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V is for Victory

Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* takes off in
San Francisco and Los Angeles

BY GERARD RAYMOND

"I feel as if I have been taken by the Vagina Queens and they have made a decision that I will serve them. This is much bigger than me!" exclaims playwright/activist Eve Ensler. She's referring to her one-woman show bluntly titled *The Vagina Monologues* (currently at San Francisco's Alcazar Theatre and Los Angeles' Canon Theatre), a show which has achieved international fame and become the vehicle for a global effort to end violence against women.

Ensler's poetic celebration of the most intimate part of the female anatomy sprang from a conversation with a woman friend. "We were talking about menopause and then we got on to the subject of her vagina," relates the 47-year-old writer. "She was a smart, forward-thinking woman, but she was saying things that really surprised me. I thought to myself, 'My God, is this what women think about their vaginas?'" Ensler started discussing the subject casually with other friends. "Every woman that I spoke to said something more amazing, more outrageous, or funny or shocking than the last. Before I knew it, I was on the vagina trail."

As she notes humorously in the show, that part of the anatomy, which some women could only refer to as "down there," is like the Bermuda Triangle — "nobody ever reports back." Ensler had discovered her mission. "You also get sucked in," she laughs, extending the metaphor. "Before you know it, you *are* in the Bermuda Triangle." Adopting a structured format, she proceeded to conduct "vagina interviews" with more than 200 women of varying ages and different ethnicity and sexual orientation. She fashioned the material into a series of monologues and first performed the show in 1996 at a small Off-Broadway New York theater.

The worldwide success of *The Vagina*

Monologues is due in part to Ensler's ability to combine her consciousness-raising undertaking with humor. Sitting on stage in a chic black cocktail dress, wearing ruby red lipstick and Louise Brooks bangs, Ensler completely disarms the audience with her bright wit and impish smile. "I cannot tell you the joy I feel making people laugh," says the playwright.

"Writing saved my life, and absolutely saved my sanity," says Ensler, who began playwriting when she was 24. She prefers not to talk about her childhood, but has said that she was abused by her father at an early age and had been a heavy drinker in high school. "It's a great privilege to write," she explains, "because you get to transform that which feels hard and sick and deadly."

In February, Ensler's latest play, *Necessary Targets*, based on interviews conducted with women in Bosnia during the war, will open in New York. And in late 2001, she expects to present another one-woman show, titled *The Good Body*, which examines how women mutilate, transform, and hide their bodies in order to fit into their particular cultures. But meanwhile, four years after its premiere, *The Vagina Monologues* has acquired a life of its own.

During her first tour of *The Vagina Monologues* both here and abroad, Ensler reports that many women came up to her and related stories of being raped or beaten or the victims of incest. "When you are privy to a certain amount of information, you have to do something, otherwise it would be irresponsible," she says. In 1997, with a group of women, she came up with the idea of V-Day — a fundraising event to help eradicate violence against women, to be held every Valentine's Day. "V stands for Victory and anti-Violence," Ensler explains. "And we wanted to take the romance out of Valentine's Day and put the Vagina back

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Eve Ensler

in!" V-Day is now an annual fixture in cities and colleges throughout the world.

Ensler still performs *The Vagina Monologues* (as she does in San Francisco), but the show has also been performed by a host of well-known actresses (as it is in Los Angeles), and in several different languages as well. "If you've ever gone through a period that oppressed, maimed, or hurt you, somehow in the middle of that experience you dream not only that it will stop, but that it will never happen to anyone else," says Ensler. "I think for me *The Vagina Monologues* has made that a possibility." □

Gerard Raymond writes on theater and film and lives in New York City.

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

San Francisco

Alcazar Theatre through Dec. 3, (415) 433-9500,
www.theatreonthesquare.com

Los Angeles

Canon Theatre, open-ended run, (310) 859-2830,
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