usinprogress
wroclaw, poland
november 17–19, 2026
AFF
17. american film festival
where Europe meets US indies
final call for submissions

“Fire is Like Sex — Neither Good Nor Bad But What You Bring To It”: Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens on *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency*

#image_title

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

by Scott Macaulay
in Directors, Interviews
on Jun 23, 2025

Annie Sprinkle, Beth Stephens, ecosexuality, Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency

In the first two films in their trilogy of environmental-themed documentaries, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle married — literally — their loving spirit of “ecosexuality” with urgent debates around the preservation of our natural resources. In 2014’s *Goodbye Gauley Mountain — An Ecosexual Love Story*, Stephens returned to her West Virginia home with Sprinkle only to find the eponymous ridges she remembered from her youth undergoing the environmentally-destructive coal-mining process of mountaintop removal. In the film, as Wren Awry wrote for *Filmmaker*, Stephens says, “Sometimes I feel like fighting [mountaintop removal] is a losing battle. Then I imagine that some good old queer ACT UP-style activism and eco-sexual performance art may be just what it takes to stop these corporations from destroying the world. That is exactly what we intend to do.” The film, which blends voices from across the issue, culminates in an eco-sex wedding, in which the duo marry the Appalachian mountains themselves.

Taking on another of the four classical elements, the filmmakers’s follow-up, 2019’s *Water Makes Us Wet — An Ecosexual Adventure,* explicitly considers climate change as it examines the causes of drought and pollution with voiceover from the Earth itself, viewed here as “a queer lover.” Again, amidst the scientific discussion and engagement with thirsty residents as well as water treatment workers, Stephens and Sprinkle use their ecosexuality as a disarming tactic but also one that asks us to see our resources as things to cherish, not take for granted. “We are in San Bernardino to meet people opposing Nestle’s bottling of local water,” remembered Sprinkle to Miriam Tola in *Filmmaker*. “Beth suddenly starts to lovingly talk to a stream of water. This was an ecoromantic impulse, totally spontaneous. It is my favorite part of the film. People use water in all kinds of ways, but how many people really give water their love?”

Now, after earth and water, Stephens and Sprinkle shift their attention to another element, fire, a move that puts their loving methodology to the test. Fire is such a destructive force, an element society tries to avoid and vanquish. With climate change accelerating wildfires, and major fires destroying entire communities, as was the case earlier this year in Los Angeles, would Stephens and Sprinkle’s very personal and quite irreverent ecosexual spirit meet its match in the roaring flames?

Fortunately, and perhaps improbably, the duo emerge from their newest film, *Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency*, with their artistic practice not only unsinged but having adapted quite well to the subject matter shift. Although bracketed by two destructive fires — the first, in 2020, drove the couple from their Boulder Creek home in Northern California home while the

Related Articles

***Do You Love Me* Reassembles Lebanon’s Cultural Memory**
by Lauren Wissot in Directors, Filmmaking, Interviews
Jul 14, 2026

Fix Your Heart or Die: Adrian Chiarella on *Leviticus*
by Alexander Mooney in Directors, Interviews
Jun 22, 2026

I Shot *I Shot Andy Warhol*
by Elissa Suh in Directors, Interviews
Jun 15, 2026

second, the California fires of early 2025 destroyed neighborhoods that are a long way from rebuilding — Stephens and Sprinkle successfully widen their lens, seeing fire as a force to be feared and tamed but also respected and lovingly engaged with. (The latter approach is demonstrated in a sequence with artist Barbara Carrellas, who engages in urban tantra fire play with Sprinkle). The film's voices include "artists, Indigenous elders, witches, formerly incarcerated firefighters and educators," traversing topics from forest firefighter hiring practices to the environmental impact of cremation. The artist Cassils demonstrates *Inextinguishable Fire*, which premiered at Sundance in 2016; already a bracing watch, within the context of the film, seeing the artist's body covered in flames is a gut punch. Like *Water Makes Us Wet*, there's a narrator, but here's it's not the Earth but rather a white peacock, Albert, a majestic Boulder Creek fixture. And, yes, there's another wedding ceremony, this one officiated by the performance-poet Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Connecting it all are Stephens and Sprinkle, partners for 23 years, whose overall inquisitiveness and generosity made me wish after watching *Playing with Fire* that they'd be commissioned for some globe-trotting travel show; the myriad issues facing our planet could all benefit from their sex-positive, deeply loving approach.

