

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

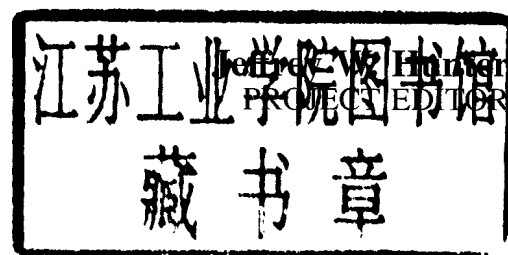
**CLC 212**



Volume 212

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

### Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- **The list of Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- **Reprinted Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xv

<b>Eve Ensler 1953-</b> .....	1
<i>American playwright</i>	
<b>Jeffrey Eugenides 1960-</b> .....	31
<i>American novelist</i>	
<b>Reynolds Price 1933-</b> .....	79
<i>American novelist, short story writer, poet, playwright, essayist, memoirist, translator, and critic</i>	
<b>Paul Schrader 1946-</b> .....	204
<i>American screenwriter and director</i>	
<b>Kurt Vonnegut 1922-</b> .....	268
<i>American novelist, short story writer, essayist, and playwright</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 347

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 447

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 459

CLC-212 Title Index 473

# Eve Ensler

## 1953-

American playwright.

The following entry presents an overview of Ensler's career through 2003.

### INTRODUCTION

Ensler is a highly regarded feminist playwright whose *Vagina Monologues* (1996) propelled her to international attention and acclaim. In her works she celebrates women and draws attention to the suffering of rape victims, incest survivors, and women who fear or are embarrassed by their sexuality. With the success of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler began the V-Day Movement, celebrated on February 14 each year with celebrity readings of *The Vagina Monologues*. V-Day proceeds are used globally to protect women from violence and violation.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ensler was born on May 25, 1953, to a prosperous executive from Scarsdale, New York, and his homemaker wife. Ensler was sexually abused by her father at a young age and the emotional scars of this abuse created turbulence in her teen and young adult years and also influenced her writing. She attended Middlebury College in Vermont, where she focused on her love of poetry, but then developed an interest in theater. After graduation, she was accepted to Yale to study dramatic arts, but could not afford the tuition, and instead began a downward spiral fueled by the use of alcohol, drugs, and casual relationships that lasted until her realization, at age twenty-three, that she needed to improve her life. In 1979, Ensler married Richard McDermott, owner of the West 4th Street Salon, and resumed writing for the stage. Her stepson and later adopted son, film and television actor Dylan McDermott, was at the time fifteen and interested in acting, an aspiration that Ensler encouraged. While enrolled in an acting workshop, Dylan showed one of Ensler's plays to his instructor, actress Joanne Woodward. Woodward was impressed, and Ensler wrote *The Depot* (1988) for Woodward and her husband, actor and director Paul Newman, to direct. Ensler's career began to blossom although her marriage to McDermott fell apart and they divorced. Her next few plays, *Ladies* (1989), *Lemonade* (1993), and *Float-*



*ing Rhoda and the Glue Man* (1995) all generated further critical attention. These plays also highlighted Ensler's escalating concern with marginalization, feminist issues, and female empowerment. She began therapy with Ariel Jordan, a psychiatrist whom she credits with stabilizing her life, and the two eventually entered into a personal relationship. In 1994, Ensler traveled to war-torn Bosnia to interview women in the country's refugee camps. The stories they told compelled her to write *Necessary Targets* (1996), about the horrors inflicted upon women during war. Ensler has also interviewed women around the world about their lives, sexuality, and bodies. *The Vagina Monologues* is a compilation of these interviews. The play brought Ensler immediate success and notoriety. Originally a one-woman play performed by Ensler, it has now been performed by famous actresses worldwide. Its popularity prompted Ensler to create the V-Day Movement, and profits from these performances are used to fund many women's issues, including opposition to female genital mutilation in African nations and assistance for



women in post-war Afghanistan. *The Vagina Monologues* won an Obie Award in 1998, has been filmed by HBO, was released as a book in 1998, and each year on V-Day is performed at over 250 colleges around the world.

