

# Cait Cortelyou

(pronunciation: KATE kor-TELL-you)



Cait stars as the lead in feature film *ASK FOR JANE*, which is based on the true story of a 1960s underground abortion network. The film is distributed by levelFILM, and played in theaters around the world, including in Beijing, South Korea, and Italy; it is now available on VOD/Digital in America and Canada. Cait created and produced the film, and stars opposite Alison Wright, Cody Horn, Sarah Ramos, Chloe Levine, Sarah Steele, and Ben Rappaport.

In the television world, Cait recurred as the memorable Nurse Monk on Cinemax's *THE KNICK* opposite Clive Owen and directed by Steven Soderbergh. She co-starred as Delilah, a murder suspect, in the New York Fashion Week episode of *BULL* on CBS opposite Michael Weatherly.

Cait is a longstanding member of acclaimed New York theatre company The Shelter. She also created the role of Diana in *GALLOW GREEN*, the magical rooftop garden of the immersive smash hit *SLEEP NO MORE*.

She holds a bachelor's degree in theater with a minor in dance from Barnard College, where she studied acting under Juilliard professors. She is an alum of the National Theatre Institute at the Tony Award-winning Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, and has studied with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-Upon-Avon.

# marie claire

## 'Ask For Jane' Offers a Terrifying Look at a World Without 'Roe v. Wade'

The new film tells the story of a time when abortion was illegal—and deadly.



by Kayla Webley Adler

May 16, 2019



levelFLIM / Morgan McMullen

*Ask for Jane* begins with a series of tragic vignettes depicting our not so distant past: In the opening scene, a pregnant woman punches herself repeatedly in the stomach; when that doesn't work, she jumps off a building. Then, we see a pregnant teen drink rat poison, which kills her. Later, we meet a woman pressured to marry the man who raped and impregnated her (he's real sorry, her dad tells her), another who is denied birth control because she's unmarried, and, in perhaps the most infuriating scene of the film, a woman begs doctors to operate on a tumor in her abdomen—she may die if they don't, leaving her two children at home motherless—but the physicians are more concerned with the impact on the fetus she's carrying. The doctors take her husband

out in the hall to discuss the situation while the woman waits helplessly in a hospital bed—god forbid she have a say in the discussion that will determine whether she lives or dies.

“We’ve lost those stories,” says **Cait Cortelyou**, 31, the brainchild behind *Ask For Jane*, a feature film about an underground abortion service run by women in Chicago in the years before the procedure was legal, opening in theaters May 17. “The right wing has been so effective in showing us images of fetuses and all kinds of horrible imagery, but there’s devastating pictures on the other side, too, of women trying to [perform an abortion] themselves with umbrella spokes and knitting needles, only we’re not seeing them. I’m excited to bring the humanity back to this story because the whole conversation around abortion has gotten so distanced from the actual women it concerns.”



The film is a vivid and painful reminder of that history—a reality we are regressing toward more and more every day. (I’m looking at you, Alabama, Georgia, and the at least 14 other states that have proposed banning abortion at six weeks, before most women know they are pregnant.) It was a time when women had no control over their own bodies, the quality and determination of their lives held hostage by laws

and the men who crafted them. It's a fictionalized account of the real-life Jane Collective, originally known as the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, which was started in 1968 by a group of women who went by the moniker "Jane," as in Jane Doe.

At the time, as many as 5,000 women in the U.S. died each year from botched illegal abortions and the founders wanted to stop the deaths by providing a safe alternative. At first, the Janes accompanied women to see vetted providers who would perform abortions, often for an exorbitant fee; later, after they learned, despite all the controversy, that abortion is a minor, easily-completed medical procedure, the Janes began performing abortions themselves, dramatically reducing the cost to their patients, most of whom were poor (wealthier women could afford to take a bus to New York where it was legal to terminate pregnancies). Ultimately, in the five years they operated, the Jane Collective provided 11,000 abortions without a single casualty. "I think they're so brave," says **Cortelyou**, who stars in the film and also served as a producer. "They saw that women were dying and they said *if society isn't going to help them, I guess we'll just do it ourselves.*"



**Cortelyou** first heard of the group in May 2016 when she watched a 2014 documentary called, *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*. “I was shocked and horrified that I had never heard this story of the Jane Collective before,” says **Cortelyou**, who also volunteers as a patient escort at a Planned Parenthood clinic in NYC. “Before the [2016 presidential] election, I didn’t have any idea how relevant this was going to be, I just thought it was a huge piece of women’s history that people should know about.” She went home and wrote a treatment for the film that night; the next day, she brought on Rachel Carey, a friend from The Shelter theater company where they are both members, to write and direct. “Not to get too *woo-woo*, but it really felt like the universe was telling me it was my purpose to make this film,” **Cortelyou** says. “It felt so much bigger than me.”

I first met **Cortelyou** back in the summer of 2017 when I visited the film set in Brooklyn. Inside a historic mansion, I watched the cast perform a scene where the Janes debate whether to go public about their work at a protest. Publicizing their efforts could help more women in need find them, but it would also open them up to arrest. Two members decide to attend the protest, advertising their service on a large banner—after all, the police already knew the collective existed (in one scene, an officer admits the women have helped many of the wives and girlfriends of men on the force). But the protest, and a subsequent newspaper ad, did indeed attract the attention of law enforcement, who later arrested seven Janes



(called “the abortion seven” in newspaper headlines), along with a handful of their patients, charging them with up to 110 years in prison.

*Ask for Jane* is dedicated to the real women who made up the Chicago abortion service “in the hopes that women will never have to do this for each other again,” **Cortelyou** says. Women like [Judith Arcana](#), 76, a Jane who served as a consultant on the film and also makes a cameo. When Arcana was 27, she thought she was pregnant and didn’t want to be; she and her husband were separated and neither had money to raise a child. She asked around: Do you know anybody who has had an abortion? Do you know anybody who knows anybody? “And someone said call this number and ask for Jane,” Arcana says. “When I thought I needed an abortion, there they were...right there in the city where I lived.” It turned out she wasn’t pregnant but her conversations with the woman on the other end of the phone intrigued her and she accepted an invitation to attend a meeting. At the gathering, Arcana thought, *This is a really good thing these women are doing*. “And I joined right up,” she says. “They were smart, they were fun, they were funny, and they were doing this incredibly heavy duty thing. I lucked into goodness.”



