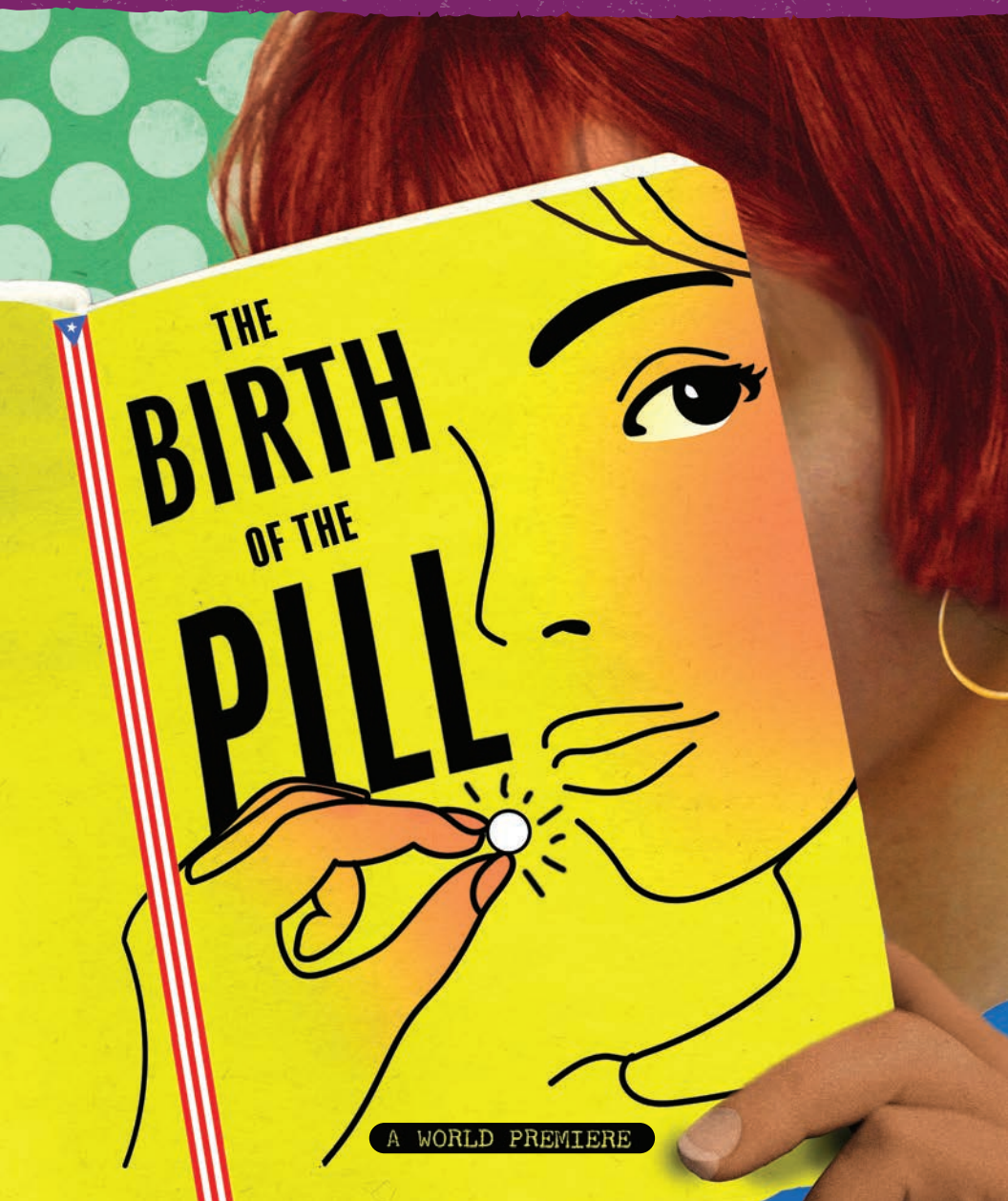


TIME **7** LINE
THEATRE
COMPANY

BACKSTORY

Your Guide to TimeLine Productions



A MESSAGE

from Artistic Director PJ Powers

DEAR FRIENDS,

Welcome to world premiere of *The Birth of the Pill*, launching the inaugural season in our new home, as we also celebrate TimeLine's 30th Anniversary.

These multiple milestones coalesce during what has already been an extraordinary year, opening our doors in Uptown and ushering in a new era for this theatre company.

Over the first months in this facility, it's been incredibly rewarding and humbling for our team, seeing the community response to all that this home has to offer and witnessing a long-held vision brought to life. It's a space designed for theatre, education, and community engagement—inviting you to arrive early and stay late for experiences extending beyond our stage.

We couldn't be prouder to begin this season with a new play that's been a passion project long in the making—a story about an invention that changed the world.

The play's evolution has been one of the most thrilling collaborations we've experienced over nearly 100 TimeLine productions. Playwright Jessica Huang has transformed Jonathan Eig's book into a stirring piece of theatre for this moment. She's built upon his research, bringing her own voice and perspective to a play that's not only in conversation with the book, but also in conversation with how history is told.

