

Gaslit Nation

23 November 2022

“Indefensible: The Jena Friedman Interview”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/indefensible-74870893>

[intro - music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:01):

Alight everyone. It's all hands on deck. We absolutely must win the Senate race in Georgia for Raphael Warnock for a long list of reasons. Number one, Reverend Warnock is a good human being and we need more people like him in the Senate to set the standard of the type of public officials we want. He's a decent, empathetic, wonderful person. Number two, a clean 51% majority in the Senate gives democracy, gives the Democrats the closest thing we have to people actually fighting for good governance at the moment. A stronger hand in negotiating with ruthless Mitch McConnell, ruthless Manchin and Sinema. The Dems don't have to power-share on this committee and it streamlines the whole process of pushing in these judges that we need to balance out the court-packing by McConnell and Trump, which saw 30% of our courts taken over by these ideologue Federalist Society judges.

Andrea Chalupa (01:00):

The third reason why we need Reverend Warnock to be elected—and this is extremely urgent—the Senate map for Democrats in 2024 is going to be extremely tough. That is why we need to bank as many Democratic senators as we can, now, this year. So we absolutely must get Reverend Warnock in there. And obviously the final reason is, who wants to deal with six years of Herschel Walker? So join us for these two extremely urgent all hands on deck phone banks for Georgia; Thursday, December 1st, 6:00 PM Eastern. That's Thursday, December 1st, 6:00 PM Eastern. And then the final one is Election Eve, Monday, December 5th, 5:00 PM Eastern. Monday, December 5th, 5:00 PM Eastern. You can RSVP for each of these events. Come join us, hang out on Zoom. At each one, we're going to select a volunteer to get a signed copy of Sarah's latest book, *They Knew* and a *Mr. Jones* film poster. Do not miss it. Again, all hands on deck for Reverend Warnock in Georgia. We must win this race. Thank you. See you soon.

[intro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (02:24):

Welcome to this special gratitude holiday themed episode of *Gaslit Nation*. The one source of reliable happiness in life, if you look at the scientific studies, they say again and again, it is our relationships. It's not how much money we have, how much power we have, the car we drive, but it's our relationships. And I wanna pay tribute to a friend of the show, a wonderful, brilliant artist that I've had the immense privilege and joy to watch bloom in her career from a standup comic in the world of Louis CK, a standup comic in New York City, to writing, producing for some of the hit comedy shows out there; *The Daily Show*, writing for Letterman. And she goes on to beat me [laughs] in being nominated for an Oscar for her role in writing this screenplay for *Borat 2*, which was a work a genius because it exposed the President of United States lawyer at the time, Rudy Giuliani, where he was trying to get down with the actress who he thought was Borat's news reporter [laughs], like the *60 Minutes* of Bulgaria. I don't know. But I'm talking about the one and only Jena Friedman who has a comedy special on Peacock, which everyone should watch. I got to see it live in Brooklyn. It was as a packed house. If you love *Gaslit Nation*,

you'll love her comedy special and also a show out now—again, it's *Gaslit Nation* spirited—called *True Crime*. Am I saying all the names of your stuff right?

Jena Friedman (04:00):

Well, the show is called... First of all, thank you so much. I love you very much. The show is called *True Crime Story: Indefensible*. It's part of this true crime thing that AMC+, which is the streamer for the Sundance Channel. I can't keep up, myself. It's part of their true crime initiative. I don't know, but it's not fully true crime. It's kind of more social justice-y, slightly comedic, but also heartbreaking and sad, slight true crime.

Andrea Chalupa (04:32):

She pulls back the curtain on the... You know how we're always saying on *Gaslit Nation*, "Corruption is an industry." She looks at the true crime aspect of the corruption industry, how people literally get away with murder. I watched her Casey Anthony episode in this series, and it's dark, hilarious, and eye-popping. And then tell us the name of your standup special. You can see how well-prepared I am.

Jena Friedman (04:56):

You got it. *Lady Killer*.

Andrea Chalupa:

Lady Killer. Okay.

Jena Friedman:

You got it. *Lady Killer*. Yeah. Yeah. And the True Crime show, it looks at the criminal legal system which is a system that we talk about, but we don't really look at under a microscope. And it kind of looks at different aspects of it, starting with cases and then we broaden out. I like to say that it's like using true crimes as a Trojan horse to get women to give a shit about—and a lot of women do, but I actually had some Trump supporters from season one message me about how much they liked the show and it made me really excited because I didn't think I would ever be able to connect to people who support, or at least at the time did support Trump. But I think true crime is like this weird Trojan horse where you can kind of connect to people and be like, "Hey, if you're concerned with violence against women, maybe vote for different people."

