

Vagina Sisters, Crying Men, Soap Opera Stars and Sushi: The Story of the *Vagina Monologues* in Belgrade

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1 Introduction

V-Day is a global movement to stop violence against women and girls. Through the promotion of creative events that celebrate women's sexuality, like the *Vagina Monologues*,¹ V-Day increases awareness, raises money and 'revitalises' the energy of existing organisations working to stop violence against women. The V-Day movement has spread widely around the world. Last year there were 2,300 events and celebrations, in over 1,100 cities, villages and towns. Since 2000, several V-Day events have been held in the Balkan region. They took place in Sofia in Bulgaria, Bucharest and Jas in Romania, Skopje in Macedonia, Ljubljana in Slovenia, Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zagreb in Croatia. At the beginning of 2006, the Serbian Anti-Trafficking Center (ATC) brought V-Day to Belgrade for the first time.

The events that took place in different cities of the Balkan region around the celebration of V-Day brought together activism and art, memories and singing, vision and celebration of women's bodies. Staging V-Day in this region, which was for years devastated by wars in former Yugoslavia, provided a metaphor

of the possibility for bringing peace and coexistence of different cultures and religions. It was aimed at strengthening women's solidarity and support and sending a strong political message demanding an end to violence against women. The performance of *Vagina Monologues* in different Slavic languages enabled women across regional borders to understand each other through the universal language of their bodies. Each of these performances empowered participation of women in public, strengthened solidarity among women coming from different ethnicities and speaking different languages, strengthened visibility of women's struggles against violence, and provided support to women's groups through raising funds. In this article, I tell the story of the staging of V-Day in Belgrade, and use it to reflect on the promise of the V-Day movement in struggles for the realisation of women's sexual rights.

2 Belgrade: new vagina city

The *Vagina Monologues* were brought to Belgrade for the first time on 22 April 2006. It was something that ATC activists had been planning for years. By coincidence, we scheduled the

performance one day before the Orthodox Easter. In a country where the church is gaining power each day, it was interesting to see how only a few days before Easter the whole town talked about vaginas and women's orgasms. This was stirred by two television clips with which we introduced the whole idea of *Vagina Monologues* to Serbian society one week before the play. Both clips were taken from Abby Epstein's documentary *Until the Violence Stops*, which captures the impact of V-Day in five different international communities. In the first clip, women from around the world were saying vagina in different languages. The second one showed a woman playing one of the monologues in which she performs triple orgasm. We loved that one. It was so empowering and humorous. It said what *Vagina Monologues* is about: about us, our bodies and how we (and society) relate to them. Unfortunately, some television stations refused to air the second video clip. Some of them had a problem with airing the first one as well: 'Too many times the word vagina is repeated' one television director told us. 'It is almost Easter and I am not sure that people would be happy about it'.

3 Reclaiming our bodies and our desires: the ‘Vagina Workshop’

Before the play, the ATC organised a ‘Vagina Workshop’ for 40 women activists and one gay man. Participants came from different towns of Serbia, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Macedonia. The *Vagina Monologues* had already been performed in each of those countries. The ‘Vagina Workshop’ was a space for activists to talk about those things that they usually do not talk about – ourselves. One of the activists said that for all the 70 years of her life she had never had an orgasm. This reminded us how many of us learned about our bodies through violence rather than pleasure, but also how important it is to create these spaces where we talk about ourselves, our desires and our bodies. We had time to think about it, away from our daily work, activism and families. We reminded ourselves that we need time to self-reflect, to look at ourselves more deeply, because only by change in ourselves, the change we envision for the world can happen. A Shaman woman

who participated taught us how to heal the body with voice, touch and massage, how to sustain our bodily selves. It was trans-generational sharing and healing with much power, strength and humour.

