

## Weekend

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### David Cale, Spinner of Dream Tales

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The voice is caressing, with an undertone of urgency, a hint of menace. With its suburban London accent full of tangy insinuation, it is an ideal instrument for the telling of scary "believe it or not" tales in which lurking night stalkers contemplate unspeakable crimes. Yet David Cale, the 28-year-old comic monologist who is appearing at the Kitchen, has deeper things on his mind than campfire Grand Guignol. The tales he spins, accompanied by live music, distill the yearning inner lives of everyday people with a surreal intensity. Reality, fantasy and an almost clairvoyant insight into personality dissolve into one another in stories that can be as memorable as one's own most vivid dreams.

Mr. Cale is one of the fastest-rising stars on the performance-art circuit, which has already spawned Laurie Anderson, Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian and Ann Magnuson. He recently completed "Smooch Music," a groundbreaking, evening-length work, bits and pieces of which he has performed around New York, and put on an anthology of monologues called "The Uproar Tapes, Vol. 1." In "Smooch Music," which is running at the Kitchen through March 8, Mr. Cale, accompanied by a jazz trio led by the Lounge Lizards' saxophonist Roy Nathanson, interweaves 23 vignettes into a sweeping overview of romance in contemporary New York. The sections range in length from five lines to three pages. Some are written in the third person, others in the first. The characters vary in age and sex. They range from the president of a swingers' club obsessively intoning the organization's code — "We are liberated, we are free, our bodies belong to each other!" — to a pubescent boy who makes hickeys on his neck with a vacuum-cleaner tube in order to appear sexually precocious to his buddies.

"Though the piece has no real story line, its sections are thematically connected," Mr. Cale explained the other day. "Little relationship pieces are connected by anecdotes of things I've seen in New York, with the whole evening bound together by music. The piece is quite influenced by albums that have dealt with love like Joni Mitchell's 'Blue,' Bob Dylan's 'Blood on the Tracks' and Laurie Anderson's 'Mister Heartbreak,' as well as by the Sam Shepard-Joseph Chaikin piece, 'Savage Love.'"

Music plays a much stronger role in "Smooch Music" than in Mr. Cale's previous monologues, in which it served a mainly atmospheric function.

"Though 'Smooch Music' began as a solo work, it grew into a collaboration with Roy Nathanson, who leads a trio of sax, percussion and double bass," Mr. Cale said. "Roy is very



Paula Court

David Cale, the comic monologist, in his work, "Smooch Music," at the Kitchen.

sensitive to the relationship between music and theater. Some sections are straight monologues that have the music wrapped around them. Other parts are more like songs with melodies. And there are a couple of moments in which the music really rocks out."

#### Dreamed of Becoming Singer

Mr. Cale, who grew up in Luton, an industrial suburb of London, always dreamed of becoming a pop singer but lacked the vocal equipment. While in his teens, he tried working as a band singer in London pubs, but nothing came of his musical aspirations. And in 1979, at the age of 20, he deserted London for New York.

"I was so naïve that I didn't even know New York had five boroughs, and all I brought with me was a little carry-on bag," he recalled.

Mr. Cale lived at the Vanderbilt branch of the Y.M.C.A., and had the good fortune to land a job as a clerk at the Australian consulate. By night, he made the rounds of showcase

cabarets where his singing was met with indifference. At the St. Mark's Poetry Project one evening, he decided to read his songs instead of performing them, and people began paying attention. Performing his monologues "The Weirds" and "Welcome to America" at BACA Downtown in Brooklyn, he won two experimental-theater awards as well as television-commercial work. Put together with a playlet called "Swagger," the two monologues became an evening-length one-man show called "The Redthroats," which tells the story of a shy, reclusive character named Steven whose father, Mr. Weird, ends up killing his mother while the young man is locked in his room listening to Judy Garland records. The young man subsequently dabbles in teenage prostitution, and in a climactic, surreal plane trip to New York has the experience of being taken over by his future self.

#### Inspired by Buñuel

"Initially, I didn't want to put the pieces together, because I thought people would presume it was my autobiography, when in fact much of it isn't," Mr. Cale said. "Indeed, I've found that the elements many people take to be surreal are simply matter-of-fact accounts. I've been very excited by Luis Buñuel's movies, in which it's often unclear what is a dream and what isn't. In my monologues I often use my own dreams, but since I feel I'm not interesting enough, I tamper with them."

"I've never stopped working on my own delivery," he continued. "A friend of mine described it as a cabaret singer crossed with a Method actor. So much of it is just instinct. Now I'm trying more and more to explore the range of my voice by pitching it at different registers, and as I do I'm finding that there are little characters in there. All the time I'm working toward something more musical. I've always admired the way really strong singers with a band can affect an audience and reach a level of energy that regular theater almost never hits."

Despite its elements of surreal grotesquerie, "Smooch Music" is an upbeat work, Mr. Cale insists.

"Though it starts off sneering a little and though parts of it are ironic, it becomes sweeter as it goes along," he said. "I really do have an optimistic and hopeful view of love."

"Smooch Music" plays at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street) Wednesday through Sunday, through March 8. Shows are at 8:30 P.M. and tickets are \$7. Reservations: 255-5793.

Availability of theater tickets appears on page C28.