

SXSW Film Review: 'Vessel'



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Shot through and through with activist zeal, this vivid profile of an abortion-rights group might have benefited from a more distanced approach.

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Winner of the SXSW Film Festival's audience award for documentary, as well as a special jury citation for "political courage," [Diana Whitten](http://variety.com/t/diana-whitten/) (<http://variety.com/t/diana-whitten/>)'s "[Vessel](http://variety.com/t/vessel/)

(<http://variety.com/t/vessel/>)" offers a vivid profile of the abortion-rights group Women on Waves, as well as its irrepressible, fiery founder, [Rebecca Gomperts](http://variety.com/t/rebecca-gomperts/) (<http://variety.com/t/rebecca-gomperts/>).

The film is an intriguing story passionately told, shot through and through with activist zeal, although a greater deal of distance might have allowed it to make a stronger case. "Vessel" ought to be a conversation-starter at festivals down the line, with a possible theatrical release on the horizon.

Founded in 1999 in the Netherlands, Women on Waves was started as a bold insurrectionist effort to provide abortion pills to women where the procedure is illegal, by picking them up on land and floating out into international waters. Theirs was a controversial mission, to say the least, and while it's unclear from the docu just how many procedures were actually performed in this manner, the attention the group received allowed it to stage a number of landlocked demonstrations and assistance programs.

Much of that attention can be credited to Gomperts' highly camera-friendly volubility. If she comes across as a sort of mix of doctor, art student and Greenpeace volunteer, that's because she is, and she seems just as comfortable facing down political opponents on talkshows or leaping from boat to shore in front of unruly crowds in Valencia as she does performing medical consultations.

After a series of contentious voyages, the mission started to evolve: Instead of simply administering the pills themselves to a handful of women at sea, the org began to use its notoriety to launch hotlines and Web resources to help women find and use the drug misoprostol to induce abortion. This provides the film with an interesting internal conflict: Scenes of the ship facing down a Portuguese naval blockade or of Gomperts wading through protesters in Morocco make for great cinema, but it's in the far less glamorous sequences of training sessions in Tanzanian villages that the org seems to be doing its real work. For her part, Gomperts speaks eloquently of the boat's symbolic value, as well as the ways fear of backlash can prevent activists from taking the steps needed to spark real change.

Obviously, "Vessel" hardly has the time to re-litigate *Roe v. Wade*, and despite providing some sobering statistics, the film likely won't do much to bring pro-lifers over to the other camp. (Though onscreen transcriptions of calls and emails the org has received from desperate girls seeking help are heartbreaking.) Which is fine; however, the docu could still stand to apply a more objective treatment to some of the group's activities.

For example, Gomperts' maiden voyage to Ireland was scuttled upon arrival by Dutch certification snafus. And her second, in which she sailed to Poland, seems to have been complicated when customs officials found that their nautical clinic had fewer pills than were listed on the manifest. (Exactly what happened here is never made totally clear.) Even if these are all just

bureaucratic details in the end, when an org seeks to intentionally subvert the laws of sovereign countries to conduct controversial medical services on the open ocean, one would hope they'd go to greater lengths to avoid even the appearance of recklessness, and that Whitten would call them on it a bit more.

Using her own camera as well as footage filmed by previous aspiring documentarians who boarded Gomperts' vessel, Whitten crafts an arresting firsthand portrait, and her up-close look at a strategy session with young activists in Ecuador gives a particularly eye-opening view of grassroots advocacy in action. Animated sequences fill in some of the medical and statistical details, while Whitten's supplementary interviews with the likes of Polish activist Kinga Jelinska — who ominously notes that the group has received increasing numbers of inquiries from the United States in recent years — provide valuable context.

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Reviewed at SXSW Film Festival (competing), March 9, 2014. Running time: **88 MIN.**

Production

(Documentary) A Sovereignty Prods. presentation in association with Fork Films, Impact Partners, Chicken and Egg Pictures. Produced by Diana Whitten, Mitchell Block. Executive producers, Dan Cogan, Geralyn Dreyfous, Abigail Disney.

Crew

Directed by Diana Whitten. Camera (color), Whitten; editor, Simeon Hunter; music, T. Griffin, Heather McIntosh; animation, Emily Hubley, Emilie Hsin Pei Liu.

With

Rebecca Gomperts, Kinga Jelinska, Cecilia Costa, Gunilla Kleiverda, Myra Ter Meulen, Juul Brockling, Lizet Kraal.

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