Arcana hopes when people see the film they walk away with an understanding of how necessity can turn anyone into an activist. “This movie is about a group of young women taking action on a righteous cause,” she says. “I was not a political person even the year before, but the need was so great and so central in the lives of everyone, especially of course, women and girls.” The film is a reminder, Arcana says, of the past, but also what might need to be done in the present. “We did this. This could happen. This did happen. And we know that it’s happening now too,” she says.

**Cortelyou** says she wants people who don't consider themselves pro-choice to see the film because her "biggest wish" is for it to change minds. "*Ask for Jane* really brings home that [abortion] is about individuals and that's why it needs to be a choice. A lot of us don't know our history, so it's easy for some to say we should repeal *Roe v. Wade* because they don't have an understanding of the lives that will be lost if that happens," she says of the landmark decision that legalized abortion in 1973, and which many experts believe is in danger of being overturned. "I want people to leave with a deeper understanding of the myriad reasons why a woman might seek an abortion." She hopes older generations will see the film and "turn to their daughters and say, 'That's what it was like for me—that's what you don't understand,'" **Cortelyou** adds. "We can't become complacent; we have to keep fighting for what should be a fundamental human right."

I went to the New York City premiere of *Ask for Jane* on Tuesday night with a friend. As we exited the theater, we turned to each other and said, "That was terrifying." Then, we looked at our phones and learned that while we were watching the film, the Alabama State Legislature passed the strictest antiabortion legislation to date, outlawing the procedure in nearly all circumstances. Once enacted—Governor Kay Ivey signed the measure on Wednesday—abortion will be allowed in the state only if the life of the mother or fetus is at risk; the law makes no exception for rape or incest. Women will not be punished for getting an illegal abortion, but the doctors who perform them will face up to 99 years in prison.

The legislation is designed to prompt a Supreme Court challenge to *Roe v. Wade*, and its anti-choice framers are confident that, with two new conservative justices appointed by President Donald Trump, the decision will go their way. If that happens, abortion will automatically become illegal in as many as 18 states, with many others expected to quickly pass legislation outlawing the practice. And in that world, we're going to need a whole lot more Janes. Because as both history and research has shown, outlawing abortion doesn't make it go away—it just makes it deadly.

#### RELATED STORIES

Kayla Webley Adler is a Senior Features Editor at Marie Claire magazine, where she edits the monthly print news and politics section (called News Feed) and writes narrative features, often at the intersection of women's health and politics.



*“Ask for Jane” Producer and Star Cait Cortelyou Brings Women’s History to Life on Screen*

November 14, 2019 | film NYWIFT Member Spotlight NYWIFT Programs | Lisa Stahl

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NYWIFT member **Cait Cortelyou** has performed on stage or film since childhood but makes a breakthrough debut as producer (and star) of *Ask for Jane*. The movie follows the true story of seven determined women – known as the Jane Collective – who ran an underground abortion clinic in Chicago in the late 1960s, a few years before abortion was legalized. *Ask for Jane*, which opened in theaters in May and screened at numerous selective film festivals, has won several awards and will screen at the next installment of the NYWIFT Member Screening Series on Tuesday, November 19<sup>th</sup>. I asked **Cait** who and what inspired her, and what it takes to make a movie.



Cait Cortelyou

**Talk about your training and background.**

I've been acting since I was eight. Instead of going to camp, I performed in Young Shakespeare Players. I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin but came to New York to study theater at Barnard. My classes were amazing; several of my professors were also professors at Juilliard. After college, I studied with a brilliant acting coach who was an enormous influence on me, Anthony Abeson. Anthony trained with Stella Adler. I made my TV acting debut in Steven Soderbergh's miniseries *The Knick*.

**Do you have a philosophy of acting or were you trained in a specific school? Any role models?**

I'm a big fan of Judi Dench. I don't subscribe to one acting school but try to combine according to what makes sense for a specific role; sometimes a part

aligns well with your [personal] character. We all have the capacity to feel the full range of emotions and as an actor, I tap into that. The more present you are in the scene, the more your lines will flow through you.

### **What inspired the leap into producing?**

I was tired of auditioning and waiting to get roles so I decided to take control and make my own movie. The movie also came about because I've always been a strong advocate of women's rights. I went to a women's college and volunteer with Planned Parenthood. I escort women to clinics.

### **How did the idea for this movie come about? Take me through the process of producing a first film.**

The movie is based on a true story which I borrowed from a documentary I saw at NYWIFT: Mary Dore's [\*She's Beautiful When She's Angry\*](#). Once I came upon the idea, I did a lot of research.... Ultimately, we took some liberties but the bones of the story are true. For example, there were many more than seven Janes and the characters in the movie are only loosely based on the original Janes. A huge boon to the film was that someone from the original Jane group reached out to us – Judith Arcana. Judith became a consulting producer and does a cameo role in the film. She was in reality one of the women who were arrested.

I had no real training in producing but once I came up with the idea, I selected many of my key collaborators and raised money for the film. First, I made a pitch deck. I tried crowdfunding. I connected with [NYWIFT member] Caroline Hirsch, one of the producers. Selecting the right people to collaborate with is critical in making a successful movie. Once I had the concept, I wanted someone really skilled at screenwriting to write the screenplay, so I asked Rachel Carey, who's part of my theater company, The Shelter. I brought Rachel a two-page treatment. She loved it. She took the two-page treatment and expanded it well beyond what I could have imagined. Somehow the story of the Janes mushroomed and the abortion issue became a very current platform.

### **Do you think there's a tangible threat to abortion rights?**

It goes in waves. But you can't ever stop fighting.



Ask for Jane (2018, dir. Rachel Carey)

**What would you hope people learn from *Ask for Jane*?**

That one person can make a difference and inspire change. I also want people to see women helping one another when society won't.

