

Review: "Tense Vagina" hilariously exposes female experience

By Tresca Weinstein

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Sara Juli in "Tense Vagina" (photo by Alban Maino)

SARATOGA SPRINGS – Here are a few things that might happen to you at Sara Juli's one-woman show "Tense Vagina: An Actual Diagnosis": You will learn how to do a Kegel exercise. You will get a snack. She will blow your nose for you, or maybe double-knot your shoes. You will laugh, a lot.

Part dance/theater, part standup, "Tense Vagina" is about womanhood, motherhood and urinary incontinence. If Lena Dunham's character on "Girls" decided to be a performer instead of a writer, this is what she'd create 10 years after the series finale. A Skidmore alum (she majored in dance and anthropology), Juli has an incredibly warm and natural stage presence, which helps her get away with just about anything. Whether she's simulating childbirth, spit-cleaning an audience member's face or turning a Disney

ballad into a vagina-focused parody, she manages to stay on the right side of "eew." She might be pushing a few boundaries and a few buttons, but she does it in the most wholesome way possible.

With two children, the titular diagnosis and numerous hours of pelvic floor rehabilitation under her belt (literally), Juli has plenty of life experience to mine for material, which is her modus operandi: Her past work has explored such personal issues as her father's death, her past promiscuity and her relationship with money. In "Tense Vagina," she interweaves super-specific biographical details (such as her multi-step homework assignment for relaxing the vaginal tissues) with riffs on topics that are familiar to many moms—for example, being reduced to a milk delivery system. (To underline that point, she gets down on all fours and moos, while strapped into a breast pump.)

Though it would be a stretch to call this a dance work, Juli moves like a dancer, whatever she's doing. There's a lovely segment that she performs twice, bracketing the piece, in which she envisions an idyllic mom-and-kids day out, accompanying each phrase with a precise and expressive gesture. It's the movement, not the simple words, that communicates the joyful picture she's painting.

The costume design by Carol Farrell emphasizes Juli's mischievous-mom persona: She wears patent-leather pumps and a 1950s-style dress over which she ties various colorful aprons. The set, by Pamela Moulton, features a dollhouse and a slew of props, including a sparkly toy microphone, squeaky stuffed animals and a bagful of vibrators. As with motherhood itself, there might be a hint of well-earned bitterness in "Tense Vagina," but there's so much love, too. Juli cradles one viewer's head on her bosom, combs another's hair and passes out snacks, along with instructions on what to do with the empty bags. Thanks, Mom.

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