



Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival Review: “This is Jane” • Opera Tells the Real Story of Chicago’s Jane Collective

Description

Salt Lake City, UT—It starts with a phone call. When a pregnant student seeks out an illegal abortion in 1965, the encounter sets in motion the creation of the Jane Collective, Chicago’s underground abortion service and one of the most consequential activist networks of its era. **Angela Elizabeth Slater**’s new opera *This is Jane*, with a libretto by **Kendra Preston Leonard**, traces the Collective through the lives of the patients, volunteers, staff, and practitioners who were part of it, drawing on interviews, memoirs, and historical sources to make the case that the fight it waged is far from finished. Opera Contempo brought the piano-vocal premiere to the Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival this week, staged at MadKing’s Fellowship Theatre under director **Emily Nelson** and conductor **J. Knight Allen**, with **Juliet Preston** at the piano. It’s a rich, under-told chapter of American history, and the company deserves real credit for tackling it head-on at a moment when the subject is anything but settled. This is a meaningful piece of music theater with real edge to it, even if Slater’s musical language asks something new, and perhaps challenging, of first-time listeners.

It’s worth being unambiguous about this: nothing in this libretto is invented for dramatic effect. The real Jane Collective, formally the Abortion Counseling Service of Women’s Liberation, began in 1965 when a University of Chicago student helped a friend’s sister find a safe abortion, and grew into a full underground network operating from 1969 until *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, providing an estimated 11,000 procedures. Even “Doctor Nick” is drawn straight from the documented history, not from a playwright’s imagination: the real Jane Collective relied on a man known within the group as “Nick,” who operated out of motels and had entered into an arrangement to perform abortions for steady business, before members discovered he had no formal medical training. The dramatic gut-punch at the center of this excerpt isn’t a plot twist; it’s exactly what happened to real women, run by real volunteers, within living memory.

The performance at the Fringe presented Act 2, scenes 3 through 5, and follows Rosie (**Kahli Dalbow**) and Kate (**Carolyn Talboys-Klassen**) wrestling with the discovery that “Doctor Nick,” the man performing procedures for their network, was never actually a doctor at all. It’s a strong dramatic hook: trust, complicity, and the compromises women were forced to make in the absence of safe options. In its best moments, the piece sits with that tension well. A quiet, aching passage about

waiting, and being willing to be cared for, was the evening's most affecting stretch, and Dalbow and Talboys-Klassen found real chemistry in it. Dalbow, in particular, was the standout of the evening, with a genuinely beautiful timbre to her voice.

The piece also leans hard on repetition, with "Radical!" chanted dozens of times over and looping vamps on single phrases. It's a common device in opera generally, one that can build real incantatory power, but here it often just goes on a beat or two longer than the drama supports, especially since it's written in English. In a foreign-language opera, repeated words tend to dissolve into pure sound for an English-speaking audience; here, understanding every word means the repetition is much harder to miss. Credit is due to conductor J. Knight Allen, who held the piano-vocal forces together with real precision through the score's trickier rhythmic passages, a genuinely phenomenal job holding the whole thing steady.

The talkback afterward was genuinely illuminating and, frankly, needed. Asked about working with historical material, Leonard explained that rather than depict any of the real, still-living Jane Collective members by name, she built composite characters: "there are definitely aspects of some of these characters' lives and personalities that I have drawn from the historical record, and there are others that I have sort of created myself." Worth noting: this doesn't apply to "Doctor Nick," whose name isn't Leonard's invention but the historical alias the real Jane Collective itself used for him, much as "Jane" was always a collective pseudonym rather than any one person's name. It's a sound, careful choice given how many participants remain active in reproductive rights work today. Slater noted the material began as a single scene written for piano at a 2024 fellowship at the Aspen Music Festival, where, as she put it, she set out to "make it politically engaged" from the start. A full orchestration and staged premiere are still ahead. That context reframes the evening usefully: this piano-vocal version is a meaningful milestone, but it's still a step toward a larger, fully orchestrated work, not the final statement.

Given that, some rough edges are entirely fair to expect from a piano-vocal premiere still finding its final shape; the repetition, especially, could tighten considerably once the piece is fully orchestrated. Slater's score favors insistence and accumulation over conventional melodic payoff, so audiences expecting something closer to traditional lyric opera may need a scene or two to adjust to its rhythm. Asked at the talkback about the score's more atonal passages, Slater described her harmonic palette as built primarily from fourths and fifths rather than conventional functional tonality, though she still hears major and minor qualities emerge from within that palette, rather than abandoning tonal color altogether. She framed the choice simply as being in service of the drama: "it's me trying to illuminate Kendra's beautiful text." That's a useful lens for the whole evening: open, interval-driven harmony rather than conventional major/minor resolution, in service of Leonard's libretto first rather than aiming for conventional prettiness on its own terms.

