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*Dramatic Publishing*

# THE FASTEST WOMAN ALIVE

by  
KAREN SUNDE

This play is fiction, based in part upon, but not a reproduction of, actual events.



**Dramatic Publishing**  
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois

# THE FASTEST WOMAN ALIVE

A Play in Two Acts

Astonishing story of Jackie Cochran. Spans 1914-1980.

Includes Chuck Yeager, Amelia Earhart, the WASP (Women's Air Force Service Pilots), the Mercury 13 (secret female astronauts), etc.

Cast: Variable. As few as 5 (2m., 3w., up to 20 / 8m., 12w., or more). Women may portray men, and men, women, by changing hats. To use 5—

JACKIE (COCHRAN) - attractive, tough, 8 to 60s - also plays YOUNG JACKIE

EARHART - attractive, gentler, 30s - plays:

AMELIA EARHART, JERRIE COBB, REPORTER 2, GIRL, PILOT 2, RECRUIT 1, RECRUIT 4, TRAINEE 1, TRAINEE 2, TRAINEE 3, BRUMMELL, WASP 1, WASP 2, WASP 4, ANNOUNCER 5, ANNOUNCER 8, WOMAN, CANDIDATE 4, ANNOUNCER 11, NASA OFFICIAL, SECRETARY, ANNOUNCER 13, VOICE

JILL - spirited, 20s - plays:

JILL, JILL JR., MOTHER, CHILD 1, REPORTER 1, GOSSIP, COMMENTATOR, PILOT 3, ANNOUNCER 3, RECRUIT 2, RECRUIT 3, WASP 3, ANNOUNCER 4, ANNOUNCER 7, NEWSCASTER 1, GLENNIS, SHARON, ANNOUNCER 9, CANDIDATE 1, CANDIDATE 2, CANDIDATE 3, HART, NEWSCASTER 2, MANUEL

YEAGER - hearty, practical, 20s to 50 - plays:

CHUCK YEAGER, HAP (GENERAL ARNOLD),  
LOVELACE (DR. RANDY), LOUDSPEAKER 1,  
HUSKY, SHOPKEEPER, MECHANIC, PRIEST, PHOTOGRAPHER, COUNTRY DOCTOR, ANNOUNCER 2, PILOT 1, INSTRUCTOR, LOUDSPEAKER 2, ANNOUNCER 6, CANDIDATE 5

FLOYD - cultured leader, with humor, 40s to 60s - plays:

FLOYD ODLUM, IKE (GENERAL EISENHOWER),  
LBJ (V.P. LYNDON JOHNSON), CHILD 2, ANNOUNCER 1, FARMER, ASSISTANT, TRAINEE 4, COMMANDER, REPRESENTATIVE LIME (HARRY), WASP 5, ANNOUNCER 10, ATTENDANT 1, ATTENDANT 2, NORTHROP, LOUDSPEAKER 3, ANNOUNCER 12

#### PRODUCTION HISTORY:

Readings: Playwrights Theatre of N.J.; La Mama, NYC;  
Jean Cocteau Rep., NYC.

Productions: Fun(d)raising Players, Cape Cod; Luna Stage, Montclair, N.J.; Praxis Theatre Projects, Theatre Row, NYC.

ROLES (in order of appearance)

YEAGER (CHUCK)	RECRUIT 4
JACKIE	ASSISTANT
VOICE	VOICES
CHILD 1	JILL
CHILD 2	COMPANY
MOTHER	INSTRUCTOR
ANNOUNCER 1	TRAINEE 1
REPORTER 1	TRAINEE 2
REPORTER 2	TRAINEE 3
LOUD SPEAKER 1	TRAINEE 4
HUSKY	BRUMMELL
FARMER	LOUD SPEAKER 2
YOUNG JACKIE	COMMANDER
SHOPKEEPER	WASP 1
FLOYD ODLUM	WASP 2
GIRL	WASP 3
MECHANIC	WASP 4
EARHART (AMELIA)	WASP 5
COMMENTATOR	ANNOUNCER 4
PRIEST	REPRESENTATIVE LIME
GOSSIP	ANNOUNCER 5
PHOTOGRAPHER	ANNOUNCER 6
COUNTRY DOCTOR	ANNOUNCER 7
ANNOUNCER 2	IKE (GEN.EISENHOWER)
HAP (GEN. ARNOLD)	NEWS CASTER 1
PILOT 1	GLENNIS
PILOT 2	COBB (JERRIE)
PILOT 3	ANNOUNCER 8
ANNOUNCER 3	SHARON
RECRUIT 1	LOVELACE (DR. RANDY)
RECRUIT 2	JILL JR
RECRUIT 3	WOMAN