Andrea Chalupa (05:43):

[laughs]. Exactly. So all the white women that keep voting for Republicans.

Jena Friedman (05:46):

Yeah. [laughs] It's basically white women catnip. True crime is catnip for white women.

Andrea Chalupa (05:51):

It's like they fear being killed by a man, like every other average woman, but they just can't help themselves with who they vote for. So tell us about your Wisconsin.

Jena Friedman (06:02):

So the episode that aired last week, November 17th, is a story about a woman. It takes place in Wisconsin. She was a pregnant person in Wisconsin who had done drugs—illegal substances—early in her pregnancy. At the time, she still could have gotten an abortion if she wanted to, but she wanted to keep the child. She found out she was pregnant and so she went to the doctor for prenatal care. She told the doctor, she disclosed what drugs she had done and when she had done them. She wasn't a heavy drug user, not that it matters, but she just wanted to be careful and make sure that her pregnancy was gonna be okay. And the doctor violated the patient/doctor confidentiality and told the hospital who then took her in custody and appointed a lawyer for her fetus where she didn't have a lawyer.

Jena Friedman(06:59):

And they basically put her in jail because she refused to go to treatment, and she refused to go to treatment because she was afraid they were going to take away her future child if she admitted to having a problem. And so she ended up in jail and then she ended up in solitary and then she got out a couple weeks later. She was pregnant, by the way. She was I think 14 or 18 weeks pregnant at the time this was happening. She could have not gone to jail if she had gotten an abortion, but again, because she wanted to keep the child, she was in violation of this act called “Act 292: The Wisconsin Unborn Child Protection Act”, which I think is still in effect today. And it basically gives this state the authority to imprison or to punish any pregnant person the state deems in violation of “unborn child protection”, whatever that means. It's intentionally vague. It was written by a lot of dudes who have no idea what it means to be pregnant. And it's just reflective of laws in many other states in this current moment where fetal personhood is gaining traction and laws are reflecting that.

Andrea Chalupa (08:13):

Yeah, I mean, Wisconsin... So we've lost Missouri. Missouri used to be a bellwether state. We've lost Ohio. Ohio used to be a bellwether state. And we're losing Wisconsin to the Republican autocracy, which is really... Based on this law that you're describing, the Republican Party has been operating like a Catholic parochial school where the priests and the nuns beat the hell outta you because it's for your own good, you know, and they throw you in solitary confinement because it's for your own good. We have this extreme Catholicism, as we see, taking over the Supreme Court where the majority of judges are Catholics. Of course on the far right they are on the Court. And they overturned *Roe*. What was that like for you, being pregnant, working on that story? You told me the story about how you needed to catch a flight in Ohio and being pregnant, driving on the road, you were just thinking, “God, if something should happen to me, if I need medical care as a pregnant woman in Ohio, what a nightmare that would be.”

Jena Friedman (09:13):

Yeah, well, I mean, as a pregnant person, you have very little power and control. We were launching into season two of *Indefensible* and I was only like six weeks pregnant. I was too early to tell anyone that I was pregnant, but I think we were in a development meeting and I just let it slip to the network, “Hey, I'm pregnant, which means I really wanna greenlight this story”, because I don't know if they would've felt comfortable greenlighting a story like that if I hadn't been pregnant, because it's... You know how networks are. And this is all before *Roe* was overturned. And so we were working on this story because I saw, as you did too—anyone since 2010, I think, or earlier, anyone in this space could see that *Roe* was gonna be overturned. And it didn't even need to be in so many states because the laws have just been so restrictive and punitive, to the point where prior to *robe* being overturned, it was virtually impossible for so many people to get access to reproductive healthcare in so many states in America.

Jena Friendman(10:10):

So the one silver lining and a side note is that it's all out there now and it's so clear and people are actually responding at the ballot box, whereas a year ago people didn't really take us seriously and they didn't really think about how these laws were actually impacting people. Now the Unborn Child Protection Act in Wisconsin has been around, I wanna say '95, maybe later. I don't exactly know the date. I could find it for you, but it's been around for a while. And a lot of these laws have. And one of the most insidious things about it is that when it goes into effect... So Tammy Loertscher, who we talk about in our episode, her trial, if you will (she didn't have an attorney, the fetus did), that took place behind closed doors because of, like, juvenile court, blah, blah, blah. So reporters don't even really know the extent to which people are targets.

