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Staging a Defense of Reproductive Rights

As anti-choice activists try using the pandemic to stop abortions, this nonprofit theater group pushes back.

by Eleanor J. Bader

May 19, 2020



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Abortion is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term “COVID-19”—that is, unless you’re an anti-abortion activist. Almost immediately after states shuttered nonessential businesses, anti-choice legislators and organizers seized the moment. In short order, they declared abortion “elective” and raced to close clinics and [limit access](#) to reproductive health care.

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abortion and birth control, high maternal mortality rates, and the ways COVID-19 impacts pregnant people are intertwined.”

And they've had some success. In Arkansas, pregnant people must show proof that they've tested negative for COVID-19 before having an abortion. What's more, Rewire.News [reports](#) that in a number of other states, access to the procedure has been curtailed. In Indiana, for example, elective or “non-urgent” surgeries must be postponed “unless doing so would cause harm to the patient as *determined by a health care provider* [emphasis added].” Similarly, in Utah it is up to a physician to decide if an abortion is medically warranted.

But it's not just abortion that is under attack. Advocates for reproductive justice—a wide array of intersecting issues that [address](#) what's needed to make having children as much of a choice as not having them—are spotlighting the many ways that the pandemic has altered the terrain for families. These range from a spike in domestic violence and child abuse, to increased unemployment, to a lack of access to health care, nutritious food, clean water, childcare, and safe affordable housing.

All of this has prompted [Repro Freedom Arts](#) (RFA), a once-live theatrical cabaret to launch an interactive Zoom production that brings reproductive justice concerns to virtual audiences throughout the world.

Founded by New York City-based activist, writer, and lawyer Cynthia Cooper, RFA is an outgrowth of [Words of Choice](#), an eighteen-year-old program she created to bridge the gap between the personal and the political. It uses theater to kick start conversations with the explicit goal of advancing both reproductive freedom and human rights, interspersing poems, personal narratives, and monologues.

words of choice

smart.

funny.

...endangered.

DYNAMIC PRO-CHOICE THEATER

Repro Freedom Arts

"We know poll-wise and life-wise that a lot of people care very deeply about reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy," Cooper begins, "but they are living their lives. These are the folks who care about choice and human rights and would do more to protect these rights if they had additional time or better information."

Before each performance, RFA members contact people who have had to put their activism on hold; members of reproductive justice organizations are contacted as well. "Activists need support, too," Cooper says. "They need to hear from others who are as passionate about these matters as they are."

Cooper, who has been involved in promoting reproductive justice since the late 1970s, understands the limits of traditional activism and stresses that theater can be a powerful tool for education.

"Since the pandemic began, we've become a one-news-topic nation," she says. "Our performances remind people that reproductive justice is still important. We remind them that attacks on access to abortion and birth control, high maternal mortality rates, and the ways COVID-19 impacts pregnant people are intertwined. We stress that gay, lesbian, and transgender rights are pinned to the right to privacy, and if the right to abortion privacy is lost, LGBTQ rights may also be lost."

The goal, she continues, is for audiences—whether live or remote—to see the big picture and make connections between the issues that fall under reproductive justice. "We want people on our side to connect abortion to a value system that respects bodily autonomy," she explains.

This means reiterating that, even during a pandemic, "our reproductive rights and health needs have not disappeared and will remain important forever. We don't endorse candidates or do electoral work, but we can remind audiences that the next President will appoint people to the Supreme Court. We also remind them that this is a long-term fight," Cooper says.

As for the constantly evolving readings that are included in RFA productions, Cooper says that the criteria are simple: "We look for beautiful writing."

The troupe has staged performances of Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun's eloquent opinion in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision alongside the late June Jordan's poem, "Incantations": "I said I loved you and I wanted affirmative/action and reaction/I said I loved you and I wanted music/Out the windows/I said I loved you and I wanted/Nobody thirst and nobody/Nobody cold/I said I loved you and I wanted I wanted/Justice under my nose."

Dr. Grisel Acosta, an associate professor of English at Bronx Community College, has been part of RFA for the past several years. She performs a monologue she wrote about the negligent gynecological care her mother received "before, during, and after my birth." Race and gender are front-and-center in Acosta's short, powerful piece.

Short Plays

on Reproductive Freedom



34 Short Plays and Performance Pieces
from the Reproductive Freedom Festival
and Words of Choice

EDITED by CINDY COOPER
with **STACEY LINNARTZ**

Repro Freedom Arts

Short plays on reproductive freedom performed during one of Repro Freedom Arts' virtual live events

"Too often women are taught to think of our lives as something to be ashamed of," she wrote in an email. This is particularly true when it comes to their bodies: Often women and girls are shamed for talking about menstruation, sexual expression, pelvic exams, childbirth, or menopause. Acosta says her oration counters the ways women are silenced, told their concerns are crazy, a nuisance, or irrelevant. "RFA makes sure we share our reality in an empowering way . . . and reminds us that all women deserve to have unencumbered access to reproductive rights and care," she wrote.

Brooklyn-based Cait Cortelyou got involved in RFA because she believes that "stories are the best way for people to digest emotional truths." Before becoming part of the ensemble, the professional actor was a volunteer escort at Planned Parenthood and sees RFA "as a natural conflation of my work as an artist and as an activist." Her piece, the humorous *Placenta Playground*, was written by Melissa Bell and describes the author's post-childbirth dilemma over what to do with the placenta currently being stored in her household's freezer.

Each performance offers a mix of the serious and the lighthearted. Pre-coronavirus, the troupe—sometimes incorporating local actors, and sometimes relying on the New York area team—brought live discussions of reproductive justice issues to colleges, community groups, and religious audiences. In today's pandemic, they're using an online platform, and while this has taken some adjustment, Acosta, Cooper, and Cortelyou agree that the transition has been successful.

The reaction to a Zoom performance in early May, Cooper says, was uniformly positive. "The audience came from all over the United States as well as from Singapore and Romania, and people told us afterwards that they were gratified to connect to this issue at a time when everyone is sad about everything. Providing attention to reproductive health reminded them that reproductive freedom is both ubiquitous and unseen, and that we can't ever take it for granted."

To bring a virtual RFA production to your community, contact Reprofreedomarts.org.

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