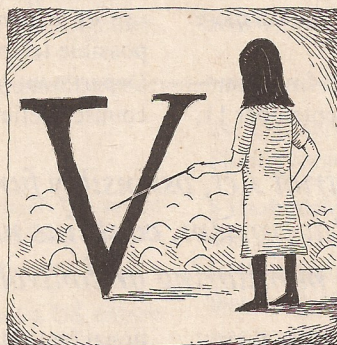


When in Rome...

JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER



On September 29, while Tony Blair was arguing for Britain to align itself with Bush on war in Iraq, female Labour Party MPs were speaking up for vaginas. In fact, they were doing the first-ever parliamentary performance of Eve Ensler's play, *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler, who did the unthinkable as an artist by forgoing her royalties on productions of *The Vagina Monologues*, offering it free to any campus or community as long as it does the play in its entirety and uses the performance as a fundraiser to benefit antiviolence initiatives, has made it her latest unimaginable goal to end violence by 2005.

When people say to her, "You can't," she responds, "Why?" like a powerful, precocious 4-year-old, replete with Little LuLu hairstyle and a predilection for hearts and boas. The most recent enterprise of Eve and the women of V-Day (the organizing arm and virtual—as in there's no office—foundation that came out of *The Vagina Monologues*' success) was to call a V-World Summit. On September 20–21 two dozen antiviolence activists from around the world got together in Rome—to share strategies, align their resources and eat gnocchi. The resulting meeting was, like the V-Day phenomenon itself, deeply political while still being fun and girly: Camp David meets Bridal Shower.

After a well-attended press conference presided over by the mayor of Rome, the activists—only three of whom were from the United States, while several had never before left their home country—gathered at a hilltop hotel. The group of women sat in a circle on red cushions, exchanging red or heart-shaped gifts. "Do you know how hard it is to find a red object in Bulgaria after the fall of Communism?" complained Mariana Katzarova, a journalist, as she presented hers. After Carole Black, the CEO of Lifetime and a major supporter of V-Day, gave everyone sterling heart bracelets from Tiffany, the women went around the room and described their relationship to V-Day.

Agnes Pareyio, a round-faced 46-year-old Masai woman, had a story that was typical for this group. For years, she traveled village

to village in southwestern Kenya on foot, educating girls about female genital mutilation. Circumcised herself, she urged girls not to get "the cut" and discussed other ways they could mark their transition to adulthood. Her one tool in this mission was a plastic female torso with removable vulva. Pareyio would show a whole vulva, then one without a clitoris (the circumcision ritual in Kenya, recently outlawed but still widespread) and finally a vagina that had been infibulated, which is the removal of labia minora and clitoris and the stitching shut of the vulva, leaving just a tiny hole. (When a girl is married, that pea-sized aperture is expanded to accommodate sex by inserting an animal horn.)

Eve saw Agnes sitting in a field conducting a class two years ago and asked her what V-Day could do to facilitate her work. Agnes said, "If I had a jeep, I could get to many more girls." So they got her a blue jeep with V-Day printed in white on the top, a satellite phone and, this year, gave her \$65,000 for a "safehouse" for girls escaping genital mutilation. A second safehouse might open later this year. Traditionally, women in Kenya aren't allowed to own property, so the vision of Agnes zipping around the savannah in her jeep, talking on her cell, is sort of like seeing a giraffe in the White House—or *The Vagina Monologues* in the halls of the British Parliament.

As each woman explained how V-Day "changed her life" (echoing the response women had to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* forty years ago), the rest of the activists wiped tears from their cheeks or threw their heads back and howled with laughter or wrinkled their brows in sympathy. Occasionally someone talked about violence in her own life of which she had never spoken, and a woman from across the circle (and literally from a different part of the world) would recognize the story as like her own, run over, squat down and hug her.

Like any important feminist meeting, though, it wasn't all catharsis and bonding. The second day was devoted to developing strategy for eliminating violence, the practical and urgent reason for the summit. V-Day is misunderstood as merely glitzy entertainment; performances of *The Vagina Monologues* have been used to marshal millions of dollars and raise consciousness about issues that affect women. These issues are generally under the

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radar of US politics—such as the Taliban's treatment of women before 9/11.

So when I arrived on day two I expected to see the women contemplating laws or analyzing the Constitution of South Africa. Instead, Eve asked them to imagine a "V-World" and posed these kinds of vague questions: "When there is no more violence, will it change your relationship to your identity? To sex? What frightens you about giving up violence? What makes you violent?" Visiting each breakout group, the women themselves—so fierce the day before—suddenly seemed mired in the most simplistic discussions. "In a world without violence, would we still get to have rough sex, or wouldn't we want it anymore?" went one pressing debate among European activists.

