

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

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

Reservations: 255-5793

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Stage: David Cale's 'Smooch Music'

By JON PARELES

LOVE confounds all in the performance artist David Cale's "Smooch Music," which is playing through next Sunday at the Kitchen (512 West 19th Street). Mr. Cale has been working as a monologist since 1982; with "Smooch Music," he adds music — for saxophone, bass and percussion, written by the saxophonist Roy Nathanson — to 23 overlapping stories about love and lust. The selections are about as long as pop songs, and they sketch situations with the economy and resonance of pop lyrics, il-

luminated now and then by a telling, specific detail.

Mr. Cale is a slight, balding Englishman with a deceptively innocent face and a smooth way of shifting from a realistic character to a stylized performer. He is, by turns, a plummy-voiced patrician, an American huckster, a milquetoast attracted to someone who laughs "like an alligator," an incredulous Upper East Side tourist and a shy English teen-ager who gives himself hiccups with a vacuum cleaner; he's also, in "Don't Let Your Lover Make a Mess of You," a twitchy combination of rapper and beatnik poet, declaiming

his words while his feet can't stop moving, threatening to dance or to flee.

While Mr. Cale bills his part as "vocals" with the band, Mr. Nathanson's music is more soundtrack than accompaniment. It provides aural locations for Mr. Cale's characters, evoking noisy neighborhoods or smoky hideaways; in "Donna Summer," one of the longer stories, the band members tap louder and louder on the Kitchen walls, almost drowning out the narrative, as yet another romance falls apart.

The vignettes are gentle ones, free of violence or exaggerated obsession; characters rebound to try old routines on new partners. Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't; nothing is earth-shattering. Yet Mr. Cale's stories and performances are so well honed, his ordinary-guy postures so convincing, that — like a good pop lyric — they reveal just how intense "ordinary" feelings can be.