

JANE BILL

EBERHARDT THEATRE
OF DRAMATIC PUBLICATIONS

Keesha
and
Joanie
and
JANE

Characters, Dialogue and Conflict Including
Opinions, Memories and Strategic Planning Filled
With Hope, Disappointment and Inspiration

BY JUDITH ARCANA

BY ERIN FENNER
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Judith Arcana is chewing on a pastry while she mulls over why it is that U.S. lawmakers politicize women's bodies. But then a toddler one booth over in the small café pitches her voice into a giddy scream.

"Well good," Arcana laughs, "Let them exercise their lungs. They look like girls. They should know how to shout."

A veteran of the pro-choice movement, Arcana has experience in various approaches to ensure women's access to reproductive health care. Before the Roe v. Wade decision made abortion legal in the U.S., Arcana was part of the underground Chicago abortion service called Jane. Jane facilitated more than 11,000 safe abortion procedures — many of the volunteers were abortion providers and sex-health educators.

She's a writer, a teacher and an activist; and says what she wants in discussion, not posturing. She wants people from all backgrounds to come together and talk about women's health and the politics around that. That's why she put together her most recent work, "Keesha and Joanie and Jane," which delves into the conversations that women have about reproductive health and how each wants to explore that issue.

Street Roots sat down with Arcana to chat about her new zine and how conversation can be used to advance women's rights.

E.F.: What is the "Jane Bill"?

J.A.: Over the last several years I have been working on a collection of stories. The stories have two primary things, or topics: One is tattooing and the other is abortion; and the collisions and coming together of these.

One of those stories is called "Keesha and Joanie and Jane." The publisher of this zine created a parody of the playbill called "Jane Bill" and made that the whole form, which I actually think is brilliant and wonderful. This piece, I believe, is useful for us in our thinking now when times are terrible.

Really, there is no point in making nice about it. It's a ferociously bad time, historically speaking, in terms of reproductive justice, abortion access, women's reproductive health, all of those things. The Jane Bill, the women who are in that particular story, they are doing what we — those of us who care about this — are doing.

So I am very much wanting people to use this zine for consciousness raising, for action, as a spark, as a teaching tool. I want it performed.

E.F.: You talk about how you want people to use this. Why are you approaching activism through a literary standpoint?

J.A.: There has been a narrative built

around abortion issues. It's more than just two sides. And that's part of the narrative as well, is that it is more than just a two-sided issue.

One thing I really care about is the multiplicity of positions. I want a depth, and density, and complexity understood. I want it out there in the world and I want it understood. I want a lot. The narrative, as you put it, is narrow and simple-minded and does not serve any of us well. Not children, not women, not men, for that matter.

I want all of us to talk about the relative issues as seriously and personally as we can. Needless to say, we can't do that in every venue. There are people that we don't want to tell our deepest thoughts and feelings too. There are, however, usually, people to whom we are happy to tell the things that really matter to us. And also people with whom we feel good arguing, which is one of things happening in the story in the zine. I did that on purpose.

I want the arguments in their variety and complexity to encourage real people, in addition to my fictional people, to have those arguments, to have those conversations and discussions.

E.F.: You mentioned the issues and arguments. What is different about the issues then and now and talk about older and younger reproductive rights activists?

J.A.: Even within the generations, there are lots of differences. I came into thinking

about these things over 40 years ago, and in that time, in the United States, the atmosphere around both reproductive health, in general, women's reproductive health, specifically, and contraception and abortion was very, very, very different than what it is now.

It was a time of opening up rather than closing down. It was a time in which people were realizing, that to live fully, we — everyone, not just women — needed to be able to make conscious choices and decisions about what would happen in our lives; to whatever extent we could have any control.

Consequently, laws began falling away. The Roe v. Wade decision came down. Education changed, both in schools and out of schools. When I say education, I mean in the largest sense: people seeking information. People learning, on the ground, everywhere. Not just in school buildings, at any level.

I had been a high school teacher in the '60s and I was especially interested in the lives of children and young people. And I was maddened, really driven crazy, by the idea that women and girls were being encouraged to "make people" simply mindlessly or helplessly: that it was not for them to decide about what it meant to make a person. Talk about an enormous responsibility and a tremendous gift. And if you're not in a position to take on that responsibility, or to give that gift; you have it forced on you, and therefore on the child.

A Chicago police mug shot of Judith Arcana, on the cover of her new publication, "Keesha and Joanie and Jane."

Jane was the common name given to the Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, which was an underground women's health care service in Chicago in the late 60s and early 70s. The women's collective was formed to address the rising number of unsafe abortions being performed by people without any medical experience. It disbanded after the Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion.

That was a strong motivating pressure and concern and issue and passion for me.

I also cared about the lives of women, being one, and having my sisters and my colleagues and comrades, the other Janes, in all parts of my life. Women's lives were illuminated in those days. Even eradicated. The learning curve, it wasn't even a curve, it was an explosion. All this stuff we never knew was suddenly becoming available. This was before "Our Bodies Ourselves" published as a book. It was an eight-page newsprint pamphlet that we carried around in our backpacks like contraband.

And there were two little similar booklets from McGill University medical school in Canada. One called the Birth Control Handbook and one called the VD Handbook. We carried this stuff around. It was enormously exciting to have this information available to us. We examined our own bodies, we examined each others' bodies. We told other women and girls how to do this.

So there was the content around contraception and abortion and reproductive rights and reproductive health, and then there was the larger sensibility of coming to consciousness as female persons in this particular country at that particular time. My generation, I am 70 years old right now, came through that.

The current people and generation who are that age that I was then, are coming through a much harder and much more painful time. It's a time of closing, rather than opening. It's a time of application of the very pressure that we were relieving ourselves of: in our personal lives, very privately, and in the streets.

I talk to young women, and they are ferociously pissed off. They are working in their time, in their way, and there is some overlap.

I suspect that the media seizes on the differences between the generations, to make it look like there is a greater division between us than there is. So, I'm concerned about that and I am angry about that, but at the same time what really matters most is actually having the conversations with people who are different than me — certainly with women and girls who are younger than I am. I take great joy in that and I take great comfort in meeting younger women and girls who are on the case. And there are plenty of them. I want that on the record.

E.F.: Tell me about the work you did with Jane.

J.A.: In the late '60s and early '70s there was an organization in Chicago called the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. And it had a lot of work groups that did everything from teaching women how to take automobile engines apart and put them back together — just like the boys were allowed to do — to a group called the Liberation

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