**Have you experienced any obstacles as a woman in the industry?**

I sometimes find myself dismissed before people hear about my accomplishments because I present as younger than I am. But I'm going to say something a bit controversial. Right now is easier for women in this industry than it's ever been. There are opportunities available that wouldn't have been available in the past. A lot of the festivals I've been involved with are women's festivals. The pendulum is starting to swing in our direction

**What is next for you?**

I'm producing another feature, a dark comedy about four best friends helping to hide the body of an abusive husband – something like *Thelma and Louise*. My

friend Emily Cannon-Brown, who initially wrote this in play form, has been developing the script... We're in the process of raising funding; hopefully the film will be in pre-production in a month.

*Ask for Jane* screens at the NYWIFT Member Screening Series at Anthology Film Archives (32 Second Avenue) on Tuesday, November 19th, 2019 at 7 PM. The screening will be followed by a Q&A with Cait Cortelyou and other members of the creative team, and a reception. [Buy tickets.](#)

PUBLISHED BY  
**Lisa Stahl**



Lisa Stahl has followed her own unconventional path, working in and out of the industry, behind and in front of the camera (TV and film), and as a writer, producing e-learning courses on personal style online, doing development research and writing for a UN-based TV show, extensive investigative research in politics and international affairs for a prominent political strategist, and as a lifestyle editor for a chic digital magazine interviewing prominent fascinating people in the entertainment, fashion, health, wellness, and travel industries. She has also worked recently as a technical writer covering the latest anti-terrorism technologies and developments in data science and artificial intelligence.

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The biggest standouts in the cast are **Cait Cortelyou** and Cody Horn. Cortelyou plays the character that is the protagonist who is (rightfully) the most agreeable character in the film. She does a good job of offering a more moderate perspective on the events with a particular charm and approachability.

*Popaxiom*

**Cortelyou** is sweet and sensitive as Rose. She has the seemingly picture-perfect life with a boyfriend and a dream, but her work within the Collective ends up threatening all that. [...] **Cortelyou** and Horn are amazing. This must be seen!

*Citizen Dame*

The acting of this was incredible and realistic, including but not limited to the performances from **Cait Cortelyou**, Cody Horn, Chloë Levine, Sophie von Haselberg, Sarah Ramos, Sarah Steele, and Megan Channell.

*The Hot Pink Pen*



**Cait Cortelyou**, who commissioned the script from director Rachel Carey, produced the film, and plays the lead, convincingly shows how a University of Chicago student who had a supportive boyfriend and an obliging personality, slowly evolved into a “women’s libber” whose sense of responsibility to other women pushed her to risk everything to help them through what for some was a life-or-death crisis.

*Alliance of Women Film Journalists*



## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Q&A: **Cait Cortelyou** and Judith Arcana on Abortion in Media and Making *Ask for Jane*

6/19/2017 by **JACKLYNN BLANCHARD**

The upcoming film *Ask for Jane* tells the story of The Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, also known as "The Jane Collective" or "The Service." It operated in Chicago from 1969 until 1973. This group of courageous women ("Janes") risked their freedom in order to help others obtain abortions—several members would ultimately learn how to perform an abortion, and by the time the group disbanded it had assisted in over 11,000 procedures.

**Judith Arcana**, now a writer and activist, was a member of The Service for over two years. **Cait Cortelyou**—a Planned Parenthood advocate—is the creator and star of the film. They spoke with *Ms.* about the film, Judith's experiences prior to her work with the Janes, and how abortion has traditionally been portrayed in films and on TV.

### What inspired you to make *Ask for Jane*?

**Cait:** I learned about the Jane Collective last May when I saw a documentary [*She's Beautiful When She's Angry*] that Mary Dore had created, and I was struck instantly by the story. It was only, maybe, two minutes in the movie, but I latched onto it, and I went home that night and started doing all this research and [found] all the information that I could. I thought it would make a brilliant film. So, I approached my friend Rachel [Carey] the next day and asked if she would write the screenplay.

I just care both about telling the story to an even wider audience – because I think it's ridiculous that most people don't know about this huge piece of women's history – and also I'm excited about having a movie with tons of women in the film, because there is this huge lack of gender parity in the film industry, and I think that this can help to correct that as well.

I think it's funny that people are so threatened by what they deem to be progressive because, just like you said about learning from history and how things are different,

things are always going to be different. Things never stay the same. And if we don't learn from our history, how can we ever move forward as a country and as a people?

**Judith:** Really, and literally as individuals within "the people."

**Cait:** Absolutely!



**Judith:** If you don't know, you know, literally, ignorance is the great thing to be feared.

**Cait:** I've been so struck in doing research for this film by the things that women said in the late 60's and early 70's that are exactly the same as things that people are arguing now. And things that my friends have said on Facebook. And just that we're arguing the same points again.

**Judith:** And of course, I think I said something like this, about five minutes ago, but the women in the beginning of the 20th century, and certainly in the last, what, four to five maybe more decades of the 19th century—and that's just the United States! We're not even talking about the rest of the planet! So yeah, even the women my age and my generation, we weren't the originators, 'cause I guess in some sense there are no "originators."

I think that another thing that is really striking and sad is that so much of women's history is not as well known, and it isn't even committed to paper. I mean...

**Cait:** Yeah! It's not taught in schools.

Yeah, exactly. I think that this has happened, and continues to happen, but there isn't as much of a record of it as there are with causes that more men have been involved with, and I think that that's really unfortunate.

**Judith:** Certainly, not as much as their wars, that's for sure.

**Cait, how did you involve any of the original Janes? Obviously, you are in touch with Judith. Are you in touch with any of the other original Janes, and how were they involved with the project?**

**Cait:** Judith, you are only the member of the Janes that I am in contact with, and I am so thrilled to have you! Judith found *me!* I'd been trying to spread the net of this project to everybody who might be excited about it, because we were doing this grassroots campaign to fund the film, because the film industry tends to be very male-centric and politically cautious and this is a film that would take probably years to make if we went that route and we felt like it was important to tell now. So, somehow in the spreading of the word, and the Instagramming and the Facebooking and the emailing, Judith heard about it from a friend of hers who had heard about it from a friend of theirs and she emailed me. And I got the email from her as I was on the train to New Jersey to have a meeting with Rachel, who's the screenwriter and director of this project, so I got this email from Judith and I already recognized the name in my inbox because of all of my research. I'd read her writing, I knew who she was and I thought, "Is this a mailing list that I signed up for? Or is this someone emailing me an article by her?" And I open it and it's from Judith. I literally cried on the train and people around me are kind of looking up and were like, "Is she okay?" It made my whole week. It's still making my whole year. It's great! So that's how Judith came to be involved.