## MAJOR WORKS

Ensler's first successful play, *The Depot*, is a comedy about nuclear stockpiling and disarmament; it enjoyed a two-year run in its initial production. Ensler's *Ladies* is based on her experiences while working at a homeless shelter. The play showcases the difficulties faced by homeless women and marks the beginning of Ensler's theatrical feminist agenda. In *Lemonade* she explores the give and take of male/female relationships and the dangers inherent in any relationship, a theme she revisits in *Floating Rhoda and the Glue Man*. In *Necessary Targets* an American psychiatrist travels to Yugoslavia to interview women subsisting in Bosnian refugee camps. The refugees tell of the atrocities of the war: most have been raped, many have seen loved ones murdered, and all are emotionally scarred by the evils of war. After recounting the powerless position of the women in *Necessary Targets*, in *The Vagina Monologues* Ensler proudly rejoices in femininity and feminine empowerment. Ensler conceived of the idea for this play when a prominent feminist friend of hers criticized her own vagina. If a feminist can hate her own vagina, Ensler wondered, what do ordinary women think of theirs? She interviewed women from all societal strata, both domestically and internationally, and found that many women are profoundly impacted by societal stigmatization against discussion of or attention to one's vagina, to the extent that the word itself is taboo. She wrote *The Vagina Monologues* as a celebration of the vagina, in defiance of society's antiquated mores. Among the play's monologues is "Reclaiming Cunt," in which the actress decries the negative connotation of the many synonyms for the word vagina. "My Vagina Was My Village" is based on Ensler's interviews with Bosnian refugees. In "The Flood," an older woman recounts her first orgasm and the shame she felt over her boyfriend's negative response to her passion; since then she has spent most of her life denying herself sexual fulfillment. Each production of *The Vagina Monologues* is unique—some monologues are excluded, and at times new monologues are added, such as "Under the Burqa," about the difficulties faced by Afghan women. In *The Good Body* (2004), Ensler further analyzes women's views of their own bodies. She studies the alarming trend of women seeking plastic surgery to augment their breasts, slim their thighs, reshape their faces, and erase wrinkles. She treats women's obsession with their bodies as unhealthy and a hindrance to achieving true equality with men.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

*The Vagina Monologues* is critically and popularly acclaimed. Reviewers applaud Ensler for combating the shame associated with the word "vagina" and for

encouraging women to take pride in their bodies and sexuality. Although a handful of critics are uncomfortable with the unabashed feminist atmosphere of *Vagina Monologues* audiences, most reviewers agree that the overwhelming success of the play proves that women need an outlet to voice their empowerment, and they praise Ensler for providing one. Some commentators argue that in extolling the vagina, Ensler has overlooked the brain, placing empowerment on a sexual rather than intellectual level and thereby, ironically, perpetuating the gender inequity she abhors. *Necessary Targets* has received mixed assessments. The play is praised for examining the effects of systematic rape and torture of women, yet some critics find the scenes lack fluidity and feel that the situations are melodramatic. Overall, Ensler is complimented for her direct approach to women's issues and her unapologetic demand for women's rights and empowerment. She is generally applauded as an advocate for women everywhere.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*When I Call My Voices* (play) 1979  
*Rendezvous* (play) 1983  
*Cinderella/Cendrillon* (opera) 1988  
*The Depot* (play) 1988  
*Scooncat* (play) 1988  
*Ladies* (play) 1989  
*Dicks in the Dessert* (monologue) 1991  
*Lemonade* (play) 1993  
*Extraordinary Measures* (play) 1995  
*Floating Rhoda and the Glue Man* (play) 1995  
*Word of Mouth* (monologue) 1995  
*Necessary Targets* (play) 1996  
*\*The Vagina Monologues* (play) 1996  
*Conviction* (play) 1999  
*What I Want My Words to Do to You: Voices from Inside a Women's Maximum Security Prison* [and producer with Judith Katz, Carol Jenkins, Gary Sunshine, and Madeleine Gavin] (documentary) 2003  
*The Good Body* (play) 2004

*\*The Vagina Monologues: V-Day Edition* was published in 1998 with an introduction by Gloria Steinem.

## CRITICISM

Robert Brustein (review date 16 December 1996)

SOURCE: Brustein, Robert. "Paying Tribute to Mediocrity." *New Republic* 215, no. 25 (16 December 1996): 32-3.

[In the following excerpted performance review, Brustein lauds *Necessary Targets* as emotionally moving.]

