

October 31, 2016

The Joys of Motherhood

Sara Juli

“Tense Vagina: an actual diagnosis”

The Chocolate Factory

Queens, NY

October 21, 2016

by Leigh Witchel

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Sara Juli’s “Tense Vagina: an actual diagnosis,” was indeed a laughing matter. The deadpan one-woman-show chronicled her battle with vaginismus, or tense vagina, where the vaginal muscles tighten and spasm. Juli narrated us through this voyage with the insanely patient logic of a mother, and we experienced that full on because for over an hour she was The Mom and we were her surrogate children.

Sara Juli in “Tense Vagina: an actual diagnosis.” Photo by Brian Rogers.

Wearing a prim black top and a full red skirt that made her look like an extra from “Hairspray,” Juli inhabited a sparse white space with little décor and bits of motherhood detritus. Toys were scattered; everything made a canned noise. Domestic articles were strung

up from the ceiling: lamps, whisks, irons, blenders. A large dollhouse towards the back hid some items. On the floor towards the front were two buttons; when pressed one said, “Yes” in a variety of ways, the other, “No.”

The show opened with the same binary option: a monologue, at first of endless positive nurturing. “I see baby bunnies . . . Yes, you can eat all you want . . . We’re going to go . . . It’s going to be the best day ever!” that morphed to its opposite: “I said no . . . You’re full, listen to your belly . . . It’s going to rain anyway.”

Juli adopted the calm, patient tone of explaining the world to a toddler to describe vaginal dysfunction, and the physical therapy needed to rehabilitate. The joking never wore thin. She had the audience raise their hands if they knew what a kegel exercise was and then told us she was going to tell us anyway because she didn’t trust us. She was frazzled, but oh so chipper.

After this came a carefully planned snack break, where the rules were explained as Juli passed around baskets with actual snacks. “You can have as many as you want, but no more than two.” We received a patient lecture on what to do with the wrappers. This included a few options, including to interrupt the performance to throw the wrapper in a pail onstage, which a few people did, to her encouragement. However, those were our only options. “I don’t want to see any fucking Goldfish on the floor!” Juli barked, her composure cracking for a moment.

Dance and movement was important to the piece, but not central. An occasional short, yearning adagio, or illustrative mime during monologues felt housewifely. Juli looked and moved like a mother, not a dancer in fighting form, and that seemed right. She went into the audience, checking on us in a chaos of parenting tasks: blowing one man’s nose, or neatening another man’s hair while murmuring at him to “comb it before you go out.” The audience adored it and started to talk back. Two men got their shoes double-knotted, which involved putting their legs between Juli’s legs as she neatly redid them.



Redoing and repetition was central, but Juli varied how she used it. All instructions were repeated and repeated, as you might with kids, but then some-times repeated more until they became echolalia, and from there mutated. "Oatmeal" became "Hold me." "Mommy" started as a question, then a call, then a demand. And somehow it morphed into the theme from "Chariots of Fire."

After singing Sia's "Chandelier" while wearing a zebra-striped lactating bra, Juli changed aprons to one lit by Christmas lights, and brought out a window box with dildos sprouting from it to plant in front of the dollhouse. Assumedly to help them grow, she sang to them, "You make me feel like a natural woman." A full bag of dildos was produced and Juli turned them all on

and set them vibrating on the floor like abandoned toys.

The only thing raunchy or dirty about all of these vibrators, vaginas and kegel exercises was the taboo of not talking about them. The good news was that Juli did get better. Her recovery was covered quickly with the axiom "A happy mother is a happy woman and a happy woman is a happy vagina." And to close, the first monologue was repeated, only in the affirmative "It's going to be the best day ever." and the Yes button provided a mechanized, Molly Bloom-for-the-nursery benediction: Yes. Yes. Yes.

The wry, neurotic appeal of "Tense Vagina" went way beyond fringe theater. You don't need to be a mother to appreciate Juli's sharp observation, tight writing and chipper, determined, exhaustion. Who knew a tense vagina could be so funny?

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Bottom: Sara Juli in "Tense Vagina: an actual diagnosis." Photo by Brian Rogers.