

## THEATRE

# Love potion #9

Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens make love, art together

by Richard Dodds

After some of their shows, Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens extend an invitation for a seven-minute cuddle session in an onstage bed. "It's very innocent," said Sprinkle, a former prostitute and porn star who has become a celebrated performance artist. "It's about spreading the love."

And while a bed remains a significant prop in their new show, only Sprinkle and Stephens (and an undercover camera) are swaddled in the comforter. But love is still the theme. "The audience leaves feeling well-loved," Sprinkle

said. "That's the goal."

*Love, Sex, Death, and Art*, opening Aug. 12 at New Conservatory Theatre Center, is part of a seven-year "Love Art Laboratory" project undertaken after Sprinkle and Stephens became partners four years ago.

"Love is the most important thing in our relationship," said Stephens, chair of the art department at UC Santa Cruz. "But following at a very close second is the art we make. I think that really sustains our relationship, because we keep delighting each other in that way."

The setting for *Love, Sex, Death, and Art* is a laboratory equipped with beakers, test tubes and gurgling sounds. Sprinkle and Stephens perform as themselves, explaining how they met and how they have turned their relationship into an ongoing work of art.

"To make art about love is challenging," Sprinkle said. "You don't want it to sound corny like a Hallmark card."

But there are zigs and zags in their story that take it beyond gift-card sentimentality. "One of us got breast cancer last year, so that's in the show," Sprinkle said. "We do a chemo fashion show, so we even got to make art out of that."

The couple's costly adventures in artificial insemination are also part of the story, as well as their elaborately themed weddings that they reenact every year in reaction to missing out on San Francisco's



Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens in *Love, Sex, Death, and Art*.

brief foray into same-sex unions.

The show also features several guest artists. Tina Takemoto, a professor at California College of the Arts, does a takeoff on Bjork in protest of her work with Matthew Barney now on view at SFMO-MA. "She feels it's exploiting Asians," Sprinkle explained.

Takemoto's Bjork appears as part of a group hallucination engendered by an elixir that the audience is asked to drink. "It makes you horny and creative," Sprinkle said of the potion that they brew in the onstage lab.

"We also have three lab assis-

tants," Sprinkle said. "One is a beautiful, zaftig Jewish mama, and our director Neon Weiss plays a quality control director. And we have Dylan Wade, an F-to-M transsexual lawyer who's buff, cute, and a total exhibitionist."

The two-act production also includes readings from a questionnaire audiences fill out, as well as an art display created from Polaroids taken of willing theatergoers' boobs.

It was, in fact, tit art — works Sprinkle created using her breasts — that first brought Sprinkle and Stephens together 16 years ago. "I was curating a queer art show when I was at Rutgers," Stephens said, "and I used one of Annie's tit prints. We became friendly acquaintances and stayed in touch. I always lusted after her, but didn't really think further than that."

Back then, Sprinkle was more straight than gay, but her tide had turned when they met up four years ago at the Queer Arts Festival in SF. "I had actually sworn off women," Stephens said, "but Annie was there, and I couldn't help myself from flirting. We went out on one date, and that was it."

For Stephens, performing a

scripted show on an actual stage is a relatively new experience. "But I've done performance art in galleries and on the street, and some kinds of interventionist work where you insert your art into everyday society. I'm always fighting with Annie and the director whether this show is performance art or theater."

*Love, Sex, Death, and Art* is a late booking for NCTC's largest theater, and the partners know they have a marketing challenge.

"They don't have a built-in lesbian audience at that theater," Sprinkle said. "But we love men, too, and I'd like to extend a special invitation to gay men to come to our show. I've probably had as many sex partners as they have, maybe even more. It's in the thousands. So I think on that level alone, they can feel at home."

Sprinkle and Stephens have set up a website documenting their seven-year art project at [www.loveartlab.org](http://www.loveartlab.org) or [loveartlab.org](http://loveartlab.org). For ticket info, go to [www.nctscf.org](http://www.nctscf.org) or call 861-8972.

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