One of the more poignant conclusions of *Forbidden Broadway Strikes Back!* is that the most gifted American actors have abandoned the stage. It was extremely encouraging, therefore, to find some of those exiles back, if only for one night, performing at the Helen Hayes Theatre in *Necessary Targets*, a play written and directed by Eve Ensler (author of a piece enticingly titled *The Vagina Monologues*). The occasion was a staged reading held in late October to benefit The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and the Center for Women War Victims, two agencies dedicated to aiding displaced innocents worldwide.

Although *Necessary Targets* will probably be produced later this year by the New York Public Theater (which originally commissioned it), I have my doubts that it will again attract such a remarkable company of actresses or leave such a powerful impact. The play itself is rather like an extended encounter session, involving as it does a trip to Yugoslavia by an American woman psychiatrist and her translator (who is also writing a book on the subject) for the purpose of counseling women victims in Bosnian refugee camps. Although worlds apart when they meet, the two Americans and the Bosnian women eventually manage the inevitable female bonding. The psychiatrist, in particular, loses her professional distance and gains personal empathy, as she learns firsthand of the awful suffering created by men who rape and pillage.

For this one evening, the benefit was able to attract such luminaries as Meryl Streep, Cherry Jones, Anjelica Huston and Lois Smith, among others. They managed to turn what otherwise might have been an inspirational movie of the week into a deeply affecting experience. Cherry Jones, a child of the stage who has never left home, was very telling as a callow writer with careerist ambitions, and all of the others read their parts with power and conviction. But Meryl Streep as the psychiatrist, harrowed by atrocity stories of decapitated husbands and abandoned babies, was the one who raised the level of the evening to true tragedy. Returning to the United States, she discovers she has lost her profession, her country and her purpose in life. The blood that flows through her veins has become one with that of all the suffering women in Bosnia. And "I bleed." The manner in which the actress spoke that line, in a voice rumbling with terror and despair, was so appalling that the hairs stood up on my neck. It was a voice that evoked all the monumental tragic heroines from Hecuba to Mother Courage, and the way Streep visibly affected the audience and the other actresses was not only moving in the extreme but reminded us how much our stage has suffered from the absence of truly great performers. Streep has been absent for fifteen years. But there is consolation in the fact that, given the impact of her playing and the instant appreciation it evoked (compared with the postponed gratifications of, and impersonal audience response to, movie acting), Streep is thinking about returning to the theater she once loved.

### Eve Ensler and Wendy Weiner (interview date May-June 1997)

SOURCE: Ensler, Eve, and Wendy Weiner. "Eve Ensler: All about Eve." *American Theatre* 14, no. 5 (May-June 1997): 31-3.

[In the following interview, Ensler discusses the word "vagina," her career, and the difficulties faced by women in theatre.]

Eve Ensler sits on a stool on an otherwise bare stage at New York's downtown theatre HERE. "I began this piece because I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas and even more worried that we don't think about them," she says. "Let's just start with the word *vagina*. It sounds like an infection at best, maybe a medical instrument. 'Hurry, nurse, bring the vagina.'"

Ensler's audiences—a surprisingly disparate group, including more than a few men—may have never heard the word "vagina" spoken aloud in public, with the (possible) exception of high-school health classes. But playwright-turned-performer Ensler is determined to change all that with her solo piece *The Vagina Monologues*. She has interviewed more than 200 women all over the U.S. and as far away as Bosnia about their (as she tells us they're called on Long Island) "pussycats." Now, what's been shared furtively in dorm rooms, bathrooms and therapists' offices—or more commonly not talked about at all—she has crafted and put onstage.

Ensler radiates the qualities of a classic storyteller—maybe it's the straightforward, unadorned style of her performance, or maybe it's because her spontaneity and tone remove the hierarchy automatically assumed between audience and performer. At this performance, after doing a show-stopping sequence displaying the sounds of different orgasms (including the "WASP moan," where she opens her mouth and no sound comes out), she throws her head back and laughs, "Wow. That was good tonight," then confesses, "Some nights are better than others." She makes you feel like you're her oldest friend, giggling at 2 a.m. over a cup of coffee, or that she's the mom you always dreamed of having.

But most moms don't tell the kinds of stories Ensler tells tonight. She speaks in the voice of a woman in a "vagina workshop" who begins crying when she can't find her G-spot. "I told [the teacher] I had lost my G-spot. It was gone. She told me my G-spot was not something I could lose." A tax-lawyer-turned-lesbian-dominatrix gives instructions on how to make a woman moan with pleasure. A woman who was sexually abused as a child imagines "a freeway between my legs, and I am traveling, going far away from here." A Bosnian rape victim dreams of "a dead animal sewn in down there with thick black fishing line." The last monologue is Ensler's own story, a piece entitled "**I Was in the Room,**" about watching her daughter-in-law give birth.

