

Crone Sexuality

by Pat Hanson



MANNERS, MORES & MASTURBATION: 1899-2009

I decided to “do theatre” this year for my sixty-fourth birthday. After reading a rave review of the world premiere of the dramatic comedy *In the Next Room* (subtitled “*the vibrator play*”) in the *New York Times*, and realizing it was only one-hundred miles away at Berkeley Rep, I got tickets with another veteran sexuality educator, also born in 1945. It’s amazing how a little math can bring one in touch with the reality of aging. We calculated that it had been thirty-two years since (unbeknownst to one another,) we’d assigned our students a field trip to Joni Blank’s then ground-breaking shop *Good Vibrations* in San Francisco.

My friend and I arrived an hour early for the matinee to have drinks and look at the museum of antique vibrators in the lobby. While we ate chocolates and sipped the special — a bright turquoise vodka concoction dubbed

the “Hysteria” — I felt like I was at Crones Counsel. The average age of the beautiful Bay Area crones that surrounded me was at least seventy-five.

Apart from the tender affection which always emanates on our rare meetings, I hugged her for the expense and courage it must have taken to be the first of my friends to sport a new set of perfect teeth. She in turn, dragged me reluctantly to the coatroom, where she insisted we both use the “hearing assistant devices.”

The play was set in Victorian 1897, a time when stiffness was *de rigueur* and respectable women wore seventeen pounds of clothing at home, and thirty-seven pounds in public. Playwright Sarah Ruhl was inspired by Rachel Maines’ *The Technology of Orgasm: Hysteria, the Vibrator and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction* to write about mores and manners at the turn of the 20th century. Maines began by

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researching the history of needlepoint and embroidery for her doctoral dissertation, but found little writing on the subject. To her surprise, she discovered advertisements for vibrators in turn-of-the-century women's magazines like *Woman's Day* and the *Sears Roebuck* catalog.



Photo courtesy of kevinberne.com

The vibrator was invented in the 1880's. Back then medical conditions like lethargy (depression), excitability (unexpressed frustration or anger), or restlessness (boring lives subjected to the whims of men and society) were thought to be the result of "congestion of the genitalia." After several years of treating women by massaging the genitals to attain "paroxysms" (orgasms), the medical profession confessed it was time consuming and — hard on their hands. First patented by Hamilton Beach in 1902, the vibrator was electrified a decade before the electric iron or the vacuum cleaner. Early entrepreneurs came up with names like "The Royal" and "Handy Hannah" or "The Shelton Dragon."

The set designer of *In the Next Room* consulted with Good Vibrations, a National Park Service mu-

seum, and The Antique Vibrator and Quack Medical Museum. The centerpiece of the set, dubbed "The Chattanooga," is a large black box on a pedestal. Several attachments to its six-foot long wire cord resemble those on vibrators today. Set at the dawn of the age of electricity, it dimmed the lights momentarily each time it was turned on.

In the play, Dr. Givings, a psychiatrist, applies the device to several female patients under their skirts, and anally to one male, an artist suffering from blocks to his creativity. In nearly simultaneous scenes Mrs. Givings sits in her adjoining parlor interacting with patients as they arrive and depart. She holds her newborn and laments her inadequacy as a mother, since she can't produce enough milk.

Enter dark-skinned Elizabeth, whom she hires as a wet nurse. Elizabeth later becomes the only character in the play to seem to actually enjoy sex, and of all things, with her husband. At one point Mrs. Givings and her assistant unlock the door to the operating room with a hatpin and the two women explore self-administration of the therapy.

My experience of the play was deep and profound. *In the Next Room* is a visual, intellectual and spiritual confirmation of the degree to which female sexuality and feminist consciousness has evolved in the last century. More about longing than lust, giving life meaning rather than masturbation, it made me grateful that our granddaughters don't have to grow up during a time when layers of taffeta, lace and whalebone constrict women's desire.

After the play, as we stood in the long line of crones turning in their headsets, I noted how well they had worked, even from our fifth-row seats. As we waited, my friend and I remembered other landmarks in the past half-century that have contributed to our culture's acceptance and integration of sexuality as means of both self and cultural empowerment.

- The artistic line drawings of women's vulvas that graced Betty Dodson's *Liberating Masturbation*:

A Meditation on Self-Loving (first released in 1974, still in print today as *Sex for One*.)

- Dr. Lonnie Barbach's landmark *For Yourself*:

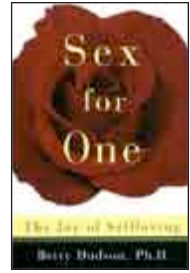
On the Fulfillment of Female Sexuality. I required this book in every Human Sexuality course I ever taught.



She was the first psychologist advocated that women explore masturbation in order to have healthy relationships.

- Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, an icon in feminist art of the 1970s, now housed in The Brooklyn Museum's permanent collection. Its fantastic triangular table of ceramic place settings, embroidered runners, and gold chalices, all with vulvar and butterfly motifs that honor women who have affected history, raised the bar for women honoring themselves.

- The groundbreaking work of Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, who lost her job for publicly acknowledging that masturbation was a vital part of human sexuality.



• Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. Premiered in 1998 on Broadway, these vignettes have been performed in over one hundred countries. Ensler interviewed over two hundred women and synthesized their experiences into the monologues in the script. Before any group can perform the scenes on topics ranging from menstruation and childbirth, to rape and genital mutilation, they must agree to adhere to specific guidelines about enlightening the audience without preaching, and avoiding shame, self-pity, and victimization.



Each year during Valentine's week, the rights to the play are given free to college campus and other communities, with the stipulation that proceeds from performances be donated to local or global projects to end violence against women and girls.

Ensler has raised over \$60 million for a global movement that celebrated its tenth anniversary at the Louisiana Superdome.

We've come a long way baby! What will you be giving as a gift to yourself for your next birthday?



Additional Resources

Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues: Official Guidelines and script for the V-Day 2004 College Campaign*. Villard Press, 2008. Available online www.dramatists.com

Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: Hysteria, the Vibrator and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Video excerpts of *In the Next Room (the vibratory play)* www.berkeleyrep.org/multimedia/vp_les.asp.

The Antique Vibrator and Quack Medical Museum:

<http://vibratormuseum.com>

National Park Service collection <http://www.nps.gov/hosp/index.htm>.

Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party Exhibit

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php. ©

— PAT HANSON, PH.D., 63, has been a health and sexuality educator for over thirty years. She is currently working on a book *Hopelessly Heterosexual? Memoirs of an Aging But Not Fading Sex Educator*.