

# Cultural Daily

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## Eve Ensler, Mad Max, and the Women Warriors of Fury Road

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, May 13th, 2015

*Eve Ensler, the creator of The Vagina Monologues and founder of VDay, consulted with the cast of George Miller's new film Mad Max Fury Road. We just had to talk...*

**Adam Leipzig:** Eve, I always knew you were badass, but when I found out you consulted on this movie you became super-badass in my book.

**Eve Ensler:** It was so thrilling to be asked. I had given the keynote speech at a human rights conference in Sydney and George Miller heard my speech. They were in pre-production. He does this wonderful thing where he sends a recording of his voice in email form. He told me about the film, and said it would be wonderful if I could work with the “wives” and talk to them about my experiences with sex trafficking, being in multiple war zones, what happens with sex slavery and rape trauma, what it would mean if you were carrying the baby of a rapist. He asked me to talk about what that kind of sexual terrorism does to your body and how it forces you to leave the landscape and disassociate from yourself, and the Stockholm Syndrome, how over a period of time you become attached to your perpetrator, and what it would mean to struggle with leaving your perpetrator.

**AL:** I have loved *Max Max* from the beginning, from 1979 when I saw the film on opening day, and the critics savaged it.

**EE:** Me too. I do not like action films, but *Mad Max* really established something else, because it was so indie, political and allegorical.

**AL:** *The Road Warrior*, which was released in 1981, is a movie every film student should see about 10 times because it is perfectly made, every shot, every cut.

**EE:** That was his best movie until this one. People are calling *Mad Max Fury Road* a masterpiece. It's a rock-body-opera.

**AL:** You worked with the cast where they were shooting in Namibia, and right after that you went to [City of Joy](#), the community of women survivors of violence you've established in Buvaku, Congo. That's one of the things I most admire about you — that you took your success from *The Vagina Monologues* and used it to create an empowering place for women who have had some of the most traumatic experiences in modern history. What was that like, to go from the *Mad Max* movie set to the real world of City of Joy?

**EE:** It was shocking. The landscapes were all too familiar. Bukavu is such a sacred place, and also so anarchic in terms of poverty, lack of electricity and water, and a town of 50,000 that now holds a million, and constant, constant influxes of terrible violence. On arriving I felt like, the future is here.



V-Day Founder Eve Ensler at Panzi at the opening ceremonies of the City of Joy, Democratic Republic of Congo, 02/05/11. (photo: Paula Allen/vday.org)

**AL: Did you do workshops with the *Mad Max* cast?**

**EE:** We worked for hours each day. I told them lots of stories, they asked questions, I had them read things, we went into deep issues around rape and trauma. It wasn't similar to other workshops I've done, because it was very specifically focused.

**AL: Did you feel the resonance of that work when you saw the film?**

**EE:** George wanted to create women who are not victims, and he certainly accomplished that. The backstories are indelibly imprinted on those actors. You believe they are traumatized. In some ways, they are living the best lives in that world because they are being kept as breeders, so they are untainted in a world where everybody is in dire circumstances. On another level, the comforts they are receiving in terms of having water and being protected are at the price of being sex slaves. There are many allegories to where we are today: so many women today are sex trafficked so they can make a living to support their families, so many women are being forced to give up their freedom to survive.

**AL: It is quite related to your work, which is also about women not being victims.**

**EE:** Absolutely. When you first see the women in the film, they are chanting, "We are not things! We are not things!" As soon as I read that in the script, I said, I'm in. That is the call of our times. How are we going to organize as women and men to rise up against the neo-liberal, capitalist, racist patriarchy, which is destroying us, and what are we willing to give up for that liberation?

**AL: What do you think needs to be given up?**

**EE:** If we really are going to bring in the new world, everyone has to be committed on some level to giving up their comforts, so we can have a world where everybody has water, everybody is fed, everybody is living in comfort and has food on the table, everybody has medical support. That's what the movie is looking at. We live in a world where 85 people are making the same money as 3.5 billion, there is a tiny percentage that have everything and the people below have next to nothing, as in *Mad Max*, where people barely get any water and are told not to get used to it because they'll get addicted to it. It's the same system we are in now.

