

Prudish Theatre Audiences on PEI

by Joel MEGGS

"Yes, I'm scared shitless of prudish reactions on PEI," says Terry Pratt, board member of ACT (a community theatre).

With *The Vagina Monologues*, a show characterized by very provocative language, about to open on Valentine's Day, the question remains: Is this sort of thing too much for Island audiences? Time and time again, PEI theatre productions have been altered or outright cancelled in anticipation of negative feedback from a perceived conservative audience. But is the audience really that prudish, or has the fear of a backlash distorted the truth about Islanders' tolerance level?

Pratt relates several examples of where anticipation of negative feedback led to theatrical changes.

In 1987, former premier Catherine Callbeck was on the board of The Confederation Centre of the Arts. She resigned her position over a line in the musical *Are You Lonesome Tonight*, about the life of Elvis. Producers of the show refused to change the line, "Look at that, will you - he's fucking the audience."

Pratt also recalls a student at UPEI who tried to put on a production of the play *Once a Catholic*. The play is a very provocative exploration of sex and the Catholic Church, discussing such things as the Pope having sex with prostitutes, Joseph stirring his tea with his dick, and at one point a penis is mounted upon a crucifix. The Theatre Society nixed the idea.

More recent is the case of *Wit*, where some of the harsher language was removed, and the last segment of

the play, where the lead character is supposed to be nude on stage, was removed. Also, as recent as just this past month, the Theatre Society production of Don DeLillo's *Valparaiso* was abandoned very early in production because of grumblings within the cast about sexual content.

"One of the people who dropped out mentioned that her morals wouldn't allow her to be in a play with dialogue that had explicit sexual dialogue. She was also concerned about what her parents and friends would think of her for saying explicit material. Some other cast members who hadn't dropped out seemed to be uncomfortable with [the content], too," says Jeff Coll, director of the play.

In the same vein, Trish Daley, director of, and performer in *The Vagina Monologues*, says that the last time they put the show on at the university, they had someone drop out because of the content.

"One of the women last year did back out. More because of the parental pressure—it wasn't so much her as her parents. She was really gung-ho, really wanted to do it, even wanted to get her younger sister involved, and then a few nights later phoned and said that [she] couldn't be in it because her parents really weren't comfortable with it."

But Daley is not the least bit scared about eliciting a negative reaction with the shock-laden *Vagina Monologues*; in fact, she relishes the idea of stirring up a little controversy.

"I have no fears actually. Last year we put it on, and I was actually surprised at how little people made

any uproar. The people who came loved it. There was no one who came and attacked us. We lost a few posters off the walls, but we're not sure if it was because people hated them or they liked them."

Asked if she is concerned about how the show will be received this time around, Daley says that although the show has the reputation of being extremely provocative, that's not what the play is really about.

"It's very in-your-face and it's very colourful. But, it's all in context. In fact, a lot of it has to do with reclaiming words that for so long have had a negative connotation to them, like *cunt*."

"Is the Island exceptional? Probably not," says Pratt. "Everyone draws their line somewhere, always has. . . . I have my own line."

And, as Andrew MacPhee, Vice-President of The UPEI Theatre Society points out, productions of *The*

Vagina Monologues in neighbouring provinces have had a great deal of trouble securing sponsorship. Daley says that here, that simply hasn't been a problem.

"We haven't had anyone come to us and say 'I can't believe you're doing this,' or 'That's offensive.' [We've had] nothing but support. I'm really one for controversy, and I was really hoping to spark some because controversy ups ticket sales."

So perhaps things are improving in PEI. But Adam Gauthier, current president of the UPEI Theatre Society, says that the Island still has a way to go. "I feel that there are definitely some issues that are hard for local amateur actors to tackle, such as nudity on stage, but issues of profane language and adult situations should be more widely accepted by the public. The fact is, if people do not like [explicit content on the stage], they do not have to watch it."

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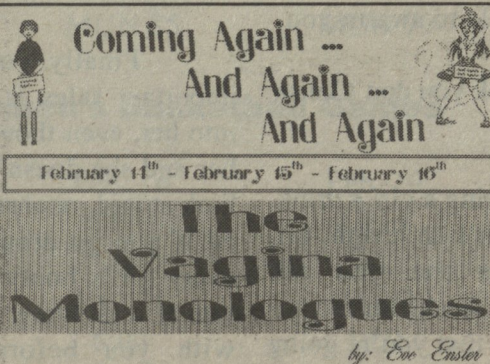
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The Vagina Monologues

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