

Women's eNews

June 20, 2006

Enslar Turns New York Into Anti-Violence Showcase

By Hannah Seligson, WeNews Correspondent



Eve Ensler and Salma Hayak in Harlem for V-Day.

NEW YORK (WOMENSENEWS) – Over the next two weeks, Eve Ensler's V-Day – which is both an organization the playwright founded and a movement she inspired – is turning New York City into a stage for examining and publicizing issues connected to violence against women.

Sixty events across all of the city's five boroughs have been scheduled between June 12 and June 29 under the single banner "Until the Violence Stops," the name of Ensler's 2003 Emmy Award-winning documentary about the impact of V-Day in five communities around the world.

There are film screenings, a quilt exhibit, panel discussions about women in conflict zones and a workshop led by actor Victor Rivers by and for men that looks at ending attacks against women, among other events.

There is even the first performance of Ensler's "Vagina Monologues" in a prison. V-Day, in conjunction with the Lotus Project-Women in Prison Wellness Program, an advocacy group for female inmates, will stage the performance on June 23 at 6 p.m. at the Riker's Island Correctional Center.

"We want the V-day festival to stop New Yorkers in their tracks and have them thinking about the issue and actively engaging in it through theater, art and community," says Susan Swan, media and communications advisor for V-Day. "The outdoor messaging campaign alone will receive 370 million impressions in all five boroughs."

"Until the Violence Stops" ads are on buses, in subway stops and at tourist attractions such as Yankee Stadium in the Bronx.

V-Day serves as an umbrella organization for the thousands of schools and organizations that stage performances of the "Vagina Monologues," Ensler's 1996 play about topics such as rape, masturbation and menstruation.

Since 1998, V-Day staffers say that benefit performances of the play have raised over \$35 million for efforts helping to stop violence against women and girls. In 2006 alone, the group says, V-Day fans staged more than 2,700 V-day performances.

Ensler's V-Day group, which has headquarters in New York and a paid staff of about eight, convened an unusual variety of New York sponsors, from the iconoclastic Bitch magazine to the CBS network. The production budget for the festival was \$1.2 million.

The festival aims to raise money for a variety of New York groups. A June 21 event about women in prison, for instance, will benefit the American Civil Liberties Union and its New York counterpart, the NYCLU. A June 25 multimedia event "It's Hard Out Here For A Girl/Brooklyn Represents: Language and Sound" will benefit the Brooklyn Family Justice Center.

Jane Fonda Helps Open Festival

On the opening night of the festival on June 12, Jane Fonda played a leading role in the performance of Ensler's 2001 play, "Necessary Targets," about an American psychiatrist who travels to a Bosnian refugee camp to help a group of women grapple with the aftermath of war.

"This is all about ending war," Ensler told a sold-out audience for the Fonda performance at Studio 54, the theater that was a famous nightclub in the 1970s. "It began for me in Bosnia, but there are women in Iraq, Sudan and New Orleans who are the victims of violence."

Women from Burma, Sudan, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Croatia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Somalia gathered for a two-hour panel at the Ford Foundation on June 13 to discuss surviving conflict zones.



Eve Ensler visited Kenya for V-Day documentary.

Stella Umutoni, a refugee from Rwanda who received the 2004 Voices of Courage Award and who attends New York University's School of Social Work, says the panel was cathartic. "Being in the same place with women who have gone through the same pain and torture made me feel more connected," Umutoni told Women's eNews.

Jerri Lynn Fields, executive director of V-Day, says the New York programs on women in war zones provide a preview of the 2007 V-Day season, in which colleges and organizations across the country raise money for anti-violence causes timed to Valentine's Day. "Next year, when organizations hold their V-Day performances, the money they raise will go to women around the world in conflict zones."

Star-Studded Program

The festival is studded with the names of such celebrities as Rosario Dawson, Cynthia Nixon, Rosie O'Donnell and Rivers. Over the past seven years, V-Day staffers estimate that Ensler has enlisted hundreds – probably close to a thousand celebrities – in V-Day events.

“I will be anywhere Eve asks me to be,” said Kerry Washington, a TV and movie actor.

Many events are also community-run and organized.

A block party to raise awareness about New York state’s five-year statute of limitations on rape, for instance, was hosted June 17 by Find Your Light and RightRides for Women’s Safety, both New York-based organizations that work to end violence against women.

Red Tent Women’s Project, a Brooklyn group that provides an urban sanctuary for women, is holding a panel of formerly incarcerated women talking about how to change the criminal justice system and putting on a play, “My Brooklyn Hamlet” by Brenda Adelman, about domestic violence.

Enslar says the goal of eradicating violence has far-reaching ripple effects. “If we stop violence, we will help eradicate classism, AIDS and poverty,” she told Women’s eNews.

“Violence against women affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetimes. It relates to every other issue. Violence is the mechanism that keeps women in their place and prevents them from having a voice, demanding their rights, rising up. For example, there is a profound connection between women getting AIDS and violence, between poverty and violence.”

Replicating the Event

V-Day organizers next hope to replicate the Until the Violence Stops festival in cities across the country and world.

Mary Morten, a long-time V-Day activist and associate director of the Chicago Foundation for Women, said that the budget for Illinois includes \$500,000 to stage a replica event.

New York City officials say the V-Day event offers a welcome introduction to its own campaign against domestic violence.

“It coordinated very well with the ad campaign the city is launching in July about domestic violence,” said Yolanda Jimenez, the city’s commissioner to combat domestic violence.

Jimenez says the awareness building at the heart of the V-Day program is a critical component to combating violence against women in New York City and getting people to use the city’s preventive services, such as hotlines.

In New York City last year, 43 of the 68 family-related homicides were female, or 63 percent, according to the mayor’s office.

“We’ve been adding various initiatives over the last four years and we are particularly concerned about domestic violence fatalities,” said Jimenez. “In 90 percent of fatality cases there is no call to the hotline.”

Hannah Seligson is a freelance writer based in New York. Her book, "New Girl on the Job," will be published by Citadel Press in 2007.

For More Information

“Two Catholic Campuses Hush ‘Vagina Monologues’”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2633/>

Until the Violence Stops: <http://www.untiltheviolencestops.org/go.php>

Red Tent Women’s Project: <http://www.redtentwomensproject.org/>

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