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Changes, controversy mark 'Monologues'

Performances to be followed by discussions

By AMANDA MICHAELS
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As the controversial play "The Vagina Monologues" makes the move from DeBartolo stage to DeBartolo classroom this week, the event will take on a distinctly more academic tone — and not just because of its new location.

For the first time in the Eve Ensler play's five-year history at Notre Dame, each performance will be directly followed by a panel discussion on "Female Sexuality and Violence Against Women: Secular and Theological Perspectives," with a different



Observer File Photo

Students rehearse Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues" last year to prepare for their performances. "The Monologues" will be performed this week in a DeBartolo Hall classroom.

Play's content both explicit, affirming

By KATIE PERRY
Assistant News Editor

The future balance of academic freedom and Catholic character at Notre Dame is not the only mystery on campus as of late. For many students, the content and purpose of one of the debate's most central topics, "The Vagina Monologues," is also an enigma.

Written by American playwright and feminist activist Eve Ensler, "The Vagina Monologues" is an episodic, theatrical performance featuring a cast of women sharing experiences and views on the female reproductive organ.

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Enslar started in the original play, which debuted off-Broadway in 1996. In subsequent years, celebrities and other cultural icons replaced Enslar as the mouthpieces for women represented in the account. Contemporary productions of "The Vagina Monologues" — such as those to be performed in classrooms at Notre Dame — assign a different actress to each role.

The theme of the vagina makes the fragmented individual stories in the play coherent. Each monologue deals with a particular issue pertaining to the female sex organ, including childbirth, menstruation, gynecology, rape, domination practices and sexual

experiences, both traumatic and pleasurable.

University President Father

John Jenkins referred to the play in a Jan. 24 address to faculty mem-

bers, saying such material was not in accordance with Catholic values at the core of Notre Dame's academic and institutional foundation.

"The concern that I and many others have is

that in 'The Vagina Monologues' ... there is no hint of central elements of morality," Jenkins said in the address. "The work contains graphic descriptions of homo-

sexual, extra-marital heterosexual and auto-erotic experiences."

Jenkins said he had "difficulty seeing" the candid accounts as "the appropriate means" to the ultimate goal of promoting female empowerment and eradicating violence against women.

Some of the most explicit parts of the play involve descriptions of casual sexual encounters, explicit accounts of the use of tampons, douches and gynecological tools and her love for women clients.

But not all the monologues

Father John Jenkins
University President

are as explicit. The performance is an eclectic collection of publicly deemed controversial and uncontroversial material. That reputation has caused opponents of "The Vagina Monologues" to point to its more graphic accounts and supporters to emphasize the play's more empowering angles.

One section of the play discusses the long-tabooed topic of menstruation — especially as it applies to young women — while another monologue weaves together the testimonies of Bosnian women who endured the trauma of rape camps.

The last monologue in the play's 1998 edition is a personal testimony from Enslar herself, in which the author recounts the birth of her granddaughter.

The underlying theme of the play is made succinctly clear

in the play's introduction — "nothing is more important than stopping violence toward women," Enslar wrote.

"When you rape, beat, maim, mutilate, burn, bury and terrorize women, you destroy the essential life energy on the planet," she said. "You force what is meant to be open, trusting, nurturing, creative and alive to be bent, infertile and broken."

"The Vagina Monologues" has garnered increased influence since its induction with the recent addition of international performances and a cable television version of the show on HBO. Each year, a new monologue is appended to the play to maintain its dynamic nature and remain current with modern issues of womanhood.

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selection of speakers tonight, Tuesday and Wednesday.

"The Vagina Monologues" was a primary point of concern in University president Father John Jenkins' January speeches on Catholic character and academic freedom, as Jenkins questioned the play's continued presence — performed annually each February — on campus. The president did not issue a firm policy in favor of or against the "Monologues" and other events, but said he hoped to make a decision before the semester's close.

"In [the] discussion of female sexuality, and in the community and culture it strives to create, there is no hint of central elements of Catholic sexual morality," Jenkins said, stressing he supports the play's goals of affirming female sexuality and reducing violence against women, but disapproves of its approach.

"I fail to see, however, how the annual performance of 'The Vagina Monologues' is the appropriate means to these ends," he said.

While the panel discussions, already in the works in late December, were not direct results of Jenkins' speech, the variety of viewpoints they offer will potentially satisfy some of the criticisms leveled at "The Vagina Monologues," said Gail Bederman, history professor and organizer of the panels.

"My impression is that a lot of the people who object to 'The Vagina Monologues' ... say that students are not getting authentic Catholic teachings when they see the play, so, I thought, 'Let's have a discussion right in the theatre after the performance,'" she said. "[In the panels] there

trine on sexuality, while the other will "discuss how theologians are dialoguing with current experience," Bederman said.

