

Jouissance is the word that immediately springs to mind when reading Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, and even more so when meeting her. In literary terms jouissance is defined as a sexual, spiritual, physical and conceptual feminine life force connoting total joy or ecstasy – and Ensler has it in bucket loads.

It seems to me that Ensler is the physical embodiment of this notion. She is the contemporary high priestess of jouissance. Her writing throbs with a palpable sense of textual pleasure and *The Vagina Monologues* has captured the minds of women all over the globe.

It all began in 1996 when Ensler defied a conservative American public and said the word vagina out loud in a downtown New York theatre – at a time when the word penis was the only genitalia allowed mention in the public arena. She said it with such a force of elation and celebration and humour and poignancy that it resonated collectively, and most who heard it wanted more.

Ensler kept on delivering. She audaciously ripped off the cloak of shame that a patriarchal order had thrown over most things feminine and reopened a portal that allowed women to celebrate their bodies with her, and say the word vagina out loud.

That was 14 years ago and the energy harnessed in this reclamation of women's joy, pain and bodily power, has taken on a vigour of its own. She has also founded V-Day, a worldwide activist movement to end violence against women and girls, which also raises funds through benefit productions of *The Vagina Monologues* and other artistic works.

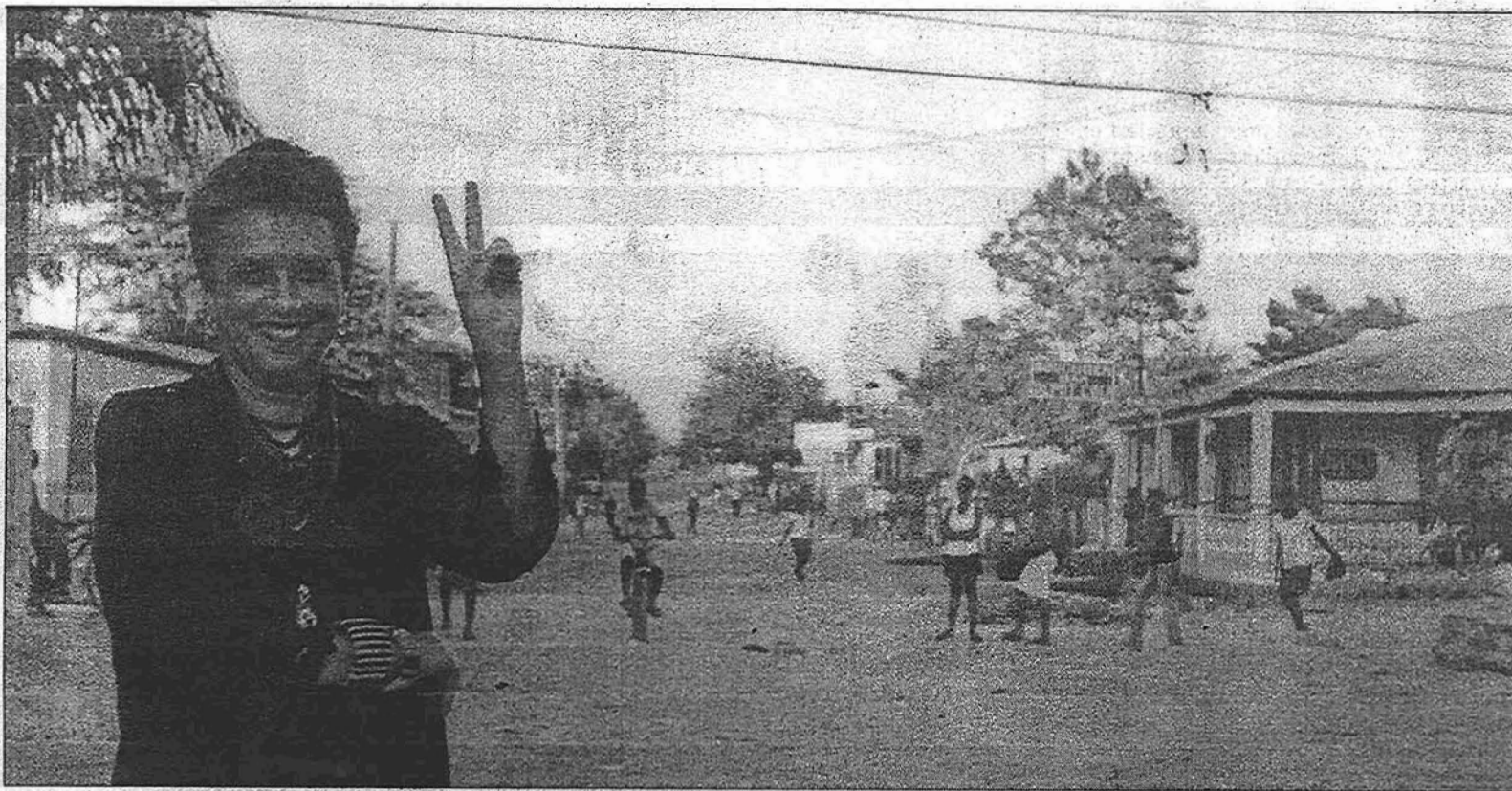
This year alone over 5 600 V-Day benefit events took place, produced by volunteer activists in the US and around the world, educating millions about the reality of violence against women and girls. To date, the V-Day movement has raised over \$85 million for the cause.