ANNOUNCER 9  
ANNOUNCER 10  
CANDIDATE 1  
ATTENDANT 1  
CANDIDATE 2  
ATTENDANT 2  
CANDIDATE 3  
CANDIDATE 4  
NORTHROP  
LOUDSPEAKER 3  
HART (JANE)

NEWSCASTER 2  
LBJ (V.P. LYNDON JOHN-  
SON)  
ANNOUNCER 11  
CANDIDATE 5  
NASA OFFICIAL  
ANNOUNCER 12  
DOCTOR (NO LINES)  
SECRETARY  
MANUEL  
ANNOUNCER 13

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

To portray the world of aviation over time, simplicity, clarity and speed are key. Like its heroine, this play must move. You'll find actor rhythms and sound can create and change the scene, so that the staging resembles a kaleidoscoping carousel from which actors step, then return as other characters. Lighting and music can work magic. Projections are also useful, but not essential.

At the end you'll find alternate opening pages that include—if you choose—the voice in Jackie's mind as she dives through the sky.

So ready or not, here we go!



# ACT ONE

*(Open stage, spectacular sky scrim.*

*Indented dialogue is a simultaneous scene, sometimes in JACKIE's memory.*

*Dark. Roar of two jet engines. Radio voices.)*

YEAGER. Now climb. And top off at 45,000 feet.

JACKIE. I read you, Yeager—nine miles straight up?

*(Silhouettes of the two pilots in separate cockpits becoming visible.)*

JACKIE. Glorious day for it.

YEAGER. Steady...

JACKIE. I read 20,000 feet.

YEAGER. Take it slow.

JACKIE. 35,000. Don't fly so close to me.

YEAGER. Gotta see your hands on the controls, Jackie.

CHILD 1. What's that?

CHILD 2. What'cha looking at?

CHILD 1. In the sky.

JACKIE. Hey, look—it's high noon, but light's fading.

*(Scrim at sunset, will keep darkening.)*

YEAGER. Yee-up.

CHILD 2. Wow. Some kinda bird machine?

CHILD 1. I want it, Joe.

YEAGER. How's she feel?

JACKIE. Ready for everything. 40,000...

CHILD 1. I want it!

YEAGER. At the top you'll want to roll, but do not try it.

Repeat.

JACKIE. Why not?

YEAGER. Fuel can't feed at zero gravity; your engine'll stop.

JACKIE. I take it you tried? 44,000...

YEAGER. Concentrate. All dials read OK?

JACKIE. Look up! My God. Stars!

YEAGER. You know, most guys would look back to earth.

JACKIE. It's the edge of space, Yeager. What happened to the sun?

YEAGER. You there yet?

JACKIE. Yeah. 45,000 feet.

YEAGER. Leveling now. You ready for this?

JACKIE. Bet your last two bits.

YEAGER. You are gonna wish to hell you wore the G suit.

JACKIE. Nope. I'm doing it the way you did.

YEAGER. Stubborn...

JACKIE. So I split an S curve, then dive, full throttle, straight at the ground?

YEAGER. That's it. Now, Jackie...

JACKIE. I'm ready, Yeager.

YEAGER. A pack of mighty men lost nerve half way down. There's no skin off no lady who does. And no one'll be the wiser.

JACKIE. Except you.

YEAGER. If you want to stop the dive at any point, pull out easy, or you'll stall.

JACKIE. I'm diving now. You can sit up here working your jaw or you can come along.

YEAGER. Damn, woman! (*Roar of jets diving. Through it, other voices intersect.*)

MOTHER. Bessie Lee! Get in here this minute.

JACKIE. Blood rush to my head.

YEAGER. You're looking good.

JACKIE. Blood's leaving my head, pressing down.

YEAGER. Breathe...

MOTHER. Let go your brother. (*Rattle of plane shaking begins.*) Think you're some kinda queen?

YEAGER. Jackie? What's your speed?

JACKIE. Mach .95. (*Rattle increases.*)

MOTHER. You're nothing!

YEAGER. Plane shaking?

JACKIE. Like a wood wagon tearing up a dry creek bed.

MOTHER. You're for making babies, Bessie.

JACKIE. .96. Shit.

YEAGER. Your right wing's dropping. Talk to me.

JACKIE. It's twisting, about to snap off. Now the left's dipping. I can't seem to... .97.

YEAGER. Stay conscious.

MOTHER. Bessie Lee!

YEAGER. Jackie?

JACKIE. Got a bull by the horns. Don't know if I can... .98.

YEAGER. It's your call.

JACKIE. Controls don't work! My cable snap? Shaking like we're about to explode. .99.

YEAGER. What do you see?

JACKIE. See?

YEAGER. Outside your canopy. What do you see?