WHAT WOULD IT WEAR?

In between the stories, Ensler seamlessly interweaves what she calls “vagina facts” (e.g.: In the U.S., the last recorded clitoridectomy for “curing” masturbation was performed in 1948 on a five-year-old girl) and answers her interviewees have given to questions such as “If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?” (“Jeans . . . sequins . . . Armani only.”)

In person, Ensler displays many of the qualities that shine through in her performance—intelligence, passion, a sense of hard-won inner strength. The survivor of a violent childhood that left her with two choices—“Be powerless or change the world”—she came through not only with her compassion intact, but with a great sense of humor.

Originally a poet, Ensler soon realized she wasn’t cut out for the solitary life, and turned instead to theatre. She was accepted as a director into Yale Drama School, but the fairy tale of attending Yale came to an abrupt ending when she realized she couldn’t afford to enroll. After that, she remembers, “My life went in a very, very different direction—a *bad* direction.”

Unsure what step to take next and unable to find directing projects that interested her, Ensler came up with a creative solution: she started writing. She soon found that writing gave her an outlet not only for her poetry but for her activism. Her break-out play of the late-’80s, *The Depot*, was about nuclear disarmament. Starring Shirley Knight and directed by Joanne Woodward, who Ensler cites as one of her mentors, it toured the country for two years. Her work also found support from Lyn Austin at Music-Theatre Group and Randy Rollison at HERE, who separately produced six of her plays. Among them are *Ladies*, based on interviews with homeless women; *Extraordinary Measures*, centered around a man dying from AIDS; and *Floating Rhoda and the Glue Man* which follows the journey of an abused woman trying to learn how to love.

The inseparability of Ensler’s art and activism are evident again in her most recent play. Three years ago, Ensler felt compelled to go to Bosnia and spend time with women refugees. (“I needed to go. I didn’t know why, I just needed to go.”) There, she heard stories of such horror that the idea of dramatizing them seemed overwhelming. “I made this decision midway that I didn’t have to tell the whole story. What I had to do was tell a piece of the story, my version of the story. And I realized my responsibility was really to write about my experience as an American, because that’s what I know.”

INVISIBLE RIGHT NOW

The result, commissioned by the New York Shakespeare Festival, is *Necessary Targets*. The play received a reading last October, directed by Ensler and starring the

dream cast of Meryl Streep, Cherry Jones, Lois Smith and Anjelica Huston. “Can you imagine directing Meryl Streep?” she laughs. “It was incredible.”

But her success with such noncommercial pieces as *Vagina Monologues* and *Necessary Targets* has not been easy. “My experience as a playwright has been a torturous one in the sense that it’s taken years and years to be in any way embraced or taken seriously,” she says. “But part of that has been a great thing because it’s really taught me how to be a writer. I’ve got to find clever or sophisticated ways to talk about those things so that people will come and see them.”

It seems clear that Ensler, who is currently at work on a screenplay for Goldie Hawn and a TV pilot for Kathy Najimy, has found a way to do just that. When asked if she has any advice for other women theatre artists, she answers with characteristic fervor. “The truth is, we’re invisible right now. Saying that is not about self-pity, it’s not victimization. I don’t feel sorry for myself on any level. But I do have rage, and I have an intuitive sense that if we do not take our power, the world will not go on. So it’s our responsibility to survive rejection, to survive being put on the outside. You bear it the way you bear the pain of birth because it’s the only way things are going to change. You don’t go, ‘Oh, my god! They don’t like me. I can’t stand it.’” Then she adds something I imagine she’s told herself many times over the years, an irreverent war cry to keep on going: “Who gives a fuck? Your mission’s bigger here.”

Josh Getlin (essay date 11 February 1998)

SOURCE: Getlin, Josh. “Not the V Word!” *Los Angeles Times* (11 February 1998): E2, E8.

[In the following essay, Getlin focuses on *The Vagina Monologues* and Ensler’s inspiration for writing it.]

When Eve Ensler tried to place a newspaper ad last month, nobody thought she’d have trouble with the subject—a gala fund-raiser protesting violence against women.

But she hit a serious snag over language. One word in particular that the paper felt uncomfortable printing:

Vagina. As in *The Vagina Monologues*, a play Ensler had written and would perform at the event along with a star-studded cast.

