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S A N F R A N C I S C O

Love, Sex, Death and Art: Sheer Joy!

By Linda Ayres-Frederick

One of the things to love about Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle is enjoying how comfortably they can combine Love, Sex, Death and Art (in their play of same name) and make it seem as easy as sipping a cup of sweet love juice. In their new performance art piece, now playing at The New Conservatory Theatre, anything and everything is possible given the atmosphere of total acceptance they so off-handedly create.

Greeted by a set that contains a bed large enough for two, covered in warm orange sheets, and a wide variety of tables with assorted useful artful props — hot-colored boas, acrylic paints — and a dozen TV monitors and screen that sport triangles of moving chemical reactions between solid Ag (silver) and liquid Br (bromine), the audience is welcomed into the Love Art Lab. This is the location of the seven-year project these unique artists have committed to — to explore, generate, and share their love through art — ultimately aiming to promote peace and equal rights in the process. Their love story offers an artistic response to the violence of war and the anti-gay marriage movement as well as explores lesbian courtship, artificial insemination, queer weddings, breast cancer, and more.

From the onset, *Love, Sex, Death and Art* includes its audience in the creative "experiment." Lab assistants hand out clipboards asking members of the audience to share their definitions of the subjects of the evening. For those who wish to volunteer, they may even have polaroids taken of their upper torsos. We're talking all genders and



PHOTO BY TRISH TUNNEY

Annie Sprinkle, Elizabeth Stephens

combinations therein. It's amazing how Annie, a woman so comfortable with her own sexuality, has a way of making everyone feel as comfortable about theirs. It's pure poetry, hearing the words of those around us read by her and her partner's sonorous voices.

More public cervix announcements come as the pair share the history of their meeting over the years: first, coincidentally, at conferences, then finally falling madly and passionately in love, when they decided to make art together. Annie Sprinkle (former porn star and performance

artist) and Elizabeth Stephens (U.C. Santa Cruz Associate Professor and experimental artist) not only break the rules by using what might be construed as an expositional narrative style — in the hands of any other artists, this could be a disastrously boring evening. But what they have to expose is so humanly touching — mixing elements of pleasure, pain, and passion — that the senses get stimulated and the heart responds accordingly, opening wide to embrace their offerings. And did I mention, it's purely outrageous fun!

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Love, Sex

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One of the highlights (and there are many in the evening to enjoy) are, paradoxically, the slides of Annie in the hospital while being treated for breast cancer. The vibrant colors and miraculous joie de vivre the two demonstrate under such duress is a tribute to their imagination and refusal to be dominated by what could be the most somber of life experiences. If only we could learn by the example they offer that no moment in life is too dark to celebrate or transform into a life-expanding, art-filled one, then how much better off we would all be. Even the initial confusion we feel as to who it is who actually has the cancer makes us realize that in some ways, it doesn't really matter who it is. When you love someone to the extent that these two love each other, it's hard to differentiate where the effect of one person's illness ends and the lover's reaction begins. The sorrow is equally felt by both. And so is the joy in the process of recovery.

What we love about you, Annie and Elizabeth, is — as you so eloquently demonstrate — how you make art and survive. May you continue your commitment to complete the seven years of celebratory weddings of artist and academe you have embarked upon for seven-times-seven years more!

Love, Sex, Death and Art continues (Thurs.-Sat. 8pm) until August 27 at The New Conservatory Theatre Center, Lower Lobby, 25 Van Ness Ave., SF. Tickets (\$15-\$25) call (415) 861-8972 or go to www.nctcsf.org ▼