The script's development has been even more remarkable, started pre-COVID and crafted parallel to history that continues to be (re)written. The world and our country's political context has notably changed, with reproductive rights back at the forefront of debate and policy-making.



The origin story for the play began 15 years ago, when I received a package at our former home on Wellington Avenue, including a note that began: "I'm a neighbor and a fan."

It was from Jonathan Eig, biographer and journalist, whose acclaimed body of work includes books about iconic figures such as Jackie Robinson, Lou Gehrig, Al Capone, Muhammad Ali, and most recently, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for which Jonathan received the Pulitzer Prize.

The unexpected, beguiling package included some of those books, and an invitation to start a dialogue, if ever TimeLine wanted to adapt one into a play.

Thus began a conversation and friendship that has blossomed over multiple years into a cherished, collaborative partnership. One that led us to commission a play based upon *The Birth of the Pill* (a book that was still being written when Jonathan first made contact).

Jonathan is the first to acknowledge that his book should have gone further to interrogate and explore testimonials from those Puerto Rican women, and Jessica's script aims to bring that crucial aspect more into focus.



Director Sandra Marquez (from left), playwright Jessica Huang, and author Jonathan Eig at TimeLine during rehearsals.

Pairing Jessica—one of the country's most exciting playwrights, whom we'd long admired—with the ever-self-effacing Jonathan has been remarkable to witness. She embraced the opportunity to not merely stage the book, but to create something new and theatrical that springboards from what he wrote.

In the book, subtitled "How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Changed The World," Jonathan focused his lens on the infamous activist Margaret Sanger, gynecologist John Rock, philanthropist Katharine McCormick, and scientist Gregory Pincus, as well as Pincus' research fellow, Min Chueh Chang.

Jessica further explores those renowned figures, while also broadening her lens to center an often under-explored and overlooked yet essential aspect of the pill's evolution—the stories of Puerto Rican women whose lives and bodies were exploited without being informed that they were participating in a drug trial.

Artistic Director PJ Powers (standing left) welcomes the cast, production team, staff, and guests to first rehearsal of *The Birth of the Pill* in August.



Jonathan is the first to acknowledge that his book should have gone further to interrogate and explore testimonials from those Puerto Rican women, and Jessica's script aims to bring that crucial aspect more into focus.

Just as the Pill had multiple crusaders bringing it into existence—sung and unsung—so too did this production. Leading the charge is director Sandra Marquez, one of Chicago's most admired artists, whose depth of talent traverses acting, teaching, directing, and visionary leadership on and off stage.

With her team of designers, this production showcases the adaptability of our new performance space. It's built to convert into various stage and seating configurations—allowing us to orient the audience-to-artist relationship in a way that best suits each play. We opened this spring with a three-quarter thrust configuration for *An Enemy of the People*. This show is designed in a proscenium layout, featuring the first of many transformations yet to come.

Bringing any new play to the stage is a significant and lengthy undertaking. I must thank and salute TimeLine's dear friend and advocate, Janice Feinberg, who has been an invaluable champion of the project from the beginning. This play wouldn't have been possible without her steadfast support.

As we embark on our 30th season, I can't wait to share with you all that lies ahead, including the razor-sharp, award-winning comedy *Home, I'm Darling*; the beautiful and searing Pulitzer Prize finalist *The Far Country*; and the heralded musical *Merrily We Roll Along*, a not-to-be-missed Sondheim classic.

I'm so grateful you're joining us for this year of new beginnings. I look forward to the provocative conversations and continued discoveries we'll have together, as we write a new chapter for TimeLine.

Best,

THE PEOPLE

Real-Life Characters in the Story of the Pill

MARGARET SANGER (1879–1966) was a suffragette, nurse, founder of Planned Parenthood, and advocate for birth control. She was born into a large Irish Catholic family. When her mother died at age 50 from tuberculosis, Sanger blamed her mother's death on the strain of having given birth 11 times and miscarrying seven times. She is best known for being the public face of activism for birth control, but her legacy is marred by espousing eugenicist tenets as part of her case for birth control.



Margaret Sanger, circa 1917 (left), and Katherine McCormick, circa 1913. (Library of Congress / Wikimedia Commons)

KATHARINE DEXTER MCCORMICK (1875–1967) was born to a wealthy and prominent Chicago family. Education was encouraged by her father, and she was one of the first women to graduate from MIT, earning a degree in biology. She married Stanley McCormick, heir to the International Harvester Company fortune, and cared for him during his schizophrenia. When he died, she inherited his \$15 million estate. She and Sanger became friends after meeting at a lecture and connected over the issues of women's rights and birth control. She would use her inheritance to be the primary funder of the development of the Pill.

DR. MIN CHUEH CHANG (1908–1991) was born in China, the son of a magistrate. He received a good education, earning a bachelor's degree in animal psychology from Beijing's Tsinghua University in 1933. Chang won a fellowship to study abroad, and so he opted to study agricultural science at Edinburgh University. At Edinburgh, he experienced racism and hostility, so he transferred to Cambridge to finish his studies. In 1945, he joined Pincus at the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology. His research would be vital to developing in vitro fertilization.

