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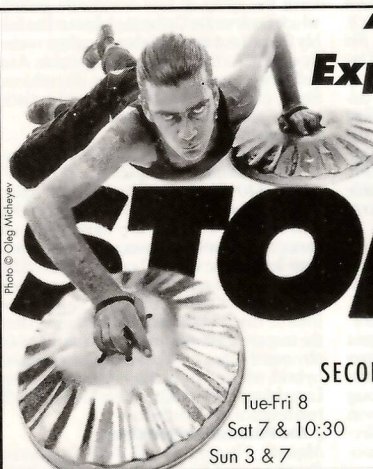
a comedy of substance

Written and Performed by **MARK LUNDHOLM** Directed by **BOB BALABAN**

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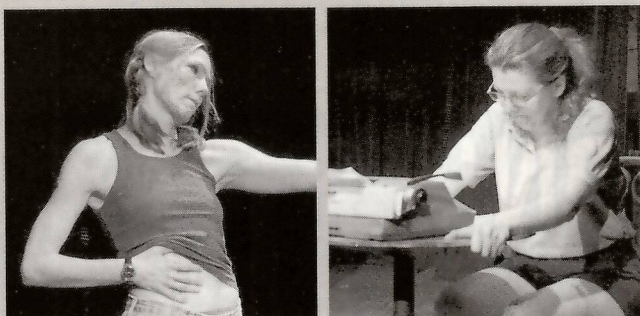
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A knish is just a knish

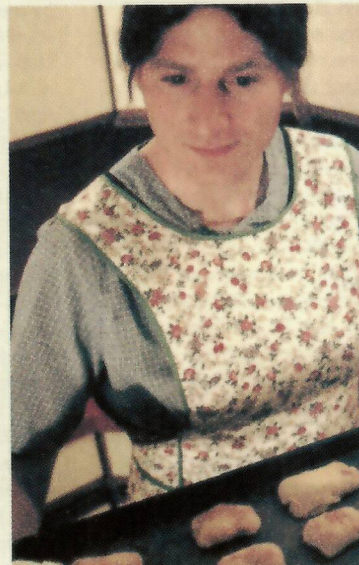
David Wise serves up a kitchen confidential in *Momma's Knishes*

By **Stuart Miller**

Although Sarah Grabel was born around the turn of the last century, she may be showing up at your apartment any day now to impart words of wisdom about life and how to make delicious knishes. Even if you're scared of ghosts or, for Atkins acolytes, carb-rich fare, there's nothing to fear here: It's simply the setup for *Momma's Knishes*, a site-specific, drag show-meets-cooking event devised by solo performer David Wise. Blending a couple of current trends—dramatic cross-dressing (*I Am My Own Wife*) and cuisine-as-performance (*The Last Supper* and *Cookin'*)—Wise gives *Momma's Knishes* a touching, autobiographical twist.

The 26-year-old actor adapted and embellished family stories to create the audience-interactive play, in which he portrays a fictionalized version of his great-grandmother in a plain house dress and wig, with no makeup. The premise is that it's 1938, and Mrs. Grabel has told her teenage daughter, Mollie, to invite friends over to learn about knish making. Audience members number from five to fifteen people. And, while Wise prefers child-free crowds, he recently handled an extended family ranging in age from 7 to 93.

Wise previously performed the show in Philadelphia, and it's bound to be one of the tougher tickets this season—because there are no tickets, really. Prospective audience members pay a fee ranging from \$600 to \$800 for the actor to transform an ordinary kitchen or dining room into an impromptu Off-Off Broadway venue-cum-cooking class. "I'm interested in doing theater in unconventional spaces and in involving



FAMILY RECIPE Wise dons a frock and fires up the oven for his gender-bending cooking show.

everyone," Wise says, adding that he's looking forward to New York audiences who will appreciate Mrs. Grabel's local references to Ebbets Field and Norfolk Street.

In the course of the cooking lesson, Mrs. Grabel shares tidbits of family life (she's buying Dodgers tickets as a present for her son) and spills family secrets (her sister's husband is abusive). More poignantly, she worries about her mother, trapped in Poland. When she translates a letter from her mother written in Yiddish, it is an actual letter from Wise's great-great-grandmother, who was killed in the Holocaust.

Between revelations and anecdotes, Mrs. Grabel gives advice about building the perfect knish. Wise's great-grandmother never recorded her recipe; the process is vague, and remembered variously by different family members. But it's no matter: the result—a golden-brown pouch with a rich potato-onion filling that the spectators enjoy after the show—is worthy of its own standing ovation.

For information about organizing a performance of *Momma's Knishes*, visit www.knishes.org.

PHOTO: CHRIS BARKER