

STAGE REVIEW
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Love is the constant in 'Cravings'



Belle Linda Halpern mixes personal anecdotes with renditions of (mostly) food-themed tunes in her cabaret show. (Elizabeth Stewart)

CAMBRIDGE - In the famous opening words to "Twelfth Night," Duke Orsino puts the matter of his outsize appetite on the table, so to speak, declaring: "If music be the food of love, play on." Belle Linda Halpern might amend that to say that food is the music of love.

In her open-hearted cabaret show "Cravings: Songs of Hunger & Satisfaction," Halpern touches upon the ways food can be an expression of love, a substitute for love, or simply, as in the Jewish heritage that forms a central pillar of "Songs," a reminder "to taste the sweetness in the everyday."

Halpern mixes personal anecdotes with renditions of (mostly) food-themed tunes. She opens with Cab Calloway's "Everybody Eats When They Come to My House" -

and she means it. Standing behind two tables loaded with bowls, a blender, and a bottle of Manischewitz, she prepares food while she speaks, sometimes attired in an apron. By show's end she will distribute the food to the audience (it's charoset, a blend of apples, cinnamon, nuts and wine that is often served during the Passover Seder).

Halpern traces her relationship with food, beginning with fond childhood recollections of her grandmother's kitchen. She enjoys a strong rapport with pianist Ron Roy, and builds one with the audience. At one point, she asked audience members to call out the food they associated with their grandmothers. "Gefilte fish!" one person offered. "Matzo balls!" cried another. "Chicken cacciatore!" said a man, prompting Halpern to crack: "I'm glad we have someone from another tribe."

It's an undeniably warm and homey atmosphere inside the Central Square Theater's small Studio Theater. In general, Halpern prefers to say it with song - and that she does quite well, as followers of the Boston cabaret scene have known for years. She can put a lump in your throat one moment, with a heart-rending rendition of Stephen Schwartz's "I'm Not That Girl," and a smile on your face the next with a defiant "I Want It All," by Richard Maltby and David Shire. She wrung every drop of insinuation from Dave Frishberg's "Peel Me a Grape" (peeling an apple as she sang), and expertly located the laughs in a chocoholic's dream version of "My Favorite Things."

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CRAVINGS: Songs of Hunger & Satisfaction Created by Belle Linda Halpern in collaboration with Sabrina Hamilton and Ron Roy.

Performed by Halpern

Directed and designed by Hamilton. Musical direction and accompaniment, Roy.

At: Central Square Theater, through Oct. 25. Tickets \$35 (\$25 seniors, \$20 students), 866-811-4111, www.centernalsquaretheater.org