DR. JOHN ROCK (1890–1984) was raised a devout Catholic in Marlborough, Mass. He received his undergraduate degree and medical degrees at Harvard, graduating in 1918, and worked at several Boston hospitals before beginning his own obstetrics practice. He married Anna Thorndike and the two had four daughters and a son. He became primarily known for successfully helping women who struggled with infertility. In 1936, he started one of the first rhythm method clinics in Boston after the Catholic Church approved it as a method of birth control.

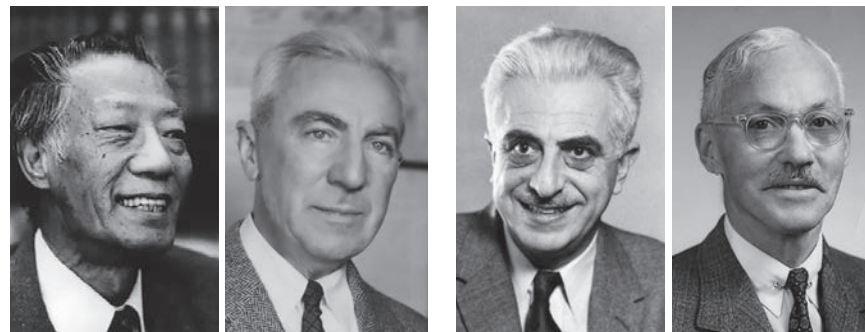
DR. GREGORY GOODWIN "GOODY" PINCUS (1903–1967) was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants living in Woodbine, N.J. He won a scholarship to Cornell University, where he studied biology, and landed an associate professorship at Harvard. He worked to achieve in vitro fertilization and claimed to have induced artificial reproduction in rabbits. However, the publication of Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *A Brave New World*—about a scientifically engineered future society—led to public fears about "test tube babies." He was decried as a Dr. Frankenstein. After Harvard denied him tenure, he founded the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology.

"[I realize] how few precious facts ... in the laboratory may resonate into the lives of men everywhere, bring order into disorder, hope to the hopeless, life to the dying. That this is the magic and mystery of our time is sometimes grasped and often missed."

— Dr. Gregory Pincus in a letter to a friend, musing on how he had come to think about his scientific work

DR. CLARENCE J. GAMBLE (1894–1966) was a medical doctor and heir to the Procter & Gamble soap company fortune. A graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Medical School, he became involved in the birth control movement but diverged from some of his peers by advocating and financially supporting eugenics. He founded the Human Betterment League, which supported forced sterilization of groups he assumed to be of low IQ, targeting people by race and low income. He took over, funded, and expanded U.S.-founded clinics in Puerto Rico that sterilized women both voluntarily and involuntarily.

Min Chueh Chang (from left), John Rock, Gregory Goodwin "Goody" Pincus, and Clarence Gamble.



William Vogt's seminal book *Road to Survival*; Mike Wallace and Margaret Sanger in a still from their 1957 interview.

WILLIAM VOGT (1902–1968) was an ornithologist and ecologist. He wrote the book *Road to Survival*, which laid out his concerns about deforestation, erosion, and the carrying capacity of the planet. The book was influential to the environmental movement but also expressed fears about overpopulation. This led him to support population control. Vogt became the National Director of Planned Parenthood in 1948.

MIKE WALLACE (1918–2012) is best known as a hard-hitting interviewer during his many years on the CBS news program *60 Minutes*. His guests often experienced what came to be known as "Mike fright" in advance of interviews because of his probing questions. Wallace was born in Brookline, Mass., and graduated from the University of Michigan. He began his career with a variety of jobs in journalism, radio announcing, and even game show hosting, and served during World War II as a naval communications officer. In 1963 he joined CBS as a news reporter and later helped launch *60 Minutes*. His interview with Margaret Sanger aired September 21, 1957, on ABC's *The Mike Wallace Interview*.

THE PILL

A Revolutionary Invention

THE QUESTION OF BIRTH CONTROL has always been about how to prevent a sperm from fertilizing an egg after intercourse.

Prior to the creation of the Pill, birth control relied primarily on mechanical means such as condoms and diaphragms that are meant to block the sperm and so prevent fertilization of the egg. The problem with these methods is that they can be ineffective if they are not fitted properly, or they can malfunction.

Spermicides have been attempted as far back as antiquity, including an ancient Egyptian suppository made of crocodile dung and fermented dough. However, spermicides and suppositories were also not necessarily effective and were prone to quackery. Douching after intercourse was also an option. For a time in the first decades of the 20th century, Lysol ran advertisements alluding euphemistically to “female hygiene,” which led many women to make themselves sick using Lysol as a uterine wash. A viable and safe spermicide wouldn’t be developed until the 1950s.

The Pill was revolutionary because it relied on an understanding of the cycle of people who can get pregnant. Hormone shifts in the body signal the release of an egg. If the egg is fertilized by a sperm through intercourse during the fertile window, it implants on the uterine lining, where the placenta forms. If an egg is not fertilized, the uterine lining thickens and is shed in monthly menstruation.