JACKIE. Nose rear ing, wants to flip me back.

YEAGER. Hold...

JACKIE. I see waves, Yeager, rolling like water over me!

YEAGER (*satisfied*). Yee-up. (*Roar increases. Roar breaks, sudden quiet. Distant "boom."* Calmly—)

JACKIE. Mach 1.01.

YEAGER. Hot dog! You did it, girl.

JACKIE. Why's it so quiet?

YEAGER. Pull out of it! Ground's coming at you damn fast.

JACKIE. I didn't hear a boom.

YEAGER. Going too fast; you're ahead of the boom.

JACKIE. And so smooth...

*(Cheers of crowd. Fanfare. JACKIE, 47, in stunned bliss, and YEAGER, 30, protective of her, come before an excited crowd, 1953.)*

ANNOUNCER 1. And here she is, first woman on earth to break the sound barrier—Jackie Cochran! And with her, our number one fighter ace, Chuck Yeager. How do you feel, Jackie?

JACKIE (*shy*). Thank you.

YEAGER. There's another first—Jackie speechless. But just look at that face. Tells it all.

ANNOUNCER 1. Come on, Jackie. What's it like?

JACKIE. Like...time's behind you.

ANNOUNCER 1. When you break the barrier?

JACKIE. You're inside an explosion.

REPORTER 1 (*to REPORTER 2*). You believe this?

JACKIE. Then suddenly it's silent, but you're still diving, so you know that was it.

REPORTER 2. Jackie Cochran does it again.

ANNOUNCER 1. Any regrets?

JACKIE. Would you pin down my feet? They still aren't touching ground.

REPORTER 1. Unbelievable.

ANNOUNCER 1. Came out of nowhere. Barefoot orphan working the mills.

REPORTER 2. Public eats it up.

ANNOUNCER 1. Jackie make a good student, Chuck?

YEAGER (*guffaw*). Headstrong as hell. Never met a great pilot who wasn't.

ANNOUNCER 1. But did she mind you?

YEAGER. Oh, yeah. I say "burn that engine to a puddle"; she melts it. Red warning lights don't register with Jackie.

ANNOUNCER 1. How long did she train, before making this dive?

YEAGER. How much time you had in a jet—four, five?

JACKIE. Six hours.

ANNOUNCER 1. Hours! You've got to be thrilled, Jackie. Say something.

JACKIE (*deep breath*). Some of you know how I got here, but I'm counting on you to keep your mouths shut. (*Laughter.*)

REPORTER 1. How do you explain your phenomenal success?

JACKIE. I just thank God, and Major Yeager—best pilot on God's green earth—but now I got to talk to Floyd—You here, honey? (*Flashing bulbs, shouts "Miss Cochran," "Jackie," "Over here."*)

LOUDSPEAKER 1. Miss Cochran, the tower's recorder didn't register your boom. They're sorry, but it means

your record is not official. (*Groans from crowd.*) Could you...do it again?

JACKIE. You kidding?

LOUDSPEAKER 1. When can you schedule another flight?

JACKIE. Now! In one hour. (*Crowd reaction.*)

ANNOUNCER 1. She makes it sound like a piece of cake, but when Major Yeager first tried to break the barrier, ninety-nine percent of pilots swore his plane would explode.

JACKIE. And the one who said Chuck might survive wouldn't bet on it. (*Laughter. JACKIE's leaving.*)

ANNOUNCER 1. So what does it take? Vision? Faith?

JACKIE. It's just nobody believes the impossible till somebody does it.

ANNOUNCER 1. What's left, Jackie? Will you be the first woman in space? (*Hit smack on her sore spot, JACKIE covers by joking.*)

JACKIE. Ask the brass. (*Pushing her way out, JACKIE hears a small plane taxiing...*)

ANNOUNCER 1 (*calling after her*) Well you're the fastest learner on earth.

(*...is stopped by her first flight instructor, 1932—she's now 26.*)

HUSKY. Take you three months to get a pilot's license—if you're good. Costs 495 bucks, no refunds, no guarantees.

JACKIE. I'm here on a dare. My friend Floyd bet me the bucks that I couldn't learn to fly in six weeks, 'cause that's exactly the vacation I got saved.

HUSKY. Sorry, Toots. Floyd wins.

JACKIE. But I said “I’m damned if I’ll waste my whole vacation,” and I bet him I’d do it in three.

HUSKY. And next day you’ll solo the Atlantic? Christ, why does every dame think she’s Amelia Earhart.

JACKIE. Who?

HUSKY. You heard me.

JACKIE. It’s just business with me. To peddle my cosmetics.

HUSKY. You tell it, Toots.

JACKIE. So let’s go, Husky.

