

Speaking the Unspeakable: An Interview with the Producers of *The Vagina Monologues* in St. John's, Newfoundland

Natalie Beausoleil

ABSTRACT

In this interview, the producers of the play in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, talk about what sparked their idea of producing the play and the process of putting it on, including the difficult search for sponsors and the ultimate success of the play, as well as how this experience changed them as feminists, as medical students and as future physicians.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette entrevue, les réalisatrices de la pièce de théâtre à Saint-Jean, Terre-Neuve et Labrador, parlent de ce qui les a inspirées à être les réalisatrices de cette pièce et le processus pour la mettre sur pied, y compris les difficultés rencontrées à trouver des parrains ainsi que le grand succès qu'a eu la pièce. Elles parlent aussi de la façon dont cette expérience les a changées en tant que féministes, étudiantes en médecine et de futures médecins.

On February 27, 2002, Eve Ensler's play, *The Vagina Monologues*, was performed for the first time in Newfoundland and Labrador. The producers were two second-year medical students at Memorial University, Kathleen Dooling and Kathryn Olsen. The play was a success and \$12,000 was raised for three local organizations working to eradicate violence against women. In what follows, the producers of the play talk with Natalie Beausoleil about the process of publicly speaking the unspeakable "vagina" for a first time in St. John's. The interview took place on June 20, 2002.

THE BEGINNING OF IT ALL: SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE "VAGINA"

Natalie

Kathleen and Kathryn, what made you think of producing the *Vagina Monologues* here in St. John's?

Kathleen

For me it all started when I came to Memorial's Medical School to volunteer as a simulated patient for the fourth-year medical students' practical examinations. In the scenario I was a 28 year old with grey vaginal discharge. Those were my symptoms. Student after student came in and it just happened that most of my students were male. One after the other they obviously had a lot of problems making eye contact. They asked my symptoms about what things were going on "down there." There were a couple instances when they would hint at the word "Do you have any disch-a-r-ge?" and just kind of look at me and I wouldn't speak until they

finished (*laughter*) the description of what question they were asking me. One student came through and I don't think he said "vagina" the entire time even though my chief complaint was vaginal discharge. It shocked me to know that the fourth-year medical students still don't have a comfort level in speaking about the vagina. It infuriated me actually. I went home and was telling my mother all about this very frustrating experience. She said "Well I just took this book from the library today and it's the *Vagina Monologues*, maybe you should read this." I did. I read it from cover to cover. In the end the author, Eve Ensler,¹ talks about the V-day phenomenon that has come forth from the *Vagina Monologues*. I thought we should be doing this here.

Natalie

I am wondering if they knew that you were a medical student.

Kathleen

Yes, they did and that is perhaps what made things uncomfortable. But in my role I was a 28 years old married woman who came in with these symptoms. I think you have to be ready to interact with people who are young and sexually active and have problems with their genitalia. It is a fact of life so, whoever they are, medical student or not.

Kathryn

When Kathleen approached me with the idea (*laughter*) she thought I was the only one crazy enough to accept her offer.

Kathleen

And I was right!

Kathryn

The part of producing the *Vagina Monologues* that appealed to me is the ability to raise money for St. John's and keep the funds to work for local charities that advocate anti-violence against women and girls.

GETTING STARTED WITH THE PRODUCTION

Natalie

Then what happened?

Kathryn

We signed on in December 2001, we signed for the rights for Eve Ensler's play, the *Vagina Monologues*. Then when we came back from the Christmas break we started right on with the auditions.

Natalie

How were you going to be sure it would happen?

Kathleen

Well, we were not!

Natalie

Did you sign on before finding a director?

Kathryn

Actually within two days of signing up, everything kind of fell into place for the director. We went to the arts community and we proposed that we have a volunteer production that should be really exciting, a St. John's premiere, trying to pitch the idea. They suggested a name of someone who might be willing to volunteer her time, which is difficult to find, who has the time and able to volunteer. We were able to contact her and she was on. That was Danielle Irvine.

Natalie

Can you tell me about the involvement of the Medical School at Memorial in the play?