The rhythm method, taught in Dr. John Rock’s Boston clinics and approved by the Catholic Church, involved counting days from menstruation to estimate the body’s most fertile time, then avoiding sex during that window. However, it was difficult to determine the fertile window and required both parties to avoid sex.



A bottle of Enovid 10mg—the first combined oral contraceptive pill sold in the United States. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Pill used synthetic hormones that mimic women’s natural sex hormones (progesterone and estrogen), convincing the body that it was pregnant so it would not release any more eggs while the person took the Pill. It was revolutionary both because it used this physiological understanding, and also because it could be taken by a woman independently and did not require the agreement or assistance of her partner during intercourse.

The Pill was first tested on women recruited through Rock’s infertility practice, where the study was presented as fertility research. Later, Rock, Dr. Gregory Pincus, and Dr. Min Chueh Chang undertook the first large-scale clinical trials in Puerto Rico, funded by Katharine McCormick and supported by Margaret Sanger. The Puerto Rican women involved were not aware they were taking part in a clinical trial, only that they were being offered a means of birth control.

During the trial, the Pill was initially given at a dosage that was five to 100 times as strong as modern dosages. It also initially included just progesterone; it was only when pharmaceutical company G.D. Searle sent a batch that accidentally included a small amount of synthetic estrogen that they learned estrogen helped minimize side effects experienced by the women. Side effects reported during the trial included vomiting, nausea, headaches,

bleeding, and uterine pain. Three women died during the trial, but the causes of their deaths were not investigated.

Many women quit the trial because of the discomfort. Afterward, because of the progesterone from the treatment, they experienced what Rock’s infertility clinics called the “Rock rebound” and gave birth at a much higher than average rate—79%.

It is estimated that McCormick contributed about \$2 million dollars to create the Pill, the equivalent of as much as \$30 million today. There were small financial contributions along the way from Planned Parenthood and others, but McCormick was essentially the sole funder of the project.

A Centers for Disease Control (CDC) report covering 2017-2019 showed that 65.3% of women ages 15-49 were using birth control. After sterilization, the Pill was the second-most popular method; use of long-term contraceptives such as implants and IUDs were highest in women in their 20s and 30s.

It’s important to note that the Pill is also used to treat a range of other medical conditions, including endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), dysmenorrhea, menorrhagia, ovarian cysts, irregular periods, PMS and PMDD, menstrual migraines, perimenopause symptoms, iron deficiency, and anemia. It also lowers the risk of endometrial cancers.

Excerpt from *The New York Times* announcement that the Pill has been approved for sale as birth control, May 9, 1960. By the mid-1980s, an estimated 50 to 80 million women worldwide would be taking it.

U. S. APPROVES PILL FOR BIRTH CONTROL

WASHINGTON, May 9 (AP) —For the first time the Food and Drug Administration has approved a pill as safe for contraceptive or birth control use.

“Approval was based on the question of safety,” Associate Commissioner John L. Harvey said today. “We had no choice as to the morality that might be involved.”

THE TIMELINE

The Journey of the Pill

1873 Congress passes the Comstock Act, an anti-obscurity law that prohibits mailing and importing contraceptive information and devices.

1912 Margaret Sanger, a nurse on New York’s Lower East Side, begins envisioning an easy-to-take pill for contraception after witnessing the consequences of unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion among the women she serves.

1914 Sanger coins the term “birth control” and publishes it in her journal, *The Woman Rebel*. She is indicted for violations of the Comstock law; the charges will later be dropped.

October 16, 1916 Sanger opens the first U.S. clinic to educate women about birth control. Ten days later, vice police raid and shut it down.

1917 Sanger meets Katharine McCormick, beginning an enduring friendship. McCormick supports Sanger’s work financially and helps smuggle diaphragms into the United States for her clinics.

1923 Sanger successfully opens the first legal birth control clinic in the United States, providing contraception for medical purposes.

1924 Dr. John Rock joins Harvard Medical School as an assistant in obstetrics. He focuses his Boston practice on treating women with fertility problems.

1929 The human sex hormone estrogen is isolated and identified, laying groundwork for later hormonal contraception.

1930s Through several federal, local and private initiatives—including the United States’ New Deal—maternal and birth control clinics open across Puerto Rico. Doctors at these clinics often focus on sterilizing women.

1936 When the U.S. government suspends funding for clinics in Puerto Rico, Dr. Clarence J. Gamble steps in to fund and expand them. A eugenicist, Gamble promotes voluntary sterilization as population control, but many women are sterilized without informed consent.

1937 Puerto Rico enacts Law 116, establishing a legal framework for state-sponsored sterilization. Promoted by local and U.S. officials, the law treats high birth rates as a root cause of island poverty.

1941 Chemist Russell Marker discovers that Mexican wild yams (*cabeza de negro*) are particularly useful for producing progesterone from plant compounds. His work makes progesterone more affordable and provides an important foundation for hormonal birth control.