Opera poses a harder problem for this kind of harmonic language than a concert or ballet score does. Composers like Copland and Debussy could let quartal harmony drift without a tonal anchor because nothing dramatic was riding on the moment; an audience free-floating for a few bars in *Appalachian Spring* loses nothing. Here, a singer delivers plot-critical text (a revelation as blunt as "Doctor Nick was never a doctor") over harmony that gives the ear no tonal handhold, asking listeners to parse dramatic language and orient harmonically at the same time, with neither task helping the other. Opera composers working in genuinely dissonant, non-functional idioms, Berg in *Wozzeck*, Britten throughout his output, tend to compensate with orchestral color, recurring motivic gestures, and text-setting closely

tracking natural speech rhythm, tools that keep the drama legible even when the harmony itself isn't. In this bare piano-vocal reduction, without an orchestra's resources to do that compensating work, some of that legibility is understandably still a work in progress; it's a fair question whether the finished, orchestrated version will solve it.

(Beyond the talkback: this tracks with how Slater has described her own style elsewhere. In a 2022 interview with [The Cross-Eyed Pianist's Meet the Artist](#) series, unconnected to this production, she said her music is "colourful and highly expressive, sometimes impassioned and romantic in its melodic ideas, and other times far more gestural and complex in harmony and rhythm, moving closer to an atonal language." That range is worth knowing going in. The harmonic language in *This is Jane* isn't a one-off provocation; it's part of a broader compositional voice she's developed over years of work.)

Given how closely this material already tracks the historical record, there's a real opportunity for Leonard's libretto to lean even further into verbatim testimony as the work develops toward its full-length form. Feminist and counter archival practice has long argued that survivor testimony carries a kind of evidentiary and ethical weight that paraphrase and composite dramatization can't fully replicate; the goal isn't narrative mastery over a history, but a container sturdy enough to hold what institutions and official records failed to keep. There's precedent for how effective this approach can be on stage and screen alike: this year's Sundance documentary short [Going Sane: The Rise and Fall of the Center for Feeling Therapy](#) draws its power precisely from staying tethered to survivors' own words rather than dramatizing around them, treating testimony as testimony rather than raw material to be reshaped. A libretto built more directly from the interviews, memoirs, and archival sources Slater and Leonard have already drawn on, rather than composite paraphrase alone, could give the finished opera that same kind of teeth: an act of counter-archiving, not just adaptation.

But the fundamentals, a genuinely important, under-dramatized history, and a cast willing to commit fully to difficult material, are there. In the end, this opera is about the Chicago Jane Collective, women fighting for other women, and it deserves the fuller telling still to come. This is a work worth watching develop. It's worth saying plainly, too: it's rare for a piece to unsettle a trained listener's own assumptions about harmony, the reflex to hear thirds and fifths, as the natural markers of consonance, but this one did. Thank you, Slater, for making this reviewer think deeper.

Note: *This is Jane* runs at MadKing's Fellowship Theatre through July 31 as part of the Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival. The talkback indicated a fuller orchestrated version is still in development, with the company hoping to stage a complete premiere at the Midvalley Arts Center. Separately, further excerpts of the opera are also slated for Roosevelt University's OperaFest in Chicago this November, a different production, not part of this Utah run.

Content warning: The production's own program notes that the work contains references to abortion, addiction, death, intimate/domestic partner violence, misogyny, police violence, racism, rape, sex, and violence. Readers considering attending should take that into account.

The program also includes a call to support Planned Parenthood's work in Utah, in keeping with the opera's subject matter.

*The reviewer has a BA in music from BYU-Hawaii, studied music with an emphasis in voice with opera singer **JoAnn Ottley**, and is completing a PhD studying decolonial archives in writing and rhetoric at*

the University of Utah.

Sources:

- Angela Elizabeth Slater, interviewed by Laura FarrÃ© Rozada, â??Angela Elizabeth Slater, composer,â?• *Meet the Artist*, October 30, 2022, [meettheartist.online](#).
 - â??The Jane Collective: Health Care for and by Women,â?• Chicago History Museum.
 - â??Jane Collective,â?• Wikipedia, accessed July 2026.
 - Angela Elizabeth Slater, composer website, <https://www.angelaslatercomposer.co.uk/>
 - This is Jane program, Opera Contempo / Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival, and post-performance talkback, July 2026.
-

IF YOU GO

What: *This is Jane* (piano-vocal premiere, Act 2, scenes 3â??5), presented by Opera Contempo

Where: MadKingâ??s Fellowship Theatre, Salt Lake City, Utah

When: Friday, July 24; Saturday, July 25; Sunday, July 26, and Friday, July 31, as part of the Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival

Info/tickets: operacontempo.com/

[DO](#)nate to planned parenthood here

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

default watermark

Category

1. Reviews

Date

2026/07/26

Date Created

2026/07/26

Author

keola06

default watermark