

Film And TV

To Fed-Up Texans, Pro-Choice Doc *Vessel* Was the Best of SXSW

By Amy Nicholson

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Dr. Rebecca Gomperts sails into Spain in *Vessel*

The Texas State Capitol is just three blocks north of the State Theater. If you stretch your legs between movies during SXSW, you could squint up the appropriately named Congress Street and see the small, green park that climbs to the Capitol's dome. And at the world premiere of Diana Whitten's *Vessel*, a rousing pro-choice doc about a Dutch activist who sails to countries that have outlawed abortions and gives women medical care in international waters, the audience made sure the legislators next door could hear their standing ovation.

Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, the star of *Vessel*, founded **Women on Waves** in 1999. Now 47, she's still girlishly spry and as stubborn as a battle-tested general - which, in a way, she is. When she attempted to dock in Portugal, the government sent two battleships to block her entrance. When she landed in Valencia, Spain, ragtag pro-life pirates leapt onboard, tied her ship to theirs, and tried to drag her out to sea. Gomperts grabbed a knife, cut their rope, and skipped around the deck waving at her supporters. By the second time we see Moroccan men scream in her face, we've stopped being scared for her: Gomperts is brave and ready to brawl.

If you watched *Vessel* in Los Angeles, you'd think it was a stirring film about trying to modernize religiously anchored countries like Ecuador and Ireland - you know, the others. Watching *Vessel* in Texas, however, feels immediate. The backhanded House Bill 2 has used concocted loopholes to shutter a third of the state's abortion clinics. Ninety-three percent of Texas counties don't have a clinic at all, and next year, when the second noose tightens, that number will get even higher. That means in the 15 years that Women on Waves' unrepentantly loud activism has convinced Portugal to legalize abortion and made pro-choice voters the majority in Poland, America has constricted the rights of women here at home.

*Vessel*

To close clinics, conservative legislators are using a faux-protective ruse: They're mandating that abortion clinics have ambulatory surgical centers and admitting privileges in a hospital within a 30-mile radius. There goes all of rural Texas. Even if a woman can road trip to a clinic that's met these demands, the Texan congress has added a new trick: She has to make the trek four times in two weeks. Day one, she must get a sonogram where the doctor is required to

describe the fetus. Day two, she has to come back twice for the first and second doses of the miscarriage-inducing drugs mifepristone and misoprostol. Then two weeks later, she's forced to come back for a check-up.

To a woman living in the Rio Grande Valley, one of the poorest regions in the state, these hurdles can seem insurmountable. By September when the last of the HB2 laws takes effect, she'll have to drive five hours to the nearest clinic in San Antonio, find a hotel for at least one night, more likely two, and then 14 days later, make the ten-hour roundtrip again. Legislators have learned that if they attack abortion as a civil rights issue, they'll lose. But if they attack the mother - especially poor, paycheck-to-paycheck mothers - they can trample over the rights of women who don't have the resources to fight back.

It's easy for lawmakers to pretend HB2 is designed to protect those women from dangerous abortions. After all, the majority of women - and, of course, the majority of men - haven't had one and might still picture scalpels and vacuum hoses and stirrups. *Vessel* erases those concerns. Dr. Gomperts' clinic is a shipping container. Instead of scalpels, she uses a pill. Women can take them on their own in an at-home procedure so simple she's launched a spin-off group, **Women on Web**, to ship the medicine and instructions to women around the world. Her sensible, medical guide exposes the Texas legislators' tactics for what they are: manipulative fear-mongering.

What's even scarier is what happens to women in places where abortion is criminalized. Every year, over 21 million women living in restrictive countries are forced to receive illegal and unsafe abortions, and of them, 47,000 die. If these Texas politicians really wanted to protect mothers, they wouldn't corner them into making a potentially deadly decision. But that's exactly what they're doing.

Judging by the screaming "Bravos!" at *Vessel's* premiere, the SXSW crowd was hungry for a commonsense documentary showing women taking back control of their own health care choices. *Vessel* even won the **Documentary Feature Audience Award**, which, judging by the worthy competition seems to be as much a vote for its politics as it is for its filmmaking. (The Documentary Jury, of which I was a voting member, gave it a **Special Citation for Political Courage**.)

Did the Texas Capitol three blocks north hear SXSW's cheers? Hopefully. But probably not. No matter: Texas has 367 miles of coastline - and its citizens also like a good fight. Say Dr. Gomperts, maybe you can dock your ship near Brownsville?

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