Jena Friedman (11:00):

And it's not all women, it's vulnerable women; women who have used drugs, women who just find themselves in more vulnerable situations. There's a lot of shame also associated with, "Hey, I smoked pot early in my pregnancy," or "I did this drug," and, and they don't want people to know, so it makes it harder for them to advocate for themselves. And yeah, I mean, there are laws like this in every state, which is crazy. I can go on a little tangent, but when I used to work at *The Daily Show*, I really wanted to get like a story about abortion on the air. And every week there was a different crazy piece. And I would pitch something to Jon and he'd be like, "No, no, no, no." [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (11:42):

Jon Stewart?

Jena Friedman (11:43):

Well, just because it's a, you know, it's a tough issue. And I think in 2013, '14, '15, the general consensus among, you know, a lot of male comedians—and I talk about this in my forthcoming book, I do talk about my attempts at doing abortion comedy over the years—I think until now people really haven't been (and by "people", I mean men) galvanized to really speak out about it because it was so taboo and not really... Like Biden up until this year was afraid to say the A word, you know? I think a lot of progressive men just have been afraid to attack this issue head on. It's also partly how we ended up in the situation that we're in and with the laws that we have because men are not making it their business when it is very much their business in the sense of helping it not be the state's business. [laughs]

Jena Friedman(12-:37):

I'm contradicting myself. I'm like, "It's men's business, not our bodies, but the laws around our bodies." Got that? Got that, everyone? But I remember there was one piece where it was so egregious that Jon gave us a green light, but it was about a bill in Alabama that gave—again, about fetus lawyers—it gave state funds to fetus lawyers to, if a teen wanted to get an abortion and she didn't have parental consent in Alabama, she could go to a judge and get a judicial bypass. But now the state was actually allocating funds from their public defender system, which was already underfunded, to these things called guardian ad litem, which are essentially fetus lawyers. So if the teen wanted an abortion and the judge deemed her "mature enough" to get an abortion (as opposed to have a child), the state could then assign a lawyer for the fetus and the fetus lawyer could put the teen on trial and put her parents on trial, her boyfriend's parents, her pastor, her basketball coach, and then run out the clock.

Jena Friedman (13:35):

And the joke is, "That's how babies are made in Alabama." I mean, it was a horrible piece of legislation and we had a field day with it. Jessica Williams was a correspondent and we sat down with a fetus lawyer and we trolled the shit out of him. But it's just so eerie that that actually was a law that existed. And so

this is an extension of that. It's less comedic because it's actually about a person's story as opposed to just the law. But it's in the same vein of all of these sneaky... I say the brightest minds in the Republican Party—which I know isn't saying a lot—but the brightest minds in that party are working in this type of personhood legislation because they're so creative and they've achieved so much... progress? It's not the right word, but they've just, what is the word? Anti-progress?

Andrea Chalupa (14:20):

Victories. Far-right victories

Jena Friedman (14:22):

Victories In this one area to the point where, yeah, Roe obviously was overturned and it was a long time coming, but it obviously happened and it's been a long time coming, I guess.

Andrea Chalupa (14:33):

Yeah, Trump is the Evangelicals' perfect vessel. Now, Ron DeSantis, who also wants to ban abortion, he is releasing all these, "I am God, I am the chosen one. I am the new Christ Messiah" videos where he's trying to get that Evangelical vote and be their perfect vehicle to pack the courts and further this war on women and victories for white male patriarchy. What do you think is ultimately—because this has been going on, like you said, under our noses for so long—what do you think has been driving this?

Jena Friedman (15:09):

It's just control. Women used to be property, particularly women of color. And so it's just men wanting to control women and vulnerable people, anyone with a uterus. I think that's really, when you distill it down to what it is, we know it's not pro-life. We can't let them call themselves pro-life. They're not pro birth, they're not pro maternal fetal health. It's just about control. And you can take it a step further and be like, blame religion, you know? Like, "Mary didn't need to get pregnant to have a baby. Why do you?" but I think on just a basic level, they just wanna be able to control women and take away our power.

Andrea Chalupa (15:53):

Exactly right. That's what it's all about. And unfortunately, like you point out, the male allies that we need to win this, to fight it, to wage it, to talk about it and have the words to talk about it, have the language. Why do you think they feel so squeamish over it?

Jena Friedman (16:06):

I think it's seen as women's health. It's not seen as an economic issue.

Andrea Chalupa (16:11):

It seems like a period commercial? [laughs] Like a tampon commercial. They're like "ehhh change the channel."

