Ah yes, we’ve hit that weird and super-early springtime, when everyone’s fancy turns to love (or lust) and our most intimate human desires force us to do dumb stuff to attract those we find desirable. It’s a wonderful time of year—just right, even, for SFR’s annual Love and Sex issue. And this year’s a doozy, from the health of your dick (page 12) and the pitfalls of dating locally while trans (page 13) to an actress who fell hard for her onstage puppet pal (page 14) and the absurd nature of that looming and terrifying V-Day (page 15). But it’s not all doom and gloom. Some of the information is lovely or at least reassuring and, if you’ve been a disaster on previous Valentine’s Days, therapist/sexologist Dr. Anne Ridley has some soothing (or maybe we should say easy-to-follow) advice in our 3 Questions section (page 27). It’s been said that love is a many-splendored thing, and this is true enough, but that doesn’t always mean it’s easy. We’re being realistic this year, Santa Fe, and though we may revel in our various forms of the big L, we know that comes with weirdness, sadness and expectations. But let’s stay positive, or as JC Gonzo would say: heart reacts only.
You Don’t Know Dick

EXPAND YOUR DEFINITION OF SEX

BY HUNTER RILEY

What is sex, and how do you define it? Is your definition universal? Often, the answers to this question vary, depending on the person you’re asking, what kinds of sex they have and what media representations they’ve been exposed to about sex and sexuality. Definitions of sex are often—and often mistakenly—based around a penis penetrating something, and that penis being erect, a certain size, and the erection lasting for hours.

I work at Self Serve, an education and health-focused sex shop in Albuquerque, and some of the most common questions I get are about penises and how they function. People come in almost every day asking if we sell pills or creams that can make their penis bigger and/or make them last longer. We don’t sell such pills or creams for a few reasons:

Pills are often not regulated in any way and they typically don’t deliver results they promise. They might even have negative side effects. Also, we don’t want to sell a product that relies on the insecurity of people with penises. Not to mention that all of this comes back around to the idea that sex has to involve an erect penis that works 100 percent; whenever the person attached wants it to.

And, spoiler alert—that often doesn’t match up with how penises actually work on a day-to-day basis. People with penises (and the rest of us) are often given lots of messages about how a penis should be, and this premise ignores the fact that lots of people have amazing, mind-blowing sex when a penis or erection isn’t even involved.

Very few parts of our body work as we would like all the time. So why do we hold penises up to such a high standard? If you’re going about your daily life and you get a headache or roll your ankle, you don’t get angry or ashamed that your body isn’t acting exactly as you hoped. Sometimes we’re dehydrated. Sometimes our joints are tired from working. If people with a penis start to get nervous or upset about whether or not their penis will function “properly” during a sexual encounter, it’s actually more likely that the penis will have a hard time getting hard because of the pressure (no pun intended).

When I talk to penis-owners about their struggles, some of the first questions I ask are:

“Have you tried using your hands or mouth instead?”

“What about picking out a dildo or sex toy you and your partner like, and using that together?”

Your partner will most likely be happy to have you go to town with your hands, mouth or a toy. It’s also likely that if you take the pressure off your body to have or maintain an erection, it’s more likely to show up or come back. Erectile health is complex, and due to lack of comprehensive sex education, most people don’t know how to take care of their erections for long-term health. There are several factors that can impact erections including diet, drinking, smoking, stress, sleep, exercise, medications and more. If you had a bad day at work, your dick might not work like you want it to later on.

So, if we expand our definition of what sex is, we don’t need our bodies to work exactly how we think they “should” 100 percent of the time. And taking that pressure off of ourselves and our partners means we can more fully enjoy sex, in all the forms it takes.

There’s a fantastic documentary on Netflix called UnHung Hero; the story follows a man as he tries almost all the penis enhancement methods under the sun. Some of them are terrifying to watch, even if you don’t have a penis. He even calls several companies that sell pills and asks them why, after taking pills for several weeks, he hasn’t seen any changes in his erections. They say, flat-out, “We don’t guarantee results.”

While there are real things you can (and probably should) do to help increase your erectile health, one of the most effective ways, according to Dr. Steven Lamm, author of The Hardness Factor, is to increase the amount of nitrogen in your blood. One of the best ways to do this is via exercise, diet, and decreasing smoking and drinking. Dr. Lamm notes that erectile dysfunction, such as not being able to achieve or maintain an erection, is often one of the first indicators of bigger health challenges down the line.

