

THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING



The Vagina Monologues -- an Experience in Sisterhood

Language: English

Playwright: Eve Ensler

Director: Niranjani Iyer

Company: Drift Theatre

This year's Dharamshala Residential and International Festival for Theatre (d.r.i.f.t) had for the first time a majority of local performances by its residents. One of the productions was an adaptation of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Directed by Niranjani Iyer and performed by Gurleen Arora, Tenzin Kunkey, Chonyi Gyatso, Pratibha Rai and Vandana Kapoor. Having received the rights to work with the text from Ensler, this power packed performance by the women did not disappoint. The popularity of the book and the "taboo" of its title spiked the curiosity of the audience giving the performers a full house on their first show. The first show having exceeded expectations several times over, the performers ensured a full house for their closing show as well. This was on March 8, 2020 -- also women's day. I watched this performance that closed the festival.

The Vagina Monologues was adapted from the original English and parts of it were translated into Gaddi, Hindi and Tibetan. Sections of the English original were kept intact and English and Hindi sur titles also ran behind when Gaddi and Tibetan were being spoken on stage. Given Dharamshala's ethnic diversity and d.r.i.f.t's commitment to creating a common platform for the various communities in Dharamshala, the need and impact of such translation was tremendous. It was also the first time this text was performed in Gaddi and Tibetan. The manner in which this opened up the play by making it accessible to so many people was empowering in itself. Sharing stories about women and their vaginas with humour and tenacity made it possible to question the shame often associated with women and their bodies and gave the audience a liberating experience regardless of age, gender, and ethnicity. Breaking the language barrier was also important as an attempt to start respectful and empathetic conversations led by women about women's bodies, about the pleasure and the fear that comes with owning these bodies in a sexually repressed and morally uptight society.

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Much of the credit for making it the liberating performance that it was goes to the five women on stage. Despite most of them being first time performers each woman on that stage created a presence and held her own while making room for the other women, and this would hardly have been possible if not for Iyer's directional work and decisions. When they laughed about vaginas we laughed with them, when they were angry we felt their anger and we cried with them when it turned into pain, but through it all and most importantly we were there with each other. What we saw unfold on stage were not just the monologues of some person-less vaginas, it was the liberating force of sisterhood cutting across race, caste, age, religion, and the construct that is gender.

While the actor-audience intimacy that this performance made possible was the nature of the space, the meticulous stage direction ensured that it was being used to the best of its capacity. The festival takes place every year in the banquet hall of Bhagsu Clubhouse, a Himachal Pradesh tourism guest house. As a result there is no raised platform for a stage, the actors and audience are at the same level -- even metaphorically. It takes a different kind of understanding and courage to stand with people as a performer; when spaces offer a closeness between the actor and the audience it requires each of us (but more so the performer) to allow for a kind of vulnerability -- one that is not easily shared with strangers. Such intimate stage-audience spaces also demand of all present a willingness for closeness that less intimate spaces such as large auditoriums with proscenium stages don't.

The openness of the women on stage to share several moments of vulnerability with the audience that day gave these stories an important feeling of being shared in solidarity. The stories were as unique as the vaginas they belonged to, but it was this underlying solidarity that suggested the universality of the women's stories waiting to be told, hiding because of the shame we are taught to carry. This is especially reminiscent of the Consciousness-Raising group in the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s where group sharings of personal experiences were essential to raising political awareness about the feminist struggle.

The resilience and relevance of any powerful narrative is in part the hope and possibilities of change that it encourages and d.r.i.f.'s adaptation of *The Vagina Monologues* gave us this and some more. It allowed us as women sitting in that room to begin to unchain ourselves from our shame, to begin to reclaim our bodies for ourselves, it gave each of us the opportunity to share a moment in sisterhood with

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complete strangers. This moment in sisterhood, however, was hardly restricted to only the women in the audience. Its ability to reach out to the men in the audience through conversations about female sexuality without fetishising it was also important to the understanding. It was a step further in renouncing the internalised patriarchy as a part of the larger feminist fight.