MICHAEL DEMOCKER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

Performers in 'The Vagina Monologues' — including playwright Eve Ensler, Jane Fonda and Faith

For this slightly skeptical and nervous first-timer, 'The Vagina Monologues' performance Saturday night in the New Orleans Arena was a deeply moving celebration of solidarity among the world's women.

Hill (center of group, in red) and Jennifer Hudson (top right) — pose for photographers prior to the show Saturday at the New Orleans Arena.

By Millie Ball
Staff writer

It was a love fest, plain and simple.

Wait. Plain and simple aren't the right words for an event that filled up most of the New Orleans Arena Saturday night, replacing the teal neon of the Hornets with hot pink words you've never seen there before and never will again.

And it doesn't describe the two-hour-and-40-minute, 1960s-style, in-your-face show that ended with Academy Award winner Jennifer Hudson belting out "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" along with Faith Hill and Charmaine Neville and Jennifer Beals, while Doris Roberts — Ray Romano's TV mama — was dancing on stage with actresses Jane Fonda, Christine Lahti, Kerry Washington, Shirley Knight, Amber Tamblyn, Didi Conn, Rosario Dawson and who knows who else, all of them moving to Aretha Franklin's theme and singing and feeling the vibe.

And just about all of us in the arena — women from all over the world, and a scattering of men, too — were on our feet, clapping and singing along. A friend who brought two daughters in their late teens shout-whispered over the noise, "For the first time in 55 years, I feel comfortable saying 'vagina.' "

"The Vagina Monologues." There, I've said it too. In public. What would my mama (rest her soul) say?

Saturday's gala was the culmination of a weekend of activities around the 10th anniversary of V-Day, a grass-roots, worldwide movement that so far has raised $50 million dedicated to "stopping every kind of violence against

See **MONOLOGUES,** *C-5*

What is HE doing here?

Outnumbered but unbowed, a man braves the 'Monologues'

By Doug MacCash
Art critic

How does it feel to be a guy in a gal rally?

Suffice it to say, the men's room wasn't crowded Saturday at the New Orleans Arena.

It's hard to say what the exact gender breakdown of the "Vagina Monologues" audience was, but I'd guess something like 20 women for every man in the audience.

From time to time it was embarrassing — if that's the right word. When the topic turned to rape, subjugation and general male insensitivity, it had the same effect as when I hear about the massacre at Wounded Knee. I can say to myself, I didn't personally have anything to do with the massacre at Wounded Knee. But I know that people pretty much like me did.

In other words, there were times during the show when the males in the audience probably felt like they were playing for the wrong team.

The performance itself was more fun than I expected. The monologues were short

See **HE,** *C-5*

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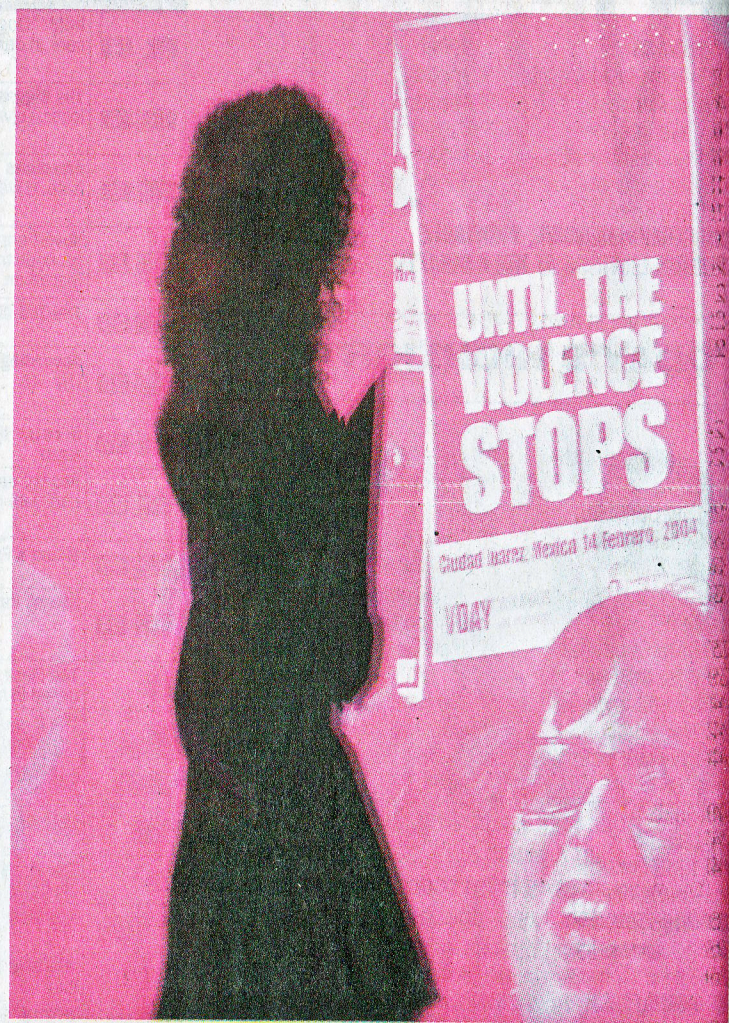

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DEMOCKER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Next door to the Arena, a giant ball of bras (LEFT) turns a few heads and a visitor takes in a display at 'Superlove,' the program of speakers and performances marking the 10th annual V-Day celebration.

