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Review: The Vagina Monologues, TheatreINQ

The exploration that these women would have undertaken in tackling this play is to be admired.




TheatreINQ's *The Vagina Monologues*. Photo by Sonia Warrell

Discussion of the very word 'vagina' is the reason why *The Vagina Monologues* was written back in 1996, and it seems that what appears to be a 'last taboo' is just as topical, challenging and confronting for people as it was 20 years ago.

During the performance it was highlighted that – because of the title of the play – a gym in Townsville refused to carry the advertising leaflets, and – worse still – the Townsville City Council refused to carry advertising in their mall video promotion. It struck me no similar issues were encountered for the theatrical tour of *Puppetry of the Penis!* So, dual standards are still alive and well!

That being said, while it is totally understandable that the content of the play is challenging and confronting to some – that is the whole point of the play and why it was written. While some people (mainly men I daresay) may be discomfited by the play and its content, judging by the after-show comments from the largely female audience, there was some element in the play which resonated with every single female in that audience.


I had not seen any productions of *The Vagina Monologues* before but was fully aware of this episodic play, which is in effect a series of monologues which explores sexuality, sexual experiences, and many other topics seen through the eyes of women of various ages, races and sexualities. What is even more interesting about the play is that it has continually evolved since it was originally developed by Eve Ensler after she had interviewed some

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200 women about their views on sex, relationships, and violence against women. Every year another monologue is added which reflects yet another aspect of the female experience. This enables directors to select the monologues which are most appropriate in the society where the play is performed.

Staged at TheatreINQ's home in South Townsville, the 80-seat theatre was packed for the performance which opened, ironically and amusingly, with five male musicians (all actors in the company), named The Pink Tacos. They entertained the audience with renditions of songs about women such as 'I Am Woman' and 'Sisters Are Doing for Themselves'. During the performance the group remained on stage, giving understated male commentary; a couple of original songs to augment the play as well as providing musical links between monologues.

I am a great admirer of director Terri Brabon, and continue to be astounded at what she brings out of her casts. And the nine professional and community female actors in this are no exception. Ranging in ages from 20 to 70, the cast were magnificent, benefitting from Brabon's customary strong directorial and coaching hand, evident most definingly in the richly detailed work in text and meaning – no doubt stemming from her love of Shakespeare.



TheatreINQ's The Vagina Monologues. Photo by Sonia Warrell.

Then there is the sense of ensemble – a hallmark of this company's productions. At no time were the differing levels of experience apparent from this group of women – they all presented to the same extraordinarily high standard. The exploration that these women would have undertaken in tackling this play is to be admired, and while the individual appeal of the content of each monologue probably dictated personal preference, this is due more to the writing than the performances which I could not fault. Kudos to all.

Affectionately the senior member of the company, Beth Honeycombe's monologue represented the older generations' attitudes, and was a perfect introduction to society's duality and embarrassment of the subject matter. She performed with great comic timing and showed her innate ability to own the stage.

A particular highlight was Anna Vella-Samms' superbly orchestrated and very funny monologue *The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could* about the woman who had traumatic early sexual experiences followed by her positive 'healing experience' with an older woman.

Stalwart community actor Jennine Padgett has never been better in her portrayal of the sex worker who specialises in giving pleasure to other women.

The play also provided younger associates of the company the opportunities to shine and demonstrate how they had blossomed under Brabon's sensitive direction and training.

Rachel Nutchey showed her mettle, demonstrating a solid stage presence and an ownership of the stage, which built on from her scene-stealing performance in last year's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Her monologue about the reclamation of the 'c-word' was probably the most challenging piece of the night.

5 The frontline pressure points are different for the regional arts sector

Faduma Ali was the surprise of the night, displaying an enormous personal journey in her confidence and command of the stage with her humorous rant about injustice and discomfort, including the tools used by gynaecologists.

Director Brabon also re-worked some of the monologues into effective ensemble pieces, which saw the group hilariously describe first menstrual periods, switch to the horrific testimonials of Bosnian rape camps; and encapsulate the story of birth.

Customarily in all TheatreINQ productions, the pace of the piece was fast, every funny line delivered effectively while successfully highlighting the dramatic elements. Agreed, while the play itself is not to everyone's taste, it remains nonetheless another example of excellence in regional theatre. Just because it is not located in a capital city does not make it inferior in any way, shape or form. This theatre company remains the definitive answer to that snobbery. (One only hopes that the company may even schedule a return season as this one has already sold out).

Rating: 5 stars ★★★★★

The Vagina Monologues

A TheatreINQ production

Adapted and Directed by Terri Brabon

Assistant director: Emma Lambertson

DESIGN

Set and lighting: Brendan O'Connor

Production Team: Arminelle Fleming, The Bridge Project

Cast: Nimisha Aithal, Faduma Ali, Beth Honeycombe, Emma 'Chops' Lambertson, Rita Neale, Rachel Nutchey, Jennine Padgett, Keely Pronk and Anna Vella-Samms.

The Pink Tacos: John 'Goodo' Goodson, Michel Gleeson, Alexander Thomas, Ron Pulman and Brendan O'Connor.

21 November – 2 December

TheatreINQ, 50 Allen Street, South Townsville, Townsville

TREVOR KEELING

Tuesday 27 November, 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trevor Keeling has been involved in the arts and creative industries for 40 years in Australia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. He has been an actor, theatre director, journalist and critic, publisher, broadcaster, music festival director, event manager and arts administrator.

Since coming to Australia in 1991, he appeared in numerous productions in Adelaide, and was Festival Director of the Glenelg Jazz Festival for six years. He was General Manager of Dancenorth in Townsville (2005-2006 and 2011-2014) and for three years was CEO of Mirndiyan Gunana Aboriginal Corporation, which included managing the world-renowned Indigenous Mornington Island Dancers.

He has worked in urban, regional and remote environments in Australia and has a particular focus on regional arts and the connection to community.

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