Kathleen

What we signed up for was the campus campaign. Eve Ensler actually gives the rights to the play to colleges to put on the production.² We as a student community wanted to put this, this play on.

Kathryn

But then we wanted to incorporate the medical school and have the backing of the medical school. That's why we went straight to Dean Bowmer to see if he would be supportive of this endeavour. And he was a 100 percent

behind it right from the beginning. We were really fortunate to have a Dean who was so supportive of the arts community and of community outreach.

Natalie

Even with this support, you had a lot to do in very little time.

Kathryn

We knew it was a large undertaking but we figured between the two of us (*laughter*) with our energy we would be able to pull it off. We were counting on other people to step up and we just had faith in our community and in the student body that we would find enough volunteers. And that's what happened in January (2002). We had an overwhelming response to the auditions. We had to open up a second day because we had so many people who really wanted to participate in the *Vagina Monologues*.

Natalie

How many women came to the auditions?

Kathleen

Thirty-five! Word spread like wild fire. We put up posters around the university but the word spread so much further than the university. Danielle Irvine, one of our directors, said that she had never had a response like this for any other auditions that she had ever done.

Natalie

How do you explain the interest?

Kathleen

People come up and say to me, "I never thought it would come here"[and] "I've been waiting so long I never thought that ..."

Kathryn

This is the first time that the play was able to go on stage in St. John's.

Kathleen

There was a community group who had been planning to put on the show as well at the same time, unbeknownst to us. I found this on the website that I had signed up on. Through the V-Day campaign Eve Ensler allows college campuses to put on the play as well as community groups as two distinct groups. I contacted the community group. Through the jigs and reels Terri Andrews ended up joining us and we went forward with one play, which would be the college initiative.

THE WOMEN IN THE PLAY

Natalie

Then what happened? Did you have to make decisions about people in the play while also looking for corporate sponsors?

Kathleen

Yes. We had to get the play going. We relied on the directors for the artistic decision. They took artistic liberties to try to incorporate as many people as possible to make it an inclusive production. Well I don't think they knew right off how many women they would include. They had no preconceived notions about how many women would be on stage and about what form the piece would take. But after seeing the auditions they wanted to include as many women as possible. It was really a validating point for me because what I saw was just an incredible range of women with such different backgrounds, from different socioeconomic circumstances, different educational backgrounds yet all just believing in the idea so much. It was not just a bunch of professional actors. We had a bunch of women who felt so strongly about the cause that they wanted to get up and have the liberty to talk about their vagina for once. (*laughter*)

Natalie

So they were not only university people and professional actresses?

Kathleen

There was everyone from a woman who is the baker at the Ship Inn to people who had previously sat on the university Board of Governors, to professors at the University. It was just a fantastic range and diversity of women. I think that it is in the end what made the directors say, "how can we turn away any of these women?"

Natalie

It must have been wonderful.

Kathleen

It was.

THE SEARCH FOR SPONSORS

Kathryn

This was going on simultaneously with our frustration of trying to find corporate sponsors. We had contacted about eleven corporate sponsors by that point and we had not had a response. At that time CBC radio had also contacted us and they wanted to get on board and be as supportive as they could as part of the media to get the word out that this was going on and to raise awareness.

So we were having a positive influence from the media and we were getting a negative feedback from the more conservative corporate sponsors. We had one sponsor that we approached who was in the media field and their response was, "well, we are interested in having a cost sharing, we'll give you a free ad for every one that you buy but we rather that you not mention the name of our company." We had to make a conscious decision at that point. We asked ourselves, "are we even going to be involved here with people who don't support the underlying reasons, the very foundation of why we are doing this in the first place, people who want to support us but to be anonymous?" The play is about raising awareness, getting the word out there. That's just contradictory.

Kathleen

The play is about being loud and being visible and doing away with the secrecy and embarrassment. If you are not really ready to associate your name with that, well, then we don't need your money. But we did need the money so that was a difficult thing to decide (*laughter*).