1944 Dr. Gregory Goodwin “Goody” Pincus establishes the Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology.

1947 After her husband’s death gives her control of his fortune, McCormick gains the means to provide what will eventually become a roughly \$2 million investment in developing the birth control pill.

1947–1949 “Operation Bootstrap,” an industrialization program heavily funded and directed by the U.S. government, brings factories to Puerto Rico. Many factory clinics offer female employees birth control, including sterilization.

1950–1958 Gamble supports an island-wide campaign promoting female sterilization, or *la operación*, in Puerto Rico. By 1970, one-third of Puerto Rican women of childbearing age will be sterilized, often without full information or informed consent.

January 1951 Sanger, now 72, meets Pincus at a dinner party in New York and implores him to pursue her “magic pill.” Pincus says hormones may make it possible, but he needs funding.

April 25, 1951 Sanger secures a small Planned Parenthood grant for Pincus. He begins to test whether progesterone can inhibit ovulation and prevent pregnancy.

January 1952 Pincus confirms that progesterone inhibits ovulation in rabbits and rats. Planned Parenthood considers the work too risky to continue funding. At a conference, Pincus meets Rock and learns that Rock has already been testing progesterone injections on women being treated for infertility.

June 8, 1953 Sanger brings McCormick to meet Pincus. McCormick gives him \$40,000 and promises additional funding.

1954 Pincus joins forces with Rock to begin human trials. In Massachusetts, where anti-birth-control laws are especially restrictive, they recruit 50 women through Rock’s infertility practice, presenting the study as fertility research.

1955 Results from the human trials are convincing: None of the 50 women ovulates while taking the drug. Pincus and Rock conclude they have found an effective oral contraceptive.

December 1955 At a scientific conference in Canada, Rock presents evidence that the progesterone pill inhibits ovulation. Word spreads through the scientific community and drug industry that Pincus and Rock have developed a birth control pill.

1956 Rock selects G.D. Searle’s progestin formulation, Enovid, for large-scale clinical trials.

April 1956 To avoid restrictive U.S. laws, Rock and Pincus launch the first large-scale clinical trials for the Pill in Puerto Rico. Hundreds of women participate and many experience significant side effects; they are not informed that they are participating in an experimental drug trial.

THE TIMELINE continues on Backstory, page 9 ...

THE TIMELINE continues ...

December 1956 Dr. Edris Rice-Wray, the medical director of the Puerto Rico trials, reports that Enovid provides complete protection against pregnancy but causes too many side effects for general acceptance. Pincus and Rock continue the trials, convinced the drug is safe. The dosage being tested is 10 milligrams (mg). During the trials, they also discover that combining estrogen with progestin improves cycle control and reduces breakthrough bleeding, helping establish the combination Pill.

Spring 1957 Pincus launches additional full-scale trials in Haiti and Mexico City.

Summer 1957 The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves Enovid for treatment of severe menstrual disorders—but not contraception—and requires the label to warn that the drug prevents ovulation. By late 1959, more than half a million American women will be taking Enovid for menstrual disorders, allowing many to use it for contraceptive purposes.

October 29, 1959 Searle applies to the FDA to license 10mg Enovid as a contraceptive. The application is based on field trials involving 897 women.

May 9, 1960 The FDA approves Enovid as a birth control pill. Searle becomes the first and only pharmaceutical company to sell an oral contraceptive, giving it a lucrative monopoly.

1962 With 1.2 million American women on the Pill, Searle’s dominance ends when Syntex receives FDA approval for Ortho-Novum, one of the first competing birth control pills. Reports of serious side effects, including blood clots and heart attacks, begin to spread.

1965 Thirty-five percent of Puerto Rican women have been sterilized amid decades of population-control programs, including those led by Clarence Gamble.

Just five years after FDA approval, more than 6.5 million American women are taking oral contraceptives, making the Pill the most popular form of birth control in the United States.

1966 An FDA task force investigates concerns about the Pill’s side effects, particularly blood clots, cancer, and diabetes. The investigation finds no specific cause but opens the door to lower-dose versions.

1969 Medical journalist Barbara Seaman’s *The Doctor’s Case Against the Pill* brings national attention to the drug’s dangerous side effects.

1970 Influenced by Seaman’s book, U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson convenes hearings on the safety of the Pill. Feminists disrupt the male-dominated hearings and demand that women be informed of the drug’s risks. The FDA subsequently requires oral contraceptive packages to include patient information detailing possible side effects.

1980s New low-dosage versions of the Pill are introduced. Soon only 3.4% of birth control pills on the market are the original high-dosage pill.

1988 At the FDA’s urging, drug companies remove the original high-dosage oral contraceptives from the market.

1990 According to an annual FDA Consumer report, the Pill is considered safe and effective by the government, medical establishment, and public.

2010 The Pill marks its 50th anniversary.

June 24, 2022 In his concurring opinion for the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision—which overturns *Roe v. Wade*—Justice Clarence Thomas writes that the Court should also reconsider *Griswold v. Connecticut* (the ruling protecting a married couple’s right to use birth control), among other privacy-based rights.