Playing with Fire: An Ecosexual Emergency premiered at Frameline last Friday and from today until June 30 is available for viewing on the festival's streaming platform.

Filmmaker: Your previous docs have dealt with mountaintop removal and clean water. This deals with fire, which is a destructive force, but one that you reframe for us in various ways. Could you tell me about the challenges of taking the more loving approach of your previous films and marrying it to fire?

Stephens: Fire, I mean, we need it to have civilization, and when it's out of control, it'll kill. It can be really beautiful or horrifying.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Sprinkle: Fire is like sex — it's neither good nor bad. It's neutral. It's what you bring to it. Fire is about the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It's a teacher.

Stephens: All three of our films are not just about the destruction of the environment but about how we engage eco-sexually with the environment. But, yes, fire seemed more horrifying. Who knows about mountaintop removal in West Virginia? And water, even in a drought you still almost always have it. But, fire, when it's coming down the mountain after you is scary and primal and magical. With climate change we're going to have to deal with it a bit more. And, this [fire] happened right in our neighborhood. The fire came within a block of our house.

Fire a great metaphor, and metaphorical thinking provided a link [for us] between physical or environmental fire — fire as an element — and the social fires that have been happening and are happening right now. We located the beginning of these in the murder of George Floyd and COVID, which were fires in themselves too.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Filmmaker: The film starts in 2020 and ends in 2025, so it's bracketed by these fires. Did the L.A. fires also convince you to just end the movie at this point?

Stephens: Yes, they absolutely did, although we did film the Big Basin scene after that.

Sprinkle: We wanted to be done, we were really close, but, you know, we do a lot of different projects at the same time. We're big multi-taskers. It really felt like the birth of this film was imminent when the L.A. fires happened. We had a test screening and got some feedback: How are we going to deal with the L.A. fires? Our friends helped figure it out, but then we kept changing things around again.

I'm very happy with this film. I think it's very complex, and I love all the different kinds of diversity we have in it. And, as a sexologist, fire is sexy. It's sensual. That's important to me, as is also introducing ecosexuality again. And I'm really happy with how the three films tie together. I hope it's helpful to people who are navigating these catastrophic events of change and life and death and rebirth — the cycle of life. We have to make friends with change and death and know that something new is coming.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE
UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS
SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Filmmaker: How did you initially conceptualize the film, and, particularly, hone in on the array of voices from so many different backgrounds to consider the topic of fire?

Stephens: We just started shooting things without a plan. We were interviewing people just as the fire receded and people could come back. People were so terrified about the fire. They were getting dropped by their insurance. And people were like, “You have to cut all the redwoods down,” which is very difficult to do in the middle of a forest. But we were supposed to doing all these things to prepare for [the next] fire, and I didn’t think that if a fire is really large and out of control that this preparation was going to help that much.

Then we realized we didn’t really know anything about fire. And we didn’t know what the shape of the film was going to be at all, and we realized we didn’t really know anything about fire. So, we pulled together a symposium at [UC Santa Cruz]. We brought all these experts and [began] a process of learning about fire. Meanwhile, all these other things are going on, COVID is happening, there are riots everywhere — it felt like our whole society was on fire. We were just kind of documenting and had no plan for how the film was going to come together until the very end. Our producer, Keith Wilson, watched a lot of footage, sat us down, and made a script. He’s really a genius at putting our crazy ideas into a timeline. And then our editor, Diana J. Brode, she did the fine tuning of the things that Keith had done. But we were still filming. We drove her a little crazy, because we would be like, “Oh, we have another scene!”

Filmmaker: And how much of the footage did you both shoot? There must have been several shooters.

Stephens: [The footage] shot during the fire was acquired. There were guys in Boulder Creek who stayed behind after the evacuation, and they were riding motorcycles around to inform people whether or not their houses had burned, and they were fighting the fires. These guys were really, really brave. But I shot stuff out the car window as we were leaving — the burned-out cars. I shot the footage of Albert [the white peacock] during the dust bath, and Annie shot footage along with five or six other people. Our poor color correction guy, he was like, “So you probably used at the most three cameras, right?” And we were like, “No we probably used 20 cameras!”

Sprinkle: We always say that we’re process-oriented, which is pretty accurate. We’re so busy all the time, and we’re either a step ahead or behind, which drives some people crazy, but it works for us. We just go with the flow, like water, and do the next best thing. When the L.A. fires happened, we were like, well, we’ve got to put that in at the end. And then to go back to Big Basin, and there’s a sign that says, “Planet over profit,” we just popped that in. We were trying to figure out how to talk about capitalism, and there it was. It was just like magic was afoot as we brought this together.

