Annie Danger: She'll Take Your Body on a Spiritual Journey

By Lily Janiak
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Annie Danger isn't officially running for Pope, at least not yet, but the performing artist might win a sizable share of the electorate (whoever they are) here in S.F. Originally from Albuquerque, N.M., Danger has been doing queer performance in the Bay Area since moving here in 1999. Part artist, part activist, she often performs with the National Queer Arts Festival and the Sex Workers' Film and Art Festival. This weekend, her The Great Church of the Holy Fuck, which premiered in a different version at SOMArts' This Is What I Want festival in 2011, once again offers the sacrament to believers and heathens alike at CounterPULSE. The show is, as she puts it, "a fake/not-fake Mass about what it's like to have a body that we don't feel good about." We spoke to Danger about her ethics as a performer, the spiritual journey she leads, and whether the Bay Area needs more discussions about sex.

How did your project get started?
This Is What I Want asked me to perform, and at first I was like, "Queers talking about the sex that they want? Boring! Queers talk about that all the time." But then I asked myself, "What do I want?" and I thought, "I want people to feel better."

Feel better about what?
I don't know any person who, in the course of a lifetime, doesn't have some trauma associated with sex. We all hate our bodies, and that's rough.

But in a city with the Folsom Street Fair, do we really need more comfort with and dialogue about sex?
I thought that too. But in queer scenes, there's this really sloppy ethic that's like, "We're really high and fucking all the time!" but those scenes are cliquish and damaging. I want healing and accepting. I want to make work that benefits audiences, artists, and causes.

Your work, it should be said, is also hilarious.
I see art as a communication tool and humor as a communication tool. I try to find a hybrid between those ethics of mine and [creating] a good time for everyone. But I don't think those are at odds, really.

Where did your morals as a performer come from?
I got really into punk from age 11 ... really into the ethics and politics of that movement. Even now I have strong feelings against art that's like therapy, that's just for the artist.
Tell us about your choice to stage your show as a Mass — or as you call it, a "heft."
It's not a comment on Catholicism. I see sex as pure church. I'm really interested in my audience's experience. I'm not trying to "convince" anyone of anything; I want to collaborate with my audience.

That must be tricky when audience members approach your work with different attitudes.
People [in the Bay Area] are really cynical, and they show up with a certain amount of doubt, but I do my best to get them involved, and they'll find themselves more willing. There's space for the audience to feel whatever they want. I start off light and funny and build trust in that way. I ask a lot of my audience, so first I ask them to play with me. I make it fun so that audiences feel cozy and engaged. There's something funny — and then something weird. A thing I say about my work is, "The joke is it's not a joke."

Your piece features many of the elements of a traditional Mass — prayers, a hymn (with original music by Noelle Duncan), and a sacrament. What kind of journey will your audience embark on?
At a certain point, a gripping, sadder emotion comes up. I've pulled the audience out of their bodies, and then there's a grounding moment in the body: What's going on in there? Then there's a commingling, a sharing, an exchange. I take a burden from you and give you something better in return. We're really playing with the edge of emotional safety; there are private moments but also public moments. And then there's a release moment together, and then donuts and coffee afterward — because it's church!

Your spiritual leader persona is Rev. Dr. Andrea Maybelline Danger. What's she like?
A mix of a Baptist preacher, Rev. Lovejoy from The Simpsons, and Carl Sagan.

You have a commanding presence and a melodious, soothing voice. What else does it take to preach the good word?
It takes a lot of respect for your congregation and an understanding of where they are emotionally and where they're willing to go. It takes thoughtfulness to ethically take them to the places you want them to go.

Would you ever consider running for Pope?
I'm not looking for disciples. I want people to be disciples of themselves.

Tags: Stage, Stage, Annie Danger, Albuquerque, Holy F * ck, Andrea Maybelline Danger, CounterPULSE

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