

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE

FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793



David Cale, Smooch Music, 1987. Performance view. Photo: Paula Court.



David Cale, Smooch Music, 1987. Performance view. Left to right: Roy Nathanson, David Cale, E. J. Rodriguez, and Brad Jones. Photo: Paula Court.

David Cale, Smooch Music

The Kitchen

Just as performance art began to be understood by the general public as a multimedia fusion, an increasing number of performance artists seem to be choosing a completely opposite form of the genre as their preferred method of getting their points across: the comic monologue. In its simplicity, its lack of pretension, and its homemade production style, this "poor theater" cousin offers a kind of karmic balance to the complex, multisensory, and expensive-to-produce mixed-media performance. It's no accident that many of the artists working in this reduced style have sprung from low-rent venues.

Solo turns by performance artists have been inspired by intellectual currents like semiotic and Lacanian investigations of the self, together with broad cultural trends like comedy in the popular media. This mode of performance locates its "impure" show as the direct yet deceptively hidden display of the isolated self, working in the gray area where cultural stereotypes and esoteric concepts collide.

David Cale's version walks a narrow line between basic theatrical conventions and performance-art singularity. As performance art, *Smooch Music*, 1987, flaunted its quiriness, using its musical accompaniment as an integral part of the show, and tilting its storytelling toward sometimes surprising directions. This was a comic monologue that didn't always go for laughs, a series of tales about romantic yearning that was often ironic. Although it was told from a basically gay stance, this aspect often seemed almost beside the point, so universal were the concerns. Broken up into 24 bits, which ranged from a few lines to lengthy, all-out narratives,

Smooch Music presented an entire gallery of would-be lovers, from shy teenagers to horny nerds, from orgiastic free-lovers to average New Yorkers on the make. Alternating between first and third person, and subtly altering the pitch, accent, and inflections of his voice, Cale created a multivoiced ensemble of characters out of nothing more than a continuous line of chatter, a few subtle body movements, and some clever lighting.

This full-to-bursting, stripped-down performance was held together by its overall theme of the restless, relentless search for love. Like a well-conceived double album of pop music, the individual numbers varied in mood, emphasis, length, and statement in their sequential unfolding. And like the best pop songs, the stories incorporated odd observations, autobiographic bits, comic shticks, and a few basic statements into lyrical messages of codified "ordinary" feelings and insights relating to love.

Although Cale frequently tossed in grotesque details and ironic twists, his heart was consistently visible on his sleeve. While freeing him from the cheap cynicism and surface glibness that all too often afflicts the genre, this general sentimentality also kept him from stumbling off into any kind of uncharted territory. The cutting edge hurts, and in *Smooch Music* Cale attempted to provide relief from pain, not more sting. But it's the weird details, the offbeat humor, and the sheer bravura panache of Cale's presentation that kept it off balance—that's another definition of performance art.

—JOHN HOWELL

SUMMER 1987 \$6.50/CAN \$8

ARTFORM