THE PSEUDOSCIENCE

The History of Eugenics

THE WORD EUGENICS WAS COINED

by British biologist Francis Galton in 1883 by putting together the Greek words for “good” and “origins.” This pseudoscience relied on the notion that humans could be perfected by selective breeding. By the 1920s and ‘30s, eugenics had developed wide political and cultural support and was being applied by scientists, doctors, and many in the general public.

Eugenics divided itself into multiple camps: one was “positive” and promoted “the fit” to procreate; another was “negative,” seeking to prevent the “unfit” from reproducing through sterilization or other methods.

Eugenics was always a vehicle for racism, nativism, and the oppression of those with physical or intellectual differences. Some eugenicists claimed that poverty and criminality were heritable traits. By the middle of the 20th century, eugenicists were also stoking fears that the growing world population could outpace the food supply and advocating for population control.

“Birth control is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit [and] of preventing the birth of defectives.”

— Margaret Sanger, 1920

The rise of eugenics aligned with the time period during which Margaret Sanger was trying to garner support for the birth control pill. She began delivering speeches for eugenics organizations and promoted the Pill as a component of eugenics in practice. Historians disagree as to what level Sanger’s support of eugenics was strategy and what

was genuine belief. Some say that she did not believe in racial eugenics or that poverty was a heritable trait; her speeches certainly suggest she supported population control.

A clear cost of the eugenics movement was that clinics run by Clarence Gamble in Puerto Rico had the express eugenicist goal of population control. Women were encouraged to undergo sterilization and many were sterilized without their informed consent. By 1965, 35% of Puerto Rican women had been sterilized.

Sanger’s support of eugenics led to protests by Black Americans during the 1950s, who were concerned that Planned Parenthood clinics were seeking to limit the Black population. Today, Sanger’s support of eugenics remains intertwined with the creation of the birth control pill. It has led to critiques of her, Planned Parenthood, and the Pill itself.

Eugenics fell out of favor after World War II as the public came to understand the full scope of the Holocaust and the horror of Nazi eugenicist experiments and practices.

While firmly debunked by science, eugenics still has sway among some communities. Recent articles in *Nature* and *Science* warn of a new rise in eugenicist ideas tied to easy access to genetic testing as well as recent political movements that center on nativism, racial purity, and hostility to immigration.

A Eugenics Society exhibit, circa 1930s, including advice to “marry wisely.” (Wellcome Library / Wikimedia Commons)



AN ESSAY

What Colonization Does

WRITTEN BY LIZA ANN ACOSTA
CO-DRAMATURG, *THE BIRTH OF THE PILL*

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND PUERTO RICO is complicated and painful. Unfortunately, the foundation of that relationship is built on strong racist and colonialist ideas that still persist to this day.

The year 1898, when the United States invaded and seized control of Puerto Rico from Spain, changed the course of the island’s modern history, tying us to a metropolis that saw Puerto Ricans as the “white man’s burden” to control, assimilate, and exploit. I will not list here all the ways in which this has happened over the last century, as many are carefully recorded and available for review. Puerto Rico’s colonial history is not unique nor uncommon, but given the ease of access to information, what still surprises me are the historical events that manage to remain invisible today.

Jessica Huang’s play asks us to reconsider this continued silence around scientific advances, where the sacrifice and exploitation of marginalized populations in the development of such barely occupy a footnote.

The character Ramona comes to life to ask questions, to speak, to witness, to listen in to moments where she should have had more agency. Ramona reminds us that these trials were not about our rights to make decisions about our bodies and our future (although they did accomplish that eventually), but rather a continuation of eugenic policies aimed to control our population, alongside the sterilization program started two decades earlier.

The argument connecting poverty to overpopulation as a reason to conduct these trials on Puerto Rican women still places the onus



Image from a clinic during the 1956 contraceptive pill trials in Puerto Rico. (Wikimedia Commons)

of economic oppression on us instead of on the policies of a government that refused to raise wages for workers and that focused on political suppression and aggressive military control of the island. The concern is not about women’s rights or how to alleviate economic stress, the concern is about land grabbing and continued experimentation on the island. Consider: Even though the Pill had been approved by 1960, why did the experiments continue until 1964?

This is the reality today: We are sprayed with pesticides and other chemicals with no advance warning. The sky glows red in the night as companies like Monsanto conduct highly secretive food and plant experiments that have polluted the water of my neighbors at home. It still goes on.

The most disappointing part is that the Puerto Rican government is so corrupt that it is shamelessly complicit in its people’s demise. They themselves joke about our dead (leaked Telegram messages from 2019 spoke about the thousands of people who lost their lives during Hurricane Maria) in the same way that Cornelius Rhoades “joked” about injecting cancer into Puerto Rican patients as a way to get rid of the “laziest and dirtiest” people he had ever met.

Many of my people have learned to hate themselves. That’s what colonization does.

Liza Ann is a Puerto Rican writer, translator, deviser, and dramaturg whose work centers Latina voices, stories, and experience on the American stage.

