



Local talent raises money, awareness 'The Vagina Monologues' visits Chatham County for first time

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PITTSBORO -- Acting talent has blossomed locally for the first Chatham County performance of Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues."

Twenty actresses -- experienced and inexperienced -- volunteered their time and effort for a show they'll perform tonight at 8 in the Carrboro Century Center and again Saturday, Feb. 28 (CORRECTION NOTE: Feb. 29), at Fearington Village in Chatham County.

Family Violence and Rape Crisis Services in Pittsboro will receive 90 percent of the proceeds from the two. The V-Day Worldwide Campaign will get the other 10 percent.

Through the V-Day campaign to end violence against women, volunteers worldwide put on productions of "The Vagina Monologues" to raise money and local awareness. There were more than 1,000 such shows in 2003, according to the V-Day Web site.

"Above and beyond all else, it's a wonderful celebration of women," said Kerstin Lindgren, producer of the Carrboro and Fearington showings. "The point of the play is to take away some of the shame that some women feel about their bodies."

In the play, female characters of widely varying ages, nationalities and backgrounds open up to the audience in monologues about women's issues and, in particular, their vaginas.

Lindgren said women tend to be hush-hush about the area "above the knees and below the navel."

"Women don't want to talk about anything around their waist," Lindgren said. "It's just generally not discussed. We should be proud of our bodies."

But Lindgren and director Ellen Bland emphasized that the show isn't just for women, and isn't intended to alienate anyone.

"It needs to be affirmative rather than segregatory," Bland said, adding that the characters should be people with whom anyone can identify, regardless of political views or gender. "That's been my goal as a director."

People shouldn't develop opinions about the play without ever seeing or reading it, said Bland, who holds a full-time community college faculty position while directing the show.

"I think the biggest thing with this show is making sure that the tone is not bitter and ... to make sure that it's not threatening," she said. "The title's bold, but I think the messages are all positive."

After deciding to direct the play, Bland witnessed a violent tragedy in which one of her students was murdered by her estranged boyfriend. She said this show would help people keep talking and opening up about violence against women.

"After the tragedy, for example, the floodgates just opened for the counselors at FVRC," she said.

Family Violence and Rape Crisis Services, the show's main beneficiary, provides domestic violence and sexual assault services, offering women shelter, court advocacy, short- and long-term counseling and a 24-hour crisis line.

Some of the group's workers are actresses in the play, said Kathy Hodges, who works at FVRC's Siler City office.

"They've been putting in hours and hours over the past several months," she said. "Everyone has their own reason for wanting to be a part of it, and their own story behind it."

The women running the show intended that kind of personal connection.

"A lot of the women in the show are doing this because they've been inspired in some way or because they have a member of the family that they're dedicating the show to," Lindgren said.

Lindgren recalled a time when a man passing on the street angrily used abusive language against her mother. The producer said the incident was upsetting enough to linger for 15 years in her mother's mind.

"All women have had some sort of derogatory, mean thing [thrown] at them at some point," she said. "There are so many stories like that."

Bland agreed. "I think that people can identify with at least one of the characters in the monologue, and it might remind them of someone they know," she said.

The play gives women a chance to develop themselves, said Vana Prewitt, a Chatham County woman who produced the show in Chapel Hill and Durham in 2002 and is acting in this year's two performances.

As the liaison between the V-Day campaign and the community, Prewitt said she wanted to continue developing local talent, so she looked for someone else to produce it this year.

The response was positive. When Bland and Lindgren put out the casting call, "the local theater community just kind of went, 'Yeah!'" she said.

"There are just so few truly meaty parts for women to play," Prewitt said. "We're the 'also-rans.' Women are rarely cast in truly meaningful, multi-dimensional parts."

This show casts women aged 21 through 83, with the majority from Chatham County. But one woman, Kathryn Williams, is a professional Playmakers actress from Chapel Hill. Another, Ann Deagon, is a nationally known poet from Greensboro.

Including the production team, 35 people are working on the play, with 20 volunteers who'll help out at each of the two showings.

At the show's end, three community women -- introduced as "Vagina Warriors" -- will give a brief talk to the audience. Bland said they're considered significant because they've overcome violence against themselves or helped other victims face abuses.

In view of the recent rapes in Carrboro, those women might be able to help answer questions like "What can we do for women when they're assaulted?" Bland said.

Ultimately, the show defuses "all the hang-ups that we have about women," Bland said. "We make so much about women something that is taboo or shameful, and this show does a really good job of saying that women's bodies are their own and there's nothing shameful or dirty about them, or about the language used for them."