

# Wedding as performance art

## Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens get ready to say 'I do' again

### THEATRE >>PREVIEW

#### YELLOW WEDDING #3: COURAGE AND POWER

January 14  
Annie Sprinkle  
and Elizabeth Stephens  
High Performance Rodeo  
Big Secret Theatre  
(Epcor Centre)

DAVID KING

In a wedding reminiscent of a California sunburst, One Yellow Rabbit is about to get yellow fever.

The "I dos" began when San Francisco-based multi-media artist and professor Elisabeth Stephens vowed, alongside performance artist, ex-porn star and sexologist Annie Sprinkle, to marry one another not once, but seven times. At this year's third, the big news is it will be legally recognized.

"It's a site-specific performance," describes an enthusiastic Stephens, "and we try to have guests participate with performance art. We have a couple of friends in the wedding party, but this will be with a couple hundred strangers, so we don't know what will happen."

An ongoing event in the couple's *Love Art Laboratory*, the Sprinkle-Stephens weddings are one of several concoctions in their Lab's experimental test tubes these days, shuffling nuptials with an upcoming theatre tour, lectures, informative "Sidewalk Sex Clinics," art exhibits and off-the-wall fundraisers. The sum of the Lab's parts is, quite simply, a defiant act of love and peace in tough times. As a couple, however, these weddings signify their biggest acts of civil disobedience.

"Weddings are performance art," Sprinkle observes. "These are for us, real weddings celebrating our relationship, but they're also very much a political statement."

Sprinkle and Stephens have valid reason to use marriage as artistic activism. For starters, their legal California wedding was cancelled a day before taking their vows, due to changes in California's legislature.

"I think the anti-gay marriage amendment in the United States has been effectively killed for now with the Democratic majority," says a hopeful Stephens, "although if the Republicans get the majority back, it may raise its ugly head again."

The Lab itself is inspired by artist Linda Montero, whose therapeutic creation *Seven Years of Living Art* encouraged a handful of artists (Sprinkle and Stephens included) to borrow its format. Based on a seven-year structure



Married bliss — Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens

(each one representing a chakra) the couple got busy with its lab of love, while others have been exploring everything from the Seven Sacraments to learning a new musical instrument each year.

Having already shown her vagina to the world, performing the personal is an act Sprinkle has been accustomed to for years. The couple met when Stephens was asked to peruse Sprinkle's notorious "tit paintings" for a gallery, and though sparks flew, their initial encounter left their first date (and kiss) unrequited for a dozen years.

"That was my foreplay," Stephens laughs. "We just weren't ready for each other, we were in different places and the stars just weren't aligned."

Sprinkle agrees, having made huge transitions in her life and art since touring her raucous performances, including a PhD in human sexuality. While the couple isn't sure if destiny brought them together, it's clear their ceremony

isn't just about politics.

"I think things line up and make things happen, but I don't know if it's the stars or your taxes," Stephens jokes. "We really respect each other as people and artists. We also have a lot of fun together and I think those are two important elements in marriage."

"I believe in timing more than destiny," Sprinkle muses. "We're two artists with eclectic, experimental, avant-garde taste, getting married, so we use art throughout our relationship to communicate, share, get closer, go deeper."

A breast cancer survivor, Sprinkle may not have made it without the basic health benefits provided to her by Stephen's domestic partnership. Not surprisingly, she's sprung back publicly about the experience, with Stephens at her side. For the world to see, the couple worked alongside their doctor and other medical practitioners to document the removal of Sprinkle's tumour and create a successful collage of pho-

tography and other art, all the while raising funds and awareness.

"All I can say," says the new Sprinkle, "is thank you, Domestic Partnership Act. As a freelance artist, I wouldn't have had insurance, but because some activist fought for domestic partner rights, I benefit."

"We (the U.S.) are one of the wealthiest countries in the world," adds Stephens, "and we can't give everyone health care. It's sad."

Befittingly, the couple's initial "red" wedding, created in a burlesque theatre, dealt with themes of "security and survival" before embarking on last year's themes of creativity and sexuality, à l'orange. This year's yellow wedding, based on power and courage, aligns perfectly with One Yellow Rabbit, but also with the couple's own fortitude of late. Judging from the last two weddings, colour is key. Audience members can expect to see everything from sun-kissed shoulder pads and platform boots to fruity lemon headgear (as the couple jokes, "bananas" are welcome, too). Audience members can participate as performers or spectators, or make a contribution

with items like food or decorations. The couple has posted its vows on the web, and despite all appearances, they're not afraid to embrace traditions like cake cutting, the garter toss and vows.

"I think those conventions are useful for expressing love," says Stephens. "What we're trying to do is express that love as a political tactic to make the world a nicer, more open and forgiving place. We like the form of marriage. In our case, it doesn't give us any rights, so for us it's a tool for protest as opposed to an institution."

Awash with decadence, ritual, role-playing, emotional overload and public display, weddings are indeed a performance of sorts — something one might say Sprinkle and Stephens take to the extreme. Nevertheless, they get my vote for wedding of the year, and if the U.S. can't give it to them legally, it's one more reason for Canada to be proud.

To participate in the wedding as more than an audience member, e-mail or phone Kenna Burima at One Yellow Rabbit, 264-3224, ext. 35 or [kburima@oyr.org](mailto:kburima@oyr.org).

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