A sense of solidarity in the Arena

Next door to the Arena, a giant ball of bras (LEFT) turns a few heads and a visitor takes in a display at 'Superlove,' the program of speakers and performances marking the 10th annual V-Day celebration.

A sense of solidarity in the Arena

MONOLOGUES, *from C-1*

women and girls."

It grew out of the monologues written in 1994 by playwright/performer Eve Ensler, who interviewed 200 women on the once (and in many quarters, still) unmentionable topic for her original one-woman show that premiered in 1996 in New York.

Now she says "vagina" 128 times a night when she does the monologues herself instead of joining with other performers for special presentations such as the one Saturday night.

Even the 54-year-old Ensler concedes, "It's a word that sounds like an infection at best." When she first read the monologues on stage, she says, "My most pressing concern was being able to get the words out of my terrified mouth."

But there they were Saturday night, all those famous folks saying it, including Shirley Knight, who's 71. And Doris Roberts, 77, whose "old lady" character compared her "down there" to a cellar that's been "closed" for years.

But not Oprah. Other big names dropped out earlier, but Oprah and Salma Hayek, who's making a movie in New Orleans and is on the V-Day board, were no-shows. Ensler said Oprah was sick. Maybe. Doubters abounded. Anyway, Oprah espouses using the euphemistic "va-jay-jay" in place of the word of the night.

Truth be told, Liz Mikel, a Dallas actress who's on "Friday Night Lights" — but not exactly a household name — was a dynamite substitute. She stepped in to perform Ensler's new monologue inspired by Patricia Henry, a New Orleans woman who survived Hurricane Katrina. Mikel, a big brassy woman with a booming voice, broke hearts as she described the flood, and kindled revival fervor as she talked about cooking up okra and gumbo and "resistance," about "cooking up a way to stay in this place."

Jennifer Hudson rehearses her 'Vagina Monologues' piece before Saturday's show.

She'd already won over the crowd (official attendance: 16,600) with outrageous comedy. Mikel's earlier monologue was about her ANGRY vagina. About the way it was treated in her gynecologist's office and well, you know . . . She had everybody hooting and hollering at the all-too-familiar experiences.

Kerry Washington, who was in "Ray" and "The Last King of Scotland," was another winner, acting out a relationship with a guy named Bob, who was forgettable in every way but one.

And Jennifer Beals, backed up by three other cast members from "The L-Word," had everybody roaring at her bit about a former tax lawyer-turned-dominatrix, with imitations of moaning women. There was the elegant woman (with a giggle), the WASP (a silent scream), the African-American . . . we can't go there.

But several times, tears welled.

Hometown singer Charmaine Neville, her hair streaming down her back, told the audience, "I want you to walk with me, to walk down the streets of this wonderful, warm, sexy, beautiful city . . . where there was music, music, music everywhere. Then Katrina came . . . I cried; I cried; I cried. And then I remembered we have to sing." She began a lingering and soulful, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans."

Ensler introduced scenes shown on the big arena screens, shots of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where "hundreds of thousands of women have been raped and tortured" over the past 10 years. And then she showed pictures of Dr. Denis Mukwege, who is spending his life helping these women. I never heard of him, but I felt an emotional lump when he walked on stage.

I have to tell you, I'm one of those women who grew up saying "down there," and frankly, I wasn't sure how I'd react to "The Vagina Monologues."

But sitting there in the dark, among the so-called Katrina Warriors — local women who worked to rebuild and make New Orleans a better place for women to live — and surrounded by friends, it worked.

Sure, some of it was like, whoa, did they really just say that?! But much of it enveloped me. I looked around me in the $125 seats — all proceeds going to fight violence against women. A young woman and her boyfriend cuddled. Others laughed, then fell silent as two actresses recounted the story of a woman in Bosnia who was raped by six men repeatedly over seven days.

Near the end, women in the audience who had been abused or beaten were asked to stand, "to break the silence." Hundreds stood up. There was a sense of solidarity in the arena.

A stranger, a 40ish woman, all dolled up in a in a black and white dress, black lace around her shoulders, wearing a glittering pendant, asked me what I thought of it.

Then she said, "I didn't know what to expect. It's different, you know. But it's true. It's true."

Maybe it was good we were sitting in the dark, I suggested. And she laughed and said, "I don't have no shame in my game."

And that in a sentence is what it was all about.

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Staff writer Millie Ball can be reached at mball@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3462.