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'Vessel': Film Review

3:24 PM PST 1/8/2015 by Frank Scheck

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The Bottom Line

It may be preaching to the choir, but it's a powerful sermon

Opens

Jan. 9 (FilmBuff)

Director

Diana Whitten

Diana Whitten's award-winning documentary chronicles the efforts of controversial abortion activist Dr. Rebecca Gomperts

Besides winning an audience award at the SXSW Film Festival, *Vessel* received a special jury citation for "Political Courage." The accolade was well deserved, as **Diana Whitten's** documentary is unabashedly celebratory in its chronicling of the groundbreaking efforts of pro-choice activist Dr. Rebecca Gomperts and her innovative organizations Women on Waves and Women on Web. While unlikely to change anyone's stances on the hot-button issue, the film emerges as a deeply moving portrait that makes palpably clear the desperation of women for whom attaining legal abortions is impossible. Opening for an exclusive theatrical release at NYC's IFC Center, it should find appreciative audiences via ancillary formats.

Seven years in the making and featuring some footage previously shot by various other filmmakers, the film details how the Dutch physician came up with a plan to provide abortions via a ship moored in international waters off the coasts of countries in which the procedure is banned. Despite the fact that the vessel was operating under Dutch law—abortion is legal in the Netherlands—the venture faced numerous challenges. The Portuguese government, for instance, responded with a naval blockade, and several other countries were similarly unreceptive.

Read More [SXSW: 'Vessel' Follows Activist Providing Abortions at Sea \(Exclusive Video\)](#)

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The obstacles eventually led to the formation of the sister organization Women on Web, where Gomperts and her team of workers provide information as to how women can induce miscarriages via the use of the medications Mifepristone and Misoprostol. As one activist puts it, "The government may be able to stop the ship, but they'll never stop the Internet."

A very human face is put on the problem via deeply moving onscreen transcriptions of phone calls and e-mails the organization has received from desperate women. According to the film, a woman dies every ten minutes from complications of unsafe abortions, and one doesn't need to be a math wizard to figure out that the statistics are deeply troubling.

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The film doesn't delve very deeply into either its central figure or the various complications, both legal and logistical, attendant to her quest. And on a purely cinematic level it's a fairly pedestrian effort, with only the informational animated interludes providing a visual diversion from the rough-hewn footage. But as Gomperts points out at one point, "The ship is a symbol," and *Vessel* is a powerfully impassioned activist documentary that well serves its cause.

Production: Sovereignty Productions
Director/director of photography: Diana Whitten
Producers: Diana Whitten, Mitchell Block
Executive producers: Abigail Disney, Dan Cogan, Geralyn Dreyfous
Editor: Simeon Hutner
Composers: T. Griffin, Heather McIntosh

No rating, 90 min.

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