

Vagina Monologues Beyond Convention

By Leah Lavigne

On Feb. 25-27 in the Hepburn Zoo, The Vagina Monologues returned in its third consecutive year at the College, but the fresh form and delivery of the play, renamed *Beyond the Vagina (Monologues)*, explored changing definitions of femininity and womanhood in an inclusive and ambitious showcase of thought-provoking narratives.

In an effort to start a conversation about previously taboo subjects like female genitalia, sexual stigmas and violence against women, writer Eve Ensler '75 compiled a theatrical celebration of vaginas and femininity based on two decades of interviews with over 200 women spanning age, ethnicity, nationality and sexual experience. Premiering in 1996 in New York City — and shown in a limited run in the same year at

the Mahaney Center for the Arts — the resulting piece, *The Vagina Monologues*, featured a candid exploration of anatomical and sexual awakenings, feminine shame and historical and societal gender oppression through one common subject: the vagina.

After a five-year off-Broadway run and a subsequent national tour, the worldwide popularity of *The Vagina Monologues* continued to grow after the exposure of a Madison Square Garden engagement and an HBO television adaptation. In 1998, Ensler established V-Day, an organization originally staffed by volunteers whose mission demands that violence against women and girls must end. Since the organization's inception, the number of annual February V-Day productions has grown to 5,800 worldwide, the proceeds of which benefit shelters and rape crisis centers to further V-Day's mission. All of the proceeds from the College's production were donated to WomenSafe, an Addison County organization working toward the elimination of physical, sexual and emotional violence against women.

Though *The Vagina Monologues* remains a global phenomenon 20 years after its debut, the play has garnered significant criticism for representing a largely white, cisgendered, heterosexual perspective that portrays a dated view of femininity and womanhood. Director, producer, script adapter and lighting designer Rebecca Coates-Finke '16.5, who has worked on three consecutive productions of *The Vagina Monologues*, wanted to create a performance experience that addressed these criticisms and expanded the play's reach and relevance. After launching the 2014 show with a student monologue and introducing an accompanying booklet of student voices in 2015 to make the production more Middlebury specific, Coates-Finke embarked on her most ambitious interpretation of the show's potential with this year's *Beyond the Vagina (Monologues)*.

"I wasn't satisfied with just doing the play as it was anymore and I was curious as to whether or not it was possible to use the script to undermine some of the central issues with it in a new play," Coates-Finke said. "I believe that a show can't be feminist if it can't reflect the context that it's in, and in that way it [*The Vagina Monologues*] does allow itself to become irrelevant over time because it keeps repeating the same story even when culture has shifted."

Featuring an all-student ensemble of 16 cast members and six American sign language interpreters dressed in black and shades of red, *Beyond the Vagina (Monologues)* was presented in the round in the Hepburn Zoo, encouraging an interactive and physical performance style that — like the content of the text — did not allow for audience complacency.



In addition to familiar aspects like a compilation book of eight monologues written, edited and illustrated by students and performances of nine monologues from the original piece — including Anna Hoge '19's confident and unapologetic rendition of "Hair," an exploration of the societal pressures placed on women to modify their body hair for 'beauty' and Jenne Meneses Montiel '19's Spanish-infused interpretation of "My Angry Vagina," a condemnation of female medical treatment and the proliferation of consumer products implicitly shaming female bodies — Coates-Finke incorporated outside speeches and materials to shatter the limitations of the original text.

Early in the show, an audio-recording of transgender writer, speaker and activist Julia Serano's piece "Cocky" played over the loudspeaker as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter Julia Desmarais '18 offered an emotive translation on a darkened stage. As a transwoman who did not have genital reassignment surgery grappling with her position outside of traditional gender definitions and the constant threat of physical violence, the juxtaposition of Serano's candid voice to the quietly gripping visual translation left the audience momentarily stunned by the interplay of raw emotion and articulate narrative in the piece.

"One of the main criticisms of The Vagina Monologues is that it's biologically essentialist, so what it does is it uses the vagina to talk about the experience of being a woman, which ends up leaving a lot of people out in terms of conversations about sexism and devaluing the feminine," Coates-Finke said. "I wanted to complicate that because there are many trans women who have not undergone surgery. I wanted to use the audio of Serano's piece to recognize the fact that there was nobody in my cast who identified as a trans woman and to acknowledge that there are some people not in the room whose voices still need to be heard."

The inclusion of ASL interpretations of each piece, as well as an increased commitment to physical performance and a greater incorporation of multimedia, augmented the thematic changes to contribute to an overall tonal shift toward inclusivity, innovation and open discussion.

Each audience member was asked to write their own definition of femininity on a piece of paper upon entering the theater, and the responses encapsulated a shifting view of femininity as a measure of power, self-esteem or choice rather than a static biological assignment or reinforced social construct. Coates-Finke discussed the reflection that three years of engagement with The Vagina Monologues has prompted.

"I have learned so much more about femininity and what my gender means from people who are a-gender or gender queer or trans women because there is something very powerful about acknowledging in some ways that there is a little bit of choice involved in how you get to identify your gender and how you can change and enact that every day," Coates-Finke said.

Another striking addition to the show was Stella Boye-Doe '19's nuanced rendition of "Respect," written by critical race theorist and founder of intersectionality Kimberlé Crenshaw for the V-Day production A Memory, A Monologue, a Rant and a Prayer. The piece confronts the history of America's simultaneous capitalization and oppression of the black vagina. Asserting that the United States was built on the backs — and through the wombs — of slave women, the piece offers startling statistics about a continued lack of progress and respect, including the fact that rapists of black victims receive, on average, one-fifth of the sentence of the rapists of white victims.

Though only a week has passed since this reinvention of The Vagina Monologues premiered, Coates-Finke and the cast have received some positive feedback.

"I don't think I've ever been thanked so much for doing a show before, and other members of the cast have had similar experiences," Coates-Finke said. "It has been really powerful to hear about people who were skeptical of the show because of previous criticisms and decided to see it for themselves. I think I was worried about not having gained the trust of the people I really wanted to be in the room, so I was glad to see that people were trying it out even if in the past it hadn't been what they wanted it to be."

In its ambition to expand its scope and explore shifting conversations on femininity and gender, Beyond the Vagina (Monologues) undermined many of the contradictions inherent in its original form, incorporating deft artistic decisions to present a piece unique to its time and place. Coates-Finke's presentation is a vision of what The Vagina Monologues could be, and it is my hope that the play can continue to push its own boundaries in years to come.

On Friday, March 4, Coates-Finke will be discussing her process in writing, producing, and directing Beyond the Vagina (Monologues) at 12:15 p.m. in the Abernathy Room.