



David Cale in the world premiere of *Palomino* at Kansas City Repertory Theatre in October 2009. PHOTO BY DON IPOCK.

David Cale

by Kristin Friedrich

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GIRL MEETS BOY. But that’s where the traditional love story ends.

Girl pays for boy’s company. Other girls start to pay for boy’s company. Boy makes a company of his company. The girls lose money, but gain a sense of self. The boy makes money, and loses himself. In the end: bad bargain for the boy.

David Cale writes, performs and self directs his one-man show *Palomino*, playing three men and four women. All seven characters are looking for love, peddling a shorthand version of love, or both. They bump around in a real-life milieu of Irish men who commandeer the horse-drawn carriages in New York City, and occasionally, also commandeer their passengers.

Most of us are not aware of this community, even if we have snapped pictures of its players in Central Park. Cale, on the other hand, had become very aware of it. He once played a carriage driver

in a low budget film, the director of which made him get acquainted with the job first hand for a week. He also had a friend who dated a carriage driver and from her, Cale heard plenty of stories about the heated shenanigans that took place in the backs of the carriages. He began to imagine the stories that might ensue post ride.

Cale is known for film parts and solo work such as *The Redthroats* (which was presented in the Center Theatre Group's 1988 Taper, Too season) and the Obie Award-winning *Lillian* (which he describes as a "one-woman show"). But the first incarnation of the carriage driver's story appeared in a piece for National Public Radio.

He had a specific Irish actor in mind for the part, but when the radio show was rushed through production — quick production has turned out to be a guiding principle in Cale's life — the intended Irishman wasn't available. Cale didn't plan on playing the lady-killer, and he certainly didn't plan on said lady-killer keeping his pants on. "My shows kind of sail into sexual situations without blinking, but I couldn't do that on NPR. It just wouldn't get broadcast," he said. "It was a good discipline for me to not go all out, to just suggest things."

Hemmed in by PG-rated radio waves, the characters' longings and complexity grew in Cale's imagination, and he began to want to wrap a longer story around the carriage driver. Connecticut's Long Wharf Theatre commissioned him to write a show, and though the piece was bumped from that theatre's schedule, its journey was far from over.

Cale got an unexpected call that invited him to the Sundance Institute Theatre Program, where he developed it and ultimately performed it on the side of a mountain — a performance attended by Kansas City Repertory Theatre Artistic Director Eric Rosen. Rosen had a sudden opening at his theatre, and so after Cale's performance, the two men made a deal on the side of the mountain. *Palomino* debuted at the KC Rep last fall.

The production process has been head-spinning in Los Angeles, too, but Cale doesn't mind the rush. "This show has a life of its own, it was always going to do what it was going to do. I like that about it — it's unpredictable."

Now fleshed out from his radio beginnings, the lead, Kieren McGrath, is a sexy, well-read import that uses women as fodder both for his bed and for the book he has always talked about writing. No surprise there, the dynamic between a lady-killer and his moneyed marks — that's the stuff of many a paperback, marketed to be read on the beach. The surprise in *Palomino* is that there are there no female victims, and even better, that the ladies who come out of interludes with Kieren are better off than when they came in.

Initially though, *Palomino* does seem to smile on Kieren. This is a man for whom everything has come easy, a man whose credo is to not worry. "I don't get tangled up inside. And I make my own rules," he declares to the audience. He burns a trail through women wherever he happens to be — the Upper East Side or a West Coast beach — and for a while at least, seems to walk the talk.

But Cale was not interested in crafting a one-dimensional cad. "I wanted it to get more complicated. How the character Vallie was handled was the most important — how I was treating her, how Kieren was treating her. I wanted to suggest that Kieren had fallen for her and couldn't deal with it."

In the end, Kieren is as tangled up as they come.

On stage, the show is woven from a series of monologues and scenes, and Cale moves from character to character without fanfare or pause. "I just kind of imagine I'm the different people. I can see them clearly. I know what they look like physically, I can see Vallie's apartment. I'm not a trained actor so it's just kind of intuitively figured out. If I connect, I inhabit people, and it just kind of falls into place."

The consequence of that habitation is that he begins to care about his characters. At the end of the show's Kansas City run, he admits he was sad for Kieren. The character doesn't meet a bloody or maudlin fate, he's just quietly tragic — grappling with that brand of unhappiness that seems to affix itself to those who have flashy runs of luck, and struggle once the run's over.

"I never feel this way with shows, but I want a sequel. I want to steer him into another place," Cale says. "I want to have him come back into Vallie's life. I'm not sure it's over between them." ●

—Kristin Friedrich is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.