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REVIEWS BY ERIC KOHN  
MARCH 9, 2014 10:26 PM  
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## SXSW Review: Abortion Doc Provides Heroic Aid at Sea In 'Vessel,' But Is the Movie About Her a Missed Opportunity?



"Vessel."

The ongoing saga of Dutch doctor Rebecca Gomperts, the valiant leader of the pro-choice organization Women on Waves, offers ideal fodder for a gripping narrative: Sailing through international waters, Gomperts provides aid to women in need of abortions around the world, navigating opposition at nearly every turn. Aided by a small army of helpers, she spreads the word about the possibilities of self-induced abortions via pills, while fighting for certification to provide operations onboard her ship. But there's a distinction between the value of Gomperts' efforts and their dramatic potential. Gomperts' quest receives a competent overview in "Vessel," Diana Whitten's straightforward documentary about the cause, but the movie largely plays like an advertisement for her efforts rather than an accomplishment in its own right.

That being said, Whitten provides ample material to do justice to her subject's cause. The movie's derives most of its appeal from dynamic footage of Gomperts' clashes with various oppositional groups throughout her journey. The filmmaker captures her subject traveling from Morocco to Ireland, Poland and Portugal, facing similar naysayers each step of the way: Pulling up at port after port, she faces hordes of protestors and hungry media hurling questions and insults. All the while, the committed doctor delivers passionate sound bytes about her mission to raise awareness for the struggles of pregnant women in restrictive societies. Her commitment is consistently impressive — she's a heroic presence who basks in the spotlight and subverts its glare.

At sea, her organization juggles countless emails from those in need, while sample messages of their exchanges constantly appear onscreen; instructive animations convey statistics about the global demand for her cause and also illustrate it — we learn, in one extensive sequence, the process by which she advises women to use the pill misoprostol to clandestinely produce abortions without facing repercussions from authorities. It's a fascinatingly covert undertaking with a huge risk factor at its center — while Gomperts functions in the public eye, she absorbs the spotlight from countless anonymous women in need.

However, the scattered portrait comes at the expense of the doctor herself developing much dimensionality; while she eventually reveals some aspects of how her private life determines her motivation, "Vessel" remains a largely professional representation of her cause, and the absence of any subjects impacted by her work means that the emotional ramifications of her efforts are left implied. While she states an effort to "make visible what has been such an invisible problem," in "Vessel," the problem is reduced to statistics.

Still, Whitten manages to stuff in a collage of compelling moments, including a tense exchange between Gomperts with an oppositional pundit on a Portuguese television show, and one gripping moment when she cuts the rope of a police boat attempting to tow her from the port. If nothing else, the movie expertly magnifies the cautious nature of her marketing strategies by exploring how she manages to capitalize on controversy to keep pushing her message forward. "The only bad press is your obituary," she asserts.

But however stirring her intentions, "Vessel" never rises to the occasion of uncovering an engaging hook, and instead falls back on empirical data. The statistics are generally robust (early on, we learn that a woman dies due to restrictive abortion laws every 10 minutes) but they never congeal into decisive picture. Unlike powerful looks at the struggles of contemporary abortion clinics found in recent documentaries "12th and Delaware" and "After Tiller," nothing in "Vessel" makes its weighty issue into a cinematically engaging affair, which creates the unfortunate dichotomy of a movie that says very little even as it reveals a woman who does so much.

Of course, "Vessel" goes great lengths to celebrate Gomperts' efforts, and delivers enough of a window into her cause to forward it — which is probably sufficient for its evident intentions. Even so, the hot button topic begs for a more dynamic treatment. "The ship is a symbol," Gomperts asserts, and certainly the recurring image of her team traversing the globe epitomizes the constant momentum of her activism. But like the ship itself, the movie is content to drift along without settling on a cogent destination.

Criticwire Grade: B-

**HOW WILL IT PLAY?** With its activist issue sure to grab headlines, "Vessel" should be able to land a satisfactory broadcast deal and find audiences intrigued by its topic, while enjoying a healthy festival run. Its limited perspective may prevent it from finding a significant theatrical audience, but it has major potential in ancillary markets.

For more coverage of this year's SXSWS Film Festival, go [here](#).

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SXSW: 'Penny Dreadful' Scares Its Audience Right Out of the Theater

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**CINDY NOLAND** | MARCH 10, 2014 10:35 AM

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Trust a man not to get it right. Vessel is about the desperate situation of women around the world who need abortion, and the lengths women will go to to make sure they are served. It's about hope and creativity, and it dramatically shows the lengths that men will go to in their efforts to suppress this needed healthcare. The film itself is a tool for giving women access to abortion, and in that it rises above the level of mere documentary to heroic rescue. I give it an A++, because of the hope and inspiration myself and other women felt afterwards. The male narrative is really irrelevant in this case.

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**NELL COX** | MARCH 10, 2014 3:56 PM

It didn't take long for me to wonder if this review wasn't written by a man. The writer clearly didn't get it, so I scrolled to the top. Yep. Eric somebody. I agree with Cindy Noland's comment [the previous comment] that "The male narrative is really irrelevant in this case." It's about a huge issue. He does acknowledge: "we learn that a woman dies due to restrictive abortion laws every 10 minutes." and in the light of that his review is like asking "...And what lens did you use?"