Kathryn

We had a lot of decisions that we did need to make. But then we did have a corporation come through, Rogers Cable, which was really exciting. That just put our foot in the door. Then through the support and connections of a professor in the Medical School, Dr. Popadiuk, we got additional money and at the last minute we got some funding from The Women's Policy Office, of the provincial government. MUNSU, the Memorial University of Newfoundland Students' Union, were behind us right from the beginning, as soon as we contacted them. Rogers Cable and MUNSU were the two driving factors financially.

Natalie

How did you choose the venue for performance of the *Vagina Monologues*?

Kathryn

Originally we were going to have the performance done on a weekend in the Reid Theatre in the Student's theatre because we wanted to keep it on campus. But three weeks before the performance date we found out there was a conflict and we had to find another venue. We had to scramble and to think of all the different options. The Arts and Culture Centre happened to have one day free on a Wednesday and we said we would take it. The Arts and Culture Centre was pretty skeptical that we would be able to meet costs. So we did it under the premise that it was a charity organization and they could receive a third of the profit. But they really didn't think they would be able to make costs though. They thought they would not sell enough tickets.

Kathleen

But in the end, in the last two days before the performance, they continually had to tell people, "no, I'm sorry, it's sold out."

Natalie

How many seats are there in Arts and Culture Centre?

Kathryn

A little over a thousand.

ADVERTISING AND THE DAYS LEADING TO THE PERFORMANCE

Natalie

How did you manage to get a full house? How did you advertise the play?

Kathryn

We needed to fill the room and we were really working on publicity. CBC radio was always behind us and we wanted to incorporate TV. But at that time the Olympics were going on. People at CBC television said they really needed a strong angle, an interesting angle. I pitched the idea we are advertising to the students very differently than the community and I was thinking, "how are we going to advertise to the students?" We told the CBC television team to come to the students' center a couple of days later and that we were going to try to get everybody to chant "vagina." They agreed that they were going to meet us and I had to come up with the idea of how to get the students to chant "vagina."

Natalie

How did you do that?

Kathryn

There were a couple of other people from the play with me. They were students. What we did was we got up and we made the advertisement that the *Vagina Monologues* was coming to St. John's. We said, "it is OK to say the word, say the word with me on the count of three, go ahead and say it." We were able to get people to chant. Of course, throwing out chocolates also helped (*laughter*). It worked.

Kathleen

Azzo Rezori of CBC Television was there and he did a fabulous piece on the evening news drawing in the *Red Trench*, which was a piece of artwork that was commissioned and done in 1985. I, as a young girl living in St. John's, distinctly remember the *Red Trench* controversy as does probably everybody who was living here in the mid 80s. I was about 10 - 12 years old and I remember thinking, "Ooh, yes, it kind of looks like a woman's vulva but what's the big deal, it is a piece of art

work and why are people getting so angry?" Rezori put that in the context of looking at how far we have come and looking at whom the message is coming from. He suggested that because it was students and the medical community presenting the play people were ready to roll out the red carpet into the Arts and Culture Centre and to listen to the word "vagina," whereas just a few short years ago there was such public outcry that this piece of art work, *The Red Trench*, had to come down off the legislature walls and be tucked away into darkness.³ It made me feel very good to be part of that movement, of that change.

Natalie

That's great! What else did you do to motivate the audience to show up and for the show to be sold out?

Kathleen

We had interviews with just about every news media: the *Herald*, *The Telegram*.

Kathryn

We did an interview on Rogers Cable TV at *Out of the Fog*. There was an article in the *Express* and of course in the *Muse*, the students' newspaper. We had several CBC radio pieces.

Kathleen

I think anybody who did not see it on TV or hear about it on the radio or read it in the paper, heard about it from friends. It did get both a lot of media play and I think just a lot of people in St. John's were talking about it before it happened. It was sold out Monday and the show was on Wednesday, February 27.

Natalie

That must have felt great.

Kathryn

There were still so many things we were trying to take care of. The whole time frame included little victories and putting out fires.

Natalie

Can you talk about the idea of everybody in the cast being dressed in black, with some red?

