

Online Feature

The Vagina Monologues Goes Global

Female Parts

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Eve Ensler has put vaginas on the map. To be more accurate, she has put them all over the globe—from Sarajevo to Johannesburg, from Antarctica to Manila, and many places in between.

The Vagina Monologues—Ensler's pioneering play in which women recount their feelings about their private parts—could be described at this point as an international phenomenon. Since Ensler first performed the Monologues in 1997, over 800 productions have been staged in over 30 countries. The productions range in scope from a performance in a tiny Anglican church in Nova Scotia to one in a stadium of 6,000 people in the Philippines, and are variously mounted by student groups, feminist organizations, and celebrity actresses and directors. But wherever they go, publicity seems to follow in their wake.



Eve Ensler hugs Abby Epstein, the director of a Mexico City production of *The Vagina Monologues*, on March 26, 2002 (Photo: AFP).

The provocative title is one reason, of course. Another is that, wherever it travels, *The Vagina Monologues* tends to polarize its audiences into strong pro- and anti-Ensler camps. Women—at whom the material is principally aimed—are especially divided on the question of whether Ensler's play constitutes a brave new frontier for feminism, or merely a set of old clichés in sexy new clothing.

"I can't remember seeing a show that generated such an atmosphere of warmth and sheer enjoyment in its audience," wrote Joyce Mcmillan in a recent review in the *Scotsman*. But for Charlotte Bauer, writing in Johannesburg's *Sunday Times*, the Monologues are "aimed at objectifying vaginas in a way not seen since men were warned not to go down that road on pain of political castration."

The source of this controversy is, as *Brisbane News* critic Paul Galloway put it, "part stand-up routine, part consciousness-raising session, part political rally, part market research survey, part revival meeting, part group therapy, and part theater." It is made up of a series of monologues in which the vagina is front and center: In one, a sixty year-old woman encounters her first orgasm; in another, a young Bosnian woman describes being brutally raped. By the end of the evening, a vast array of women's experience has been presented through the unique filter of the female apparatus. It's a format that would make a gynecologist proud.

The play has also spawned its own anti-violence movement, *V-Day*, which began in 1998 and takes place every year on February 14th (V stands for victory, vagina, and anti-violence, in addition to valentine). On V-day, performances of the play are used as fundraisers for women's charities around the world. According to its web site vday.org, the movement aims to connect "the rape/ murders of young women factory workers in Juarez to the dowry killings in South Asia and the

battering of a girlfriend in Montreal to the sadistic rape of girls and women in Bosnia and Rwanda" and thereby to " produce sweeping changes in our ability to stop the violence."

If that seems like a lot for one piece of theater to achieve, consider this: the show has come a long way from its roots. Initially, Ensler says, she got the idea for *Monologues* from a conversation with a friend who described feelings of shame and disgust toward her menopausal body. Realizing that many women—menopausal or not—had similar feelings about their bodies, the playwright went on to interview some two hundred women around the world, then turned some of the interviews into monologues. She first performed them as a solo show in 1997 in the basement of a café in New York's Greenwich Village. The rest, as they say, is herstory.

More recently, what has given *The Vagina Monologues* its huge popular appeal is its element of audience participation. As it has traveled, so has the show evolved and become much more of a group project. These days, during one of the monologues, audiences are encouraged to reclaim a traditionally derogatory word for the female anatomy by chanting it (regional variations have been popular: from the Eastern European gypsy word 'minja' to the Filipino 'puke,' pronounced *pook-ay*). And before most shows, a questionnaire is distributed to women in the audience, asking questions like, " If your vagina could dress itself, what would it wear?" " *Kebaya* (a traditional Indonesian costume), a miniskirt and woven batik," was one recent contribution in Jakarta. (Whether you find this kind of confession moving or trite will probably determine your stance toward the rest of Ensler's concoction.)

And thus we have the Vagina Wars: on one side, vagina enthusiasts like Russian actress Ingeborga Dapkunaite, who believe that Ensler is a vagina virtuoso, a poet of the privates. Dapkunaite, who recently performed in a production of the show in London, told *Moscow News* that the show is " about our sex complexes. But this is just an angle, if you will, from which to take a panoramic view of human life."

The other side's arguments can be summed up by a question posed by Marion McKeone of Ireland's *Sunday Tribune*: " Surely much of the past 40 years was about proving to the world that there was more to women than their vaginas, that we are more than the sum of one part?"

Another source of debate is an element that could be called " Ensler's ecstasy." While the grass-roots success of *The Vagina Monologues* has proven that women everywhere respond to the play's message about the vilification of the female body, it seems that not everyone is convinced by Ensler's distinctively American response to the issue: a compulsion to talk about it as much and as loudly as possible.