Your dick is trying to tell you something.

It’s telling you to take care of yourself, so it can take care of you and your partners. And one of the best ways to do that is by taking some pressure off. Really, what it comes down to is: Your dick is begging you to expand your definition of sex.❤️
As a gender non-conforming person, navigating most spaces can be a nightmare, especially when it comes to dating. The majority of interactions with people outside of trans-affirming spaces means someone will look at your body characteristics to try and determine your gender and, often, what they see will tell them how to identify you before you ever get a word in.

For these people, physical characteristics ascribe gender. But ultimately, it’s what’s between your legs, right?

Wrong. Gender is not genitalia. In fact, gender can be everything and anything (including genitalia), but it has no singular definition. Those who fall outside the standard construct are often “other,” and “other” is usually trying to gauge which label they should claim while trying to safely and respectfully maneuver into an engagement with another being that feels sexy and fun, or at least worth a drive across town.

When I am looking to date, I feel I have a lot of explaining to do or like I have to make excuses for one part of me or another. What attributes will I claim? What gender will I choose from the two options? Or will I tell the truth? How will we navigate the individual consents of our bodies? Will we do that at all? How can I look or be seen in these spaces when mine is an error in the cis-tem; an anomaly?

Inclusion can be mind-blowing. Throughout the ripple of trans visibility, some of us have achieved opportunities to participate in normative society. It’s almost like the popular kids talking to the band kids: It looks good in action, but it’s almost like the popular kids talking to the band kids. It looks good in action, but it’s difficult to trust it.

Between old-fashioned ways of physically co-existing and speaking to strangers in public and online dating—where we swipe and scroll our way around an attraction to heavily constructed digital selves in hopes of potentially meeting in real life—being non-conforming sometimes means a lot of negotiation; sometimes, as in Santa Fe, options are limited.

Meeting for dates, hookups or hangouts already seems a struggle as one ages, but the bigger the intersectionalities of identity, the more complicated these tasks become. Recently, many online dating sites have expanded offerings to serve the transgender community; both binary and non-binary alike, with Grindr currently all the rage for opening the gateways for other genders to peruse the site. (But really, they were already doing it anyway.) Non-binary shares its category with others like non-conforming, queer, crossdresser, (…), and, lastly, custom non-binary.

Pronouns: they/them/their; my pic and words, etc.

Things one might say on their profile: AFAB, non-binary/non-conforming queer seeks (…).

If I get a like, a swipe, a message—great. But we’ll likely get 99.9 percent close to meeting before this last minute flake-out completely obliterates this option. Usually, the messages start out like, “Hey,” or “Trans?”

They’re neutral. Then it’s on.

One message I recently received seemed promising. This apparent “boy” asked if I had facial hair, to which I responded, “Yes, of course!” because I can say that now and it’s thrilling! (He had no idea how I have waited to answer that.) He gave me his number, I text him and, finally, I received:

“Hey/I’m so and so/I’m discreet/ Would you mind shaving your facial hair?”

I sent back a line of typed out laughter. I asked if he wanted to compensate with some money.

He declined.

I asked if he was looking for more of a girl, because this is clearly a queer scenario and I am maybe into it. He said no. That he only used Grindr for blow jobs but since I “still had a pussy and tits I’m all down.”

In the end, I learned he was straight and cruising the formerly gay-only space to net thirsty young queers who perhaps didn’t care. Suddenly, no matter what my identity was or how non-conforming either of us were, I was a fuckable woman.

The messages stopped. Another dissatisfying interaction. Forever in this awkward duckling stage, I keep moving forward. Reactivating and redownloading, half-heartedly swiping left and right. I can play along with the narrative anytime I want, be whatever I want to be, determined by my consent within the moment.

My inclusion is meant to open expanded options for all, but even though I may find myself ready to be included in those spaces, it seems a lot of people are not ready for me. What if I mess up on the love of my life because I refuse to answer whether I’m a man or a woman? But the kinds of people I want to engage with would never ask that question, and would identify across the gender spectrum themselves.