THE INTERVIEW

Jessica Huang, Jonathan Eig, and Sandra Marquez



Playwright Jessica Huang (from left), author Jonathan Eig, and director Sandra Marquez.

As rehearsals for *The Birth of the Pill* started, marketing team member Samanta Cubias (SC) spoke with playwright Jessica Huang (JH), author Jonathan Eig (JE), and director Sandra Marquez (SM) about the book and its road to the stage, what's unlocked as history is told across generations, and the character you'll most want to see.

(SC) Jonathan, what first drew you to the story of the birth of the Pill?

(JE) I heard a sermon, actually, by a rabbi talking about how we all have a responsibility to act in partnership with God to try to change the world. And he cited the birth control pill as an example and said that maybe it was the most important invention of the 20th century.

And I thought, it really *was* important. It changed not just reproductive rights, it changed human dynamics. It changed marriage. Education changed. The labor market changed. Everything changed. But who invented it? I had no idea.

So I started looking and found this incredible tale of these rebels who did it all underground. It's an underdog story. That's what really drew me to it.

(SC) How did we come to option your book?

(JE) I've been a fan of TimeLine Theatre for almost 30 years. It was my neighborhood

theater, so I would go all the time, and I got to know some of the people.

I mentioned to PJ once that I was a writer and I'd love to see one of my books on stage someday. But it wasn't until I met Janice Feinberg, who said to both me and PJ, "This book should be made into a play," that PJ said, "Yeah, that's the one."

(SC) Jessica, tell us the story of being commissioned to write this play.

(JH) It began with a meeting I had with PJ. We both really appreciated each other's approach to thinking and talking about history. And then I got an email from him saying, "What do you think about this book?"

I read the book, loved it, and wrote a treatment that was a little audacious. It was a treatment about the footnotes of the book. What if they were in the center?

(SC) The cover page of your script describes the play as being "in conversation" with Jonathan's book. What does that mean?

(JH) The play *is* the book, is the retelling of this history. And it's also a highlighting, lifting, examining, bringing in another perspective *to* the book, which is the story of a fictionalized woman named Ramona Delgado, who is representative of the Puerto Rican women on whom the Pill was tested.

My husband is Puerto Rican, so when I told him, "I'm being asked to tell the story of the invention of the birth control pill," Ricardo

Marquez (from left), Huang, and Eig during rehearsal with actors María Victoria Martínez and Mary Beth Fisher.



said, "Well, on the island there's a very different feeling about the Pill." People have told me they refuse to take it, actually, because of how it was invented.

So it felt really important to me to see what happens when the history of the women on whom the Pill was tested non-consensually encounters a modern telling of the story.

(SC) You've both spoken about the idea of what changes when histories are retold generation after generation.

(JE) Yes, Jessica and I have talked a lot about how history changes, and how our perception of a story changes, over time.

I mean, what is history? It's the telling of a story, right? And it's told over and over again. So it's not ever set in stone. And we're figuring it out as we go along together.

The events described in the book and play take place in the 1950s and '60s. I was writing this book in 2012, 2013. Now we're doing a play 12, 13 years later. And at each stop along the way, the story looks different.

I think it's important to think about history as being something that's not just in the past, but it's running through our lives, and it will be a different story 20 years from now.

(SC) What has surprised or inspired you both the most during this process?

(JE) Having the chance to actually connect with somebody who's deconstructing my book and asking questions of it. Why did I pick four crusaders? Why did I leave out [Min Chueh Chang]? Why did I devote only a handful of pages to the women in Puerto Rico who were experimented on? I think that anytime you retell or hand off a story to another storyteller, you should challenge the old versions.

(JH) I was inspired by the way Jon's book captured what life was like before the Pill, and what life was like after the Pill. The sense of limitation and the sense of absolute transformation that happened—the explosion. It changed everything about the world.

BACKSTORY: The Credits

Maren Robinson
and **Liza Anne Acosta**
Dramaturgy, Research, Writing

PJ Powers and Rosie Schultz
Additional Contributions

Lara Goetsch
Editing and Graphic Design

Michal Janicki
The Birth of the Pill
promotional image design

Backstory is published to accompany each production.

THERE'S MORE ONLINE!

Don't miss any of the materials and events created to spark your curiosity and enhance your time with *The Birth of the Pill*!

Visit timelinetheatre.com/explore-pill to explore the show's discussion events, digital versions of this *Backstory* and the Program Book, additional resources, our blog Behind the 'Line, ways to take action, and much more.



Scan to view
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“I think it’s important to think about history as being something that’s not just in the past, but it’s running through our lives, and it will be a different story 20 years from now.”

— Jonathan Eig

(SC) The play moves between history and memory and theatrical imagination. Sandra, how do you approach putting that on stage?

(SM) I think it’s super fun. When you get a really good group of actors, design team, and writers, it’s a joy to go in and figure out all the different opportunities.

(JH) Our cast is so good. It’s crazy. They’re so, so good.

(SM) Every day, it’s coming into a playground. This moment feels fun in this way. And this moment feels poignant in this way. We’re teasing out all those different colors.