Filmmaker: Beth, tell me more about the symposium you created to learn more about fire. Are the interviewees in the film from that symposium, or was it more purely an academic research practice?

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE
UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS
SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Stephens: Our symposiums are half academic and then half like family reunion. We did a really big one at Performance Space New York two summers ago. We always incorporate academics with sex workers and artists. We have performance art, and we show films. They're really art events.

Filmmaker: I wanted to ask about including the work of the artist Cassils. I loved that whole sequence, and I remember seeing a video version of that fire piece at Sundance years ago. When you decided to make a movie about fire, did you start recalling people you knew, like the woman who does the kind of fetish fire therapy? Or was it more of an exploratory process to discover people? Or both?

Stephens: At UC Santa Cruz I teach classes that are based on video interviews. I have this beautiful studio at school where I can interview people. So both of those scenes were originally for my interview class, although we didn't interview Cassils there.

Sprinkle: But we did draw from our friends and community. Our communities are mainly artists, activists, scholars and, of course, sex workers. Madison [Young] was a fetish model. Barbara Carellas does urban tantra sex education. We interviewed the young game designers for Beth's class, and they were a last-minute inclusion.

Stephens: We've shown the film to everyone who's in the film, I believe. We were nervous about the FFRP, the Forestry Fire Recruitment Program, if they would like the film because they're not queer. And they were really happy. I don't want people to be in the film, especially main interviewees like that, if they don't want to be. But they really loved it. The film doesn't just have single identity appeal, and that's the film I wanted to make – something bigger than we are and that's not silo'd into one identity.

Filmmaker: Annie, was it difficult for you to film and include the scene of your mother being cremated?

Sprinkle: Well, we had to do a little clandestinely. The crematorium was skittish about being filmed. We were shooting with our phone.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE
UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS
SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Filmmaker: What about emotionally?

Sprinkle: Oh, yeah, but my mom would have liked it. I wouldn't have done it if my family and my mother wouldn't have wanted me to.

Filmmaker: I know — you have that line of dialogue in the car afterward about your mom would have wanted you to accompany her on the final moment of her journey. I was really touched by that. Everyone in my family has been cremated, and I'll admit to never even thinking about being part of the process.

Sprinkle: It's called a "witness cremation." You pay a little extra, like $100. And did you know you can be aquamated now? They put your body in some water and chemicals, and you turn into seashells. I'm going to be aquamated for sure. And it doesn't pollute the air.

Filmmaker: There are many different modalities through which one can look at these issues. Beth, when Wren Awry wrote in our pages about *Goodbye Gauley Mountain*, she quotes you speaking about queerness: "This work is not just making environmentalism more accessible to queers, it's helping make queerness a visible and public part of the discourse around mountaintop removal." And: "The film is unabashedly queer in its own situated (eco)sexuality, which may be used to discredit those who appear in it." Today, why is it important to continue to consider these environmental issues through a queer lens?

Stephens: I think the word queer is expansive, and I'm interested in that expansiveness. You know, I took *Goodbye, Gauley Mountain* to this festival in West Virginia, the Conservation Film Festival. My cousin went with me, and he got so depressed watching all these horrible environmental films. He was like, "Why live?" I never want to make a depressing film like [those] where there's really no alternative but to have this liberal "feeling sorry for yourself and everything's going to die" — it seems cynical to me. I was at this thing the other day with a comedian who said, "It's horrible that democracy is going up in flames, but it makes for great comedy." I was like, wow.

