

Rhode Island's Sweet Little Variety Show

"All the world is a Sweet Little Variety Show and all of our LGBTQ friendly humans merely feminist, anti-racist, queer-positive, body positive players in a cabaret," to paraphrase William Shakespeare.

Aurora in DownCity PVD demonstrates their commitment to diversity and acceptance as host venue for the Sweet Little Variety Show, one of the biggest hits in Aurora's programming, held the 2nd Thursday of every month since 2009. General Manager Chrissy Wolpert was quoted in *Motif* last month saying, "It's incredibly important to everyone at Aurora that people feel safe to be, hear, and feel at Aurora."



Vatic Kuumba performs as a poet at the Sweet Little Variety Show at Aurora PVD.

(Photo: Ian Silvia)

The Sweet Little Variety show offers enthralling music, poetry, stand-up comedy, swing dance, ventriloquists, band music, the Lil' Rhody Lindy Hoppers, hula hoopers, magic tricks, the Moist Towelettes, burlesque, a mentalist, and even the Extraordinary Rendition Band have popped in to play. Sometimes the SLVS coincides with Aurora's full schedule of Bourbon nights, karaoke, and DJ hosting.

Erin Olson, a comedian known at SLVS for Garden City Biddies with Steve Dionne and now pursuing her craft with iO and Second City in Chicago said, "SLVS has always been unique for me because it offers the opportunity to engage with a vibrant and diverse audience that has proven time and time again to be smart, enthusiastic, and incredibly receptive."

The minds behind the Sweet Little Variety Show understand that the best performances are enhanced by the positive energy between stage and audience. Jen Stevens, one of the three producers since SLVS's inception, agrees. "Nicole [Maynard], Meg [Sullivan], and I work together to curate a diverse show across multiple genres. We like to encourage artists to experiment, and we bring a mix of new and returning talent. We've developed a really friendly audience that's open to just about anything. Every show is full of pleasant surprises."

The fabulously functional blend of Aurora's and SLVS's philosophies relaxes audiences right away. The performers, often returning over the years, look forward to it. Singer-songwriter John Fuzek is a SLVS staple after eight years. "Sweet Little Variety Show is a lot of fun," he said. "It is a loose show with a lot of heart ... Meg and Nicole keep you entertained with all sorts of straight-up talented folks..."

One of the “loose” shows, the Lil’ Rhody Lindy Hoppers “Jive at Five,” was as loose as it gets. Providence Swings offers weekly beginner-friendly social dances called the Bread and Butter Jam. “We find that Sweet Little Variety Show is a wonderful example of a venue [Aurora] that values inclusivity, artists from all walks of life, and a place that fosters community and warmth, which is what we try to do with Providence Swings,” said Vivian Madrid.

It’s not just SLVS’s dedication to pay each performer that elicits loyalty, and the performers of SLVS benefit from watching and supporting each other at the shows. Often the performers bring their own audiences, further developing the collective vision of Aurora, Sweet Little Variety Show and the welcomed guests.



Wild Cat, the RHD-RI band, performs at the Sweet Little Variety Show at Aurora PVD. L-R: Brian Mustari on guitar, Amy Rostkowski on drums, and Nissah Armstrong on vocals. (Photo: Ian Silvia)

At the March 16 show, MC “Nicool” (Nicole Maynard) introduced the Resources for Human Development of RI (RHD-RI) band Wild Cat, which consists of Nissah Armstrong on vocals, Amy Rostkowski on drums, and Brian Mustari on guitar. Armstrong immediately took full control of the stage. “We are friends with some staff members at RHD who approached us about having Wild Cat, the RHD Band, perform,” Maynard said.

Armstrong and her band, according to Jen Stevens, “... totally stole the show at their first SLVS performance! We look forward to having them back one day.” Meg Sullivan, as one of the team of SLVS producers, added, “That was probably one of my favorite moments in SLVS history so far.” In addition, Wild Cat will perform at 8pm on April 8 at the Parlour in PVD for the A is for Awesome benefit for autism.