**Judith:** I just want to put a footnote on that very wonderful and sweet recitation. It is actually and completely accurate about me. I got a note from a pal of mine who's a long-time activist in reproductive justice work and who had heard from a friend of hers who, like Cait, is a longtime Planned Parenthood advocate. And so my friend said, "Do you know about this?" And I thought, "No." So then I checked them out, of course, because I get, and the other Janes do too, a bunch of stuff, and more and more, of course in the last four months it's like open season on Janes. But when I checked out Rachel and Cait, I thought, "Well these gals look like the real deal!" And I thought, "You know, it can't hurt to write her a little note." Because I have wanted movies about Jane for years and years and years. I write stories about Jane, well I have written, I'm done now, I'm doing other stuff, but I have a lot of stories about or rooted in Jane experience, also a book of poems that was rooted in Jane experience and I do a lot of talking and so on and so forth, performances of my work, all of that. But movies, damn it, I want movies!

**Cait:** Rachel, who is writing and directing *Ask for Jane*, is very interested in heist movies... so she was very excited about this piece because ultimately it's this empowering story about women helping each other and there's this cool spy element to it with everyone having to use the name "Jane" and having to operate in secrecy because of the nature of abortion being illegal.

**I do think that there is something to be said for the fact that our entertainment does affect our political views. If you look at gay marriage in regard to how *Will & Grace* became a very popular TV show, and it was in the living rooms of people who had never had very much experience with "out" gay people, and over time their opinions changed. And I feel that having something similar in regard to**

**abortion could have a really positive effect. That's part of what drew me to this film because it talks about the history, of course, but it also shows what is at stake, and I think that that is incredibly important.**

**Cait:** I would expand on what you just said. I think that it's more than just changes to political views, film and media, I think that it can change all kinds of views in just the collective consciousness. For instance, the representation of women, to see women who are doing things and taking action and having initiative and not being the victims or side tangential characters and not being relegated to, say, the eye candy who's half-clothed throughout the movie. This is a movie that has, gosh, 70 percent speaking, important female characters in it. I think that films like that help with the collective consciousness because girls can see them and think, "Oh yeah! I can do stuff. I can be powerful. I can make a difference." Instead of feeling like hapless victims as the media so often portrays them.

**Judith:** I just read an interview with Geena Davis this morning, and also, of course, there's the Bechdel Test, clearly this movie is going to pass the Bechdel test with an A+, gold star!

**Cait:** Flying colors!

**Judith:** Indeed, so this interview with Geena Davis... she was talking about exactly what you're talking about right now, in terms of the percentages.

**Cait:** I think the numbers are three men to every one woman speaking character in the top 200 films. And that this statistic hasn't changed since the 1940s!

**Judith.** Yup. People who speak of progress have to speak of slow action.



Photo Credit: Josh Goldsmith

## Hollywood tackles abortion as the fight gears up in Washington

Four films that look at the time before abortion was legalized are in the works.



By Luchina Fisher via [GMA](#)  
Jul 19, 2018 4:11 AM ET



When Cait Cortelyou first began developing her film, "Ask for Jane," about the pre-Roe v. Wade underground abortion network called the Jane Collective, it was before the 2016 election.

"I thought we would be living in a very different time," said Cortelyou, who said she expected [Hillary Clinton](#) to win.

"I had hoped this film would come out and it would be historical relic," she explained. Instead, "It's telling a story that's still so chillingly relevant."

In fact, the independently produced "Ask for Jane" is one of four upcoming films about the period before Roe v. Wade.



The films, which address the period leading up to the landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States, are particularly timely given that *Roe v. Wade* is once again at the center of a Supreme Court nomination fight.

Last month, Justice Anthony Kennedy announced he would retire, opening the door to the very real possibility that *Roe* could be overturned by the high court. Trump, who vowed that "judges will be pro-life," nominated Brett Kavanaugh, a federal district court judge, to take Kennedy's place.

Activists and politicians on both sides have already geared up for the fight ahead. Now, Hollywood has entered the fray.

"My first instinct is to say it's a good thing," Asha Dahya, founder and editor of *GirlTalkHQ*, told ABC News. "With safe and legal abortion access hanging in the balance, films have a way to challenge people's perspectives in a way activism cannot."

Three of the films are about the underground Jane network, which provided services to women before abortion was legal. The fourth film, which was first reported on by [The Hollywood Reporter](#), looks at the landmark case itself and stars some of Hollywood's most outspoken conservatives, including Stacey Dash and Oscar winner Jon Voight.

women have fought to have control of their own bodies," Melissa Silverstein, founder of Women and Hollywood, told ABC News.

But, she added, "You have to have a good story no matter what your film is about."



 (Michael William Bernstein) The arrested members of the Jane Collective are described in papers as "The Abortion Seven," in a scene from "Ask for Jane."

Cortelyou knew she had stumbled onto a good story when this self-described lifelong feminist and third-generation Planned Parenthood volunteer was hearing about the Jane Collective for the first time two years ago, while watching a documentary on the history of the feminist movement.

She wrote a treatment that same night, then connected with friend Rachel Carey, who co-wrote the script with her and directed the film. Caroline Hirsch, founder of the famed New York comedy club Carolines, where Robin Williams, Chris Rock, Billy Crystal and more got their start, came on board as a producer.

Judith Arcana, an original member of the Jane Collective and one of the "Abortion 7" who was arrested, reached out to Cortelyou when she heard about the film and signed on as a consultant. She also makes a cameo in the film.



