

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

"Monologues" produce confusion, not good

Letter to the Editor

Posted: 4/26/06

Dear Father Jenkins,

I graduated from Notre Dame in 2004. At that time "The Vagina Monologues" was just beginning to reach its zenith on our campus. I particularly remember a day in LaFortune when I was studying for an exam. I was on my way out and as I was walking toward the back entrance, I was accosted by a young woman wearing only some flimsy crime tape around her in the shape of a bikini, telling me that as a woman I should be one of the first in line to attend this year's rendition of "The Vagina Monologues." I looked down at her "bikini" - the words wrapping around her said "Date Rape Free Zone." I looked up again into her eyes and asked, "Have you ever been raped?" Almost puzzled by the directness of my question, she cocked her head to the side before answering "no." I asked all the girls there - not one of them had actually been raped. I turned and walked away, feeling rather violated all over again because two years prior to graduation, I had been the victim of rape.

A little about me: I consider myself a very "liberated" woman. Growing up, I lived in 14 different states; cities as different as Los Angeles, Calif. to Paducah, Ky. In other words, I've been around. I can easily say words like vagina and clitoris. I don't really see this as a major accomplishment. I am a recent convert to Catholicism. I do not see myself as an "arch liberal," "arch conservative" or "arch anything." I do not pass judgment on an idea until I think I understand it.

When I was raped in 2002, I made a point to take a closer look at gender relations because I wanted to understand my own experience and be able to help others in similar circumstances. I read and watched "The Vagina Monologues" performed by Eve Ensler herself. I read books by Elizabeth Wurtzel, Betty Friedan and Jennifer Baumgardner, and I attended as many talks as I could on campus on the topic of violence against women. What I found was a mass of confusion, pain and bitterness. Only one talk on campus throughout my two years of avid, personal research touched me in any real way - that talk was given by Katie Koestner in the Hesburgh Library Auditorium about her horrible experience as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary. Her speech was not overly dramatic or explicit, but it was real. The pain was real, the feelings were real and because it was so honest, respectful and simple, the discussions afterward on the topic of violence against women were more poignant and encouraging than any others I engaged in at Notre Dame. Unfortunately, this talk did not receive as much press as "The Vagina Monologues" that year because Koestner did not use words like vagina and cunt to describe her experience. She only used words like emptiness and fear.

So why am I against "The Vagina Monologues?" You would think that as a woman who has been sexually violated that I would want to further my cause at any cost; but that is just the point - I believe "The Vagina Monologues" does not further my cause or the cause of women. After many hours of reading and many hours of talking with others on this topic, I believe that despite the fact that Ensler's play has garnered tremendous publicity, it has caused far more confusion about the true dignity of women than it has ever clarified. This is a cost that I am not willing to pay.

Before "The Vagina Monologues" became such a hot issue on campus, it was easy to see the real and unrehearsed reaction of students to the play. You would see some men coming out of Washington Hall either laughing hysterically because some woman was screaming cunt over and over again or a few others walking rather shamefully and awkwardly back to their dorms because the visual and audio stimuli was more like a free peep show. Some men just felt plain anger because of the absence of any significant story about a good experience that involved a man. Of course, the play generated conversations among women because, unfortunately, many of us have experienced some form of inappropriate sexual aggression, but I never found the conversations constructive no matter how open I tried to be. It was more like a group of women trying to out do each other with how horrific and miserable our experiences had been.

The only people on campus who seemed to truly "understand" this play and its direct correlation to helping stem the tide of violence against women were the faculty endorsing it and the small group of students dedicated to seeing the

production through. Being a philosophy major, I had to ask myself, "why?" As I became acquainted with most of the faculty and students involved with the production of "The Vagina Monologues," I quickly noticed a rather common trend. Despite being dedicated to the protection of women, most of the women I encountered who were directly involved with the production of "The Vagina Monologues" held a very limited and sometimes even warped understanding of a woman's true beauty and power. They simply equated sexual forcefulness with liberation and healing. In essence, they advocated a position that it is healthy for women to act in a similar manner to the men who had hurt them - domineering, insensitive and completely self-absorbed. It was hard for me to warm up to this idea.

During my final years at Notre Dame, I began to read Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. I also took a theology class on this topic and participated in conferences and talks given by Christopher West, a Catholic scholar on the Church's teaching of sexuality. I wanted to ensure that I was seeing both sides of the gender dialogue at Notre Dame, and I think it really did help me to see the difference between constructive and destructive dialogue.

Standing against "The Vagina Monologues" is a hard thing to do because to do so is to risk being persecuted as anti-woman, anti-feminist and to be framed as an ultra-legalistic conservative - afraid of sexuality, crude words and scantily clad women - a fact that I think has contributed to much of the success of "The Vagina Monologues." I am not afraid of my sexuality. I will be married this fall and I look forward with anticipation to a happy and frequent sex life. I am not afraid of crude words. I have a very quaint grandmother who when given the proper provocation can make even a truck driver blush. And I am certainly not afraid of scantily clad women, fighting for women's protection or raising awareness for true feministic issues. However, despite the author's good intentions, "The Vagina Monologues" clearly trivializes the dignity of women because it gauges the health of a woman's sexuality by her ability to personify her vagina, not to mention the blatant misandry throughout the dialogues making it seem more like a work of hate than of love.

Am I saying that "The Vagina Monologues" should be banned from the campus in any form? No, I would never place such a restriction on academic freedom, and I believe that any book or media with academic interest and merit should be available for study at Notre Dame. What I am saying is that I am shocked and very sad to hear that you, a Catholic priest and philosopher, choose to keep a spotlight on "The Vagina Monologues" and claim that "The Vagina Monologues" is not, "overt and insistent in its contempt for the values and sensibilities of this University, or of any of the diverse groups that form part of our community." I refrained from writing earlier because I believed given your initial statement on academic freedom that I would really have nothing to worry about. Your recent statement on "The Vagina Monologues" shocked and, quite frankly, depressed me. To say that "The Vagina Monologues" does not violate our Christian identity or show contempt for part of our community is to cross over onto very thin ice. As Catholics we are not allowed to do even a small amount of evil so that good may be obtained. I believe that "The Vagina Monologues" does more than a little evil by further confusing the dignity of women and obtains only an infinitesimal amount of good through its efforts to raise awareness of violence against women. There are much better ways to accomplish this goal while still preserving an open, academic environment.

You remain in my prayers.

Amelia Marcum
alumna
Class of 2004
April 12

© Copyright 2007 The Observer