The Sweet Little Variety Show rocks Aurora, 276 Westminster St, PVD, every 2nd Thursday of the month. Guests planned for the April 13 show include musicians Jacob Haller (“He sings about kitties and robots. He’s amazing,” said Maynard) and Mark Molloff, Stuart Window doing stand-up, excerpts from *Horror*, burlesque with Bettysioux Taylor, Jasmine Packard performing poetry, and hula hooper Jessie Jewels. Cover \$7 to pay the artists; 18-plus unless accompanied by an adult.

Menopause Mama Brings Dinner Theater to Providence



Anyone who knows Rhode Island knows that Rose Weaver is an icon who works in stage, film and television. She sometimes graces the steps of the state house with her powerful singing voice and has numerous awards to match her endless credentials. Now she's bringing dinner theater to the state with her show *Menopause Mama*.

An impressive piece of Weaver's *Menopause Mama* is the implementation of a paper fan. She explains the origin of the fan, exhibits a tutorial on how to SNAP open a fan, gifts fans to lucky audience members, and explains how a fan is helpful during hot flashes.

This hot-shot writer, singer and creator explains that diabetes and high blood pressure contribute to women's hot flashes. One cannot help but wonder if her HOT body and roomful of human fans might also contribute to those hot flashes. Weaver points out that a hot flash might be welcome in the 28 degree weather at the Southside Community Culture Center.

The men and women gathered on a Sunday in March to watch Weaver perform were a collection of professional artists and friends, activists, health care professionals and people who heard about the amazing Rose Weaver. She held everyone in that full and beautiful room in the palm of her hand. The audience was believing what Weaver could easily sell: truth, clarity, courage and joy.

"People don't talk about these things," says Weaver. But when these topics are discussed in *Menopause Mama*, people are on the edge of their seats. Additionally, for the audience voyeurs, it is a fantastic sight to see men in the audience listening and learning.

In the post-performance discussion, a gentleman in the audience admits/brags that he learned two very important things from the show. He was empowered by the heightened level of respect that Weaver cultivated during her 90-minute masterpiece. The gentleman explained further that, had he seen Rose Weaver's show before the event of his daughter's first... (the audience, prompted by his unabashed resistance to the word, chorally completes his sentence) "menstruation," he would not have tried so hard to "celebrate with her on the occasion." Right by his side, his wife cued the audience to chime in, advise, laugh and congratulate. This is the atmosphere that *Menopause Mama* creates.

Weaver entertains, educates, raps and dances with agility and grace. She expertly weaves ('cause her name) among a long and varied list of characters. It's a show for the whole family! In addition, there is a spectacular soundtrack with song credits including Quincy Jones, Barbara Baig, Weaver herself and more.

Readers might recall a 3-month production of *Menopause Mama* at the former Perishable Theater (now 95 Empire, part of AS220) produced by Jill Jaffe and directed by Bob Jaffe. The current production, produced by Rose Weaver with assistance producer Elizabeth Loo, evolved after Weaver conducted hundreds of interviews while documenting her own experiences with menopause. She was encouraged by Kathy Jellison and formed a group called the Kitchen Cabinet, which served as an advisory board. Rose Weaver graciously credits many people in her program notes, curtain speeches (impeccably delivered by the gorgeous spokes-model Pamela Lambert), audience talk backs, and various television and newspaper interviews. She makes sure to mention that Liz Chace and the late Kim Chace supported the show from its inception.

Menopause Mama offers a standing ovation performance as well as the only available dinner theater opportunity in Providence. Be the first to see its more recent incarnation while savoring each gesture and every morsel that Weaver and Pot au Feu Bistro have to offer. Providence owes a huge thank you to Rose Weaver. She has brought dinner theater back!

From March 22 - March 26, one can enjoy Menopause Mama at Pot au Feu Bistro at 44 Custom House. Tickets can be purchased at potaufeu.businesscatalyst.com. For a deeper connection to the text, visit the Menopause Mama page on Facebook, or the soundtrack at CD Baby: cdbaby.com/cd/roseweaver. Menopause Mama can be booked through the Facebook page.