deadly serious, multi-million pound one. It's important that as members of the audience we put our two pennorth in – those multi-millions are ours. We could do worse than to follow the advice of Ken Campbell, perhaps the finest British comedy actor of his generation, during a recent one-man show. "If you don't like it, throw something," he urged.

much emphasis is put on Edinburgh and stand-ups, rather than pure writing talent. Graham Norton is on five nights a week! Gibson believes that British audiences, "yearn for it to all go a bit *Lord Of The Flies*" and identifies, "a worrying lack of pigs heads on sticks," as the main trend in current comedy.

For those who take their comedy this seriously, website *Some Of The Corpses Are Amusing* (<http://corpses.comedyetuk.com>) is essential reading. Outspoken,



Nice Mum. Kris Dyer and Dave Marks make each other laugh