Jena Friedman (16:17):

For sure. It's just the framing, too. I mean, reproductive autonomy, it's a human's rights issue. It's an economic issue, it's a climate issue. It's everything. And so the fact that we relegate it to this weird subset of women's... subset? Subject? [laughs] I'm so fucking tired. I have a one-month-old at home. It

was just relegated to this obscure, like, women's hell. I mean, I could go on a whole rant about our disconnected late stage capitalist hell hole. But, you know, we don't see things in terms of communities and public health. Unfortunately, women's bodies suffer because of it.

Andrea Chalupa (17:01):

Yeah. So you just raised something and I wanna just clear this up for our audience. So Jena is technically on maternity leave and I agreed to—

Jena Friedman (17:10):

There's no such thing in America. Not for a freelancer.

Andrea Chalupa (17:13):

That's so true. That is a trillion percent true. So she reached out to me to come on the show because we've wanted her on the show for a very long time now because what she does is right up our alley. And also because it's gratitude themed, this episode. In 2016, when Trump stole the presidential election with the help of the Kremlin, right? There's a 400-page Mueller report about this. Sarah and I met during that time of darkness. We just joined forces right away. And immediately, the very first person who had any sort of cultural standing—a big following on Twitter, doing interviews about the various comedy shows that she was doing, putting on and all that—was Jena Friedman. I remember reading some interview with you that you posted in some hipster magazine—I don't remember which one—where they asked you, “Who are you following on Twitter?”

Andrea Chalupa (18:05):

“What are your news sources?” And this is at a time when the Kremlin and Jared Kushner's *Observer* were all writing hit pieces on us. And the idiots on the far left thought that Sarah and I were just creating excuses for why Hillary “neoliberal shill” won. You know, and you came out and you're like, “I'm following Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. I think they're great. Everyone should follow them. Code red.” You were like one of the very, very, very, very first. And that was a really wonderful boost of encouragement that you gave us during that time.

Jena Friedman (18:35):

Well, you guys were totally right-on. I remember when your podcast started and I remember, I think, you and I connecting on social media because it was around like either December, 2015 or something when the trolls really started to come out. I had tweeted something I thought was pretty benign about how a divided left will make way for fascism.

Andrea Chalupa (18:53):

Which is true.

Jena Friedman (18:54):

“Think of Weimar Republic, Germany.” And I got so trolled. There were these comics like Jimmy Dore early on who just came at me.

Andrea Chalupa (19:03):

He's like the Tucker Carlson of the internet.

Jena Friedman (19:06):

I didn't see it coming back then. I remember I emailed him, he was like trolling me over something. I had a Bernie supporter in an audience at a show I did in London and the guy just kind of heckled me. And then online, after the show, I just kind of said, "So typical Bernie bro, coming to your show and yelling at you for blah blah, blah..." I don't even know what I said, but it lit the far-left internet on fire. And then they were like, "This wasn't real, she never performed, she's a Hillary show." It just went crazy. And I emailed Jimmy or something. I DMed him, like, "Comic to comic, like, what?" And I shouldn't have said it like that, but I just thought that comedians were... It was at a naive time when I thought that being a comedian was a more prominent identity than being political. And this is how naive I was. And he just took that and ran with it. And I don't think I saw it coming, the economy for far-left and far-right provocateurs that emerged around 2014-2015. I'm gonna go on a tiny little rant, but I don't know if you remember the show *Redacted Tonight*?

Andrea Chalupa (20:11):

Oh, yeah.

Jena Friedman (20:12):

It was a comedy show on RT. Lee Camp.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmmhmm <affirmative>

Jena Friedman:

Lovely guy that I used to know.

Andrea Chalupa (20:19):

Yeah, he was at Huff Post. He was like a comedy guy that was always on Huff Post doing political comedy.

Jena Friedman (20:24):

So he got an opportunity to do this kind of left-of-center daily show, whatever that means, for RT. And I was working at *The Daily Show* at the time.

Andrea Chalupa (20:31):

RT. Russia Today. Kremlin blood money-funded propaganda which laid the groundwork for the genocide in Ukraine by dehumanizing Ukrainians. Go on.

Jena Friedman (20:40):

Yeah. I remember somebody reached out to me to see if I wanted to audition to be a correspondent or something on that show. And I was happily at *The Daily Show* field producing. But I remember thinking—and I think it was around the time when John Oliver and this producer, Brennan Shroff, actually went over to Russia to interview Snowden and they came back with all these crazy stories. This is maybe 2014.

Andrea Chalupa (21:00):

John Oliver just did a scathing, scathing interview to Ed Snowden's face, which revealed what an egomaniac that guy basically is. But fo on.

Jena Friedman (21:09):

Yeah, this one, I don't think he was mean to Snowden then.