It’s also delightful to watch the collaboration between these two. It feels like there’s jazz happening, there’s riffing going on.

I love new plays. There’s something joyous about everybody adding their ingredients to the recipe and then tasting it and going, oh, we need a little bit of this or a little bit of that.

Collaboration in action! Huang (left) and Eig exchanging notes during rehearsals for *The Birth of the Pill*.



(JE) Can I just say that that’s normal for you guys. But it’s totally trippy for me. I don’t get to hear my characters speak. They’re long gone. I don’t get feedback from them. But here you can bring them to life, and you get the feedback from each other, from the actors. To me, it’s so exciting. And it makes me jealous that I’m stuck with just my dry pieces of paper and my dead characters.

(SC) What do you hope that people take away from the show?

(JH) I’ve been talking to my mom a lot, and it’s just incredible to have a conversation about this thing, this pill, that impacted her in a really particular way. We come from different generations, obviously, of women and of feminism. But we’re finding ways that we can share language and experience, and ways we can teach each other. So I think the intergenerational conversation is really exciting.

(JE) I hope people have conversations about the idea that we don’t have to accept the world as it is. These people who invented the birth control pill were imagining a radically different world, and they set out to try to make it happen. And the odds of their success were really slim.

Did they make mistakes along the way? Did they hurt people? We need to talk about that, too. How we can change the world *and* the risks involved in doing that. But imagine a world without safe, effective birth control, how different it would be today.

(SM) How do we do better when we are exploring or inventing to move things forward? How does this story help us to be more compassionate, to be smarter, to be more aware, and to move forward ethically?

(SC) Why should people see this show?

(SM) Because it’s a mind-blowing story told in a fun, interesting, and poignant way.

(JE) It’s sexy, it’s important. And there’s a character named Jonathan Eig who may or may not come off so well, and you’ve got to find out for yourself.

BACKSTAGE

Your Role: Vital To Sustaining TimeLine’s Work



Join our growing community of supporters!

WE’RE THRILLED TO WELCOME YOU to TimeLine’s new home! Whether you’ve been following us for the last 30 years, enjoyed an open house event or *An Enemy of the People* last spring, or are joining for the first time, you are a key member of our community. And **you’re here at just the right time!**

As a nonprofit theatre company, TimeLine relies on donations from individuals, organizations, and foundations. With ticket sales covering only a portion of our costs, supporters of our Annual Fund are crucial to propelling TimeLine’s mission and vision forward.

Learn more about deepening your connection to our work—at every giving level—at timelinetheatre.com/individual-giving.

YOUR CONTRIBUTION TODAY:

- **Inspires the next generation of Chicago artists** and thought leaders by sharing the power of theatre through our education programs.
- **Sustains a vibrant community** of artists, staff, and teaching artists who make our work possible.
- **Invests in our people and organizational resources** to ensure long-term impact of the company’s mission.



We hope you will join us with a gift to our Annual Fund today!



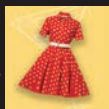
ABOVE (FROM LEFT): TimeLine Company and Staff with honored guests at the Civic Celebration in March: Nora Daley, Juliet Hart, Elizabeth K. Auman, Nick Bowling, PJ Powers, Lara Goetsch, Sophie Meiko, Mica Cole, Leni Manaa-Hoppenworth, Nat Madson, Anne Voshel, Mayor Brandon Johnson, Angela Clay, and Ciere Boatright. BELOW (FROM LEFT): TimeLine’s vertical marquee blade sign; guests mingle at Gala Opening Night of *An Enemy of the People*; TimeLine South participants explore the exhibit gallery.



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The Inaugural Season at 5035 N. Broadway

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CHICAGO PREMIERE
BY LAURA WADE
DIRECTED BY MECHELLE MOE
NOV 11 – DEC 13, 2026

A darkly funny exploration of marriage, nostalgia, and the allure—and delusion—of the “perfect” past.

THE FAR COUNTRY



CHICAGO PREMIERE
BY LLOYD SUH
DIRECTED BY HELEN YOUNG
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A sweeping, urgent, and deeply human epic about immigration, identity, and the struggle to claim a future in America.

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG



MUSIC & LYRICS BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM
BOOK BY GEORGE FURTH
BASED ON THE ORIGINAL PLAY BY
GEORGE S. KAUFMAN & MOSS HART

DIRECTED BY NICK BOWLING
MUSIC DIRECTION BY OTTO VOGEL
CHOREOGRAPHY BY ERIN KILMURRAY
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Spanning 20 years and moving backward through time, this bittersweet, Tony Award-winning musical is about friendship, ambition, and the choices that shape a life.



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A LUNCHEON TO BENEFIT



BACKSTORY LIVE!

**Behind the Scenes
with Jonathan Eig and Jessica Huang**

**Thursday, October 1, 2026
12pm – 2pm**

University Club of Chicago
76 East Monroe Street, Chicago

Join for an exclusive luncheon
and discussion celebrating
TimeLine's 30th Anniversary
Season and our production
The Birth of the Pill.

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