" With the singing, moaning, and baptismal-type rituals, it all sounds more like a Billy Graham revival—or worse, a Nuremberg rally—than a play," wrote Diana Wichtel in the *New Zealand Herald*. Paul Galloway, of the *Brisbane News* agreed: " The overall tone has a preachy, new-age Americanism that no localizing changes to the script can disguise," he wrote. " Ensler is the Oprah Winfrey of the pudendum."

Outside the western world, viewers have sometimes been perplexed by *Monologues'* candid approach to its subject matter. A March, 2002 performance in Jakarta proved that, even in an era of globalization, cultural differences are alive and well. The performance, which was organized by the feminist political group the Coalition of Indonesian Women for Justice and Democracy, drew an audience of hundreds, but elicited " a varied response from the audience....Some were amused, some giggled or laughed bitterly, while others looked confused," according to the *Jakarta Post*. The paper attributed the mixed reaction to Indonesians' delicacy when it comes to talking about sexual organs: " The word 'vagina,' just like 'penis,' is considered somewhat taboo here. Rather than say 'vagina,' people use the word 'anu' (something unknown)."

Maximillia Muninzwa, a Catholic activist in Kenya, says she initially embraced the play's message but then began to worry that it could have a counter-productive effect on sexually abused women. " Pray, how do you bring a sexually assaulted woman to healing memories of a very nasty experience when you parade her very intimate and already abused reproductive organs and shattered image to the public?" she wrote in Nairobi's *East African Standard*. " It is like exposing her to another assault."

In countries with large Muslim populations, authorities haven't always been amused by the play. In February 2002, City Hall in Kuala Lumpur shut down a production of *Monologues*, generating fierce criticism that it was stifling women's right to freedom of expression.

Popular Malaysian television actress Joanna Bessey, who appeared in the production, pointed out that the ban had been counter-productive: " I didn't mind it actually because it probably created more awareness about women's empowerment rather than us doing another run for another five days," she told Malaysia's *New Straits Times*.

Other A-list female celebrities—who appear everywhere in regional productions—have had mixed reactions to the play. Filipino newspaper editor Alya B. Honasan, who appeared in a recent Manila production, reported that on the night of her performance, there was an " energy so palpable you could run a chainsaw through it," and enthused, " Man, that night, it felt great to be a girl." But feminist author Germaine Greer, who performed in a production of the play in Britain's Mercury Theater in Colchester, was unimpressed. In an article for London's *Telegraph*, the author of the 1970 feminist classic *The Female Eunuch* (who declined to mention why she'd agreed to perform in it in the first place) launched a blistering attack on the play's triviality. " We all agreed that our vaginas were one thing we didn't have to worry about," she wrote. " Our kids, Afghanistan, the National Health, George W. Bush, breast cancer...we were more worried about them than we were about vaginas."

To illustrate her point, Greer singled out a scene where a woman describes a partner, Bob, who likes to contemplate women's vaginas because " it's who you are." After one inspection, Bob announces, " you're so beautiful...you're elegant and deep and innocent and wild." (Badges reading " I'm your Bob" were briefly popular in New York.)

" In Britain, Bob would have found himself immortalized in Pseud's Corner," fulminated Greer, " but Vaginaland has no sense of the ridiculous."

Whatever can be said about Ensler's mode of artistic expression, however, there can be little doubt about the sincerity of her politics. On April 8, 2002, a safe house for young women fleeing genital mutilation and early marriage opened in Narok, Kenya: it was funded directly by Ensler. Another safe house is planned for native Sioux women in north America.

Ensler uses her newfound celebrity power to sponsor activism, and has become a roving ambassador for women's rights. " Recently she set up meetings between a delegation of 40 Afghan women, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan," reported Marion McKeone of Ireland's *Sunday Tribune*. " She is a regular visitor to Capitol Hill where one source suggested that many women senators fear her but fear the consequences of snubbing her more."

This, then, is the paradox of *The Vagina Monologues*: it is a collection of below-the-navel-gazing speeches that promotes altruism, a possibly retrograde piece of theater that has become a vehicle for radical activism. And Ensler herself, as McKeone writes, is " a perplexing mass of contradictions...a radical feminist who induces apoplexy in other radical feminists...infuriatingly naive yet savvy beyond belief."

Enslar doesn't let the criticism faze her. She responds by citing real life examples of how her play is changing lives around the world. There was, for example, Marsha, an abused Guatemalan woman who came to see a 2001 performance of the Monologues at Madison Square Garden, then decided to take the play to Guatemala. " She organized first a commercial run of it, then a V-Day at the National Theater of Guatemala," Enslar told the *Irish Times's* Arminta Wallace. " I went. It was packed with 2,000 people. And this girl stood up in front of all those people and told her story. It was one of the most amazing performances I've ever seen—and she changed Guatemala. It will never be the same. And she's 21 years old. So I see that, and I think anything's possible." ■

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