Andrea Chalupa (21:14):

It was like a John Oliver gentle touch.

Jena Friedman (21:17):

Yeah. But it was interesting. And they came back and they told us all these crazy stories about the production and everything. And then, so I told my friend, I was like, "Okay, RT, isn't that funded by the Kremlin?" And he's like, "We're allowed to talk about anything." And, you know, then I was like, "Well, what about Putin?" And he's like, "Well, anything but Putin." So I thought that that was so interesting. And then I saw that show kind of... It never achieved a hugely popular status, but it was 2014 and then 2015 and RT started advertising around New York and just raising their profile. And then I don't know when you and I first connected, but I was getting trolled on social media and I think we were talking about it because I know everything that was going on with your sister, you were telling me. It's just so interesting how it all kind of played out. And then when you and Sarah started the podcast, it was just a breath of fresh air and it was crazy how people just didn't take what you were saying seriously when it was exactly what was happening and exactly what has played out to happen.

Andrea Chalupa (22:20):

Yeah. That's why the show's called *Gaslit Nation*.

Jena Friedman (22:22):

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (22:23):

I remember that in real time, watching the whole RT talent pool, if you will. You know, the whole RT troll class or whatever coming after you, hardcore, just for making some, like you said, some benign tweet. And they just were like bullying you. And this was very early on and I think obviously the hell we've all gone through with Trump and just seeing the Kremlin's victory dances during all of Trump's time in office, which ranged from a long list of things that we all sort of went through. like massive Pearl Harbor level cyber attacks against the US in the middle of a pandemic, you know, attacking hospitals and so on. It's just a long list. And I think Americans were initiated into a club of people who have experienced firsthand what Kremlin aggression is like and how insidious it can be. And I think that really has not fully gotten rid of the RT trolls, but it's definitely taken away some of their power. And people are fed up with Russia. And of course the war in Ukraine has ignited more than divided people who are all sort of rallying around a good versus evil battle to define the soul of the world, not just our country. So do you feel like it's let up from what it used to be?

Jena Friedman (23:41):

I mean, I was never... Getting children on social media can be frustrating. I mean, you definitely get scary DMs. You have people sending you photos of an AR 15 and you're a performer who puts your tour

dates on your social media. So it is a little scary, but it's nothing compared to, you know, actual Russian aggression. But I do think it went from feeling like, "Am I crazy that this is going on, that on an RT blog my name is listed? I'm so small potatoes, what's going on?" From that to actually seeing everything playing out the way that it was playing out. I mean it's all horrible. I think it just went from thinking that you're crazy to knowing that you're not crazy. That's all. And I do think, at least on social media, I don't wanna talk about Twitter now because of the whole Elon Musk thing, but I think in the past year or two it has gotten a lot better. The peak frustration for me was around 2015-2016. I also was on Colbert's election night show. I don't know if you remember that, where I got into a little bit of trouble because we were live on air when Trump won. And my reaction was caught in real time. And Steven looked at me and he was like, "What do you think?" And I said, get... Did you see this?

Andrea Chalupa:

No.

Jena Friedman(25:04):

Oh, I'll send it to you. It'll be funnier for you to see it, but I was just, my whole thing was like, don't cry in front of your coworkers but I said, "Get your abortions now because we're gonna be fucked and we're gonna have to live with it."

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow.

Jena Friedman:

And I said that live. It was airing on Showtime and then Steven made a joke about it. But still get trolled for that comment. But I think the internet trolling reached its peak around 2015-2016 and now it's bled into reality. You know, you're seeing Russian aggression.

Andrea Chalupa (25:36):

Yeah. I mean it was always laying the groundwork to bring someone like Trump to power to normalize. Because trolling is bullying. It's normalizing bullying. It's normalizing cruelty for the sake of cruelty. And that laid the groundwork for Trump to come to power. And then the Kremlin needed Trump in power in order to seize Ukraine, which, you know, they're nothing without. There's that saying in foreign policy where Russia with Ukraine is the Soviet Union, Russia without Ukraine is like Canada. So, we're living in a time of mass trauma. We've all been impacted by it. There's nowhere to hide. We've seen Generation Z completely pissed off and with pitchforks and torches go to the ballot box and they're gonna be running for office increasingly, because we're fucking up the world. And the Nancy Pelosis at the very top aren't doing, you know, aren't serving quality of life issues, standing up to the climate crisis and so on. So the anxiety level is very high right now. How do you find in this atmosphere, this very charged time, where does comedy come in for you? What is the role of what you do and how do you go about doing it, especially when so many people feel really shaken up inside?

