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Iffley and the former porn star

6: 40am Thursday 18th June 2009

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By [Reg Little »](#)

Just seconds beforehand, we had been complete strangers. But somehow I had ended up hand in hand with the former porn star Annie Sprinkle, looking up at the sky. Soon, after the lightest of squeezes, I was being urged to find a single word to sum up my inner feelings at this moment in my life. "How about 'help'?" I was tempted to mumble.

Miss Sprinkle had taken me in hand, I should explain, to lead me to a gathering of about a dozen fully-clothed, highly-respectable people, who were all standing in a circle, holding hands and looking up to the clouds. The others in the group, who included an Oxford Green Party councillor, had been taking part in the first day of the Love Art Laboratory, an event holding out the prospect of "making love into art and art into love".

But things promised to get even stranger by the end of the week when the former blue actress, who has established herself into "an internationally known multimedia artist", would be marrying Prof Elizabeth Stephens in the gardens of novelist Graham Greene's former home in Iffley.

Both women would be donning extraordinary wedding dresses, with everyone in the village invited: grannies, children, the local vicar, everyone. For this would be a wedding like no other. It would be a Blue Wedding involving two "eco-sexual brides" who would be making "sacred vows to their lover, the sky".

The brides and guests would be dressed in blue, with guests invited to drink blue bubbly, nibble on a slice of blue wedding cake and catch a blue bridal bouquet. It was all being done in the interest of art. And this remarkable event would be going on at Grove House, where Graham Greene's devout Catholic wife Vivien had famously created a museum of dolls' houses.

The regency house, dating from 1792, also happens to have once been home to the mother



Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle



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of Cardinal Newman and has long been a place of pilgrimage for admirers of the Victorian churchman, who is expected to become a Catholic saint in a year or two.

Little wonder that one local priest I spoke to about Miss Sprinkle's plans had, after a very long pause, reflected: "Well, it's not really ideal. Perhaps you would like to talk to our bishop about this one?"

Somehow the prospect of having to go through Annie's career highlights, such as the stage show *The Legend of the Ancient Sacred Prostitute*, with a Catholic bishop was not instantly appealing.

Grove House is now owned by Polly McLean, who invited the two women over from America as part of her ongoing interest in opening up the house to performance art and the community. Ms McLean, 35, is the daughter of the late founder of Oxford Airport. And she has been dedicating both her time and wealth in recent years to philanthropic work through the Funding Network charity.

She bought Grove House three years ago from the estate of Graham Greene's widow, Vivien, recognising its potential for hosting charity and arts events, small concerts and book launches — "things that bring together the arts, social change and philanthropic work: my three interests".

The house has been transformed into an eco-house, with a wood pellet boiler, rainwater harvesting and heavy insulation. But clearly the house's history greatly appealed to her.

"It is a fantastic venue for events. It housed Vivien Greene's collection of dolls' houses and is very characterful. She had lived there for 55 years and was quite elderly when she died, so it was a major job to renovate it."

Ms McLean has also thrown herself into the local community, sometimes working in the Iffley post office, while at the house she has hosted cream tea parties on the lawn for locals, and put on plays and folk music gigs.

But Grove House has never seen anything quite like the Love Art Laboratory before, which represents some experiment to really put Oxford audiences to the test.

"This is definitely the wackiest thing so far," said Ms McLean. "I really enjoy being part of the community in Iffley. That is why I must stress that it is a family-friendly thing. I would really not like people to imagine that I'm disrespecting the house."

But "family-friendly" is not a phrase that you could always apply to Ms Sprinkle, who at various times has been a prostitute, stripper, pornographic actress, cable television host and sex film producer, whose CV includes the 'classic' *Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop*.