Hours later, however, when the women began revealing their V-Day plans for the next two years, an important transformation occurred. Their ideas were visionary. Rossana Abueva and her partner Monique Wilson, who have organized the V-Days in the Philippines and all over Asia, will spearhead a star-studded event in Tokyo in 2004 to shame the Japanese government into finally apologizing to the 200,000 "comfort women" enslaved and raped by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Eve is going, of course, and they plan to fly in celebrities and as many living comfort women from around the world as they can find, making a connection between the old comfort women and the "new comfort women"—girls who are sex-trafficked. Thus far, more than fifty damage suits have been filed against Japan; most have been rejected. If the V-Day event manages to be as big and splashy as Eve hopes, they could succeed in humiliating the government. Wilson and Abueva pointed out that in Japan, being disgraced can have serious consequences. Thus, the hope is that the V-Day shaming will provide more catharsis for the comfort women than have the UN reports and failed court cases.

Meanwhile, the V-Day 2003 that they are planning in Kabul (which is again unimaginable—vaginas and burqas?) will feature Eve, Jane Fonda and any other activist who can get there. The performance will be in a theater in a once-magnificent park in Kabul that is now barren, all of its trees cut down for firewood. Eve wants to bring in women from around the world to plant red flora in the park before the show. Shabnam Hashmi, from New Delhi, isn't doing a V-Day, but she requested that activists come to Gujarat, the site in western India of horrific ethnic cleansing of Muslims that has been largely ignored or tolerated by the media and the government. "We'll come," said Eve. "When do you need us?"

Watching her in action, it's hard not to be impressed by Eve and V-Day—yet her grandiosity irks many, feminists included. They worry that she is self-promoting, or that her "Let's end violence in eight years" plot is naïve. That's all beside the point, though. The salient question is, "Is V-Day effective in liberating women and ending violence?" The answer to that query is "yes"—and at a time when people tend to dismiss the women's movement as a thing of the 1970s, V-Day boasts 1,281 events around the world and \$14 million raised in the past few years. It grants more money to antiviolence initiatives than the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) does; this year, UNIFEM has dedicated \$1 million to be divided among twenty-two countries. (On November 25, the UN-decreed Inter-

national Day to End Violence Against Women, UNIFEM is bringing together four international activists who have made concrete strides in ending violence against women—and Eve will be on hand, too.)

Meanwhile, the women in that room in Rome had a hand in saving hundreds, if not thousands, of girls from genital mutilation. A 16-year-old Guatemalan girl named Valerie Lopez helped get her sister Marsha out of an abusive relationship—and the two (with their mother) went on to produce a sellout performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in Guatemala City. Noelle Colome organized a V-Day in San Francisco that raised half a million dollars. V-Day focused on Afghanistan last year and raised \$173,000 to benefit Afghan women, in addition to the \$120,000 raised so far. And V-Day isn't simply focusing on women "out there," ignoring the problems in our own backyard. This year the spotlight is on "Indian Country"—Native American reservations, among the poorest places in the United States. Next month, a V-Day delegation will travel to Egypt, Jordan and the Middle East to talk with female peace activists. V-Day intends to bring media attention to these inspiring but overlooked activists and convey their strategies for peace to policy-makers in the United States.

V-Day has other grand and galling plans: "We are launching the 1 Percent Campaign in February [2003]," announced Eve during the Saturday strategizing session, sitting cross-legged on her cushion. "We are calling for every country with a military budget to donate 1 percent of the budget to ending violence against women." In the United States, that would be somewhere around \$4 billion. "That's far too much to ask for," gasped an American woman who lives in Milan and provided the decadent dinners for the group each night. "Well, I started off thinking we should ask for 20 percent," said Eve, laughing.

The most profound contribution of V-Day, though, might be

simply saying the word and performing the piece. It plays differently around the world, but there isn't a hunk of land anywhere where it's uncontroversial. Irene Ndaya Martine Nobote from Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, was arrested for staging a production of *The Vagina Monologues*; other women have had to face injunctions and restraining orders, the scorn of their peers and their own fears.

"I wish I could say I was with V-Day from the very beginning," Jane Fonda said at the summit's press conference. The woman unafraid of going to Hanoi against her government's wishes turned down an opportunity to perform *The Vagina Monologues* because she was terrified of saying "vagina." All these fearless activists nodded their heads when Fonda admitted that "I was afraid to name my most core part." Overcoming her fear has meant huge transformations in Fonda's own life and undying loyalty to V-Day—which means not just her presence in Rome but more than \$1 million in donations.

Janet Kiarie of Nairobi, Kenya, had a different click of consciousness. She was enlisted by Agnes Pareyio to host a V-Day last year. She read the monologues aloud with her colleagues in the women's movement, but they all concluded that there would be too much backlash: "It felt just wrong talking about our vaginas," Kiarie recalled. "I resigned from helping with V-Day" and, instead, just hosted a meeting for Eve and others traveling from the United States. After the meeting, Kiarie went home and asked her 7-year-old daughter if she knew what "down there" was. Her daughter didn't know the word for vagina—not in English and not in Kikuyu, her own language. "That's when I realized I was depriving her of her own sexuality in some way," said Kiarie, "by being afraid of my own."

If we needed any more evidence that the personal is political, this is it. ■