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Afternoon Delight: A Conversation with Jill Soloway

Sophia Stein · Thursday, September 12th, 2013

Afternoon Delight is the feature directorial debut from seasoned television writer and three-time Emmy nominee, Jill Soloway. Soloway was awarded the US Dramatic Directing prize for her film at Sundance this year. Kathryn Hahn plays Rachel, a stay-at-home mom intent on spicing up her marriage with yuppie husband Jeff (Josh Radnor). To this end, Rachel adopts an unconventional strategy; she invites stripper McKenna (Juno Temple) to move into their Silverlake guesthouse, as their live-in nanny. “*Afternoon Delight* is an exploration of marriage and relationship in our highly connected, disconnected era,” Soloway explains.

Soloway traces her comedy roots to improvisation at the Annoyance Theatre in Chicago, where she co-authored plays with her sister, Faith Soloway (including *The Real Live Brady Bunch* and the *Miss Vagina Pageant*), and she collaborated with actress Jane Lynch (who plays Dr. Lenore in *Afternoon Delight*). It was the short story Soloway authored about a woman who lost her ability to have an orgasm, *Courtney Cox’s Asshole*, that scored Soloway a break as a television writer on Alan Ball’s *Six Feet Under*.

The story of *Afternoon Delight* evolved from “my own personal obsession with sex workers that has spanned two decades,” Soloway explains, and “the notion of how hard it is to keep having great sex in a long-term relationship.” Soloway developed the screenplay for *Afternoon Delight* with the support of Radar Labs, on an artist retreat that they sponsored in Mexico in 2012.

I recently had an opportunity to speak with Soloway about *Afternoon Delight* — sex-workers, Sundance, and *Six Feet Under* — in the lobby of the Hotel Rex, when her film screened at the San Francisco International Jewish Film Festival.

Sophia Stein: You are a very accomplished television writer. So what prompted the transition from writing to directing?

Jill Soloway: I felt that I had reached a ceiling. A lot of my friends were like, “What’s your problem, you’ve got a great career in television!” But I had never had my own show. I was always just to the right of the show runner — On *Six Feet Under*, *The United States of Tara*, and *How To Make It In America*. I was a co-executive producer, with a lot of responsibility and vision — but it was never my particular show. I think it was after seeing *Girls*, how Lena Dunham’s directorial vision made it possible for HBO to green light that show, that I knew that I wanted to pull-off something similar. As a Jewish woman, who had been wishing that there was a show with a nontraditional anti-heroine, Dunham inspired me.

S2: What was the seed for this story?

JS: I was in Vegas with some friends, and it’s kind-of a hipster-thing, to go to a strip club with a coed group. Girls get lap dances these days. Strip clubs are no longer these secretive male-only spaces. While I was getting my lap dance, I was struck by the notion that this girl liked me...and

that maybe she needed me, and I needed to help her! Later I realized, Oh...that's part of the experience. Part of what a great sex-worker is able to do, is to make an emotional connection. I thought that it would be comedic if "a mom" got herself into that situation.

S2: I read that your obsession with sex workers has spanned two decades?

JS: Coming out of college and women's studies, Susie Bright, Annie Sprinkle, and Carol Queen were these feminist performance artists, filmmakers, writers, who felt to me, like the female equivalent of war journalists. They had been to the front lines of the female experience. I loved what they were able to bring back from being in a room with a John or on-stage at a Peep Show. I have always found their memoirs and art compelling in a way that I didn't understand. In San Francisco, I am collaborating with Michelle Tea and Radar Labs, which is a network of women artists who explore issues of gender, sex-work, and art-making. Through Michelle Tea, I met sex-worker and writer Antonia Crane, and porn star Lorelei Lee. I rolled them together to create my character McKenna. With these women (ex-porn star Jenny Ketcham, for one), I often feel, "Oh, my God, you're the cutest thing in the world. I love you! You just feel like a sister to me!!" McKenna was that idea concretized into the most adorable, pocket-sized, little blond Barbie-doll of a sex-worker — not a Barbie doll, actually more like a cute Bratz doll.