Kathryn

That is what Eve Ensler does when she does the *Monologues*. She wears all black and she usually has a red feather boa so we thought that would be very easy and cost effective. Again, with every decision we made we wanted to minimize the expenses of our budget. It was a production that costs about \$5,000 in total.

Kathleen

That was just renting out the Arts and Culture Centre. Our production costs over and above that amounted to a few hundred dollars. It was almost nothing. We begged, borrowed and stole the things we needed for the set. The directors did a fabulous job in keeping things simple and clean, ensuring that the words could take center stage.

Kathryn

We also wanted the maximum funds that we raised to stay in St. John's and to go to the selected three organizations.

Natalie

What were the three organizations that you funded?

Kathleen

The Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre, Iris Kirby House and the Women' Centre on campus, three grass roots local organizations working toward ending violence against women.

THE PERFORMANCE**Natalie**

Tell me about the night of the performance.

Kathleen

Kathryn and I had actually written small pieces for the show and as well we were acting in it. I remember about five minutes before the production going, "Oh my God, I am actually going to be in this thing."

Kathryn

We had done quite a bit of research to include facts because it would bring the performance closer to home and saying these are Newfoundland facts about violence against women here.

Kathleen

We had testimonials and vignettes about stories of sexual assault that have happened on campus at Memorial. We were saying, "The very campus that you are visiting right now is not exempt from sexual assault and the communities that you are living in, this is how many people have to seek the help of Iris Kirby House every week. These are your neighbours, these are your relatives." We gave these statistics that I didn't even know about, such as, Newfoundland has twice the National average statistically in reported sexual assaults every year.

Natalie

You know that's what people say. It's very safe here, except in the home. *(Pause)* What more can you tell me about the performance that night?

Kathryn

It wasn't until up to five minutes to the performance that I was, "Oh my goodness, I am in the play, this is the end of production part, this is actually about the performance." The production required so much energy and time that I never really devoted enough time to the actual play. I just remember it was a complete blur because we did not really have time to practice. We were doing so many things. We did not have time to practice our lines, the lines that were just still being developed *(laughter)*.

Kathleen

I do remember being very aware in the moments of the play. I was able to really have a look out into the audience and see how people were reacting and really enjoy the lines that my fellow castmates were delivering. I will always remember being in the play at those very moments. For instance, Catherine Popadiuk was giving her monologue and I could hear people crying in the audience. I had to tell myself, "OK I am not going to cry here. I'm in the play, I can't cry." *(laughter)*

Kathryn

You know, I do remember portions of the performance in that I forgot that I was actually on stage and it was just completely in the monologue and I saw people who had never performed that way. They were exquisite, you know, people just performed at their best when they were on stage and everybody just came together. It was so fun to watch.

Kathleen

It was so difficult 'cause Kathryn was sitting right next to me and so many times I wanted to just lean over and grab her and go, "Oh my God can you believe it?" *(laughter)*

Natalie

It must have been extraordinary. Tell me about the end, about the reaction of the audience.

Kathleen

The audience leapt to their feet almost immediately with a standing ovation.

Kathryn

It was incredible, the energy in the room.

Kathleen

It was very, very gratifying.

Kathryn

We had a cast party directly after and just about everybody came and we thanked each person individually. It was really fun to me to bond with the cast members and everybody came together. Everybody

from the cast said how good they felt about themselves and about how the community responded.

Kathleen

Yes. I think there was such a sense of pride in being a part of this first performance in St. John's. So many people did not say the production. These people said, "St. John's is a conservative town. Nobody will get behind this." The whole cast and crew proved them wrong because it was a huge success. People loved it.

Kathryn

It was team effort and I think everybody knew that it was a team effort and each individual counted and therefore everybody could take pride in that production.

Natalie

Have you talked with people of the public about the play since then?

Kathleen

Yes. For instance, just a couple of weeks ago I saw a friend I had not seen in years. She was a figure skating coach from way back when. We talked and she said, "well, I don't need to ask you what you have been doing, I watch the news." We started to talk about the *Vagina Monologues*. Yes, it did get out to a very wide segment of Newfoundland society.