“The guy from the ad-acceptability department said they had trouble with the fact that we used the word so much,” Ensler recalls, laughing at the story. “And I said, ‘What’s wrong with the word? It’s not a curse word. It’s part of our anatomy!’”

The newspaper adman, she continues, “didn’t really know” what was wrong with the word. “But then again, nobody ever does.”

Ensler’s Obie-winning play takes a provocative look at sexual politics, gender identity and the female body. Told in the voices of diverse women across America, it has built a strong cult following.

Now, it is about to reach a much larger audience. On Saturday, Valentine’s Day, *The Vagina Monologues* will be the centerpiece of the “V-Day” fund-raiser in New York, an event celebrating women and calling for an end to sexual violence. Individual scenes will be performed by Susan Sarandon, Whoopi Goldberg, Glenn Close, Winona Ryder, Rosie Perez, Lily Tomlin, Marisa Tomei, Margaret Cho, Shirley Knight, Calista Flockhart, Barbara Walters, Liz Smith and others.

Later in the spring, Ensler will take the play on the road, performing all the scenes herself, as she normally does; a four- to six-week run is booked for Los Angeles. Villard is publishing a paperback edition of the monologues this month with a special introduction by Gloria Steinem.

Yet, with all this firepower, Ensler still had to twist arms to get word of V-Day into a newspaper ad. Finally, after protracted negotiating, the paper OK’d an ad that toned down the graphics (too Georgia O’Keeffe-ish) and permitted the lines: “All Together. All Talking About Vaginas. All Night Long.”

“We’re talking about ending sexual violence,” Ensler says. “We’re talking about women celebrating their bodies and their power. But some people can’t get past that word.”

In an age of lurid talk-show debates over oral sex, severed penises and semen-stained dresses, the squeamishness over Ensler’s work may seem absurd. Yet vagina is a word rarely mentioned in the mainstream American press.

“It’s a word of such central importance to women,” Ensler says. “But in this culture, we don’t talk *about* things. We talk around them. We avoid what’s important.”

Ensler, 44, didn’t simply wake up one morning and start talking about vaginas. The crusade that consumes her came about by accident, at a time in her life when “body politic” was an abstract term instead of a rallying cry.

“Several years ago, I was talking to a very well-known woman, a feminist, and we stumbled onto the subject of sex and menopause,” Ensler relates, curling up on a

chair in her Greenwich Village office. “Out of nowhere she started talking about her vagina, and she said really negative things. She spoke with such contempt, and I was shocked.

“When I raised the subject with other women, they had much the same kind of reaction.” Ensler wondered: Aren’t feminists supposed to be liberated and in touch with their bodies? How could women talk this way?

The problem, she suggests, is that many women have made a distinction between the party line of the feminist movement and its deeper, more revolutionary implications for their bodies.

“What happened to us has happened in other movements,” Ensler says. “It certainly happened in the black liberation movement. People locked into positions without addressing their deepest feelings. That’s why racism is still so prevalent.

“Some feminists have been revolutionized and changed. But for the most part, women bought into an ideology without it touching them personally. I see a lot of feminists who are incredible thinkers and yet hate their bodies. Until you make that connection, things don’t change.”

Galvanized, Ensler began talking to women about their most intimate thoughts and feelings. She interviewed elderly women, girls, homeless mothers, professors, divorcees, rape victims, corporate professionals, therapists, suburban moms, urban singles and others. She talked to African American, Latina, Asian American, Native American, white and Jewish women.

“At first, women were reluctant to talk with me,” Ensler says. “But once they got going, you couldn’t stop them.” Each had a riveting story to tell, and the best made their way into *The Vagina Monologues*, which debuted in New York in 1995.

Critics were impressed: “That Eve Ensler avoids mere shock value or even titillation is a tribute to the intelligence with which she has fashioned this courageous piece,” said the *New York Daily News*. The *New York Times* said Ensler’s writing “has the intensity of poetry . . . eliciting roars from the audience.”

By talking about something most women rarely discuss, the characters in Ensler’s play turn their souls inside out. In one scene, a Bosnian rape victim mourns that she no longer feels connected to the most vital part of her body:

*Not since the soldiers put a long thick rifle inside me.  
So cold, the steel rod canceling my heart. Don’t know  
whether they’re going to fire it or shove it through my*