

'I never thought I'd talk about sexual assault on stage'

With two irreverent comedy specials on Netflix and a UK tour, Daniel Sloss will be appearing at The Playhouse Theatre in Edinburgh tonight and tomorrow night. **Mark Wareham** meets this most fearless of stand-ups

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Daniel Sloss is devouring a fat steak while sipping delicately from a glass of prosecco in the corner of an Edinburgh restaurant. For this young Scottish stand-up, who exudes a palpable red-blooded laddishness combined with an unexpectedly sensitive soul, it seems the perfect lunchtime combination.

By any comedian's standards, Sloss had a decent end to 2018. Remarkably, he completed his tenth hour-long show on the bounce at the Edinburgh Fringe (his 11th appearance if you include his 25 minutes of fledgling stand-up when he was still just 17)... not a bad haul at a still tender 28. Last September saw the release of two comedy specials, *Dark* and *Jigsaw*, on Netflix. And he's set to hit the road across several continents with Daniel Sloss: *X*, his latest show that opened in Edinburgh to five-star reviews and plays a raft of UK dates, ending with a show playing to 3,500 in Moscow.

Sloss has come a long way from the teen who made his full-length Edinburgh debut at 18, talking about playing Xbox and beating up his brothers, before landing a DVD deal. Latterly, his shows have taken on a dark, at times controversial hue, yet there are still those who think of him as that fresh-faced, eager pup bouncing about the stage.

Sloss is hoping his Netflix shows change all that. "I'm excited because I finally have something that fully represents me. I've never had that. My early DVD was all my material from when I was under 20, had barely started shaving and had floppy hair. TV spots are ultimately toned down due to the nature of those programmes, so it's probably quite fair to say that most of the mainstream comedy industry still thinks I'm just a precocious teenager with nothing to say. So I'm really proud and happy that it's out."

On a wider note, Sloss believes that far from

↑ **Now 28, Daniel Sloss started out in stand-up aged 17**

killing live comedy with its oversaturation of stand-up specials, Netflix is showing viewers that there's a whole world of comedy beyond the mainstream. "Netflix is saying, 'By the way, there's way more funny people out there than you think. And some of it's not for you, but some of it is.' "They're putting out some of the more unusual ones, some of the more serious ones and some of the sillier ones. But comedy is for everyone. It annoys me when people say, 'I'm not really into comedy.' Who doesn't enjoy laughter, you psycho! Perhaps it's just that TV hasn't shown you which comedy you like yet."

Sloss is making a habit of mining laughter from taboo topics, his last three shows entering challenging bordering on sometimes uncomfortable territory. The Netflix release *Dark* deals with disability, his sister's cerebral palsy and how his family employed black humour as a coping mechanism for

bereavement (which may go some way towards explaining his dark sense of humour). The sequel to *Dark*, *So?* (retitled *Jigsaw* for Netflix) caused a storm on social media by passionately advocating that people stuck in relationships for fear of being alone should take the plunge and dump their partner. The relationship toll, post-Netflix, currently stands at a proud 40,000 couples splitting up, including cancelled engagements and over 120 divorces (with him often being asked to sign decree nisi papers after gigs), though Sloss maintains, "It wasn't meant to be a break-up show. It was meant to be a love letter to single people saying it's OK to be on your own."

Finally, the third show in what had accidentally but quite naturally evolved into a trilogy Now addressed paedophilia and Sloss's experience of being unsuccessfully groomed at 13. All hard-hitting stuff but, crucially, handled with the lightest of touches.

His latest unflinching show, Daniel Sloss: *X*, is his bravest and trickiest to pull off yet and couldn't be more timely in the wake of #MeToo. It's ostensibly a show about masculinity or, as Sloss calls it, "a love letter to men".

"I'm a straight white man and I'm very aware that if my life was a computer game, it's set to easy street. Men aren't emotional, men aren't supportive, but every time anyone in my group of friends goes through a rough time, the men who have relentlessly bullied that person for the rest of the year, every one of them steps up and says, 'Well of course we're here for you.' We're stupid big idiots, but when it comes to the crunch, we're there."

"A lot of masculinity's coming under attack, rightfully and fairly. So understand the dangers and try to be more responsible. Understand that, as a man, you are just naturally more intimidating and perhaps more confident."

All that comes home to roost in the shocking denouement of his new show when Sloss reveals, in what has become a trademark twist, the fallout from a sexual assault on him and his closest circle of friends.

"It's horrifically common. Most people in the world are surrounded by sexual assault survivors but they don't know it. In comedy, people are coming forward and talking about it thanks to comics like Hannah Gadsby and Richard Gadd. Now that I have started asking the right questions, I would estimate that 50 per cent of my peers have been affected in some way and I think it stands to reason that the same statistic holds true for the rest of the world as well as every audience I personally play to. "And if you think this doesn't affect you, ask the women in your life if they've ever experienced any form of sexual assault or harassment, and watch your world crumble in front of you. For women it literally happens all the time."

So how does he justify addressing the subject, given that most right-thinking people would contend that sexual assault is never funny. "One of the ways we've been able to take power away from bad experiences is by making fun of it. And before people leap to their blogs or arrive at any conclusions they really need to see the show to understand what I mean. But without issuing a spoiler to perhaps act as a trigger warning, that previous sentence needs some context. I never thought I'd talk about sexual assault on stage. In the past I've said that jokes about any subject matter can be funny, but I wouldn't make one about sexual assault because I don't have any experience of it. Now, sadly, I do."

Whether or not Sloss eventually runs out of taboos remains to be seen. "Maybe I'll get some disease, though it needs to be a headline one. I can't be going on stage saying 'I'm gluten intolerant.'"

Hard-hitting material has become his calling card and that goes hand in hand with a fierce ambition. Whereas most stand-ups are content to go on tour every two or three years, Sloss has been hitting the road with a brand new show every year for the past decade.

"I get into this discussion with a lot of other comedians and I realise that my mind-set is different. Some comedians just love what they do – to go out and express themselves, that's enough for them. But I want to be in the same league as the comedians I look up to. I want to become good enough to be considered one of the best stand-ups in the world."

And with that kind of fighting talk, Sloss is well on his way to achieving his ambition.

● **Daniel Sloss: *X* will be at The Playhouse Theatre, Edinburgh tonight and tomorrow night. For tickets go to www.danielsloss.com/tour/ or call the box office, tel: 0844 871 3014.**