Ultimately, I cannot say how I will find them. Maybe not in a dating app or hookup app or singles gathering downtown. The kind of person I want to engage with is going to come out of nowhere, when I least expect it. For all of my complexity it’ll take a little luck, many no-thank-yous and a whole lot of magic.

While Santa Fe feels like a queer desert, devoid of young and reasonable pursuits for a my type of gender non-conformity, I get by instead with the curious experiences I accumulate in the City Different.
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he sad state of sexual affairs in media and art has recently been rightfully and glaringly exposed. You thought all those middle-aged men were just benevolent patrons, brilliant teachers and talented artists … but nope. They’re all rapists, degenerates and human dumpster fires. Yikes.

So let’s take this somewhere else. Let’s reclaim the idea of love between artists. Let’s go to a simpler place; a sweeter place; to the realm of the showmance.

For those who’ve not set foot on a stage, the concept of a showmance is a pretty simple one: amorous feelings between members of a theatrical production. It happens a lot. Honestly, it’s even a little odd if a show goes by without a showmance. It’s a fact of life in theater: You’re gonna get laid, and it’s probably gonna be good. (Best. Hobby. Ever.)

Even at the “lowest” level of commitment (unpaid community theater shows), you’re still rehearsing six or seven days a week for three to five hours a day for maybe two months. You’re all arty-types, which means you’re probably passionate and a little fiery. (That’s said without judgment; takes one to know one.) Then you start performing—there’s that endorphin rush. After performances you’ll probably go out for drinks. If nothing’s happened by that point—then, well, that’s what cast parties are for, right?

Even for someone like actress Tara Khozein, who defines herself as a staunch “boundaries girl” and who has never had a relationship with a fellow cast member, passion is inherent in the practice.

“I probably fall in love with everyone that I’m ever paired with onstage,” she says. “I think about a life with that person, and all of the details of that. ... But it can’t happen, at least for me, if there’s any sense that it will follow me out of there.”

As separate as she tries to keep herself, she admits it’s a slippery slope. “We’re playing with fire with this craft,” she continues. “It’s soul stuff. It’s deep, weird, mysterious heart stuff. So there needs to be an amount of sacredness around it.”

And then there’s Kate Chavez and Robin Holloway, two-thirds of the company Up & Down Theatre. They met while studying at the London International School of Performing Arts, and after two years, they formed Up & Down with classmate Lindsey Hope Pearlman in 2011. A year after they formed the company, Chavez and Holloway realized they were also in love. A year ago, they were married.

They have a unique love-work balance, however. “When we work together in the company, it’s almost like we revert back to the collegial relationship,” Chavez says. “Then we go to bed at night and it’s like, ‘Oh, hi!’”

If it sounds a little sterile, don’t be fooled. Chavez still thinks that romance is to be expected. “There’s a level of intimacy ... that seems like a very natural, and almost necessary outcropping of an artistic life. For longevity, you need distance and professionalism, but you also need a certain level of intimacy. It creates a breeding ground for romance.”

Holloway takes it a step further: Maybe it’s even a benefit. “At this point, it’s really hard for me to imagine not working with my partner.” But he admits it’s also weird. “When you’re doing a show, it consumes your whole life,” he says. “It’s everything you think about, it’s everything you share. ... It feels like you have the world in common. But then ... the show closes, and the veil drops, and you’re like, ‘Woah, I don’t even know who you are.’”

When Janet Davidson, president of Theatre Santa Fe, responded to my query about showmance, she definitely took the cake for weirdest story: “I fell in love with the puppet while on tour with Snow White,” she wrote in an email.

Okay, maybe I could roll with this. Maybe it was one of those beautiful, kinda-weirdly-sexy art puppets. And then Davidson texted me a picture.

The 1968 photo showed a supple 20-year-old Davidson as the titular character, coiffed and dewy, with Sweet Pea: a burlap-clothes-wearing, glassy-eyed, plush, bulbous … well, puppet.

On a tour from New York to Illinois in 1968, Davidson describes her close friendship with Bob, Sweet Pea’s puppeteer. Their friendship deepened until a fellow company member had to step in.

The friend “got the two of us together and he said, ‘Look, Bob is gay. Sweet Pea is not. You’re falling in love with Sweet Pea. Not Bob. Bob is gay.’ And then he turned to Bob and said, ‘Bob, Janet’s not Snow White. You’re falling in love with Snow White. And you have to grow up, the two of you.’ I was so confused about the whole thing. Then, do I not love Sweet Pea? Or Bob? Or what?”