**AL: The landscape of scarce resources and the few vs. the many goes back to those first *Mad Max* movies. It was a clear political agenda, and very much an art house film agenda. One of the reasons I so admire *The Road Warrior* is that it was the first film that combined the art house with commercial filmmaking. For that reason it is a landmark piece of cinema.**

**In the same way, there is a relationship to your work. When you first started doing *The Vagina Monologues*, it could not have been more art house. In fact, it wasn't even in a**

**theatre. It was at the fringe of the fringe, but it became extraordinarily commercial — not because you were seeking success and fame, but it happened.**

**EE:** Because it resonated with so many people. I just now got [this article sent to me](#), a new Gallup poll:

While International Women's Day this Sunday will focus mostly on how the world thinks women are doing, it's important to understand how the women of the world think they are doing. The best way to find this out is to ask them.

This International Women's Day, more than one in four women worldwide — or about 620 million women — rate their lives positively enough to be considered “thriving.” The life ratings of the rest — or about 2 billion women — place them in a category of “struggling” or “suffering.”

**AL:** Things come full circle. A few months ago there was a performance by the WordTheatre at Guerrilla Atelier, a considered lifestyle space here in Downtown LA's Arts District. A group of men read your poem *The Man Prayer*. It begins:

May I be a Man  
Whose confidence comes from the depth of my giving  
Who understands that vulnerability is my greatest strength  
Who creates space rather than dominates it

**I sent you a photo of it, I think you were in Paris at the time, and you emailed me back about how moving it was to see that.**

**EE:** Yes. And now I have been reading the press around *Mad Max*. There are some so-called “men's rights” groups, which I think are fairly reactionary, who are boycotting the movie. They are saying women are not equal to men, women have no logic. They're angry that I was a consultant on the film. They feel feminism is destroying *Mad Max*.

**AL:** Oh, give me a break.

**EE:** It is astonishing. Here is what's amazing about the film. Charlize Theron's character has a real mission. Any violence that occurs does not feel gratuitous because she is directed toward her mission. When you see a female action character, who is capable of fighting on equal ground with the men, who is the most powerful fighter in this film, when you see that, as a woman, allegorically, metaphorically, in all ways, it changes your idea of yourself. You actually believe you have agency over your life, you can fight with men as an equal partner — in some cases she is saving *Mad Max*, in other cases he is saving her. You never feel women are crippled, or disabled, or incapable of defending themselves. That alone is so empowering.

Charlize's character is taking the wives to the green place called the Land of the Many Mothers. Another thing that is astonishing is when they get there, there's a reveal. I don't want to spoil it for people, but the reveal of who they are is something I have never seen before in a film.

**AL:** Its antecedent is in Monique Wittig's 1969 novel *Les Guérillères*.

**EE:** It has never been in a movie. These women are fierce and capable. I do not believe in violence. Yet as a metaphor for women fighting and standing up for what they believe in, and joining forces with other women and men to rally forward, it is incredibly powerful.

**AL:** As every movie franchise is rebooted, it goes back to its origin story. *Mad Max Fury Road* feels as though it grapples with the origin story of men's violence against women.

**EE:** Going back to our origins, where the collective unconscious sets up what propels us in a particular motion, and what story is at the basis of our consciousness — that's what determines our reality right now. This film is so powerful because it rearranges the whole cellular makeup of that story. Even to utter the words "feminist action film" is to transmit a new idea into the collective unconsciousness.

Feminism has never been excluding of men or at the expense of men. When women are liberated and equal, men will be liberated as well.

*Top image: Charlize Theron, at right, leads the wives on a quest for freedom in Mad Max Fury Road. This photo and background photo courtesy Warner Bros.*

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