Eve Ensler asserts that humanity has dis honored women’s bodies in the same way that it has dishonored the planet

BY DONNA BEAMAN

Eve Ensler has inspired and empowered women all around the world to speak out about their bodies and to protest women-targeted violence. Artistic, courageous, generous and funny, Ensler is a groundbreaking playwright, internationally bestselling author, award-winning actress and champion performer. Her Obie-winning and world-altering play, "The Vagina Monologues," has been published in nearly 80 languages and performed in more than 140 countries. Ensler's books include "Insecure: A Political Memoir" and "I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World," and she is also a passionate and illuminating commentator and journalist.

On the activism front, Ensler founded V-Day, a remarkably effective global movement to end violence against women and girls that supports thousands of programs and safe houses. V-Day in February celebrated its 15th anniversary with One Billion Rising, a global day of action on which people in 207 countries rose up and danced for the freedom, safety and equality of women. Ensler has also worked with women in Cambodia and Congo, to establish City of Joy, a center for survivors of gender violence. The recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Isabelle Stevenson Tony Award, Ensler has been named one of Newsweek's 150 Women Who Changed the World. Ensler's new book is "In the Body of the World," a stunning memoir about trauma, cancer and how we treat our bodies and the earth.

When Printers Row Journal spoke with Ensler, the force of her spirit, intelligence and love of life poured through the phone like spring water, like light. This is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Q: When did reading and writing become part of your life?
A: I was very young. As soon as I could write, I started to find ways to express what was going on inside me in words, writing in journals. It was a way of surviving and keeping my sanity.

Q: Did you read a lot, too? Did you have favorite books or writers?
A: I read two books over and over in my childhood, and they’re very strange books. One was "Death Be Not Proud" by John Gunther. It’s the story of his son, Johnny Gunther, who had a brain tumor and was gallantly and nobly dying of the brain tumor exploded through his skull. I just read it recently for another project and I just can’t even believe I was reading that book when I was a child. It’s so deeply disturbing on every level. The other book I was obsessed with was John Hersey’s "Hiroshima." I also read it over and over. I think there was something even then about mastering the most horrific as a way of dealing with how traumatized I felt. I think what most terrifies me is what I don’t know, what I can’t see, what’s behind the curtain.

Q: The phrase "behind the curtain" leads to the question: What inspired you to write plays?
A: It’s a big part of that, actually. I remember the first show I saw on Broadway where the curtains would open and there was something so intimidating about the magic behind the curtains, the world behind the curtains, the fact that there were all these people back there doing something that was going to be revealed. There’s something about the idea that onstage there’s a mirror of the world, and there you can take it on you can handle it; you can listen to it; you can go into it, which you often can’t do in real life. I think everything about the theater is so brilliant. The fact that we’re gathered in the dark with strangers. The fact that it’s community; the fact that the audience makes the play with the actors and the writers. It feels like such a revolutionary act, the theater. And it’s so in the present, so in the moment.

Q: In your work you continually cross the divide between the private and the public. What was it like to move between these realms when you were writing about having cancer?
A: "In the Body of the World" came from such a different part of me. It really feels like it came from my body. Like my body wrote it; I don’t even know what means. But that’s what it feels like. It was such a physical experience. So there was no way to separate the private from the public. It was all one.

Q: That is dramatically manifest when you write about the shock of seeing a CAT scan of a raging post-surgery infection, when you describe as "a huge pool of blackness in the center of my body" on the very day we all began watching televised footage of the Gulf oil disaster, a sea of dark poison.
A: It was unbelievable. This whole journey has been so unbelievable. I think what’s taught me is that we call synchronicity is really the fact that there is connectedness. What cancer did was throw me smack into the center of my body so that during the Gulf oil spill, there were moments when I felt that there was oil in me. I couldn’t distinguish between the two.

Q: This experience leads you to write about our habit of denial when it comes to our bodies and to the damage we do to nature.
A: One of the things that breaks me is we rely on us to tell us what we need to do. We get us where we need to go and we give us what we need — but we don’t value them. We just use them. And I think when you start thinking about the brilliance of the body — the body gives us all its organs. It found a way to compensate and recuperate. That’s what the body says. One of the things I’ve learned is that we can’t take care of the body without taking care of the world.
Q: In your work you continually cross the divide between the public and the private. What was it like to move between these realms when you were writing about having cancer?
A: In the Body of the World, came from such a different perspective. It really feels like a whole new body, a whole new experience. I was really on my own, and I felt like I was in a different world. It was like a whole new experience. I was really on my own, and I felt like I was in a different world.

Q: That is dramatically manifest when you write about the shock of seeing a CAT scan of a raging post-cancer radiation. How do you scribe as "a huge block of blackness in the center of me"? the very day we all began watching televised footage of the Gulf oil disaster, a sea of dark poison.
A: It was unbelievable. This whole journey has been so unbelievable. I think it's taught me not to hold onto synchronicity in the way that I thought was right. That's what was right.

Q: At each stage of your work, you've examined our perception of the mind-body divide. What was it like to write about the mind-body shift?
A: I think it's mind-body shift, with the body being considered lower and not to be trusted, is being changed by all that's being discovered about emotional intelligence and the human body. The intelligence in the body has been unvalued in the same way that the earth has been. They're things we rely on — we get to trust that we need to do — but we don't value them. We just use them. And I think when you start to value them you realize the brilliance of the body. The genius of the body. My body figured out how to live without seven organs. It found a way to heal itself and rearrange itself to keep me living. That's what the body knows how to do. Of the things I've learned this year with One Billion Rising, when a billion women rose up and danced around the planet, it was the intensity with which we knew our bodies into the world, into the open. That is how really how we should be living. And I've been brought back to me to reduce us, or make us feel bad about our sexuality and our power. What cancer did was put me back into my body in a way that I suddenly felt the magnitude of the body, whether it was my body or the body of the world.