"It really felt like that the universe was saying this is the film I have to make," said Cortelyou, who also stars in the film alongside Sarah Ramos ("Parenthood"), Cody Horn ("The Office") and Sarah Steele ("The Good Wife").

When filming began, it was the summer after the election, and suddenly, Cortelyou said, the film "felt like a revolutionary act -- like the importance had increased."

Then last fall, the trades reported that another independent feature about the collective was in the works. "Call Jane" will feature "Handmaid's Tale" star Elisabeth Moss as the title character who becomes pregnant unexpectedly and turns to the group of women for help. "My Week With Marilyn" director Simon Curtis is expected to helm the film.



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## ABORTION UNDER 45 HEARKENS BACK TO THE JANE ERA

by [Jacklynn Blanchard](#)

Published on January 21, 2019 at 9:00am



***This story was originally published on August 23, 2017.***

*“The fact is when abortion is illegal, it’s not medicine, it’s not healthcare; it’s felony homicide. That’s what we have to look forward to in the near future.” — Judith Arcana*

From day one of the Trump presidency, the [right to a safe and legal abortion](#) has been under attack. It no longer seems irrational to believe that there might soon come a time when we will need to learn from the resourcefulness of prior generations that did not have access to legal abortion. Before the passing of *Roe v. Wade*, it is estimated that as many as [1.2 million illegal abortions](#) were performed every year in the United States. These procedures were often extremely dangerous for the patient, and in addition to risking death or imprisonment to obtain an illegal abortion, it was not uncommon for women to be [sexually assaulted by their abortionist](#).

The Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, which operated in Chicago from 1969 until 1973 and was later nicknamed "Jane" after its code name, is a prime example of the brilliant ingenuity of the past. Over the course of its brief history, the [members of Jane performed over 11,000 illegal abortions](#). The women and girls who visited Jane were given information about the entire abortion process from start to finish and the agency to make their own decisions (sometimes the first adult decision of their lives). The Janes also treated them with kindness and empathy—occasionally holding patients' hands during the procedures—and some had even been patients themselves.

I reached out to Judith Arcana, a writer and activist who was a member of Jane for two years, and **Cait Cortelyou**, a Planned Parenthood advocate and the star/creator of the upcoming film about the Jane Collective, [Ask for Jane](#), to get their insights on the past and future of abortions.

### **What parallels do you see between the Jane era and now?**

**Cait Cortelyou:** When abortion isn't accessible and safe, it doesn't ever mean that fewer of them happen; it just means that more women are dying from them. Women have used knitting needles, coat hangers, umbrella ribs, bicycle spokes, and poison. These things are still happening. Women are still dying, and that's the most important reason to make [abortion] legal, safe, and regulated.

**Judith Arcana:** People believe that, "Hey, *Roe* hasn't been overturned. Everything is pretty much okay! There's just a few bad places." But, of course, that's not the case. The case is that more than 90 percent of the counties in this country do not have abortion healthcare available.

### **Are you confident that *Roe v. Wade* will be overturned?**

**Arcana:** I don't know that I would use the word confident. Confident is sort of too positive for what I think. But, I believe that that is going to happen, yes. This is one of the times I sure hope to be wrong. But also, it's very important to me to make sure that people understand that even though *Roe* is "on the books" the majority of women and girls in this country do not have access to good abortion health care, right now. And that has been true for years.

### **How does class continue to play a role in who has abortion access?**

**Cortelyou:** Money is a factor in terms of being able to travel to another state, having money for childcare, being able to afford to take time off of work to travel, because in some places you have to stay overnight. You'll go to a clinic, and they'll have to counsel you, give

you an assessment, and make sure that this is really what you want to do. Then you have to [wait] 24 hours, and the next day you can go and, hopefully, get the procedure done. Which means women having to take time off of work, women having to travel, women having to find childcare, and that's not something that everyone can afford to do.

I read one interview [about abortion accessibility in the '60s] with a woman who said, "We knew that something had to be going on because all us poor people here would just have families with so many kids. You know, five and six and seven children. But those rich people up on the hill there, they'd only have one or two. Something had to be going on, so that they could be choosing the size of their family. Why can't we do that?" And that's still true.

**What advice would you give those who live in areas where abortion is not easily accessible?**

**Arcana:** If a woman lives where abortion is not available or she doesn't have the money, she should contact her local/regional abortion fund. There's the [National Network of Abortion Funds](#), [which helps] women get money for the travel, the childcare, whatever they can't get together themselves. Women all over the globe now have access to appropriate and healthy information on the internet. The folks that did [Women on Waves](#), that wonderful documentary from the Netherlands, they've now become [Women on Web](#), and they have information about medical abortion.

But for people who are not in the early weeks, it's a far more complicated situation. They have to do some searching unfortunately. If you're asking me if I think once *Roe* is overturned there will be an underground, of course there will. There already is everywhere on the globe, especially where abortion laws are the most strict.

**Cortelyou:** If you have funds that you can contribute, I would give them to those services that Judith mentioned that can help women who are in need. That's a really actionable, direct thing that we can do to help other people.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*



[Caroline Hirsch and \*\*Cait Cortelyou\*\* Talk About Illegal Abortions in 'Ask for Jane'](#)

*Sway in the Morning, Sirius XM*

[#1532: Ask For Jane Activism, Acting On A Pledge](#)

*Women's Media Center 51% with Allison Dunne*

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[Whats the buzz Ny with \*\*Cait Cortelyou\*\* of ASK FOR JANE](#)

*Whats The Buzz NY, Blog Talk Radio*

[WMC Live #287: Judith Arcana, \*\*Cait Cortelyou\*\*, Caroline Hirsch](#)

*Women's Media Center Live with Robin Morgan*

[WMC Live #287: Judith Arcana, \*\*Cait Cortelyou\*\*, Caroline Hirsch](#)

*Women's Media Center Live with Robin Morgan*

[Signal Boost with Zerlina Maxwell and Jess McIntosh](#)

