

LISTEN UP!

Parts Unknown

Talking about 'down the *Radice* consciousness

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A woman's private parts are like the Bermuda Triangle — no one ever reports back," said performance artist Eve Ensler, minutes before the curtain went up on a star-studded reading from her work, "The Vagina Monologues."

Last Saturday night, women's private parts was all that anyone on stage at midtown's Hammerstein Ballroom was talking about. In an unprecedented feminist event, a group of celebrities — including Glenn Close, Whoopi Goldberg, Winona Ryder and Lily Tomlin — took the discussion of female privates public in an attempt to open discussion on what's considered by many to be a taboo topic.

Each of the women performed excerpts from Ensler's book, a compilation of 200 interviews with women talking about their often-ignored sex organs. Ensler had asked them questions that delved into the most intimate issues of female sexuality. The women — a mix of age, race and social background — came up with answers that are as amusing as they are poignant.

We cheered as Whoopi Goldberg begged gynecologists to trade paper gowns that felt like "recycled freezer wrap" for purple velvet and to lose steel stirrups for fuzzy slippers. We wiped tears from our eyes as Winona Ryder performed a

piece — we groaned our guts laughing as Lily Tomlin said she had abandoned climax because it "felt too Hollywood, orgasm by formula." We squirmed as Marisa Tomei talked about pubic hair. We commiserated with Rosie Perez, who mimicked a group of teen-age girls talking about menstruation.

Then Shirley Knight impersonated a Jewish woman talking about "down there," saying: "I haven't been down there since 1963. No, it had nothing to do with Eisenhower." Knight's 72-year-old character discovered her sexuality after dreaming about dining with Burt Reynolds, who is washed away in a flood in the restaurant. "I don't know why it was Burt Reynolds," she says. "He never did that much for me in life."

A horror story

There were plenty of moving moments. Soraya Mire, a filmmaker from Somalia who was a victim of genital mutilation, talked about the torture she endured at the hands of her mother. Gloria Steinem embraced her, handed her a red tulip, and they both cried.

Susan Sarandon became teary performing "I Was There in the Room," a piece Ensler wrote about being present when her daughter-in-law gave

it was a wide, pulsing heart," Sarandon read. "The heart is capable of sacrifice. So is the vagina."

The readings were interrupted briefly by a disturbing photo exhibit of battered women, accompanied by hauntingly beautiful native American drummers.

Ensler's niece, Hannah Ensler-Rival, litened the mood by answering the question "If my vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" with a snappy "Red high tops and a Mets cap worn backwards."

In addition to raising consciousness about women's liberation, all the money raised at the celebrity-choked event, dubbed V-Day, was donated to help combat violence against women. Ensler, herself, is an incest and battering survivor. At the end of the performance, she asked every woman who had been the victim of abuse to stand up. Most of the audience was on its feet.

"Eve is a power of example for the universe," said Lynn Blumenfeld, a member of the V-Day Committee. "She makes you believe you can change the world every day."

Even though Ensler's show has traveled the world, and the country, the playwright is not done yet. "I want it to be like a big vagina quilt," she said, "and keep on growing."



OWNER'S MANUAL: Backstage at "The Vagina Monologues": from left, Susan Sarandon, Winona Ryder, Glenn Close, playwright Eve Ensler and Whoopi Goldberg.