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it all off for naked yoga classes.

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Sprinkle & Stephens in
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BAY AREA REPORTER

Vol. 36 • No. 33 • 17 August 2006

Serving the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities since 1971

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THEATRE

Up-close and personal

'Love, Sex, Death, and Art' at New Conservatory Theatre Center

by Richard Dodds

You'll see a few things in *Love, Sex, Death, and Art* that you've probably never seen before, and had you actually been asked, probably would decline to view. But the overall spirit of this performance-art collaboration between Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle is so gentle and friendly that these unsettling images become reasonable parts of an ambitious project.

Sprinkle, former porn star and prostitute, and Stephens, an art professor at UC Santa Cruz, became partners in life three years ago, and their show documents their relationship. They view that relationship as a work of art unto itself, and frequently inject theatrics into their daily lives (documented in projected video images). The expectation that strangers will share this self-fascination is not always met, but the production, both complicated and casual, still manages to draw us in.

The stage in the largest of New Conservatory Theatre Center's three theaters is dominated by a large bed surrounded by video monitors showing scientific imagery, and before the show starts, performers in lab coats pass through the audience with surveys on love, sex, death, and art. When Sprinkle and Stephens arrive on stage, they tell us we are in their Love Art Laboratory, and each of the surveyed subjects is addressed through their relationship.

In a comic duologue, Stephens and Sprinkle talk over each other with versions of how they came to be partners. They then jump under the covers with a video-camera for some hot-and-heavy foreplay before director Neon Weiss, as one of the lab technicians, tells them they must get back to the show. That's a scripted bit, but it turned out to be helpful to have the director on stage monitoring the proceedings.

Even in the relaxed circumstances of performance art, the opening-night performance was



Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, partners in life, love and show business.

in need of tightening. And the production itself could be structured better. But Stephens and, especially, Sprinkle have a way of

getting us to smile through any snafus. Sprinkle is adept at tossing off asides with a childlike spaciness reminiscent of a sweet-

er Roscane Barr.

Sprinkle's breasts, which deserve the adjectival cliché of "pendulous," are significant characters

themselves — and are amply displayed in person and in video scenes. Thus, it is shocking when cancer enters the picture early in her and Stephens' relationship. But that doesn't stop the pair from creating "cancer erotica" and "a chemo fashion show" to counter surgical imagery that we view.

The pros and cons of gay marriage are debated with the audience, and a manifesto against reinforcing a straight institution is distributed. Even so, Stephens and Sprinkle have opted to stage yearly wedding ceremonies with design schemes thematically linked to chakra colors. For the uninitiated, the chakras are illustrated with paint on the naked body of giggly F-to-M transsexual Dylan Wade.

Tina Takemoto, another guest performer, comes out to close the show in geisha drag in what a few may get is a send-up of Bjork and artist Matthew Barney's art collaborations. It's a fuzzy bit that doesn't give this goofy, sweet, and sincere show the finale it deserves. ▼

Love, Sex, Death, and Art will run at New Conservatory Theatre Center through Aug. 27. Tickets are \$15-\$25. Call 861-8972 or go to www.nctcsf.org.