*ThinkProgress, Sirius XM*

# Myself Think

By Carol Sloan

## Athena And My Girl Crushes

Enter **Cait Cortelyou**. As she walked toward me, my internal scanner fired up like airport security and I got a good picture of her immediately: gorgeous, poised, long chestnut hair, bright red lipstick, a full length fur coat, red patent leather day heels and no bra beneath her blush coloured top. My scanner collated this data and spit out “New York privilege with a hint of entitlement”. Her smile was literally dazzling. She was here to promote her film “Ask For Jane” that she produced and stars in. She was looking for her filmmaker’s badge. Mmmmm hmmm. ‘Filmmaker’ is far too gritty a word or occupation for what I was looking at. Her look, I computed, was that of a New Yorker whose access to private money very likely helped make this film. Can you be young, beautiful and struggle in the arts like the rest of us? I doubt it but I thought, I’ll play along. It was late, I was hungry and apparently about to eat my words. I walked with **Cait** and her friends through the tunnels of Barnard to the Alumni dinner that night and held her coat while she gave her speech. I felt the heavy warmth and history of the fur on my arm slowly melt my armour like a candy in the sun. After her speech we chatted. And then we chatted some more. She tried to feed me a drink too but her motives were pure. The fur coat belonged to her grandmother **Rose**, whom her character is named after in the film and whose legacy of activism she is paying homage to with the story. Her lively demeanour sucked me in and I found myself laughing, agreeing, and urging her to move to Canada. How was I so wrong?

After studying under Julliard professors at Barnard and moving on to the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford GB, she is currently a member of the acclaimed New York theatre company The Shelter. She plays in award-winning indie films, recurring TV roles and has never shied away from challenging stage characters. Beneath the **IMDB** bio is a woman who has been an advocate for women’s rights her entire life, three generations deep, and a woman who, that night, was as interested in everyone else as she was herself and the image I thought she held

more dearly than substance. Her film, “Ask For Jane” is about a group of women who created an underground network in the ‘60’s helping thousands of women receive safe, illegal abortions in the years leading up to the landmark Roe vs Wade case. A heavy subject for an actress I thought was air. She spoke of family, her memories at Barnard, and the future she sees for herself and others. I didn’t see lipstick and heels much longer because I had become completely blinded by her vision.



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## ADVICE FOR FILMMAKERS MAKING YOUR FIRST FEATURE FILM

written by [Cait Cortelyou](#), Actor/Producer | April 25, 2018



*'Ask for Jane' is a fictionalized version of the true story of the Jane Collective, a group of young women in 1969 who helped provide over 11,000 safe and illegal abortions in the years before Roe v. Wade. The film was conceived by first-time producer Cait Cortelyou, an actor and activist with Planned Parenthood who also stars in the movie.*

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Hello! My name is [Cait Cortelyou](#), and I recently created, produced, and starred in the feature film *Ask for Jane*. As a first time filmmaker, I learned a LOT along the way (as I'm sure you can imagine!), and I wanted to share some of my newfound knowledge with other aspiring filmmakers out there. Read on for six tips that I'll definitely use on my next film; hopefully they'll also be helpful for you!

### First, the quick story of how I became a filmmaker as well as an actor:

I've often heard the phrase "if you can think of anything else you'd rather do, go do that" in conjunction with acting. I've been at this for a long time now, and have affirmed time and again that indeed there is nothing else I could ever see myself doing. And yet, exciting roles for women are scarce - the Madonna/whore dichotomy is alive and well, and frequently female characters are granted so little autonomy that they could easily be replaced by a fancy vase without changing much of a story's plot.

As actors, we are used to waiting for permission; waiting for an audition, a callback, a job offer. We're used to being passive. Well screw that! It is high time we make our own projects, depicting the kinds of women we want to portray: women who are brave and vulnerable and smart and complex, women who are more than objects for lust, women who can change the world.

In the spring of 2016 I went to see a screening of [She's Beautiful When She's Angry](#), hosted by [the New York Women in Film & Television](#). It was during the course of this documentary about feminism and women's liberation that I learned about the Jane Collective - an incredible group of women who helped provide over 11,000 safe and illegal abortions in the years preceding *Roe v. Wade*.

What?! I was a lifelong feminist, a graduate of Barnard College, the third generation of women in my family to volunteer with Planned Parenthood - how had I never heard of these astonishing women? That very night, I went home and wrote out my very first treatment for a feature film.

Soon after, I took my idea to a talented writer/director I knew through [The Shelter](#) to see if she might be willing to write the full screenplay. Thankfully she said yes, and together we embarked upon a mission to share this story with the world. Now, two years later, we've shot the film, befriended real-life "Jane" Judith Arcana, garnered the approval of [Gloria Steinem](#), and are just beginning to submit to festivals around the world.

This was my first time producing a movie, and I feel immense pride and honor to have created something that is not only socially relevant in the extreme, but that provides dozens of meaty roles for women in what one actress described as "the most Bechdel Test-passing project I've ever been a part of."

The following is just a handful of the many lessons I've learned along my way producing and starring in an independent feature film. I hope they provide you with some insight and inspiration as you set forth on your journey!



*Behind the scenes of the feature film "Ask for Jane"*

### 1. Tell the story that YOU are passionate about telling.

Don't spend all your energy catering to what you think other people want to see and watering down your vision – if you work with passion, your audience will find you. And, when you're exhausted and worn down, your passion is what will pull you through to keep on keeping on.

### 2. Prepare your fundraising materials.

Once our script was in great shape, we called in a whole bunch of favors and filmed a gorgeous little teaser trailer for zero dollars. I also created a pitch deck with stills from the trailer, a synopsis of the film, letters from me and from the writer/director, bios of a few actors attached, investor incentives, and more. This meant that when I was going into meetings, I had a visual representation of what I was asking money for.