It sounds silly—except for anyone who’s acted with a puppet, maybe.

“It was my first encounter with confusing relationships,” Davidson says. “I wonder to this day if there wasn’t something more there that was coming out of Bob.”

“I never knew if you can make heads or tails of that, because to this day, I can’t. I never saw Bob again.”

As she “grew up,” she learned that this was all just part of the biz. “When people are thrown into long hours of intense work, there end up being relationships, whether they’re hate or love. I don’t think you can get away from it,” she says.

And really, let’s not get away from it. Theater is people interacting with people; the messy realness of humanity is what makes it a living art form. And there’s nothing more romantic than that.
up through my mid-20s, I’d spent every Valentine’s Day single. Relationships never seemed to last through that cycle, and nor did I ever mind. Though, I secretly wondered if I was missing out on appreciating some aspect of the gaudy holiday. (Spoiler alert: I wasn’t.) And while familial love, friendship, self-appreciation and other lame ways to celebrate serve as alternatives to coupledom, they don’t measure up to the truth of the holiday. Let’s not kid ourselves: Valentine’s Day is the day of traditional monogamous romantic relationships.

As a millennial, countless thinkpieces theorize and render statistics on how I may feel about Feb. 14. Most reports conclude that millennials are tricky targets for marketing, meaning the same shitty campaigns of the past couple decades don’t work anymore and an ailing middle class has forced more creative expressions of appreciation. Hikes and other low-cost outdoor experiences are apparently popular (according to Huffington Post and other media outlets) while jewelry sales are generally plummeting.

Still, generations of Valentine’s Day culture have a way of seeping into the mind and expectations remain heavy. I liken this to the same desperate need to validate every minute, unexceptional detail of our average lives via social media. Lunch, a walk in the park, your pet, how upsetting Trump’s latest tweet was, so on and so forth, have become the spectacle of daily digital noise that has entranced us all. So, while dating has been reduced to swiping left, right, or “woofing,” we still are faced with a steady influx of both ironic and non-ironic hashtags, memes and couple selfies, with folks out having as singular moments; other, made up of many random, trivial things theses—may be more at risk with marriage itself dropping to an all-time low. Stats and economic forecasts aside, what does Valentine’s Day mean to me? My dear friend, anthropic radio satirist Ronn Spencer, calls it just another “Mandatory Fun” day, which resonates with the mandatory fun we all need to exhibit through our online profiles. To be coupled on this day can now be broadcast to the reaches of your friend or follower list. The results are irritating enough to send people offline for the holiday. Perhaps bigger stakes come with online relationship statuses, as the Facebook Data Science team reports predictable progressions in relationships forming and breaking apart by mere data collection from activity logs. One must wonder what such data looks like come mid-February.

At last, though, I am now coupled during February, and I’ve found the holiday underwhelming. While my partner and I have made efforts to celebrate, we’ve both come to the conclusion that celebrating our love on a designated day of the year falls short of encapsulating the joy of being together. A single day isn’t that special and hardly comprises what makes up the good, bad or ugly of a relationship. Like most real-life things, relationships are both a process and a spectrum. The essence of my relationship can be made up of many random, singular moments; other, unexpected days of beauty that don’t happen to fall on Feb. 14, and that usually involve zero to little spending. This makes planning for an obligatory momentous celebration of my love for my significant other all the more a nuisance and chore. Yet, every year, we are all faced with the barrage of plastic red, pink and gold garbage spewing from corporate hallmarks. Every year, we are all faced with the barrage of red, pink and gold garbage spewing from corporate hallmarks. Why must we ratify love?

On one hand, we have more ad campaigns geared towards singles with cheesy tongue-in-cheek humor, akin to how Singles Awareness Day is SAD—get it? A singles-inclusive take on Valentine’s Day, while boring, possibly boosted sales of romantic ephemera to an all-time high in 2016, with search results shifting from “what to buy for my [husband/wife/etc]” to “friend.” On the other hand, the staples that make up the holiday’s aesthetic—jewelry and absurd or wasteful romance-themed memorabilia—may be more at risk with marriage itself dropping to an all-time low.