HUSKY. Wait! You can’t step up there.

JACKIE. This what you steer with?

REPORTER 1. Ever dream you’d come this far, Jackie?

*(HUSKY’s plane takes off; JACKIE, at 5 years of age, yowls as FARMER yells—)*

FARMER. You stole that chicken.

YOUNG JACKIE. I didn’t! Stupid chicken just come ’long behind me.

FARMER. Because you drug a cob of corn ’long behind you on a string.

YOUNG JACKIE. Well the chicken ate my corn, so I ate the chicken.

JACKIE *(turns to us to explain herself)*. Nobody believes me, ’cause I’m the brassiest broad they ever met. Born starving you don’t learn “Excuse me, after you”; you just step up, grab yours, and whoever doesn’t like it can... *(Startled by HUSKY, she’s drawn back into the air, bounced through time and events.)*

HUSKY. Up you go, Toots. She's all yours.

JACKIE. You're letting me solo, Husky? I've only had two lessons.

HUSKY. So show me. (*Sound of plane taking off. JACKIE flying solo—*)

JACKIE. It's magic. I rise on the air, where "No you can't, no you won't" cannot find me.

(*In the bliss of flying, JACKIE floats back to childhood—*)

SHOPKEEPER. What you staring at, young lady?

YOUNG JACKIE. Most beautiful thing in all the world.

SHOPKEEPER. Well right here in the company store, you can buy yourself a chance on that doll.

YOUNG JACKIE. A chance?

SHOPKEEPER. Every twenty-five cents you spend gives you another chance to win.

YOUNG JACKIE. I can win her?

SHOPKEEPER. So what'll you buy?

YOUNG JACKIE. I ain't got twenty-five cents.

JACKIE (*to us*). But I swore I'd work my way, and charm my way, all the way to...

(*Soothing jazz, dancing. JACKIE, elegant, 1932, is out of her cockpit.*)

FLOYD. I'm Floyd Odlum. You work here in Miami?

JACKIE. Winters. My New York company chases its snowbird clientele.

FLOYD. What company is that?



JACKIE (*beat*). Jac que line Cochran Cosmetics?

FLOYD. Has a nice ring.

JACKIE. I picked my name out of a phone book. Does that shock you?

FLOYD. Would you like it to?

JACKIE. Very much.

FLOYD. Then I'm shocked.

(*A GIRL whispers with YOUNG JACKIE—*)

GIRL. That jar's full of chances on the doll?

YOUNG JACKIE. A thousand's in there, but I'm gonna win.

GIRL. How many those chances are yours?

YOUNG JACKIE. Two.

GIRL. You got bad odds, Bessie.

YOUNG JACKIE. Watch! He's putting his hand in; he's got one...

SHOPKEEPER (*beat*). And the winner is...Bessie Lee Pittman.

YOUNG JACKIE. I won! She's mine!

MOTHER. You're too old for dolls, Bessie. Give it to little Mae. (*MOTHER takes away the doll.*)

YOUNG JACKIE. Mama, no! She's mine. I won her!

MOTHER. See how happy you made baby Mae?

YOUNG JACKIE. Don't you call me Bessie—my name is Jacqueline!

(*FLOYD picks up as though there's been no interruption.*)

FLOYD. "Jac que line Cochran"—a name full of promise.

JACKIE. And what brings you south, Mr. Odlum?

FLOYD. Floyd. Please.

JACKIE. I know you're special. Spotted you the second you came in. (*To us.*) He wasn't ritzy, sort of country, struggling lawyer maybe? But so calm, like nothing fazed him—delicious. Oo, down girl. Don't go for a poor one.

FLOYD. That's prescient of you. Because...

JACKIE. Prescient. Is that with an "sh"? (*Pulling out pencil and pad.*)

FLOYD (*off guard*). "sc," I think...

JACKIE (*writing*). "Pre-scient," like before science? Good one. I'm prescient because I spotted you?

FLOYD. Be cause you're the rea son I'm here.

JACKIE. Me?

FLOYD. I hate these soirees, but our hostess promised I'd be fascinated...

JACKIE. By what?

FLOYD. ...by a pretty shopgirl, with spunk enough to wangle herself an invitation. Do I mistake?

JACKIE (*stung*). No mistake. I lied. You've met the shopgirl, Mr. Odlum. You can move on.

FLOYD. Come, I mean no insult; I'm curious. Talk to me.

JACKIE. What's the point? I'd lie. Easy as breathing, Mr. Odlum...

FLOYD. Floyd.

JACKIE. ...it's what I do.

FLOYD. But that's not all you do. And everyone lies, Jackie.

JACKIE. That so?

FLOYD. To escape a difficulty, to gain an advantage. All that matters is not lying to yourself.