



'The Vagina Monologues' raises money and awareness



Actors work on the set of "The Vagina Monologues." GRACE L. WILLIAMS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

The Vagina Monologues

By Eve Ensler

Presented by V-Day Montclair

Studio Playhouse

Feb. 27-29, 8 p.m.

Benefit for S.O.F.I.A., (Start Out Fresh Intervention Advocates), which provides advocacy and more for at-risk women and children of domestic violence

Vdaymontclair.com

Waitlist begins at 7:15 p.m.

By **GRACE L. WILLIAMS**

For Montclair Local

As a young child, Sharon Alston observed domestic violence incidents that culminated in the murder of her mother by her father. That's one reason it's meaningful for her to perform in a show that raises money for S.O.F.I.A., (Start Out Fresh Intervention Advocates), a Montclair-based non-profit that provides advocacy, supportive services and referrals for temporary housing to "at-risk" women and children of domestic violence.

The show is Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues," and Alston is performing the scene "The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could." V-Day Montclair, the Montclair nonprofit connected with Ensler's V-Day Foundation, presents the show at Studio Playhouse last night through Saturday.

Since its debut, the play has raised awareness and been produced nationally and internationally. In 2018, the New York Times included it in a list of "The 25 Best American Plays Since 'Angels in America.'" In 1998, Ensler started V-Day, a global non-profit whose mission is to end violence against women and girls through benefits of the play. "The Vagina Monologues" is made free once a year as part of V-Day.

Ensler adds a new monologue every year, highlighting an international issue affecting women.

Ensler's 1996 play begins with the line "We're worried about vaginas."

To craft the narrative for the script, Ensler spoke with over 200 women spanning a spectrum of lifestyles and circumstances. From there, she created characters based upon her interviews. Originally, Ensler performed it as a solo production. It has been performed with three actors, and with many more. In Montclair, it will be performed with more than 20.

Monologues and scenes have titles such as "My Angry Vagina," "Hair," and "Because He Liked to Look at It."



WILL HARPER

Community response to the initial casting call was encouraging, according to Will Harper of V-Day Montclair, who is producing the show. The original plan was to cast 12 to 13 participants into the various roles, said

Harper, who produces and directs. Roughly three times that number showed up for auditions, according to Harper. Turnout was beyond “what we even had thought it could be in our wildest dreams,” he said. “We wanted to incorporate as many women as possible. This is a benefit show, and we don’t like to turn people away.”

As a result, a diverse group of women will take the stage and share an evening dedicated to the controversial and mysterious body part known as the vagina using humor, creativity, and cold, hard statistics. Nothing is off-limits or considered too taboo in the play. Sketches cover topics such as body image, genital mutilation, childbirth, orgasm, marriage, and LGBTQIA experience.

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Community enthusiasm for the play has also translated into robust ticket sales. Harper decided to add a Thursday performance after the initial shows sold out. At 7:15 all three nights, there will be a waiting list at the door for no show tickets, which will be resold at 7:50.

The support from so many has also shined a much-welcomed spotlight on S.O.F.I.A.

“The play allows us to reach a wider audience than we usually do,” said Kristin Wald, vice president of the board and teen workshop facilitator for S.O.F.I.A.

TALKING OPENLY

Cast member Adee Shepen of Montclair did a lot of acting in high school and college. When she saw the posting for auditions, “something came over me,” she said. “I decided ‘I’m going to go for it.’”

Shepen, who is part of the Vagina Chorus, which reads statistics and facts between sets, said it’s as relevant today as it has ever been. “People think of us as this progressive town, and yet it’s hard to say the word, and it’s hard to say a lot of words in the show,” she said. “To be on stage in this town and still feel awkward about it is surprising.”

Wald said one key initiative of her organization is to remove stigma from victims of abuse. “The more people can be open about it and talk about the experiences they have, the more they will be able to seek help for themselves and their friends,” Wald said. “It’s important to not feel shame, and that includes people who perpetrate violence.”

Despite the “leaning in” and shattering of glass ceilings that often dominate headlines, domestic violence is an ever-present and real problem. In October 2019, the Centers for Disease Control reported that an estimated one in four women would experience physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. One in three women experience some form of sexual abuse within their lifetime, according to the CDC.

Actor Nina Nsilo-Swai, who also performs in “Little Coochi Snorcher,” is an entrepreneur, the creator of the Pee-kaboo Potty Sticker, which assists with potty training.

In “Little Coochi Snorcher,” the narrator takes the audience on a journey back in time to recall memories of traumatic childhood sexual experiences and a “positive healing” experience with an older woman as an adolescent. The skit — which once listed the girl’s age as 13 during the sexual healing and included the line “If it was rape, it was good rape” — is one that sparked controversy and outrage, so much so that the age of the character was moved to 16 and the “rape” line was removed from the sketch.

Through her business, Nsilo-Swai learned that formative events like potty training can lead to incidents of abuse.

“Statistics show that where there’s child abuse, there’s also intimate partner abuse,” she said.