

All about Eve

A conversation with 'The Vagina Monologues' Eve Ensler on healing other women and healing herself



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

She went to the Congo to help women whose bodies were ravaged by sexual violence. Then a cancer diagnosis led Ensler to reconnect with her own body — and the world

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Situated in the heart of sub-Saharan Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a country that's green and red at the same time. The equatorial climate allows palm trees to flourish and provides lush habitat for the world's only wild population of bonobos, primates that are some of humanity's closest evolutionary relatives. The soil contains untapped raw minerals estimated to be worth more than \$25 trillion, making it a country that, along with having some of the world's poorest people, possesses some of the globe's most valuable mineral resources.

The DRC is also the focal point for what's known as the African World War, a conflict involving nine African nations that began in 1998. Violence and disease stemming from that conflict have resulted in the deaths of more than five million people. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported in 2010 that 40 percent of women in the eastern Congo have experienced rape, sexual violence or both. The UN says it's the highest percentage in the world.

On one level, such troubling statistics motivated Tony Award-winning playwright Eve Ensler to go there. Known for her seminal work "The Vagina Monologues," Ensler traveled to the war-ravaged country because, as she told the New York Times in February 2011, she wanted to help "build an army of women." Not that she planned to arm them with rifles and bullets.

Instead, she helped Congolese women build a center where they could gain skills they could use to become leaders in their communities. The center is called City of Joy.

While the completion of the center filled Ensler with joy, her time assisting women in DRC coincided with a personal crisis: She was diagnosed with uterine cancer.

She underwent months of treatment in the United States, including a nine-hour surgery in which surgeons removed numerous organs, including her uterus, ovaries, cervix and part of her vagina.

She balances the events in DRC with the illness in her body in her newest book "In the Body of the World: A Memoir" (Metropolitan, \$25). It's a mesmerizing story. Ensler tells it in a voice that's both sharp and soothing. She writes openly about how cancer affected her own body, including her ileostomy, a surgery that brings part of the small intestine outside of the skin's surface in order to collect intestinal waste in a bag.

In recent weeks, Ensler has been on a book tour, presented by Northwest Associated Arts, Planned Parenthood and The Stranger, talking about her commitment to stop violence against women and her own cancer. In this interview, we also talked about what led her to Congo, her time working at a homeless shelter and how we can end violence in the world.

Rosette Royale: *What caused you to go to the*

Democratic Republic of the Congo?

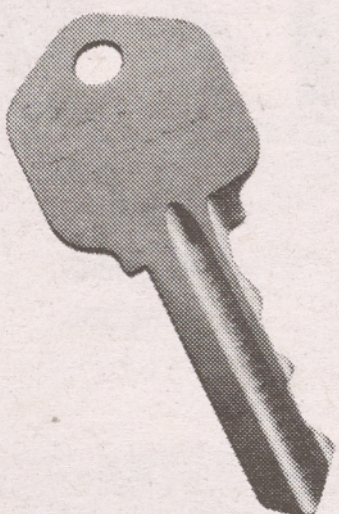
Eve Ensler: I went about seven years ago at the request of Dr. Denis Mukwege, who is the director of the Panzi Hospital and is a doctor, a surgeon and an OB/GYN, who has been working in the middle of the war for the last 14 years, sewing up women as fast as the militias are ripping them apart. I had interviewed him at the behest of the UN and was completely overwhelmed by his nobility and devotion and brilliance. And he asked if I would come to help with their efforts. So that's what (took) me there.

R.R.: *Your book is called "In the Body of the World," and it draws up a lot of ideas. One is about landscape. So how would you describe the Congo?*

E.E.: Well, I would say the Congo, particularly Eastern Congo and the city of Bukavu, is one of the most beautiful places I've ever been. It's some of the most fertile, green, gorgeous land, and Lake Kivu is this stunning body of water, which can be kind of sea blue or sky blue, or it can turn black, depending upon the day. A friend of mine once said, "It's hell in paradise." Earth and birds and fruit and mangoes and avocados and bananas: life. And then this incredible violence being enacted both on the landscape and on the minds and on the bodies of people, particularly the women.

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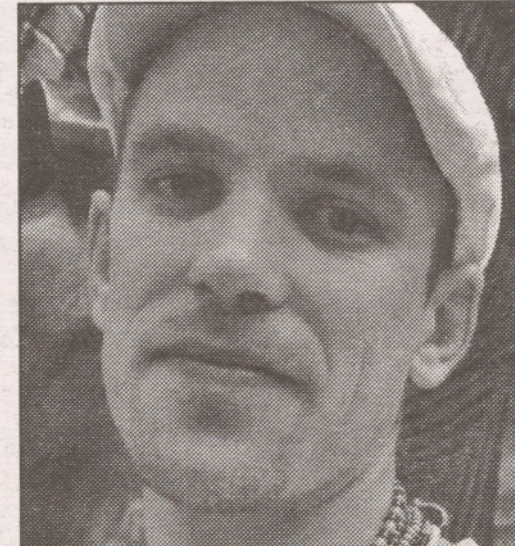
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