



MOVIES | MOVIE REVIEW

'Vessel,' Directed by Diana Whitten

By **BEN KENIGSBURG** JAN. 9, 2015

The debates over access to abortion often invoke personal rights. "Vessel" concerns the intersection of those rights with national sovereignty. The movie follows the work of Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, a physician from the Netherlands who founded Women on Waves, an organization whose goal was to provide medical abortions in international waters to women from countries where the procedure was illegal. She later started Women on Web, a telemedicine support service. (Emily Bazelon covered Dr. Gomperts's efforts at length in *The New York Times Magazine* last year.)

An unabashed work of advocacy, the documentary — which includes snippets from as early as 2000 — follows Dr. Gomperts to several countries. While the statistics and arguments about the need for legal abortion are unlikely to strike viewers as new, the film vividly illustrates the precariousness of access, with shots showing the checking of global coordinates as abortion-inducing pills are administered.

Alongside talking heads, the film includes more dramatic footage: In a sequence from 2004, as the Women on Waves vessel nears Portuguese waters, it is met by two warships. Dr. Gomperts goes on Portuguese television and reveals the pharmaceutical method by which women might on their own induce abortion, information the film illustrates in detailed animation. (Abortion later became legal in Portugal.)

In chronicling some unsuccessful missions — the boat's 2001 maiden voyage, to Ireland, was stymied by controversy over issues including whether Dr. Gomperts had a particular medical license — "Vessel" becomes a film not just about abortion but also about activism. It raises provocative questions about the power of laws to police information in an increasingly globalized world.

VESSEL

Opened on Friday

Directed by Diana Whitten

In English, Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese and Swahili, with English subtitles

1 hour 28 minutes; not rated

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Directed by Diana Whitten; director of photography, Ms. Whitten; edited by Simeon Hunter; music by T. Griffin and Heather McIntosh; produced by Ms. Whitten and Mitchell Block; released by Film Buff. Running time: 1 hour 28 minutes. This film is not rated.

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