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Clean the Kitchen and Invite Some Guests—the Performance Artist Is Coming

By Barbara D. Phillips

Forest Hills, N.Y.

First there was dinner theater, whose generous servings of prime rib and past-their-prime stars kept suburban theatergoers satisfied. Then “Tony n’ Tina’s Wedding” began making audiences around the world part of the play without stinting on the spaghetti. Currently in New York, Ed Schmidt performs in his Manhattan apartment kitchen in “The Last Supper,” Dorothy Lyman plays with

MOMMA’S KNISHES

www.knish.org

food in “My Kitchen Wars,” and a Korean troupe is “Cookin’” up a storm. In “Chef’s Theatre: A Musical Feast,” which premieres March 30, celebrity toque-wearers will prepare meals onstage that the audience will eat, and performers will sing and dance about consumption of the culinary kind.

Ho-hum. Do any of them really *deliver*?

It took the aptly named David Wise, a writer, director and actor just a few years out of the University of Pennsylvania, to bring to the American theater that most beloved innovation of the food-service industry: home delivery. The Danbury, Conn., native—who majored in English and theater, and got an A+ in the classes in marketing and entrepreneurship he took at Wharton—takes his interactive, cooking-centered show, “Momma’s Knishes,” right into the kitchens of his patrons. They invite friends and family to make and eat potato-and-onion pastries with Mr. Wise, who, as Mrs. Grabel, a Jewish housewife in 1938 Brooklyn based on his own paternal great-grandmother, guides the guests in cooking as she speaks to them about her life.

The work, he says, is largely taken from family reminiscences about a woman “talked about with reverence,” with a dash of historical fiction added to the mix. He spent a few months trying out the show in friends’ kitchens and tinkering with the work before performing it for the public in the Philadelphia area beginning in January 2003. And through fliers, press coverage and word-of-mouth, he’s racked up what he estimates are 70 to 90 gigs in eight states, the most nerve-wracking having been the one in his parents’ kitchen in Danbury. (With an average of one to three performances weekly, Mr. Wise, who moved to New York this month, seems to have solved the starving-artist problem for himself.) Since the venue changes nightly, along with the guests-turned-supporting-actors, each show is slightly different, a fact which keeps him on his toes. “Anything can happen,” Mr. Wise says. The worst experience so far? Drunken hecklers.

The setup could not be easier. Contact Mr. Wise at (917) 608-0417 or www.knish.org.



David Wise as Mrs. Grabel

knish.org, agree on a date and time, pay in advance by check to reserve the performance (\$600, Monday through Thursday; \$800, Friday through Sunday), provide directions to your home, and invite your guests. Mr. Wise prefers an audience of at least five people and no more than 15. Everyone, including Mrs. Grabel, must be seated at the kitchen table—or, in a pinch, the dining-room table or kitchen island. He started out in spacious suburban kitchens, but he actually likes things a little cramped and loves performing in pre-war New York apartments—for verisimilitude’s sake.

Well, he got his wish at my place on Saturday night.

I had decided that only six (fairly slender) people could squeeze around the 2½-by-4-foot table in my 8-by-18 kitchen. When one guest became ill and dropped out at the last minute, my suitably petite upstairs neighbor graciously agreed

to join us. (She turned out to have a real flair for knish cookery.)

Mr. Wise arrived early from his home in the West 90s in Manhattan, two suitcases in hand. He briefed me a bit (during the performance, I would be Mrs. Grabel’s 13-year-old daughter, Mollie, and my guests her school-friends), set up my kitchen (a noncook, I largely use the oven for pot storage and reheating), and unloaded his props and the fixings for the knishes. He

comes with everything from cookie sheets and potholders to oil, flour, dough and the potato-and-onion filling. All the host needs to provide are drinking glasses, water, paper towels and soap.

Then the tall, slim and sandy-haired 26-year-old retreated into my bedroom and bathroom to change into costume and emerge at 8 as a tall, slender red-headed woman in housedress and apron, black Mary Janes on her feet and a worried expression on her face.

“Momma’s Knishes” is a kitchen-sink drama in the most literal sense, plain and simple, and Mrs. Grabel’s worries—about a brother’s secrets, about a daughter’s schoolwork, about her own night classes, about a sister’s marriage, about the mother and young brother in far-away Poland whom she hasn’t seen in 20 years—become increasingly moving as we enter more deeply into the story and her life, washing our hands in that real kitchen sink, rolling out the dough and spreading the flour as she instructs, smelling the knishes cooking in the oven just steps away. My friends were eager to help Mrs. Grabel find a way out of her dilemma, and I found myself—both as Barbara and as teen-age Mollie—growing misty eyed as a thoroughly happy ending proved elusive.

When the 90-minute show was over, Mr. Wise joined us as we noshed on the food we’d helped prepare, as well as some French pastries I’d bought across the street. (Several knishes went home with my guests.) The performer chatted with us, cleaned up the kitchen, and then picked up his two black bags and headed off into the rainy night, a door-to-door salesman of the American theater who’d left five satisfied customers behind.

Ms. Phillips is deputy Leisure & Arts features editor of the Journal.