

I appeared as a guest columnist in the March 7-20, 2006 Edition of *Metrobeat*, writing in response to an opinion piece in the previous issue that had blasted our recent V-Day benefit production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

Defending *The Vagina Monologues*

It seems odd that, in preparing to write his "Wuzzing the Twits" column about Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, Jim Hennigan neglected to contact me – the director and organizer of Greenville's latest performance of the piece. Heck, he shook my hand at the event, but didn't mention his intentions. But lucky him – he's got my attention now.

I'd like to take the time – as someone who has directed the show four times, performed in it three times and seen it performed once – someone who has studied the text, had contact with the V-Day organization and been exposed to the rationale and instructions of Eve Ensler – as a heterosexual female in a happy relationship – as a woman – to shed some light on the true intentions of the piece.

But first, Hennigan complained that the piece "shut down rational conversation." Yet he began his column calling those who would question his views "unequipped to comprehend" him. And he encouraged people not to attend future performances (charity events, I might add). It seems to me that he set out to "shut down rational conversation" himself.

But I invite his conversation. The aim of *The Vagina Monologues* is to inspire discussion, examination and discovery, so I thank him for opening the floor. His views are certainly valid, though I doubt that he can fully relate to a piece called *The Vagina Monologues*. He's never menstruated or had a pelvic exam. I know many men who have enjoyed the performances over the years, but they don't claim to have a full handle on it. That does not invalidate their opinions. But to ignore gender in a discussion of a piece called *The Vagina Monologues* is naïve.

Hennigan said he came in with an "open mind," but later he detailed his expectations to include, "ribald humor" and "playful jabs at men." Frankly, it sounds to me like he was prepared not to have to take this piece seriously. But this is a very serious piece dealing with very real, very moving, and sometimes very troubling issues. She addresses issues like women's insecurities, rape, molestation, oppression under the Taliban – and she takes on lighter fare like your first period and thong underwear and sexual moans. It's funny sometimes, but it's not fluff.

Also, **it is not a condemnation of men.** In fact, this piece isn't about men at all. As you may have guessed from the title, it's about women. More specifically, it's a celebration of women. And it's important to note that a celebration of women isn't inherently a condemnation of men. It's about women overcoming the stigma – imposed by themselves, by society, by specific incidents – and finding the permission to be comfortable with themselves. It's about not feeling the need to whisper or giggle and blush when referring to our own bodies. It's about feeling empowered in our own sexuality.

By nitpicking tidbits that he found undesirable, Hennigan lost sight of the forest for the trees. These pieces are snapshots, thematic illustrations of episodes that brought the women she interviewed (hundreds of women) into a better understanding of themselves. But more importantly, they are symbolic of a greater meaning or lesson that goes beyond any one story.

Where male characters occur – where any peripheral character occurs – they are there as literary devices to further the central message of the individual story. Adaptations of true stories, each piece takes a moment in time and expands it to make a point. They are not meant to be taken literally. The piece in which a 24-year-old woman aids a 16-year-old girl in her sexual discovery is “not an endorsement of underage sex” according to Eve Ensler’s notes. It is a true story that, for that specific woman, was about overcoming the pain of her past and finding her own sexuality. So she chose to use that story as an illustration of that message. Is the story morally questionable? Absolutely. Is the heart of the story about something that woman saw as beautiful? Absolutely.

The piece about the lesbian sex worker isn’t about sexual force or props or costumes or even about the symphony of moans she conducts. It is about helping women to find and express their own unique sexuality. The piece about the man who liked to look at vaginas is about connection and finding your own beauty in the eyes of another.

The piece about the short skirt is about being yourself – for yourself. It doesn’t say, “Shut up, you’re irrelevant.” [as Hennigan suggested in his column] It says, “I am who I am, and I’m proud of it.” She dresses hot because it makes her feel good, not because she’s out to impress. She’s shouting from the rooftops because she is rejoicing in herself, not because she cares who hears. It’s about personal empowerment and value, not “butt out if you don’t like it.” In fact, that might be the anthem of the whole show.

I could go on and on about every piece in this show. I could detail thematic elements of every monologue as they relate to women discovering and loving themselves. I could point to heterosexual women and their “sweet boyfriends” and husbands: “the only man I ever loved.” I could point to very funny moments about metal stirrups and tampons and I could point to disturbing rape statistics. But I won’t.

I will simply say that I am very sorry that Hennigan’s experience with *The Vagina Monologues* was so unpleasant. But, you can come to a show like that and find whatever you want. If you want to find a discussion, entertainment and moving stories... you will. If you want to find something to write an angry column about, you can find that too. I just hope that Hennigan’s views will not dissuade future audiences from supporting a worthy charity and making the decision for themselves.

To learn more about V-Day, visit vday.org and our beneficiary organization at gcccac.org. Thanks!