S2: In the movie, I was touched by the scene where McKenna is preparing to babysit for the girls, and then, of course, that doesn't come to pass –

JS: Getting together her little princess toys and jewelry. The film is about the confrontation between the two halves that most women struggle to integrate — Madonna-whore and child-woman. McKenna and Rachel are both are crossing back and forth that divide. For McKenna, that moment in the story represents her journey from child to woman, from daughter to exile. McKenna is welcome and safe in the house, as long as she behaves a certain way — which I think, is common for a lot of children. When McKenna is going to the store to buy the toys for the little girl, she is embodying "the beautiful princess" persona, which is how she identifies. Ultimately, McKenna the whore is cast out. This movie is about the divided feminine in our culture, as embodied through these women's personal journeys.

S2: You have said that your film is about the Peter Pan generation — resisting adulthood battling too many choices, tapping their iPhones instead of tuning into what matters. How do you see that manifest in your life and relations?

JS: It is everywhere. If adulthood is about being able to recognize how to make a life that matters, or being able to find meaning in the appreciation of something as simple as a scenic vista...I think it is getting harder, and harder, and harder. Given how you can have your needs met with your iPhone or computer, connecting with people is almost impossible. We are so lucky that we get to do this interview right now. Face to face conversation where people talk about what matters is so rare. Rachel and Jeff represent a Peter-Pan aesthetic. Their house is decorated with primary colors. They don't think of themselves as sophisticated. Their brand is about "whimsy." There is this Brooklyn-Silverlake-Noe Valley, late thirties, stroller-derby crowd — where the living room and the kids room are all the same, and play is something that is considered important for adults. I think that there is a real confluence of adulthood and childhood in a certain generation of people who don't want to grow up. In some ways, the movie is "a coming of middle-age story."



S2: What was your inspiration for therapist Dr. Lenore (Jane Lynch)?

JS: I have a great therapist in LA, Ellen Silverstein. She gave us her chair. She gave us her footstool. I stole some of her lines — that moment when Lenore says, "I am trying to be a clear

mirror — baccarat crystal” — I lifted that line straight out of my therapist’s mouth. She does not eat quinoa in sessions, but she does occasionally share from her personal life. But she is always careful to check boundaries by first asking, “May I share something?” before she proceeds. So my inspiration was my real therapist. She is not a screw-up — but I needed the character to be comedic, and Jane Lynch is so funny!

S2: How did you approach casting the film?

JS: I have known Jane for twenty-five years. In Chicago, we were in the Annoyance theatre company together. So, that was easy. She was an easy phone call. I asked her if she wanted to be in it, and she said, “Yes.” “But you haven’t even read the script,” I said. “I’ll say ‘yes’ to anything that you do,” she assented. I think that really helped the other actors to come aboard. We went through the traditional casting process with Bright/Daniels Casting. It was a constantly shifting mosaic — right up until the very last minute.

S2: What was the most challenging aspect of directing this film?

JS: Honestly, when I was directing the film, it was one of the easiest things I have ever done in my life. I like to say that regular life, where you don’t get to tell people where to stand, what to say, and how to say it — that’s challenging! But directing, was actually, incredibly relieving. I had written the script. I was making my vision come true. The challenging thing was going back to my house, where the people weren’t actors and they didn’t have scripts that I had written. (Laughs.)

S2: About directing, you’ve commented that “It was like being in a La-Z-Boy, in a rocket — in a dream that I wrote — and nothing at all like being in a director’s chair.”

JS: I was bringing the “Yes, and...” quality of improv theatre to it. I was bringing the writer’s room camaraderie of “Groupthink” — together, we are greater than the sum of our parts — to it. By holding hands and believing in one another, the answer will generate from the center. Instead of “I’m the leader; I’m the boss; and this is how it is going to go” — I never took that role. I’m a community organizer in LA, so I’m always creating spaces for people to come together. I took this directing workshop from Joan Sheckel, who is a process guru and teaches this way of directing from the feminine — which means showing up and being present to feel what’s happening. As filmmakers, we are showing up to capture feelings moving across the bodies of the actors. The only way to know if we are capturing it, is to feel it. To be present. I set up a space for the actors to play in. Mostly, I felt like I was just watching. It was awesome.