Now V-Day is in South Africa to do the first theatre production of Ensler's latest book – *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around The World*. This precious resource is made up of original monologues about and for girls from all over the globe.

"The process has been remarkable," says Ensler at Kaldi's Coffee shop in Newtown. Her eyes radiate with enthusiasm when she talks about the girls who have been selected for the stage production of her book.

"There is such amazing energy in that room. These girls have taken to the work with such gusto... and they have also shared their stories with us. It's organic because we all feed into each other, and I will work on new material depending on what unfolds. Already, because of the musicality of the South African girls, we have included dance and song. The play is made up of rants, poetry, questions and facts that speak of the universality of girls: their resilience, their wildness, their pain, their fears, their secrets and their triumphs."

I want to know what the outcome of the play and the workshops will be for young South African women. Ensler's eyes glitter as she replies: "There is this mandate for women to please, in every country in every culture: please the fashion industry, please your husband,



Eve Ensler is the embodiment of jouissance. She says those who have survived brutality have, bizarrely, the capacity for the greatest joy.

## HIGH priestess of Jouissance

Girls take centre stage in a new play by Eve Ensler of *The Vagina Monologues*, writes Gillian Schutte



### EMOTIONAL CREATURE

THE CAST consists of girls from South Africa, America, Congo, Zimbabwe and they come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. They are Samukelisiwe Khumalo (Dobsonville); Karabo Ishikubu (The Lab, Jeppe); Antoinette Kayembe (Crawford); Charmian Bonnet (flew herself from the US); Tanyaradzwa Tawengwa (Zimbabwe, flew herself here, Princeton scholarship); Molly Houlihan (US, Yale); Ratanang Mogotsi (Sacred Heart).

V-Day is also hosting workshops to bring local teens together where they can share, envision and strategise what girls want and what they want to change.

These activities are part of V-Day's V-Girls campaign, a burgeoning youth movement, grounded in girls' voices, aspirations and world views, and developed in conjunction with *Emotional Creature*. Performances are will be at The Laboratory at The Market Theatre in Newtown from July 15 to 27 for schools and the general public. Tickets range from R66 to R140.

please through housekeeping and religion... the list goes on. That mandate has made those of us who are older progressively mute and has undermined our authentic selves.

"Often when we do access our wildness or authenticity, we feel a sense of loss of control or madness and it is frightening. Girls have not had that happen to them yet. They are still themselves so this piece is a call to not please. It is a call to dance, to create, to invent, have discourse, do anything but please. Be defiant, be questioning. If we can get to girls before they go underground and before they get shut down then we have a whole new wave of energy, and women are so powerful it would translate into a whole other natural resource."

I ask the question that is on the lips of many a South African feminist who wants to know how a celebratory take on the feminine body is even possible for those who live outside of the middle class comfort zone. She is moved by the question.

"You know I always use Congo as a good example of women's ability to access their joy. Congo has the worst record of atrocities towards women but I have experienced or witnessed more celebration and more aliveness in women in Congo than women in any other part of the world.

"V-Day Congo works with the Panzi Foundation, which recently opened up a place called City of Joy – a safe home for women who have been victims of violence. So many people said, 'you can't call it joy... women have been abused and it is a place for survivors'. Yet those women have such a deep sense of joy and are so expressive of it that many who visit say they never want to leave."

Ensler, a cancer survivor, goes on. "Women have a great capacity for joy – even those who have been through the worst violations. Once you pass through the worst brutality you have, bizarrely, the capacity for the greatest joy. Once you have gone through the grief, your facility for both empowerment and joy is immense. Grief and birth and grief and joy... they are right next to each other. In our workshops we have had many girls telling their stories, many of them just weeping.

But afterwards there was a huge celebration. You often find that women and girls who can express their grief and express their rage and express what is buried and shoved down – that enormous energy and joy and power comes right after. It is the accessing of this power that will drive the change in this world."

I ask Ensler if this translates into revolution and if so, is it on the go already or are we at the very beginning of one?

"What's going on with women across the planet is so extreme... both in violence being perpetuated against women and this huge desire on the part of women everywhere to be free. That kind of constellation of those two things happening – and the *Vagina Monologues* being there at that moment for whatever reason – really has created a type of radical activist movement. Last year alone there were 5 000 productions of it in 1 400 cities. It has been translated into 48 languages and has been performed in far-flung places such as Congo and Mongolia. So in spite of the world, which seems dismal, I have great hope that there is this other world attempting to emerge and is emerging – not as fast as we'd like it, but it is emerging."

I am mindful that Ensler has to get back to her rehearsals, but we speak for a further half hour, shed some tears and shout a few slogans. She makes up spontaneous and ludic words for things that enter our conversation. She talks about "Vevolution" as opposed to revolution.

I ask her if there was anything further she'd like to say for the interview. Her eyes glitter again as she talks about her passion for the stage. "I think the theatre is a powerful tool for this 'Vevolutionary' wave. Theatre is such a great carrier. It carries things in body... it is of the body, so I think it is a language that gets carried into people.

"And what is so incredible about the theatre is also the immediacy of the message. It moves people because it comes from the body. You can move through a range of things so quickly. You can move from one to the other and it is accepted because it is drama. But you know, what I call life, the world calls drama," Ensler laughs.