Sprinkle: I had to stop doing films for maybe 10 years. And Beth wanted to do film about mountaintop removal. Apparently, as far as anyone can ascertain, it's the first queer environmental activist doc feature. Now there's a new one, *Rivers of Grass*, which we're excited to see. You know, our influence is the Radical Faeries, who were doing queer, environmental, nature-loving eco-sex.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE
UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS
SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Stephens: Right now, and historically, the queers are among the groups under attack. I think it's really important that our leaders and these really conservative people in this country who are fighting for the eradication of difference see that we're everywhere. And queerness is in nature, it's in culture, it's in the air we breathe, right? Difference is the thing that makes life worth living, but it also threatens. It threatens conservative ideology, which is intended to, you know, be a tool, a mechanism of control I guess I really am for people to have the freedom to be who they are and to do and think and believe and be with the people they want to be with, as long as they're not hurting others. And not just humans. I mean the non human too. It's hard to navigate life without hurting others, because we step on bugs all the time, and we breathe out carbon dioxide. We're like little killer machines. But I feel like capitalism has gotten to such a point that *it's* really the big killer, and these people that are professing to be good Christians, they just want to kill everything, it seems? And so I feel like, queer is such is such a fruitful idea for me. I grew up in West Virginia, a very, very conservative area, and where there was a price to pay for being a free thinker. And part of that price was being part of a diaspora, you know? I think queer is a really generative idea for me, because it just means different. That's the original meaning of the word. You're strange, right? The strange stranger. I like being the strange stranger, and I like other strange strangers. I'm always a little leery of the normal, whatever that is.

Sprinkle: We have a book called *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth is Lover*. We both talk about our backgrounds, and it's about two artists in love. But we also acknowledge all the critiques we get about eco sex and our work, and we push up against sex negativity. You know, it's a big taboo to eroticize anything but a human —

Stephens: All those taboo-makers are eroticizing money, I can tell you that. With their cars and private jets.

Sprinkle: And violence and wars — they get off on it.

Filmmaker: Annie, humor has always been such an important part of your work, and humor really pops out unexpectedly in this film, especially with the talking animals and their animated dialogue bubbles. Tell me a little bit about the decision to lean into humor in the editorial process.

Sprinkle: Beth and I are both Fluxus trained. My boyfriend in my 20s, William De Ridder, was Fluxus Artist and Beth's professor, Geoffrey Hendricks at Rutgers, was a Fluxus artist. We both really love conceptual, experimental art and are huge fans of Fluxus. In fact, at our movie premiere, we're giving out all these eco Fluxus boxes. But humor makes the medicine go down.

Stephens: The text bubble thing came from our producer, Keith Wilson. He was the editor for our first two films, and we begged him to edit this one, and he refused. He even moved to Georgia and took a gig in the theater department at the University of to get away from us! We tracked him down — we got a visiting artist giggle [there], unbeknownst to him — and took him out to dinner and said, "You've got to help us with this film!" He said that you can't have a film today without having [cell] phones in it. One of my grad students shot this footage of goats eating brush to help the fire [management], and she gave it to us as a present. And then Keith put the text bubbles on them. And then, well, then, of course, Albert had to have them. But, I'll tell you, I applied for a grant, and I used the text bubbles as an example in our work sample. And I was watching the committee, and one woman was like, "What does this has to do anything! This isn't funny!" Carol Queen, who has the Center for Sex and Culture, and I had the two lowest scores.

RISE OR DIE
ANDREW GARFIELD
THE UPRISING
ONLY IN THEATERS SEPTEMBER 11
WATCH TRAILER

Filmmaker: Is there anything else either of you want to add?

Stephens: Well, I think love is so important in the world today — the kind of love that generates new ideas, new art and new connections. Love that heals and protects the people who need a little extra help.

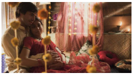
Sprinkle: And kudos to the filmmakers out there. It's not an easy thing to finish a film! And I just want to say in closing that I'm here at the Tribeca Film Festival, but it's weird, I'm trying to step back from the spotlight. I'm 70, and I'm ready to go swimming and just build some muscle again. Some self-care is needed. But at the same time, we have to save the planet. I mean, the planet will go on, but we gotta make it. I mean, the moon is ugly. We have the best planet.

Stephens: How can you say that?!? We're married to the moon! Reverend Billy married us!

Sprinkle: I meant Mars! And we need a distributor. I'm looking at you, Kino Lorber. You distributed the first one, so be brave! We have a trilogy. It's just like *Star Wars*.

usinprogress
wroclaw, poland november 17–19, 2026
AFF
TAURON
17. american film festival
where Europe meets US indies
final call for submissions

Featured Articles



Salman Rushdie and Deepa Mehta on *Midnight's Children*

By Kevin Canfield on Apr 17, 2013

Interview with *Gayby* Director Jonathan Lisecki

By R. Kurt Osenlund on Oct 12, 2012

Corrective Lens

By Ray Pride on Jul 23, 2015

25 Picks for the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival

By Scott Macaulay on Apr 16, 2014

©2026 Filmmaker Magazine All Rights Reserved

A Publication of the gotham