Jena Friedman (26:47):

At least with my standup, a lot of my standup is like, "You're not crazy." It's preaching to my small demographic of people who give a shit about my comedy, just telling them that they're not crazy with

jokes. That's a lot of my standup. But the true crime show, I think, is reaching a little bit of a broader swath of people. I know a lot of comedians after the 2016 election were like, "How do we reach out to the other side? How do we cross over?" And I think sometimes you don't have to, sometimes you just go even further into your bubble and you tell those people, "Hey, you're not crazy. Here's what's going on. And you're not alone." And there's power to people, especially people who are activists who are working their asses off, who are exhausted and demoralized.

Jena Friedman (27:28):

If you can give them a little bit of reprieve with some jokes or just some comedy, I think that that's always helpful. When I was at *The Daily Show*, there were segments that we did that I really do feel like impacted people in a positive way. There was one segment on voting rights, which is laughable now given what has happened. But it was a segment that I did with Aasif Mandvi that was actually cited in a court case in 2013 or '14 to overturn racist voter ID laws. But those laws are back now. This is in North Carolina. And so I do think especially with those Daily Show pieces, if you could be like, "Here's why voter ID laws are racist" and you can show people in a funny way—and John Lewis was actually in that piece. It went viral.

Jena Friedman (28:10):

It was a pretty powerful piece—you're helping people understand issues that kind of seem complicated, but distilling them down to their essence and using comedy to do that. I think comedy can be really powerful that way. With the true crime show, I'm trying to do that with the criminal legal system. We have an episode about rough sex defenses, otherwise known as the Consent Defense, which is legal in the US but not in the UK. And it's basically, typically, they manifest if a guy kills a woman, he could say, his defense could be, "Oh, we were having sex and I strangled her accidentally." And that's how that would manifest in court. And when a defense attorney uses that defense, it will sometimes result in a reduced sentence or an exoneration of the defendant. And so we did a story last season about how those defenses are bullshit and no one consents to die and you don't accidentally ever strangle someone during sex. So comedy can be used to engage people in issues that they wouldn't really be thinking about and raise awareness and kind of give people the language and kind of tools to understand certain things that they could maybe mobilize against.

Andrea Chalupa (29:28):

How do you go about writing your jokes? Do you sit down with a pad and paper and go, "I'm writing jokes today."? Or are you just capturing your inner monologue and when something occurs to you, you just rush and write it down?

Jena Friedman (29:40):

It depends. I write a lot when I'm on stage. So if I'm in New York and I'm doing a bunch of shows at night, I'll tape my sets and write jokes and work out jokes in between shows. In LA, I'm not really as disciplined in terms of standup. When I did the standup special that I just taped, that was tricky because I was pregnant during covid so I was trying not to do indoor shows. And I wrote a special that was changing as I was changing with the pregnancy. And so some of the jokes... There are a couple lines in the special that... Did you come to the seven o'clock or the nine o'clock show?

Andrea Chalupa (30:13):

The seven one in Brooklyn.

Jena Friedman (30:16):

Okay, so the seven o'clock show... The nine o'clock was actually, I don't know how that show was like an hour and a half, but the nine o'clock show was... It was a better show.

Andrea Chalupa (30:25):

[laughs] Okay.

Jena Friedman (30:26):

I dunno how to say it but it was like I was still working out the show. At the seven o'clock show, I was still like working out jokes. But I think I had one line that just like. Yeah, I had some lines that just, I was working them out on stage and some of those jokes came out of a show I did in Edinburgh that I was gonna tape before Covid. And then a lot of them came out of just being pregnant and, you know, tweeting something or thinking about going into a maternity store and seeing that they had boyfriend jeans. And that was funny to me and I was like, "Why is this funny?" And I made a joke about it.

Andrea Chalupa (30:55):

[laughs] So we're always telling our listeners, "Make art, be creative, do something." What advice would you give someone? We have people of all ages listening.

Jena Friedman (31:05):

I would say relax [laughs]. We don't need more comedians. Use your time to focus on climate change and capturing carbon. No, I do think consuming art, producing art can be cathartic and can be therapeutic if that's what you are compelled to do. People have told me recently about certain things like, "Oh, like write a show about that." You know, it's what I found works for me, but I don't wanna tell anymore people to be comedians because [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (31:36):

It's like a giant diesel truck. We don't need another one on the road.

Jena Friedman (31:40):

Yeah, exactly.