Her first porn movie, *Teenage Deviate*, was released in 1975 and one of her films, *Deep*



Music at Oxford

NICOLA LISLE on some of the treats in store at the forthcoming 26th season of Music at Oxford



Premium vintages need to be enjoyed

SARAH McCLEERY wishes she did not get involved in so many silly debates



Julie & Julia

Meryl Streep looks certain to secure a 16th Oscar nomination for her tour-de-force portrayal of an

American cultural icon in the new comedy from writer-director Nora Ephron (*Sleepless In Seattle*). Based on two memoirs set more than 50 years apart, *Julie & Julia* (12A) is a frothy and entertaining tale of cuisine, l'amour and the art of killing lobsters.



Music in the Abbey : Dorchester Abbey

GILES WOODFORDE talks to local conductor John Lubbock ahead of his annual autumn abbey festival



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Inside Annie Sprinkle, was the second biggest grossing porn film of 1981.

When she turned to art, her one-woman shows hardly saw things being toned down: for example her piece Pubic Cervix Announcement saw her inviting audiences to view her cervix with a flashlight.

But for the last seven years she has been collaborating with the love of her life, Elizabeth Stephens, who is chair of the art department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Together they created the Love Art Laboratory and Miss Sprinkle was relaunched as a purveyor of performance art.

Anyone who went along last week expecting to find a damaged, bitter woman, preaching of the dangers of exploitation, will have been shocked.

"I came out a winner," she told me. "I've written five books and my work has become part of the curriculum at many major universities. I'm the first porn star to earn a PhD."

And, if you are wondering, she received her doctorate in human sexuality from the Institute of Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco.

She speaks of the men and women that she worked with in the porn industry with affection and respect before adding: "But all that was 30 years ago. Do I look like a porn star to you?", suddenly lifting a loose baggy top to show a far from trim figure. And, in truth, she does now resemble an eccentric, slightly overweight, favourite auntie, with a taste for heavy make-up, rather than a blue movie queen.

Her partner insists that compared with the cut-throat world of art in America, people in porn behave like saints. "You should meet some of Annie's porn fans. They are just lovely," said Prof Stephens. "At our weddings the guests are mostly artists, academics and sex workers."

Miss Sprinkle goes on to explain that she has always regarded sex to be a performance art. But then the couple appear to see everything they do as art. When Miss Sprinkle was diagnosed with breast cancer, even this became part of the Art Laboratory project. The couple would go to chemotherapy infusions together dressed in absurd, incongruous costumes to entertain the other patients.

"What better time to make love art?" Ms Sprinkle asked.

The two women have been married a number of times now. There was a red wedding in the old Harmony Burlesque Theater in Manhattan and a green wedding at various locations.

At one point they became involved in a lively discussion about whether the wedding at San Francisco or in Canada was the legally binding one.

The weddings idea was, in part, their way of

protesting about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We wished that everyone could be as in love as we were," said Prof Stephens. "As artists, we decided to generate art about love and present it as an alternative vision to the violence and destruction."

They were also irritated about a move by right-wing American politicians proposing an anti-gay marriage amendment to the US Constitution.

It was all beginning to sound more early Yoko Ono than Miss Whiplash.

For £180 it had been possible to sign up for a week-long workshop at Grove House, by way of preparation for the wedding. This featured an intimate tell-all evening with the two ladies, sharing their experiences.

Another session, led by the artist Luke Dixon, offered participants the chance to make prints with their naked bodies and to decorate the walls of the fabulous Rotunda, where Mrs Greene had once kept her dolls' houses.

If the response of the Iffley-based writer and historian Julie Summers was anything to go by, Ms McLean did not have anything to worry about as far as the locals were concerned. "It sounds an amazing concept, pushing the boundaries of art in a way that Graham Greene would not have imagined during his tenure of the house," she chuckled. "I do like Polly."

So, how did the big wedding go?

Well, sadly, The Oxford Times is, for once, unable to reveal all. A few days before it was due to take place, Ms McLean's appetite for publicity suddenly vanished on learning that the piece would appear after the event.

With no prospects of selling £12 tickets to the wedding on the back of the feature, our invitation was hastily withdrawn and my stunning blue suit has gone back into the wardrobe. So, there would be no more holding hands in circles, or sacred vows to the earth, for me Still, no need to feel too blue. I could always look at the sky at home in the back garden.

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