4 Reaching out to a wider society

When we organise conferences, workshops and other events, we always see the same faces. It feels like we are talking to each other all the time. Finding ways of reaching out to different communities, and engaging wider society is crucial if violence against women is to be addressed. But it is not easy. How do you talk about violence against women in a society that has been overwhelmed with war crimes for more than ten years, and has acquired such a high level of tolerance to violence? How do you put violence against women on the agenda at a time of economic transition, where other issues are seen as a bigger priority than human rights, especially women’s rights? How do you find innovative ways to grab people’s attention? We knew that if the

Vagina Monologues were to be performed by women activists in venues where we usually organise different workshops, panels and performances, not many people would come. We would only be able to attract those that were already within ‘our’ circles. But how do you reach out to others, how you reach out to the ‘unreachable’?

The V-Day movement involves enlisting celebrities to draw the attention of society at large to issues that would otherwise not make it to the general public. By getting celebrities to perform the *Vagina Monologues*, whether they are known as actresses, singers, politicians, sports players or business women, visibility is assured. So this is what we did. Beatriz Luengo, an actress from Spain who stars in a Spanish television soap opera that is hugely popular in Serbia, helped us in that, together with Myleene Klass, a pop star from the UK, and ten other amazing and famous actresses from Serbia and one from Croatia.



Activists participating in the ‘Vagina Workshop’

Participants drew their own, unique vaginas



5 Soap stars as women's rights campaigners

Beatriz Luengo is famous among 12–17-year-old girls. As one newspaper article wrote: 'Hundreds of young girls came to see the *Vagina Monologues*, but not because of its provocative content but because of the participation of their idol Bea'. Yes, they came to see Bea and at the same time they heard about vaginas, clitorises, pleasure and orgasm. They heard about incest, sexual abuse, rape, genital mutilation, domestic violence. They also heard about being lesbian. They heard about how to love their bodies. And that was a success.

6 From behaving like divas to becoming new allies in making change happen

As for other actresses, they passed through their personal transformations while reading the monologues. Each monologue is a personal story of a woman about her body. It was beautiful to see how the actresses were moved and touched by each monologue. After the play some of them came to us individually and said

how important this play was for them personally – how vulnerable and at the same time powerful they felt while performing the monologues; and how they are familiar with the stories that the monologues describe. They knew them from their own experience as well as the experience of other women around them. Seeing them on the stage performing and hearing their stories afterwards about how important the monologues were for each of them, I knew these are our new allies.

Now when it is all over, with a smile I remember a phone call I received from a few of the actresses in the middle of the chaos, asking me to order them a sushi: 'Is there anything else you actresses would like to eat except sushi?' (which we could only get from a very expensive restaurant on the other side of town that was impossible to reach due to the international marathon that took place on the day of the play). 'No, we want only sushi, and can they bring it to us as soon as possible', the actress replied. In the chaos of making sure that

everything was set for the play, securing a back-up camera, communicating with two airline companies about the lost luggage of one of our guest actresses (subsequently we had to secure back-up for her clothes and make-up since her baggage was delayed) and batteries for microphones for actresses to perform in a few hours (the batteries on the microphones the actresses used on their last rehearsal had run out), getting sushi seemed an impossible task. But once the actresses were out there on the stage bringing the message out to the people I forgot about it all. Because what these women were saying and the passion with which they said it helped each of us to relate to it. That is the reason why it was so powerful. It was about each of us and that is why it made so much sense. As one of the actresses said, she had never received such applause in all the years she had been acting; 'Well, this is not Shakespeare my dear', said the other, 'this is us'.

Men in the audience were crying and were not ashamed of it.



Actresses performing together

Women were laughing and crying. The women I spoke with after the performance told me that it was an empowering event. Most of the men I asked could hardly define what happened. But I believe the *Vagina Monologues* made them understand the reality of many women. There was no anger or defensiveness.

7 Using *Vagina Monologues* to acknowledge women's activism during the war

An important characteristic of the *Vagina Monologues* performance is that it was a fundraising event. We decided that the beneficiaries of this event should be women from a grassroots organisation in Travnik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, called KOLO. They were so

touched and moved to get this support. Although they had been working for ten years, this was their first official grant. KOLO works with women who are survivors of rape camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, some of which were run by Serbian paramilitary forces. During 1992–5, Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed over three years of brutal war among the

Anita Matic from Croatia performing



Actresses, activists and the audience applauding after the play



Serb, Croat and Bosniak population, following the break-up of Yugoslavia. Some of KOLO's activists are themselves survivors of the rape camps. Inviting women from this organisation to come up on the stage to receive the grant, in front of an audience of 700 people representing Serbian society was very powerful. It was a public acknowledgement of their work, and of everything they, the women they work with and other women like them had experienced during the war in former Yugoslavia. In a period when Serbia is confronting its difficult past, acknowledging what these women experienced and survived during the conflict and how they worked to rebuild the communities when the conflict was over, is an important step towards reconciliation.