Natalie

What about other medical students, did they go to see the play?

Kathleen

Yes. They loved it. I think perhaps one of the most powerful things for me was male students coming up and saying, "It was fabulous. I really got a perspective that I had never heard before or that I learned things that I never really knew or considered before." That made things so worthwhile.

Natalie

Were other medical students involved in the play?

Kathryn

Yes, there were four first-year medical students.

Kathleen

In acting and stage managing capacities.

THE IMPACT OF THE EXPERIENCE FOR KATHRYN AND KATHLEEN

Natalie

What other thoughts do you have about this now? Has this experience changed you, changed your lives?

Kathryn

First of all if you would have told me a year ago that I would have been leading a chant in the students center, even saying the word "*vagina*," I would have laughed because this was really a progression for me to become comfortable with the word. If you told me that I would have been very surprised. I had seen the play in the United States but I was sitting on the fence after I saw it. I was not sure. Although I did enjoy the show, there were parts of it that still wouldn't quite sit well with me. I would have considered myself very conservative and in the beginning I was not all that comfortable with some of the monologues. Some words I thought are not necessarily to be used in public.

Kathleen

Like the word "cunt."

Kathryn

Yes. I was raised in a conservative family where the word "*cunt*" would never have been used. You know, we were always very medical about things and not comfortable with colloquial terms. I am just seeing how I progressed in my thinking and my comfort level with "*vagina*." When you have to say the word "*vagina*" about thirty to thirty-five times a day for three weeks, it is amazing how comfortable you become with the word. (*Laughter*) In the end I just loved this performance, you know, and the production and everything that came about.

Natalie

Do you think the experience has changed something for you as medical students?

Kathryn

I think I am a lot more comfortable with the subject and if patients were to come to me with problems, I would be very comfortable talking about these issues. Because of that, I think that the patient would be more at ease and comfortable talking to me about it. It has been very positive in that way.

Kathleen

I realize that just because you have gone through a certain amount of schooling doesn't mean that you are comfortable with different parts of your body. Society has had a lot more time to influence your thinking than your four years in medical school. Everybody can get over that in different ways and if theatre and art can help people in that progression, then that's what we should be doing. I think that the theatre has its place as a tool in medicine.

Natalie

Can you tell me more about what the process of producing the play has meant for you?

Kathleen

I think that what changed for me the most was going from someone who always had what I would consider to be feminist ideas and strong feminist attitude to somebody who brought that from just an involvement on the fringe or within groups to leading something and actually feeling that I had affected change and brought about something new. It did put a twist on feminist ideas that I could really be proud of and say that this was my own, seeing that project through to the end.

Natalie

For you then, it was action, not just talk?

Kathleen

That's right. In addition, there were so many different facets of the production. The gist of the V-day cause is an initiative to raise money to end violence against women. But once you take a step outside of that, looking outside of that, the secrecy and embarrassment around the vagina really leads to a lot of other more covert things regarding women's health. I think our production, coming from the medical perspective, was able to elucidate those problems with all the negative trash associated with, and covering up, women's bodies. I think if people were not comfortable with the in-your-face chanting of "*cunt*," they were at least able to think that by removing some of the negative societal attitudes towards women's genitalia, maybe women will seek medical help when they need it rather than wait until a late stage cancer. There are a lot of different ways to come at the *Vagina Monologues*. There is something in it for everybody actually (*laughter*).

THE FUTURE OF THE PLAY IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Natalie

I would like to get back to this idea of St. John's being conservative. Did you talk with other producers of the Atlantic area, in the Maritimes more specifically?

Kathryn

We did not personally talk to the producers. I think we were just too busy to get it all together on our end. However they did a story with CBC radio. It was a national story saying how Atlantic Canada in general is very conservative and how people in Prince Edward Island were also having difficulty. They were kicked out of their venue and forced to take another venue. The story also mentioned that we were having difficulty finding corporate sponsors.

Natalie

In the end, were all the plays produced?

Kathleen

Yes. I don't believe anybody had barriers such that they had to cut off the play.

