

Old-fashioned gal

Elaine St. George's tuneful, gay take on marriage

By John Amodeo

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"I'll be happy to play to a big old audience of queers," declares lesbian comic and cabaret singer Elaine St. George, who in spite of having been performing for over a decade, has never performed in P-town before. This coming weekend, however, that will change when St. George, who has graced many Manhattan cabaret rooms, makes her Provincetown debut with *The Girl That I Marry*, at the Provincetown Inn, August 13-15.

Not that she is a stranger to the Cape or Massachusetts. The New Jersey native, who still lives there, summered on the mid-Cape every year growing up ("My mother was a teacher, so she had summers off," adds St. George). Even now, her partner of eight years is a Northampton native, which they still frequent to visit friends.



St. George spoke to *Bay Windows* by phone from her New Jersey home, where she immediately conveyed a great deal of warmth and sincerity through her deep smoky speaking voice, which belies the singer's clarion soprano that serves as a musical foil to her show's comic banter. In fact, it is the juxtaposition of her sharp satirical wit, and her remarkable voice that gets people's attention. New York City-based radio station WRTN/WVOX asserts "St. George is an inventive vocalist with a spunky, sassy persona," while *Time Out New York* declares "Barbara Cook and Elaine St. George must have been separated at birth. St. George hits the same gorgeous, shimmering notes ... but she puts a decidedly modern spin on her music."

Counter to what is considered hip and cool in today's music scene, the repertoire of this distinctly hip performer relies heavily on the Great American Songbook, with works by Arlen, Berlin, Kern, Rodgers and Mercer. As a child, she discovered a stash of her father's favorite records in his basement woodshop. "I started playing them, and was blown away," recalls St. George. Strains of Ella Fitzgerald's "Gershwin Songbook," and

Ella Logan singing on a studio recording of *Finian's Rainbow* changed her life, and the way she would sing. One of her favorites was *Guys and Dolls*, and she includes in her cabaret show a song from that score, "More I Can Not Wish You," a song she says her father always had wanted sung at her wedding.

For St. George, comedy was always a little more intuitive, but she most enjoys the more writerly comics like Lily Tomlin and Eddie Izzard, the latter of which floored her with his ability to weave his tale on the creation of the world throughout his show, going from Hitler to Bugs Bunny to the present. "Those who tell jokes here and there do less for me than a show that has an arc and a through line," explains St. George. "[*The Girl That I Marry*] has that kind of arc. You go from Point A to Point B, and it seems like a journey you've been on."

Though St. George's repertoire may be filled with standards, her lesbian perspective puts a twist on her show that is anything but standard. "I have access to every song that has ever been sung by a man in the history of the world," proclaims St. George. For example, she sings Rodgers & Hart's "Have You Met Miss Jones," typically sung only by men. Even when Ella sang it, she changed it to "...Sir Jones." When looking for someone to write liner notes for her live recording of this show, she approached Richard Rodgers' daughter, Mary Rodgers, not without some trepidation, thinking Rodgers would be put off by a woman singing that song as written, until Rodgers herself confessed that as a child she used to walk around the house singing "...Miss Jones." While many standards from the early-mid 20th century make up a good part of the show, St. George also includes several works by Sondheim, and even moves into the 21st century with the bawdy lesbian showstopper, "Old Fashioned Love Story," from Andrew Lippa's *Wild Party*.

The latter piece is an example of St. George's satirical take on the issue of marriage. "I really love the subject [of gay marriage]," acknowledges St. George. "I love being able to make people laugh about this subject. I love being able to talk about something so important, but in a way that is not preachy."

While her humorous side is most evident, a serious, more sensitive side of her lurks just beneath the surface, emerging occasionally through some of the ballads in her show, such as "Love Who You Are," from *A Man of No Importance* (Ahrens/Flaherty). "I love making people cry when I'm performing, because that means that people are really listening to me," confesses St. George. "Ballads are some of the most beautiful songs ever written, and if I couldn't sing them, I would be really sad. Even Lea De Laria sings ballads."

Elaine St. George performs "The Girl That I Marry," on August 13-15, at 9 p.m., at the Provincetown Inn, 1 Commercial Street, Provincetown, MA. Tickets are \$15. Reserve tickets online at www.capetix.com, or at the door. For more information, call, 508.487.2666, or visit www.ptownfringe.org, or www.elainestgeorge.com.