

The best success fantasy I ever heard was my brother's: he saw himself riding through the streets of New York in a Bentley, scattering subway tokens to the masses. He hasn't done it yet, but he thinks about it a lot.

ances which I convert for my own purposes into a statement," he says, at the Greene St. loft which he shares with his wife Sara. "I would cover the floor of a room with paper and ask everyone to write down what they said. You could follow

cocktail parties is success. (So much for the Protestant work ethic.) Although, for me, success will always mean Bentleys and subway tokens, I am perfectly open to other definitions. After all, diversity of outlook makes *Failure* a success. •

28th, videos will be shown at 1 p.m. Contributors to this series are Cara Devito, Nancy Holt, Martha Rosler, Susan Russell, Ilene Segalove, Ingrid Wiegand, Nancy Cain, and Susan Landry.

Gallery Humor

Noel Carroll

Michael Smith
The Kitchen
484 Broome St.

From certain perspectives, comedy appears to be the epitome of chaos. And yet, ironically, comedy is one of the most rigid, structure-bound modes of art. Its basic devices, including the pun and the equivocal situation, are ancient, and perhaps changeless. In fact, comedy is less like the other arts we know and more like what Plato claimed about Egyptian art: that essential forms had remained the same for 10,000 years. The argument might even be made that comedy cannot be an art specifically because its basic structures are so established that they defy innovation, the *sine qua non* of every mature modern art.

I mention this extreme position on comedy, not to embrace it, but to clarify some of the uncertainties that I feel surround Michael Smith's performance: Smith is a comic, but it is comedy couched in modernist rhetoric. The program states that he explores the fine line between popular entertainment and serious art. That certainly sounds like an acceptable avant-garde project. But I wonder whether or not there can be such a thing as avant-garde comedy that is distinct from ordinary comedy. Of course, an avant-gardist can be humorous, but it is hard to understand how avant-garde wit differs

from other types of wit just because comic devices seem perennial and invariant.

One of Smith's pieces, *A Day with Mike*, underscores this problem. The central character is a stock comic figure. He is slow witted, easily befuddled and absent minded. He seems partially modeled on Buster Keaton, wearing a serious mask throughout his losing battle with the objects of his daily existence. The comedy in the piece is quite accessible, but is only moderately successful. However, everything about the performance suggests that there is something more than ordinary humor at stake, and that that "something more" (probably something more modernist) is what makes Smith interesting. Yet, I cannot locate that mysterious additive.

A Day with Mike begins with Mike (alias Blandman) attempting to decide what to wear to work. A running monologue accompanies all of Blandman's thoughts. One shirt, he mumbles, is too fancy for work. Blandman is the type of person who carries an arsenal of pens in every pocket. He puts each shirt on only to belatedly realize that it is stained in exactly the same place as the others.

The comedy here is quite classical. It is based on the equivocal situation, *i.e.*, a situation which can be seen as two situations: what the audience knows versus what the character believes. The audience, in other words, sees the splotch minutes before Blandman. An exemplary dunce, Blandman, believing all is well, buttons his shirt completely before he discovers that he will have to remove it. From a position of superior knowledge, the audience howls with laughter at his slow-wittedness.

The topper to this running gag comes when Blandman finally selects a suitable

shirt. But he turns around and the audience sees a telltale spot on his back, unbeknownst to Blandman. A pen, presumably the culprit behind all these stains, falls out of the shirt. Blandman stares at it, perplexed, and then, quoting a famous Keaton gag, puts his hand out as if to see if it is raining ballpoints.

Smith's routines in *A Day with Mike* rely on tried and true methods. This is the comedy of unawareness, including Blandman's unawareness of how he appears to the audience. But Smith's delivery is weak. He does not wear his version of the Great Stone Face easily. At times he is visibly struggling to suppress a smile, to resist being infected by the audience's laughter. This is troublesome because it undercuts the sense of Blandman as totally oblivious.

I suppose that the claim could be made that if we want to see what's avant-garde about Smith we should consider *Let's See What's in the Refrigerator* and not *A Day with Mike*, since the former is much more episodic and absurdist than the latter. It seems to be about a restaurant. Smith plays all the characters — a cook, a man in a black hat, and a ridiculously costumed superman figure, called Mr. Everything, who constantly interrupts whatever fragile narrative there is to explain with lectures and songs how to set tables and make sandwiches.

The humor in *Let's See What's in the Refrigerator* is of three sorts. Much is at the level of simple absurdity — for instance, Smith keeps hats and a telephone in the refrigerator. And objects are comically transformed. Coffee containers (I think) and paper plates turn into multi-deckered sandwiches recalling Chaplin's famous metamorphosis of a boot into a turkey. But the most important comic

practice for Smith in this piece is parody.

Smith lampoons the conventions of the musical by breaking into song and dance at the most improbable moments. An inept Fred Astaire, he keeps rhythmically slamming the refrigerator door to a musical tune that he hums rather after the fashion of a bent kazoo. The absurdity of Smith's libretti emphasizes the mindlessness of conventional musical numbers.

Acting codes are also debunked — the man in the black hat and the cook have some vague disagreement about a sandwich that is portrayed with a set of super-charged gestures, glances and double-takes straight out of a Republic potboiler. Exaggerated seriousness is yoked to trivial subject matter to demolish melodramatic acting.

Smith's assault on convention may seem to give his comedy some purchase on modernism. But I would want to urge that parody is to comedy as a train is to a journey. That is, parody is a traditional means of comedy. I see no justification for special pleading on the grounds of Smith's avant-gardism. He must succeed as a comic or not at all. But his parodies are repetitive, and often bland.

I have heard Smith defended on the basis of his set design, which shows (if possible) a refined sensibility for funkiness. I would guess the next stage in this argument would be to propose that the banal targets of his parody are the natural extensions of his almost painterly concerns with the dilapidated, the obsolete and the awkward. But I protest. Comedy is temporal; a comic performance must develop and succeed in time in a way that painting does not. Avant-gardism cannot excuse a bad joke. Can anything? •