Andrea Chalupa (31:41):

[laughs]. Okay, that's good to know. I've never talked to you about this, but the process of working on Borat, because Borat came out in the pandemic and so I never got to chat with you about this. What was that like? I mean, I know people that have worked with Sacha Baron Cohen and they felt that the whole process of tricking people into talking to you and having all these things planned for them that they're not aware of could be very uncomfortable. What was sort of your role in that film and how did you sort of deal with all the weird stuff that must have come up?

Jena Friedman (32:13):

I mean, it was a dream job. It was a dream. I think one of my favorite scenes was the pregnancy crisis center, which was a pitch of mine. And I remember I was in a room with Sacha and a bunch of guy comics and talking about pregnancy crisis centers and how... I remember the joke about like, "Oh, if she swallows a baby and it's a plastic baby on a cupcake..." But then they go to the fake abortion clinic and they say, "There's a baby inside her and it's mine." And I forget who it was, but they were like, "There's

no way that a person there would ever be okay with incest” or something, “with the idea of incest”. And I told them, “No, these places would be totally okay with it.” And then we shot it and everybody was just jaw dropped with what footage that we got.

Jena Friedman (33:00):

You can see it if you see the movie. And I will tell you this: I helped produce that segment and in terms of moral compass, where your moral compass is when you're doing a piece like this, you know, I can't get into too much about how the sausage is made, but there was this moment where I was like, “Are we gonna get in trouble for this?” And then I thought, What would the news headline be? ‘Comedians prank people who trick vulnerable pregnant people’? And so I just was like, you know, fine, go to town, let's get the shot. But I think it depends on who your target is. And if your target is a fake abortion clinic that misleads vulnerable people, then go for it. I think with all the work that I do, I try to make sure that my target's in the right spot.

Jena Friedman (33:47):

It was the same thing with *The Daily Show*. The idea of, Oh, are we making fun of people or are we shining a light on people in power and their hypocrisies? I think, again, if the target is worth it, comedy can be a great tool. Public shame can be a great tool. I think people like Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio and Ron DeSantis should never—and Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham and Josh Hawley and did I say Ted Cruz?—should never enjoy a meal at a nice restaurant without the fear of there being spit in it. I think they should never be able to sit at a restaurant without somebody going up to them and yelling at them and maybe us getting to see that video on TikTok. That's not the same thing as comedy, but I do think teasing or shaming people in power is great and it's peaceful and it's effective.

Andrea Chalupa (34:35):

And we need more of it

Jena Friedman (34:36):

And we need more of it.

Andrea Chalupa (34:37):

So Trump is running again, which is... Thank you, Merrick Garland. What do you think about, you know, even if it's not him, if it's DeSantis in 2024, this Republican Party, they're here to stay. They wanted to have an extreme Republican Party and they built one. They've been working towards this for such a long time and they're locked in thanks to extreme gerrymandering. This is it. This is who we're stuck with. What advice do you have for the rest of us? What advice are you going to cling to in the years ahead for us to carry on to confront this, to sustain our emotional mental bandwidth and confronting corruption and calling out corruption and hypocrisy?

Jena Friedman (35:19):

I mean, I'm parroting what you say. We just have to keep voting and phone banking and just getting people to give a shit. I think comedy can help with that. It can help galvanize people and, again, expose people to issues they might not be thinking about. There was a lot of talk about the role of *The Daily Show* in getting Trump elected or political comedians, yada yada, yada. I mean, I don't have answers, but I do know that there's so few people you can trust. But I trust a lot of comedians—left of center comedians who deliver the news. I know that when I worked at *The Daily Show*, we were not beholden to anyone. We did a segment on fast food worker strikes and McDonald's was a sponsor of ours and no

one ever told us what we couldn't do. And so I do think people who maybe work at CNN or MSNBC or other news outlets might be beholden to higher powers, but I know a lot of the comedians, I'm pretty sure nobody censors John Oliver and no one censors Jon Stewart.

Jena Friedman (36:20):

And I'm pretty sure no one censors Sam Bee. And so just on that fact alone, comedians are or can be a trusted news source. Now, with great power comes great responsibility and I think in this current moment you're seeing a lot of people like Joe Rogan having huge platforms and disseminating false information. You know, so I don't wanna say "trust all comedians", but I think comedians, I think it's... I don't even know if I'm answering your question, but I've always felt like comedians are kinda like the canary in the coal mine of democracy. Once we start getting arrested or getting censored, then you really know that your democratic system is fucked. And you can look at it in other countries around the world, how comedians have fared there and how they continue to fare there. Comedians are a sign of a healthy democracy and we're part of it. Continue to support comedians, I guess I would say, not to be self-interested, but just hold your comedians close and continue to support them because in a lot of fascist regimes, they don't exist in a way that they do now. Healthy discussions without censorship are critical to democratic health.