8 Breaking the silence around violence

After the play, together with two other activists, I went on-stage to thank people who came to watch the play and support the cause. We also thanked the actresses and activists that came from all

over former Yugoslavia to take part in events that were organised before the play. Having all those activists present, including KOLO from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and an actress from Croatia, showed that the lines of ethnic divide that fuelled the war in former Yugoslavia can be crossed with such a small step.

Rada Boric was the first person to bring the *Vagina Monologues* to Croatia, Macedonia and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2000, together with Eve Ensler, the play writer and V-Day founder. Once the play was over, Rada joined us on-stage and invited everyone in the audience who had experienced violence in their lives to stand up. There were only a few that dared. 'OK, maybe you are scared and you think you are alone in that, which is completely understandable, but to show you that you are not alone I would like to ask all of you who know a woman or a girl that experienced violence in her life to stand up', said Rada. At that moment, almost the whole audience was on its feet. 'And now', Rada said, 'I would like to

ask all of you who will make sure from this very day that no violence will be committed against any woman or girl, or anybody else, to stand up and continue standing'. The whole audience was on its feet. People were crying and laughing. 'Is it possible that so many people know somebody who experienced violence?' asked an actress standing next to me. 'I did not know, but now I see.' She continued, 'This knowledge is hard but I want to tell you that if you ever need me to support your cause and to help raise awareness like we did just now, please call me. I will be there for you'.

9 Beyond *Vagina Monologues*

The *Vagina Monologues* has proved to be a powerful tool to enable communities to talk about women's sexuality. As shown above, the performance in Belgrade connected together many issues: pleasure and women's sexuality, actresses and activists across generations, many coming from former Yugoslavia and crossing the lines of ethnic divides that once fuelled the war. This performance also brought



Beatriz Luengo and Myleene Klass on the stage after the play

men into the struggle for a more equitable society.

Because the venue for the event was one of the most prestigious theatres in Belgrade, we tried to make the event as accessible as possible to the wider public through selling cheap tickets. The diversity of actresses as well as the presence of Beatriz Luengo and Myleene Klass helped us in attracting hundreds of young girls to come and watch the play. After the great success of the event, ATC recognises that there is a need to

continue with this kind of initiative, as this is an amazing tool with which we can discuss women's sexuality in the Serbian public. Extraordinary energy was generated after the performance as well as an amazing network of new allies who will now support ATC in its work on social change. For the next year, ATC hopes to bring *Vagina Monologues* to smaller communities and towns, and to schools. It envisages continuing to perform it as a commercial event while making sure that it does not become an elitist gathering but a

catalyst for change that remains accessible to everyone. A necessary further step will be to make the *Vagina Monologues* 'trans inclusive' – that is, to encourage participation of all of those who identify as a woman, including transgendered women, as has happened in performances elsewhere in the world.



Beatriz Luengo with fans after the play



Sandra Ljubinkovic, Jelena Djordjevic and Rada Boric

Notes

* I would like to acknowledge the inspiring work of Sandra Ljubinkovic and the whole ATC team that worked together tirelessly to make this event happen: Sinisa Djuric, Jelena Milic, Marijana Stojcic, Natasa Ljubinkovic, Adam Puskar, Bora

Djurkovic, Milica Djuric and Darko Lalic. I enjoyed every moment working with each of them on *Vagina Monologues*. Also, without the help of Rada Boric, Tamin Larby and a number of ATC volunteers, this event would not have been as special as it was.

- 1 Play by Eve Ensler developed out of interviews with 200 women of different ethnicities, sexual orientation and age talking about their vaginas.