Natalie

It is really interesting to me that you say how easily the community here got involved, how everybody got involved. St. John's may be conservative but it also includes a very strong arts community and a very strong feminist community. At least the fact that so many women wanted to be part of the cast is not surprising to me.

Kathryn

I think part of the reason why the community overall received it as well as it did is because the play came from the medical school and that gives it legitimacy right there.

Kathleen

I think something that is often seen as a conservative institution bringing forward an idea that is not necessarily conservative in itself kind of makes people think, "what do you know, perhaps shouting 'vagina' isn't dirty, maybe this *Vagina Monologues* is good." Perhaps medical students may reach the more conservative people. I think the arts and women's communities were always going to support it right from the beginning anyway.

Natalie

What do you see will happen for St. John's and the *Vagina Monologues*? Do you think it will be produced here again and elsewhere in the province?

Kathryn

Yes. The group of first-year students that were involved this past year is on board to bring it to St. John's again next year. We are going to just pass it on and keep it in the medical school. We do not exactly know the tone that *Vagina Monologues* will take on but we do know that there will be a production that comes from the medical school and the first year students are very excited to be putting it on next year. There might also be a professional production coming along because the community was so receptive to the play. There might also be a production of the play in Corner Brook. The beauty of the *Vagina Monologues* is that theatrically it is very simple to carry out. You literally need one woman and a stool. That's what you need. Women anywhere can do this play.

Natalie

Will you be consultants for the next crew producing the show?

Kathryn

We have already met with them, we have given little tips. We have passed over the production and we said, "It's all yours, do whatever you want to do with it. But we are here."

IN CONCLUSION

Natalie

What are your projects with regard to women's health in your own work? Do you know exactly what you will do?

Kathryn

I am convinced that Kathleen will become an ob-gynecologist. (*laughter*)

Kathleen

I was a little bit afraid that we were going to be pigeon-holed after this project as the "vagina girls"; that no other specialty would accept us aside from obstetrics and gynecology. There are a lot of other things in my life that I need to look after and balance in terms of choosing a specialty but I think you can certainly fight for women's rights in whatever specialty that you go into.

Kathryn

Exactly.

Natalie

Any last thought on the play, on the whole process for you?

Kathleen

I thought it was interesting, we were able to seek the help from St. John's from some women who were involved in the feminist community for years. It was very sobering to hear about how the feminist community has been fragmented at so many turns. So I was really glad - even though it wasn't always easy - that the community and the school were able to come together. I was really glad we had one united *Vagina Monologues* première that included students and women from the community and moms and young women.

Natalie

This must have felt just wonderful.

Kathryn

It was so exciting, it really was, it was vindicating for all that difficulty that we had trying to find corporate sponsors and some of the fires that we did have to put out along the way.

Kathleen

It is nice to think about it again. Neither one of us ever had much involvement as anything in the arts but a patron of the arts. And there we were: first time producers of a first time production. But we had guidance from a cast member who works at CBC. We also had help from MUNSU for the publicity. We had help from the directors and from the cast. V-day International gave some guidance as well and a lot of things we just kind of made up as we went along.

Kathryn

I think it just shows that when someone puts their mind to something and they have the support network that they need in order to get it done, it can be done and it can be done as a team. I think that's the take-home message from this. It is not just one person, it's a team that gets it done and if you can stay united and have a main goal and objective, which was to raise awareness and raise funds for the needs and cause. As for the cast members, I think it is something that will live on in their hearts and minds. This is a bond that they always have and when they see each other on the street they do stop and they do talk about it and it is that excitement that comes back in their eyes.

Natalie

I congratulate you again. Thank you very much for producing the play and thank you for this interview.

Kathryn and Kathleen

Thank you very much.

ENDNOTES

1. Eve Ensler. *The Vagina Monologues*. New York: Villard, 1998.
2. See the V-day website at www.vday.org
3. The *Red Trench* was removed from the Confederation Building and stored for eight years. It now hangs in the main foyer of Memorial University's Arts and Administration Building.