

Lawless shows no fear in latest intimate role

By [Michele Hewitson](#)

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In what a normal person would call the slightly grotty rehearsal rooms at the Auckland Theatre Company, Lucy Lawless is hamming it up. Interview over, she wants her photo taken next to a signed print from the American feminist artist, Judy Chicago. The print shows a woman in the crowning stage before giving birth. It is signed: To Xena.

Lawless is sitting on a stool beneath it, pulling faces. She wants me to email a copy of this photograph to Chicago. She thinks the artist will enjoy a picture of Lawless, aka Xena, beneath her artwork in a room where Lawless is rehearsing her part in feminist playwright Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. I have no idea how to email this picture to Chicago but when Lawless asks you to do something, you find yourself saying you will. She is quite bossy.

It is quite odd to be sitting with the big star in this room talking about vaginas. Still, shock radio jock Howard Stern once interviewed Lawless and asked her seriously rude questions about sexual positions. She didn't flinch. Much.

He would no doubt have loved to ask this one: if Xena's vagina got dressed what would it wear? This is not a bad taste joke – but depending on your sensibilities, it may not be to your taste – in which case you will no doubt not be in the front row of *The Vagina Monologues* when it opens on February 14.

There is a section of Ensler's unlikely hit play which asks this question of various women. The answers include: a pink boa, Armani only, a tutu. Or, obviously, a breastplate and leather mini-skirt.

The play, based on interviews with 200 women, has had actors and celebrities queuing up to retell the stories, including those of a Bosnian refugee rape victim, a 72-year-old New York woman who talks about her vagina in terms of a cellar.

Glenn Close (who led a 2500-strong audience in chanting the C-word), Calista Flockhart, Kate Winslet, Naomi Campbell and Oprah have shared the VM experience. In Auckland, Danielle Cormack and Madeline Sami will share the stage with Lawless. In Wellington, broadcaster Kim Hill will do a star turn.

Lawless, no doubt, could have appeared anywhere in the world in this play. Instead, wearing jeans with an expandable waistband, pink T-shirt, hippy beads and with a six-and-a-half months pregnant belly, she strolls into the rehearsal room, "as happy as a sandboy", she says.

It's like rehearsal rooms everywhere: a collection of old chairs a junk shop would reject. A fan moves the stuffy air languidly. The scuffed floor is criss-crossed with tatty remnants of tape. "It's very civilised, actually quite flash," says Lawless.

Once upon a time when she was Xena, Lawless rested up in her own trailer between sword-flinging scenes. There was catering. There are still people, in the United States, to open her mail – some of which is certainly strange.

Last week I saw Lawless wandering down Wellesley St, swinging her bag, looking radiantly happy and happily anonymous. Not a single car horn sounded. Nobody did a double take, possibly because they, like me didn't recognise her immediately (the guy I was with pointed her out).

She's enjoying complaining lightly that she couldn't get parking at Sky City for \$55 a week because it was reserved "for workers", not those who keep layabout actor's hours.

She can't think of any better way to spend "the last couple of months of my pregnancy" than working. She's good at lying, she says with a poker-player's face, but no good at lying around.



The face is the same but Lucy Lawless' latest role is light years from Xena. Picture / Martin Sykes

Close up she's still the face that launched a hundred fancy-dress party outfits. But those piercing blue eyes (disconcertingly, she never seems to blink) seem softer and the jet black hair which framed that determined jaw is lighter, shorter and slightly wispy around her face. It's a terrible cliché, but she is one of those much-photographed people who are much nicer-looking in the flesh.

She has a well-honed sense of the ridiculous. Rehearsals, she says, are like being in a room with three 13-year-old girls and director Oliver Driver, who is apparently delighted to be an "honorary vagina". She says they all make juvenile jokes.

But more seriously – and *The Vagina Monologues* is more akin to a movement than a play – she says that it has given her "a new respect for the vagina, for the power of it and the sacredness of it. [While] I never felt disadvantaged by having a vagina ... I never realised it was a privilege."

If she is nervous about what is her live theatre debut (she doesn't count her role as Rizzo in a Broadway production of *Grease*) she's holding her nerve. In live theatre there are no second takes. No secure set. You can hardly screen ticket-sales either. In the Auckland season of *The Blue Room* last year, which featured Xena bad boy, Ares, Kevin Smith and fleeting nudity, a fan ran up the aisle, and grabbed Smith's undies.

Lawless doesn't think the loonies will turn up. She is serene about the idea of performing such an intimate play in the intimate circumstances of theatre. She couldn't care less if people come to see her in the play because she will forever be Xena. "As long as they come."

She can be a bit snippy. In response to a reference to British criticism of the play that women have spent the past 40 years trying to prove that they were much more than their sexual organs, she says, "Well, I don't think we have all the answers yet. How could we have had all the answers in the 70s? What are we afraid of? Going into a group and talking about things? How can that hurt us?"

I didn't read her Barbara Ellen's *Observer* column where she writes that the monologues "emerged less as hymns to female genitalia than nursery rhymes chanted by a disturbed child ... 'If your vagina could talk, what would it say?' For any sane woman there could be only one response, surely, 'Get your coat, vagina, we're out of here!'"

I'm pretending that the reason I don't is that it would be a shame to trample on such unbridled enthusiasm. The real reason is that she's got that mean Xena look in her eye. And for all I know she might still travel with the lethal weapon satirist AA Gill called her flan dish, in her handbag.

* *The Vagina Monologues*, Maidment Theatre, from February 14.

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