### 3. Don't listen to the naysayers, and take every meeting.

People are frightened of success, and when they see you reaching for your dream, they'll try to tell you how impossible it is. I can't tell you how many meetings I had when I was just starting to get *Ask for Jane* off the ground where people told me to think smaller, to start with a short film instead, to maybe just do a play. I took all "advice" with a grain of salt, and never let the pessimists dampen

my enthusiasm and my conviction that this story needed to be told, and that I was the one to tell it. As it turned out, one of those meetings ended up being with our incredible financier and producer [Caroline Hirsch!](#)

### 4. Work with people you like.

Not to be hyperbolic, but making a movie is hands down the hardest thing I've ever done. At some point in your shoot, everything that could possibly go wrong will, and everybody will be tired and hungry and sweaty and cranky... imagine how much easier it will be to get through that if you actually like the people you're surrounded with. Hire competent and kind people with a good attitude, who will work well even under pressure.

### 5. Surround yourself with people who know more than you.

Don't let your ego get in the way, hire a crew and cast that's smart AF and then *listen to them!* Trust their advice, and trust your own instincts (after all, you hired them). When I was just starting out on *Ask for Jane*, I was lucky enough to connect with [Josh Folan](#), who I hired as my co-producer. This dude has literally written the book on indie filmmaking on a budget, and was a huge help in hiring great crew heads who then hired great crews.

**6. Take time to appreciate the incredible thing you're doing.**

How many people just talk about an idea, but never actually follow through on it? And here you are **MAKING IT HAPPEN**. After our first day of shooting last summer, I remember sitting on the porch of our beautiful location in Brooklyn and looking up at the stars and just feeling awash in gratitude. I'll never forget that moment, and I want you to have that moment too.

Wishing you love and luck – **YOU CAN DO THIS!**



Alison Wright and **Cait Cortelyou** in *Ask for Jane*

# NYWIFT || New York Women in Film & Television

While NYWIFT is famous for its panels, workshops, funding for filmmakers, advocacy for equality and star-studded galas like Muse and Designing Women, perhaps its best-kept secret is its member-driven affinity groups. Members with shared interests can connect through NYWIFT and organize their own informal meetings to network, support and learn from one another. Or, as the members of the New Works Lab will tell you...create fantastic new projects. Open to writers, directors and actors, The New Works Lab, created and produced by member Denise Rogers, gives the writers positive critiques for their screenplays or plays. Scenes are staged by directors and read by actors during monthly workshop meetings.

In September, the Lab presented selections from two of this year's stand-out pieces at a showcase for industry professionals, hosted by NYWIFT partner Adorama at the Adorama Live Theatre at CBS Radio.

Lab producer **Denise Rogers** sat down with creators of the two projects, **Cait Cortelyou** and **Sarah Elisabeth Brown**, to talk all things New Works Lab.



(From Left:) Denise Rogers, Cait Cortelyou and Sarah Elisabeth Brown

**CC:** So what made you start the NYWIFT New Works Lab, Denise?

**DR:** My main reason for doing this is helping women move forward with their projects. If it's something that I can be a part of, great, but if I can help you get from point A to point Z—meaning getting it produced or getting an agent or whatever it entails—I would love that! I think it's about a collaborative effort.

**SEB:** I think sometimes for women it's hard to find those spaces and those resources. It's just so wonderful when women can support women.

**CC:** That's why I joined NYWIFT, because I was excited about women helping other women, and having more females in this industry that's been largely male-driven for a really long time.

**SEB:** [to Cait] I'm interested to hear the story of the development of *Ask For Jane*, because that was really using the NYWIFT resources.

Based on real events, *Ask For Jane* tells the story of a group of young college women who developed an underground abortion network that helped over 10,000 women get illegal abortions in Chicago between 1968 and 1973.

**CC:** Yeah! *Ask For Jane* came about because I went to a NYWIFT screening of [She's Beautiful When She's Angry](#) [organized by NYWIFT board member [Margarita Cortes](#)]. It was a whole documentary about feminism and women's lib, and there was maybe a 2-minute segment where they talked about this group called the [Jane Collective](#), and I latched onto it. I went home and couldn't stop thinking about it, and I started doing a lot of research online. I'm primarily an actor, but I wrote out a whole treatment that night. I approached Rachel Carey who I know from [The Shelter](#) (which is a theatre company we're both part of); she's a brilliant writer, and I asked her if she would write the script... and she was super excited! And she wrote the whole thing, and now she's a NYWIFT member—

**DR:** Yay!

**CC:** And we brought it to the New Works Lab. It was the last day that we could be considered for the showcase, and Denise chose it on the spot, which was so exciting. It's an immense story.

**SEB:** We're all very excited about it. It just was something that you instantly felt like, yes, we have to make this.

**CC:** Thank you so much! So we were gearing up for the showcase, and I went on the NYWIFT member directory online, and I looked at all the producers and

people who have experience fundraising and who might want to be involved with the project. The most exciting woman that I found was Caren Spruch, who's the head of Arts & Entertainment for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, produces films about women's reproductive health and rights, and sits on the NYWIFT Advisory Board. So she came, we chatted at the reception, and then we met for coffee a little later, and we are going to meet again in November. She's a lovely woman and I'm so excited to have met her through this, because she's fantastic. I'm an activist with Planned Parenthood and have been for a while, so it was really cool to meet this higher-up at Planned Parenthood.

**DR:** That is so cool! I was wondering what had happened with your script. So you're meeting with her again in November.

**CC:** We are. And the reason for that is: Rachel and I reworked the screenplay into this beautiful 10-episode mini-series, and we're going to the [New York Television Festival](#) later this month as a finalist with [Participant Media](#)!



The cast of *Ask for Jane* at the New Works Lab showcase at the Adorama Live Theater at CBS Radio in September (photo by Katie Chambers)

**DR:** Oh my God!

**SEB:** That's awesome!

**CC:** Thank you so much!

**SEB:** Well, you are moving very quickly.

**DR:** [to Sarah] So what's going on with your piece, *Pizza Slut*?

*Pizza Slut:* When a pizza junkie falls in love with a raw food vegan she defies her traditional "chubby best friend" role and discovers just how far she's willing to go for love.

**SEB:** I think for me, the lab was really valuable to go through and actually to have a rehearsal process and a performance date. It clarified the writing for me. You know, Cait is coming at this as a producer; for me, I was focused on developing the writing.