The panels will begin at 9:15 p.m. in the same venue as each night's 7 p.m. "Monologues" performance — 101 DeBartolo Hall tonight and Tuesday, and 102 DeBartolo on Wednesday. Bederman said she hopes even those who may shy away from seeing "The Vagina Monologues" will engage in the subsequent discussions.

The student organizers of "The Vagina Monologues" responded positively to the addition of the panels.

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Emily Weisbecker
organizer

"We welcome the academic discussion and the panels, because one of the main points of 'The Vagina Monologues' is to raise awareness and promote discussion of female sexuality and ending violence against women," said organizer Emily Weisbecker. "It is likely that some members of the community will be at least somewhat more comfortable with the

presence of this show on campus knowing that the theological perspective will be clearly presented in conjunction with each performance."

They are, however, more ambivalent when it comes to the change in setting from last year's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts. Even though organizers said they appreciate the dialogue generated by this year's show, they face the difficulties of staging a play in a classroom and not a theatre and regret the lack of fundraising opportunities in the new academic environment, Weisenbecker said.

But the change in fundraising policy has lifted a degree of stigma from the event. This year, Notre Dame/Saint Mary's Right to Life will not be protesting the performance, as the group has in the past.

"[Right to Life's] problems with the event were always in the fact that money from

Films

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activity." "The fact that [The Vagina Monologues' and Queer Film Festival] have been sponsored annually by units of the University, and have been widely publicized, prominently associates the University's name with t h e m ."

Jenkins said. "Such occurrences suggest the University endorses or at least finds compatible with its values certain views which are not in fact compatible."

All the film screenings were either sold out or nearly sold out, Laina said, and turnout for the various panel discussions was also strong. Due to high demand, organizers added a second screening of "Brokeback Mountain" to the schedule and tickets sold out in two hours, Laina said.

The quality and diversity of the films shown this year played a role in the success of the film series, Laina said. The presence of two of the films' directors — Miguel Albaladejo, director of "Cachorro" and Don Roos, director of "Happy Endings" — on campus to speak firsthand about their work was also significant, Laina said.

Junior Mac Russell saw every film at the event's inauguration two years ago and attended two screenings — "Brokeback Mountain" and "Happy Endings" — this year. He said he made the effort to go to the film series out of his own desire to see the movies and to show support for AllianceND, Notre Dame's unrecognized gay/straight student group.

"[The series has] only been getting bigger — more social events, [more] movies ... I'm always amazed at the

[variety] of movies that are out there," Russell said.

Tessa Sainz, a 2003 alumna, attended screenings every night of the series and said it was great the University had the opportunity to host prominent filmmakers.

Individuals choose to attend universities to expose themselves to different viewpoints, Sainz said, criticizing the administration's efforts to curb the film series.

"I think it's ridiculous [to hold discussions regarding the film series about] the moral issues of homosexuality," Sainz said. "That's not what it's about. It's about films."

After attending several different screenings and panel discussions over the course of the film series, graduate student Theresa O'Byrne said her favorite movies were "Saving Face" and "Happy Endings."

A member of AllianceND, O'Byrne said since the event is spurring controversy it was especially important that she attend to show her support.

"I'm a big supporter of academic freedom and it's always been an issue for me through my college career," O'Byrne said. "Part of inquiry and part of academic discussion is to look into these things that are potentially explosive."

O'Byrne said she does not like the fact that the name of the film series was changed, but she was heartened by Jenkins' willingness to engage in open discussion

about academic freedom. "I'm pleased that he's at least brought this up — at least had the courage to stand up and bring this to the floor and [not] sweep it under the rug," O'Byrne said.

Senior Tiffany Thompson attended the 7 p.m. screening of "Brokeback Mountain" Thursday wearing an orange "Gay? Fine by me" T-shirt. She said she has attended at least one film during the series every year.

"I think [the name change] is kind of silly," Thompson said. "I don't think it is a huge thing but I didn't think it was necessary either ... We're doing the same thing."

Freshman Sean Gaffney also attended "Brokeback Mountain" Thursday and said he was there first to see a good film and second to find out what all the discussion was about.

"I guess it's kind of a big controversy and it is always good to be knowledgeable about what is being talked about," Gaffney said.

Laina, who will not be at Notre Dame next year, said the future of the film series is "very much up in the air" and will depend on the outcome of the discussion of Catholic character and academic freedom at Notre Dame.

Laina said he took an organizing role for the event because he wanted students at the University to have the opportunity

to see quality films and hopes it continues in the future.

"It is important that if students and alumni feel that this event is important ... [it is] valuable that they express those views to the president," Laina said.

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Martin Laina
film series co-chair

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