Andrea Chalupa (37:25):

When Putin first came to power, a popular *Saturday Night Live*-style sketch comedy show in Russia that used to make fun of him went away. That was Putin. He got rid of the comics [laughs]. They were some of the first to go and then he starts murdering the journalists and then the ethnic minorities and so on. So when you and I were teenagers—I think it was around the time we were teenagers, maybe in college—Christopher Hitchens in *Vanity Fair* came out with a straight-faced essay with the thesis, "Women Are Not Funny". That happened in our lifetime, when you and I were trying to figure out our own voice in this world and find our way in the world, and this is who was commanding thought leadership. How has being a female comic, how has being a woman producer/creator, how has that changed for you as you've gone up, up, up in the world?

Andrea Chalupa (38:20):

Because you keep going up and it's wonderful to see, it's heartening to see. I remember the very first time I met you, it was a million years ago. I think it was like 2010 or 2011 at a *Salon* gathering. It was at a party. It was like a Molly Crabapple party. And I remember you and I were just talking alone in a corner and you were telling me these rumors about this comedian Louis CK masturbating in front of people. It was classic whisper campaign women to woman trying to protect each other. "By the way, if you're ever thinking of pitching Louis CK for anything, don't, because he'll masturbate in front of you." And it's crazy because I, you know, we were young things trying to make it in New York City with these big, crazy dreams. And I did happen to meet Louis CK. My path did cross with him. We were out in public with a bunch of people present so nothing happened, but you know what I mean? It just goes to show.

Jena Friedman (39:18):

Well, as much as he was masturbating and whatever, he still was better than other guy comics that I, you know, have encountered. And I think he gets a disproportionate amount of shit. I don't know if he can hear my little kid crying in the background Daddy's got you! But he... I'm not defending Louis by any means, but a friend of mine—and I write about this in my forthcoming book as well, I write a little bit about this—but a friend basically said, you know, we were swimming in a toilet. And Louis's peccadillos, sex crimes, whatever you wanna call them, are out in the open now. But there were so many people that

were worse than him and that still exists and are thriving. I'm not gonna name names, but it's just like... And by Louie you mean Grammy winner and current Grammy nominee.

Jena Friedman (40:08):

It was a tough world. It was so much easier for us than it was for the generation before us. I think about all those actresses in the '90s who had to deal with the Harveys and the whatever. And then I try to be optimistic about... The one thing I'll say is that from when I got into comedy in 2005 to now, the amount of progress in this one pocket of our culture is really heartening. There are more women in comedy. There are more non-binary people in comedy. There are more marginalized people getting paid to do comedy, building incredible careers. I do believe that there has been an immense amount of progress in this one lane that I've been in for 15 or 16 years now.

Andrea Chalupa (40:54):

Thank God. Okay, Jena, tell us, where can we get your comedy special, *Lady Killer*, and your new book, *Not Funny*, [laughs] Jena Friedman, but that's not out, Academy Award-nominated screenwriter on the cover. That doesn't come out until April, I thought..

Jena Friedman (41:11):

April.

Andrea Chalupa (41:12):

Okay. And the book's called *Not Funny*.

Jena Friedman (41:15):

The book is called *Not Funny*. It's just about the past 15 or so years of stories about being in comedy, and our culture. There's an essay about... There's like a chapter about dead baby jokes. It was fun to write. And so that comes out in April. As you mentioned, my standup special *Lady Killer* is out on Peacock. I have another special that came out right before the 2016 election called *American Cunt*. I think that's out on Spotify. I don't know where that is and I don't know if I even get any residuals if you buy it, but there's some good abortion jokes that I also posted on YouTube. And then the true crime show is called *Indefensible*. That is streaming on AMC+ and it's every Thursday at 10/9 Central on Sundance TV. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (42:02):

Thank you so very much, Jena Friedman. Mom. Wonderful mom.

Jena Friedman (42:09):

I can't wait to have you meet him and to see you in Brooklyn or in LA if you guys come out here. It's been too long.

Andrea Chalupa (42:16):

Yeah, we'll arrange a marriage with my kid, my baby. So thank you so much. Jena Friedman, tenacious comic, social critic, Oscar-nominated producer, filmmaker, screenwriter and *Gaslit Nation* listener. Uh, Thank you so much.

Jena Friedman (42:32):

Die hard fan.

Andrea Chalupa (42:33):

Thank you. Thank you, thank you. Love you. I'm grateful for you and you hanging in there and fighting the good fight for all of us.

[outro - theme music, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

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Andrea Chalupa:

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