**CC:** Who's a producer?

**SEB:** You.

**CJ:** Oh, me!

**DR:** [laughs]

**SEB:** I mean you're an actor, but you're pushing the project. The main thing for me about the lab was developing a sense of style and voice with the work. I think it became clear what the tone of the piece is. I was trying to write a romantic comedy, but it's pretty clear now that it's a comedy that's romantic, like *Bridesmaids* or *Trainwreck* –it's still the romantic comedy formula, but there's this overblown tone to it that's very broadly comedic that I want to maintain.

**CC:** I totally see that.

**SEB:** And it also became clear that it could be a play too, that's another discovery that we had. I'm going to be having a full reading on November 13<sup>th</sup> at [Workshop Theater](#), which is another company that I'm a part of that develops new plays. It'll be a reading with the same cast, and a talk back.

**CC:** They were such a good cast.

**SEB:** They were hilarious. They were so fun. [The] lab itself was very, very encouraging and fun. I feel like as an artist you need to go where you're loved. Instead of trying to bang on the door all the time to things that you don't have access to, go to places where you can access relationships that are nurturing. I mean, this is a life. This is not just about "making it." We want to build a

community; let opportunities come naturally out of that, rather than trying to knock on some unattainable door all the time.

**DR:** I just want to enjoy the journey, and bring other people along to enjoy it with me.

**SEB:** Well you're doing a good job of that!

**CC:** Agreed.

**SEB:** You're creating a wonderful space for that.

**DR:** I just want this to be a really loving and creative area for women.

**CC:** I feel like as artists, one of the most important things in success is having a community. You need to find your tribe and people that you can rely on, who are all working together to create something beautiful, and supporting each other. And I don't think you can succeed without that.

**SEB:** We already have this safe environment... that's the hard thing to find. Once you have safety, then you can play.

*Additional reporting by [Katie Chambers](#).*

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# 'Ask for Jane' Film Interview

by [LIA F.](#) 15 days ago in [INTERVIEW](#)

With lead actress/producer Cait Cortelyou



*Ask for Jane* is based on the true story of a 1960s underground abortion network in Chicago—Jane Collective—which originally was named Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, to help women obtain safe abortions during a time when it's illegal in most of the United States.

46 years after **Roe vs Wade**, a decision of the US Supreme Court that protects a pregnant woman's liberty to choose whether or not to have an abortion, remains a controversial topic in the US.

The movie comes in no better timing as conservatives of several states (such as

Alabama, Ohio, and Georgia) are reversing history with possibly overturning the landmark Roe vs Wade decision. These States recently passed a law that bans abortion in almost all cases, at six weeks, before most women know they are pregnant. This new law does not include exceptions for cases of rape and incest.

*Ask for Jane* focuses on the women that go through the process, and it's frightening reality when they perform the abortion themselves. At that time, as many as 5,000 women in the US died each year, from mishandled illegal abortions, and the Jane collective wanted to stop the deaths by providing a safe alternative.

We spoke with the lead actress and author **Cait Cortelyou**, who is also an advocate for Planned Parenthood, about the real story behind the film, the challenges and reactions so far, advice for aspiring female filmmakers, and more.

**Interviewer: You brought back a chilling reality that's very current. What was the main message you wanted to bring across?**

Cait Cortelyou: It's funny, because it wasn't current when I first started work on this film in the spring of 2016. When I learned about the Jane Collective, I was simply struck with how women's history is so frequently erased; I was angry that I'd never learned about the **Janes** in school (even though I went to an all-women's college!), and I just wanted to make a narrative movie to tell their story. My simple goal was for women and girls today to remember the bravery of the Janes, and to be inspired by what we are capable of when we work together.

After the election, the film took on an urgent and frightening relevance, and making the movie became more about reminding people of the realities someone faces when confronted with an unwanted pregnancy. We wanted to humanize the individuals who seek an abortion, to share their stories. I also think it's encouraging to be reminded that women have done this for each other before, and if necessary, we can do so again.

**Indeed. Let's talk about the main challenges of the film.**

Honestly, one of the main challenges has been convincing people to take a chance on the subject matter, from film critics to investors to distributors. Even when the individuals I speak with are ardently pro-choice themselves, they worry about taking a public stand, and upsetting members of their client base who may have different

views. On the one hand I understand that concern, but I also keep thinking of my

favorite line from *Hamilton*: "If you stand for nothing, what will you fall for?"

### **How was it to work in an almost all female cast and crew?**

We were actually a pretty even mix of men and women on set, which was refreshing in and of itself! I've been on plenty of sets before as an actor where I looked around and realized I was the **ONLY** woman present. I will say that most of the departments heads on *Ask for Jane* were female-identifying: producers, writer/director, cinematographer, colorist, script supervisor, production designer, key makeup artist, key hair stylist, and costume designer. But I'm really not interested in feminism that excludes men, I think we all need to work together to achieve equality.

### **What has the reaction of the film been so far?**

Pretty tremendous! This was just a small indie film, but we've been written up in *Marie Claire*, *Deadline Hollywood*, *Variety*, *ABC News*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Jezebel*, *Bitch*, and much more. We've moved on from the festival circuit and are now playing in select cities all over the country, and expect to be released on VOD by the end of the year. The audience talkbacks we've done have also been incredibly moving: at almost every single one, someone either shares their own abortion story in the audience, or they come up afterwards to talk with me about it. Our society has stigmatized abortion so severely that it's easy to forget the statistic: one in four women will have an abortion in their lifetime. If you don't think you know someone who has, they probably just haven't told you. I applaud actor Busy Philipps who has been working to remove this stigma with her hashtag #YouKnowMe, and I'm proud to have made a film that holds space for these stories to be shared.

### **Any advice to aspiring women filmmakers?**

My favorite advice is just to find your people, those collaborators you vibe with and respect—for instance, my artistic home for the past four years has been the Shelter theater company, which is where I met *Ask for Jane* writer/director Rachel Carey, as well as the writer of my next feature that's currently in development. My other piece of advice is to really believe in yourself and the story you have to tell—there will always be naysayers, but every "no" you hear means you're that much closer to finding that "yes."

*The film is currently playing in selected theaters. To find out more, click [here](#)*