S2: You won the US Directing Award at Sundance. How did that springboard the life of this film for you?

JS: I tell people that being at Sundance was like being in a dryer with a shoe — it’s the high of opening night, and the next morning some guy from the trades saying we sucked! There was one male reviewer in particular who just ripped both me and Kathryn to shreds the morning after opening night. It was horrible. I had really believed that we had made something special, and to read that review was so disheartening. Winning the directing award made me realize that the work was important. Filmmaker Ed Burns, presented me with the award. “Thank you so much for this. You have no idea how sad I’ve been after getting some shitty reviews,” I confided to him. “You know, this is it!” he replied. “Grow up! This is part of being an artist. The better the work is, the more you are going to divide people — you’ll have people who passionately love your film and people who aren’t just indifferent, but actually hate it!”

S2: What was it like working on *Six Feet Under*, which remains a fan favorite for so many people?

JS: It felt like graduate school. Alan Ball was an amazing boss, with a feminine style of leadership. The characters lived in the center of the writer's room, and we would all show up and listen together to what the characters wanted and transcribe that. Besides learning that collaborative technique from him, he had us do everything. We would edit a cut of the episode; we would bring songs to the editor; we did our own rewrites. A lot of TV writers get the script taken away from them, but we were responsible for staying connected in an emotional way to every scene. So I really learned everything I know about content-making in those years.



S2: I read that HBO optioned your pilot, *Jewess Jones*, a female superhero –

JS: It was this idea that my sister and I had about ten years ago. Jewess Jones was constantly dieting and flat-ironing her hair, but when super-hero Jewess Jones felt the call, her hair would start to frizz. She was able to guide a girl in a different direction if the young woman was about to be in an unsafe situation with a fraternity boy. She also always knew exactly how much food to order in a restaurant. If she overheard a group of people who weren't ordering enough, Jewess Jones would butt in to the rescue, "There are ten of you, I think you should get an extra couple of orders of eggrolls."

S2: Is stand-up comedy a part of your repertoire?

JS: I do storytelling. I really do enjoy an audience, but I don't have a huge need to perform. There are so many great performers out there, people who are really comfortable on stage. I would have to get over a whole bunch of hurdles — for example, the fact that I hate the way I look...

S2: As a director, what is next?

JS: I have written a pilot called *Chance Parent*, that Amazon Studios is shooting. Like Netflix, Amazon is getting into producing original content. It's a dramedy about a family living in Los Angeles, understanding themselves through a legacy of secrets, boundaries, flesh, and food.

S2: You have lamented that you would love for there to be more feminists in the world, particularly funny ones. Where do you think feminism is on the burner at the moment?

JS: I sense sort-of an Arab Spring for feminism on the horizon. A lot of the conversations that completely agitated me ten years ago are now getting a national audience. Conversations about consent, rape, abortion, porn, and sex-workers are being had, and seeming important to young women again. Maybe it is because the internet allows women to connect with each other. In her book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg predicts that women will prevail as leaders in the next century "because success is not a ladder, it's a jungle gym." I believe that the internet's ability to connect people across the world around ideas, instead of waiting for things to trickle down through corporations, is beginning to empower, inspire, and light up women everywhere. I think "feminism," being this dirty word, and young women feeling like they didn't want to identify with angry women was born out of competition. The feeling that there is not room for everybody to succeed. The internet makes it so that there is enough room for everybody. You don't have to impress the president of Time Warner to have a show now. You can just put one up on YouTube, and other people can hear you and love you. You can find your own audience. I believe that accessibility which emanates in all directions, will erode stratification around categorical divisions, such as, feminist/not-a-feminist, mother-daughter/sex-worker.

"Afternoon Delight" is currently in theatres. [Details here.](#)



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