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REVIEW – THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES

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Stepping into Theatre iNQ's rehearsal space-turned-theatrette for the opening night of *The Vagina Monologues* (2018), the apprehensive anticipation of the assembled audience was evident. More-than-mildly suggestive photos of furry pink scarves and juicy-looking oysters had been hung on the wall. Titillated chatter and nervous giggles bounced about the room. And upon the stage sat the production's house band, aptly named The Pink Tacos. The band – comprising some of Theatre iNQ's male mainstays John 'Goodo' Goodson, Brendan O'Connor, Alexander Thomas, Ron Pulman and Michael Gleeson – busted out some of the greatest female empowerment hits of all time and in their pink ties and PussyHats they looked damn good doing it. The choice to include an all-male band for a show that's synonymous with female empowerment was a tremendous one. It immediately united a group that could have been easily divided, by reminding everyone in the room that *The Vagina Monologues* aren't about women versus men or the rise of one group via the oppression of another. Instead, *The Vagina Monologues* are about lifting the shroud of secrecy that envelops all things vaginal and in doing so creating more room for love, compassion and acceptance.

"Yeah, but what are they *about*?" you ask.

Honestly, this was cause for some heated discussion on the way home from the theatre. And when we got home. And again the morning after.

Are they about feminism? Disrupting the Patriarchy? Atrocities committed against women? Love? Hate? Sex? Regret? Shame? Desire? Power? Confidence? Self-expression? Womanhood? The

C-word?

Depends who you ask.

But at the centre of the Monologues is one indisputable common thread: The Vagina (betchya didn't see that coming!)



Catch Theatre iNQ's remount of The Vagina Monologues at NAFA, 17-21 July 2019. IMAGE: Sonia Warrell

Playwright Eve Ensler crafted the original monologues in 1994 from a series of conversational interviews with 200 women of varying age, race, sexuality, profession and locations; and consequently they explore a wide array of vagina-related matters including hair, periods, sex, sexual violence, birth, body image and nomenclature.

In the hands of Director Terri Brabon, this particular collection of Monologues (a new one is written every year) really is a

whirlwind of emotions. I found myself laughing uproariously one minute and trying desperately to swallow the lump in my throat the next, nodding my head and then shaking it, giggling gleefully and then gasping with disgust at some of the stories that were shared.

The ensemble of nine courageous women did not hold back.

The Monologues began with Rita Neale's matter-of-fact delivery of *Hair*, about a woman's refusal to shave her pubic hair for anyone. Rita set the conversational tone of the show beautifully, inviting the audience into a world where it was perfectly normal to discuss these matters just as one would discuss the weather.

Beth Honeycombe followed with a heart-warming and heartbreaking performance of *The Flood* about an elderly woman who hadn't been 'down there' since 1953. Shamed by an early sexual encounter, the woman chose to shut up shop instead of open herself up to the possibility of embarrassment again. Beth brought a real sense of regret-tinged-nostalgia to her performance and her character's reluctance to be interviewed, followed by her recognition of the cathartic value of talking about her experience, helped to frame the importance of the rest of the show.

Emma Lamberton, Jennine Padgett and Nimisha Aithal each explored the wonder of the Vagina – the wonder of its form, the wonder of its potential for pleasure and the wonder of its sheer function as an organ. Emma brought a youthful wonder to her piece about seeing the vagina and discovering the clitoris – her character wasn't necessarily naive or innocent, but contagiously enthusiastic and 'new'. Jennine's role as a sex worker for women

was wiser and more empowered; and Nimisha was so earnest in her recount of witnessing a birth and how easy it is to be so irreverent when faced with the vagina's expansiveness.

Keely Pronk was strong and powerful in her monologue about 'being seen' by a lover. Keely seemed to fill the room with her power, not in an intimidating way, but in the way that makes you want her for a best friend or older sister. Faduma Ali brought a sass that I haven't seen from her performances before. This was a tell-it-like-it-is, take-no-prisoners, consequences-be-damned delivery and of all the performances in this show, Faduma's character felt the least like a person and the most like a vagina personified (I mean that in only a good way!). Anna Vella-Sams had a meaty monologue to work with and she did it absolute justice. Anna was innocent, vulnerable, hurt, curious and sexually-awakened as required and her accent work was the icing on top. And Rachel Nutchey. Rachel reclaimed 'cunt'. Rachel's was a short monologue, I believe so as not to over do it on a certain word, but I would have happily sat through that if it were four or five-times longer. Rachel brought a delightful quirky joy to this show that was just so likeable (even when she was uttering 'obscenities' in a drawn-out fashion) and served to remind the audience that we don't have to take vaginas so seriously.

I didn't really know what to expect in terms of physicality from this show, but Terri has brought her signature brand of stylised simplicity to the table. This was more than just one actor taking their turn to deliver a monologue and then disappearing to give the next actor their turn. The ensemble remained on stage the entire time, weighing in on vox-pop-style segues between monologues, performing basic but powerful choreography

where needed, embellishing on some of the monologues – including one memorable chorus of the many and varied orgasms – and, most importantly, providing a sounding board for the other monologists. Without the ensemble on stage, the monologues may well have been spoken into a black hole rendering them futile, irrelevant secrets; but Terri's choice to place an 'audience' before *the* audience, meant that these monologues had been heard, were meaningful and provided hope. That the band was also involved in actively listening and responding to each monologue, only amplified this.

By the end of the show, the tentativeness that had filled the auditorium was replaced with a sense of.... not 'sisterhood' – the men were in on it, too. 'Unity' is perhaps the right word. We'd all been brought a little closer together through open discussion of something that we don't normally discuss.

Even though they're 20 years old, *The Vagina Monologues* remain a powerful conversation starter. Prepare to laugh, prepare to cry, prepare for the possibility of some discomfort, and really prepare to leave with quite a lot of thought for thought as to what they're about and who they're for.

Theatre iNQ will reprise their production of *The Vagina Monologues* at the North Australian Festival of the Arts on 17-21 July 2019. For performance times and tickets, click [here](https://whatson.townsville.qld.gov.au/events/nafa/vagina-monologues).(https://whatson.townsville.qld.gov.au/events/nafa/vagina-monologues)