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Comic Chameleon

Two years after winning the Edinburgh Comedy Award, Russell Kane has carved out a successful niche straddling the divide between high and low culture. Sam Friedman finds a man at peace with his inner contradictions.

Russell Kane is looking an alarming shade of orange. As he shows me around his handsome North London flat, I'm trying my best not to stare. But it's tough. The streaky remnants of spray-tan are glaring at me from the semi-circle of chest poking out of his low-cut t-shirt and his normally chiseled features look suspiciously like they've just been Tangoed. "Oh that", he says offhandedly, finally noticing my gaze. "I think I'm the Torso Of The Week or something for *Heat*, again. There's a photo shoot tonight."

Glancing at the contents of Kane's flat it strikes me that, actually, there's nothing particularly incongruous about Kane's tinted coating. In fact it fits quite neatly with the curious taste-adventure aesthetic of his home decor. A colossal flat-screen TV dominates the living room, and opposite sits a similarly flashy brown corner sofa. But jostling for place among the chrome and leather is also a substantial collection of vintage furniture, at least three bookcases stuffed full of classic literature, and a majestic copy of Pissarro's 'Hyde Park.'

After Kane's finished giving me the grand tour, he leads me outside to his "pièce de résistance" - a rather romantic wooden shed at the bottom of the garden where he's been writing this year's Edinburgh show. Lowering himself cross-legged into a battered armchair, he reflects on his omnivorous tastes. "I'm a Chav—in an ironic sense; Owen Jones, I'm reclaiming the word—from the bottom rung of the ladder, but I also have a First in English. So I can walk into the hardest pub in Cheshunt, full of Garys and Daves, walk straight up to them, have a pint, and talk about anything. But the next day I might also go to the Iris Murdoch convention at St Anne's College and be in my absolute element.

"In fact," he says grinning, "that sounds like the perfect weekend."

This ability to straddle the class divide is most likely the result of Kane's upward social trajectory. Brought up on a council estate in Essex, Kane describes himself as the "stereotypical drop-out" at school, "fucking up" his exams and heading straight for a dead-end job in retail. But after going out with a girl who was studying at university, something suddenly kicked in. "It was like someone had pulled back a curtain on another world and I saw what had happened to me," he says. Kane immediately enrolled at college and raced to an A in A-level sociology "so quick I got an award from Betty Boothroyd!" It was clear Kane had unlocked a voracious intellectual appetite, and this only intensified when he got to Middlesex University. "I had so much pent-up energy, that's why I walked away with a First – I was so fucking angry. It was like a nervous breakdown in the other direction."

This frenzied pursuit of social mobility has also had a lasting impact on Kane's comedy. Forever the class transfuge, he seems to have one foot in the world of his working-class origins and one in the cultured milieu of his destination - a tension that has proved a very fruitful vehicle for

humour. Describing himself as “class bilingual,” the 31 year-old has used this unique social position to craft consistently insightful, articulate and sociologically critical comedy, with material notably taking aim both upwards and downwards – most prominently in his 2010 Foster’s Edinburgh Comedy Award-winning show, *Smokescreens and Castles*. His recent career moves have also reflected this liminal position. While Edinburgh success has propelled him to the top of British standup, recent outputs have included contributions at very different ends of the cultural hierarchy. The critical-acclaim of his comedy has thus been augmented by the successful staging of his play, *Fakespeare*, at the RSC and the recent publication of his debut novel, *The Humourist*. But at the same time Kane has also established himself as an unashamed patron of pop culture. Hence the orange-glow of *Torso of the Week* and even more conspicious presenting gigs on *Big Brother’s Big Mouth*, *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* and *Geordie Shore*.

But standup remains where Kane’s gear-switching capacity is at its most impressive. Here he fuses the two sides of his career, presenting intellectual insights in a way that “brings in” his reality TV audiences, rather than willfully excluding them. “I’ve got a pathetic need to be liked by everyone. So the thought that someone might not be getting it doesn’t make me think ‘yeah, you don’t get it, leave.’ I think ‘that’s sad, this person’s given me £17.50, they *need* to get this. I want the story to adumbrate the ideas without me saying, ‘here’s my thesis – laughter optional.'” In contrast, Kane laments a recent rise in “pseudo-intellectual” comedy (he doesn’t name names), which he says generally consists of “big flowery displays of language with fuck all underneath, except usually the comedian sucking themselves off.”

At the heart of Kane’s desire for inclusivity also lies a deep ambivalence with the traditional cultural hierarchy. He’s highly skeptical of elitist definitions of art, particularly the highbrow notion that culture is only legitimate if it makes you think. “How can you separate your thoughts and emotions?” he asks incredulously. “Surely all good art should make you feel something?”

Kane has his own preferred definition of art, something that “elevates your perceptions, thoughts *and emotions*, so after you come out feeling different, more engaged with the world, even if just for a few hours.” If we use this definition, he says, comedy should definitely be seen as art. “But then again so should *Eastenders*. And if you buzz off your tits from *The National Lottery Show*, so should that.” Getting into his stride, he yells excitedly into my dictaphone, “And who are the elitists who are able to put Ballet up there and *The National Lottery Show* down here. Who are they to downgrade someone else’s artistic experience, because they don’t have a masters degree in Modernism? How dare they.”

In his comic repertoire, Kane has a number of signature Big Ideas; class, family and—increasingly so, in recent years—gender. This year he continues to probe this latter theme with a show about fatherhood entitled *Posturing Delivery*. The genesis of the show, Kane says, was another painful relationship split (“everyone thinks I’m gay but I’m not”) back in February, after which he started to contemplate whether he was going to be “one of those people who never has children.” A female friend’s response (“You’re a man, it doesn’t matter”) fascinated and infuriated Kane.

“Yes, men are fertile into their 80s, and that takes the edge off the rush to reproduce, but therein lies the problem. If there’s not that rush and you think ‘fuck it, I can be a dad in my 50s,’ that’s

the kind of slack attitude that leads to a lack of engagement in fatherhood and all sorts of problems." So, eschewing the usual tired comic meditations on male fatherhood (''Hey I'm a new dad, I'm covered in sick, come and watch my hilarious show"), Kane's hour aims to reflect on fatherhood from the outsider looking in. At the start of the show he'll be handed Ivan, a metaphorical baby, and over the next 60 minutes he'll aim to successfully rear Ivan to the age of 18.

Although Kane famously won the Edinburgh Comedy Award in 2010, it's striking that he continues to come back to the Fringe. He says he knows he doesn't "need" to come back, "but by forcing yourself to go to Edinburgh, it shows you've got balls, even when you're 'established.' Edinburgh's different to everywhere else. There's a critical atmosphere, a different heat."

Kane, it seems, is forever walking this tightrope between critical and popular success. While many might see it as a contradictory, even fundamentally irreconcilable strategy, Kane has simply embraced the contradictions. His social trajectory, he says, has given him "two different passports" and professionally he says he's "at home in both worlds." While, for many, such long-range upward mobility can lead to status anxiety or a sense of dislocation from one's roots—feelings that, notably, Kane has alluded to in the past—today he seems remarkably at home in his (albeit artificially bronzed) skin. "In the same way I'm confident enough of my heterosexuality that I can put on eyeliner and skip around the stage, I can sit down with my nutritionally balanced pescatarian meal, watch *Geordie Shore*, and piss myself laughing. Don't get me wrong, I love BBC 4. And of course I want to watch the *Storyville* about child models being exploited in Russia, it's just I also want to watch Holly from Middlesborough get double-teamed in America."