

British Theatre Guide

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The Vagina Monologues

Eve Ensler
New Players Theatre
(2010)

This newly re-imagined version of Eve Ensler's super-famous episodic feminist piece is part of *See You Next Tuesday*, a programme showcasing female and feminist artists over the next two weeks to coincide with International Women's Day and to raise funds for a refuge centre for female survivors of sexual violence in the Congo. It's an interesting programme, for an extremely urgent and worthwhile cause. But it does seem that we passed the point a while ago where the play was the thing: now it is rather eclipsed by the much wider movement it has generated. But I doubt that Ensler would have a problem with that: the original project, I suspect, was always about getting somewhere further than simply giving contented Westerners a raunchy night out.

It is still raunchy, even though we know enough about the content to not be taken aback now. But I still think there is plenty of substance behind the sauce. It's a piece that defies easy categorisation; it's hard to accuse it of having a crude political agenda, as some people seem determined to think it must have. It's not anti-men; not anti-sex; not pro-lesbianism; not pro-women in a militant way or in an unbearably fluffy and cod-spiritual way. It's just interested in women, and in their experiences. Ensler was told frank stories by hundreds of women, and she does her best to relate them just as frankly.

Yes, so some of these stories are about "learning to love your vagina" self-empowerment sessions, or re-enacting the experience of the "surprise triple orgasm". But even this is shocking only really in so far as it's something that many of the audience never dreamed they'd see on stage. As it always must, the orgasm reenactment brings the house down. And it helps that this production doesn't rely on shipping in celebrity guests to grab the limelight and go all scandalous. The young, earnest and committed cast manage to maintain a better balance between the outrageous and comedic moments, and the far more serious ones. Occasionally they break up the monologues with facts, some light-hearted (the famous clitoris analysis), but others far less so: particularly that about the prevalence of female genital mutilation in parts of Africa. It's the moments of sombreness which pierce the evening, that give it weight.

The best monologues, for me, are the ones which are less showboating, more tender. For the elderly woman recounting her one and only sexual experience, one of the cast brilliantly channels Catherine Tate's Nan character; but it ends up unexpectedly affecting. And the same actress brings a lovely simplicity to the story of a woman who meets a man who teaches her to appreciate her own parts. Meanwhile the monologue based on the experiences of Bosnian women raped during the conflict of the 1990s, is just devastating.

One downside to the production, though, is that its reimagined elements don't constitute much improvement to the original text. They consist of adding a strong physical element to many of the monologues, and to all the group sections: the cast of five prance about the stage, demonstrating the words they're saying in a variety of exaggerated poses that make them resemble sign language

interpreters, or the community theatre troupe in The League of Gentlemen. To incorporate a physical element into the show is not in itself a terrible idea, but it must add something new, not merely ape the words being spoken. As it is, you fear the directors simply felt they must keep our eyes busy, from an assumption that we wouldn't be able to concentrate on the script on its own. It means for instance that the sweet little monologue from the six-year-old girl is made far too hyperactive as the actress playing her bowls about the stage in over-demonstrative tomboyish manner. And the sequence about reclaiming the c-word is over-choreographed.

But whenever the cast are allowed to stand still and simply tell us things, they do it marvellously. Ensler's work is still a thing to discover: it's a powerful artefact, its mere existence a testament to the extraordinary power of listening to women tell their stories; and a testament as well to how far we still have to go.

Until 20th March

Reviewer: [Corinne Salisbury](#)