

Dramaturgies of risky play: two (risky) case studies¹

Erika Hughes

Abstract

In this descriptive autoethnographic essay, I discuss my work on risky play as a dramaturgical framework in two recent performances for young audiences—one traditional, one site-specific—staged in the U.S. metropolitan area of Phoenix, Arizona. I directed the first, *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*, in February 2015, and one year later I collaborated with a youth artist to create and perform in *The Light Rail Plays* on the Valley Metro light rail commuter train system with Rising Youth Theatre. Through both productions, I sought to investigate potential ways in which risk might function dramaturgically in two different youth-focused performance environments. These diverse experiences taught me much about the ways in which I use risk (and its aversion) to negate and control the spaces in which I (claim to) seek to enable empowerment and action. Through this journey, I came to understand risky play as a powerful strategy to facilitate problem solving onstage.

It is difficult for a young person to be happy when living in a sterile suburb that lacks opportunities for action, forced to attend schools where there is little chance to express oneself except in abstract intellectual terms, surrounded by a small nuclear family that is seldom together and relaxed enough to interact freely. (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003). Keeping Children Safe Involves Letting Them Take and Manage Risks. (Brussoni et al, 2012).

¹ An earlier version of this essay was first presented as a keynote address at the University of Arizona School of Film, Television and Theatre's Undergraduate Research Symposium on April 14, 2016. Many thanks to Dr. Melissa Thompson and Dr. Jessica Maerz for their incredible feedback, enthusiasm, and encouragement. Many thanks as well to my incredible collaborators on these performances, who have all freely consented to being named and discussed in this essay.

Introduction

“I just want you to play.”

The twenty-odd undergraduate actors who had come to callbacks stared at me perplexedly for a moment. Then, almost all of them raced past me through the gate into the tiny on-campus playground. Some of them constructed elaborate mimetic representations of who they thought they had been when they were younger, playing *at* playing. But the majority let themselves actually play. They leapt onto a tire swing, rocking the structure so hard I worried it might fall. They took turns jumping off, rolling, swearing, chasing one another around the fence, playing leapfrog, diving into ditches, yelling, and laughing. Finding themselves in the high risk, high stakes environment of a combined audition callback and impromptu playground session, these highly skilled players entered into the state that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has termed flow (1990). As a theatre maker, this spectacle was even more fascinating to watch than I had anticipated.

In this descriptive essay I discuss my work on risky play as a dramaturgical framework in two recent performances for young audiences - one traditional, one site-specific - staged in the US-American metropolitan area of Phoenix, Arizona. I directed the first, *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*, in February 2015 as part of the annual MainStage series at Arizona State University. The playground callbacks mentioned above were part of the audition process for this show. One year later, I was part of the devising and performance ensemble in Rising Youth Theatre's *The Light Rail Plays*,² performed in Phoenix on the Valley Metro Light

² While the entire series of works was presented together as *The Light Rail Plays*, each individual piece did not have a formal title. For the purposes of this essay, I refer to the entire series as *The Light Rail Play* and the individual piece I co-devised and performed in as our *Light Rail Play*.

Rail commuter train system in February 2016.³ For *The Light Rail Plays* I worked collaboratively with a youth artist to create one performance that appeared in rep as part of a curated series of eight short plays performed multiple times per evening throughout the run. Through both productions I investigated potential ways in which risk might function dramaturgically in a youth-focused performance environment.

My methods and approach to this as an area of study have naturally evolved since I first became fascinated with risky play as a formal concept several years ago, and continue to evolve. As such, my approach to this essay is descriptive, reflective, and autoethnographic; I offer these observations in the hope of guiding the reader along my journey with risky play. Tami Spry writes that “[t]he autoethnographic text emerges from the researcher’s bodily standpoint as she is continually recognizing and interpreting the residue traces of culture inscribed upon her hide from interacting with others in contexts” (711). Indeed, my own journey with risk through these two performances was inherently corporeal, and crossing over from the realm of director into that of performer illustrated to me the extent to which the body becomes inscribed as a site of negotiation during the act of conscious risk-taking. My work in risky play from the dual (subjective) perspectives of director and performer helps me to understand risk from both within and outside the sphere of risk-taking during performance. As such, the ways in which I describe and discuss these two performances at hand differ, although my question remains the same: how might risky play function dramaturgically?

In recounting his own performance work through writing, dramaturg Guy Cools reminds us that “the act of re-membering is always one of deconstruction and transformation. Our

³ Since 2013 I have served on the board of directors of Rising Youth Theatre. Although my work on *The Light Rail Plays* informs my service on the board, and my board service informed my approach to *The Light Rail Plays*, I was not invited to work as an artist because of my status as a board member.

memory is always subjective. It takes apart the factual experience, already in the moment of experiencing it through the senses, and reassembles it by stressing certain parts and forgetting others; by reordering them in a logic that seems appropriate and makes sense to the self that remembers” (180). My re-membering of my relationship to risk begins in childhood.⁴ My little brother and I lived in a doublewide trailer, propped on cinder blocks, that sat on four acres of mostly untamed North Carolina foothills land, save for the random discarded spare tire or piece of broken old fencing. Together with our neighborhood friends we discovered landscape treasures like the “boing-boing tree,” which, having been hit by lightning long ago, was fantastically springy and lent itself to flinging our small bodies like a slingshot some eight feet into the air. In winter we sped on metal sheets down icy banks of rock, and in summer we disregarded property lines, waded in creeks, and built bridges with the random materials left to rust. My days were full of formative risk-taking from which my body bears a few proud scars: the mark of a slip of my pink Swiss Army knife, a gash on my leg that occurred when I successfully snuck out of church camp to go eat at McDonald’s, and an off-centered fingertip that was reattached by my own grandfather in his kitchen (he was a war surgeon). Just a few years later, at the age of sixteen, I took the biggest and most formative risk of my life when I independently decided to leave my parents’ home - an act that also left several scars, albeit not as readily visible to the naked eye. Twenty years later I know that my risk paid off - the decision to ‘run away’ set me on a fundamentally different life path than had I remained. I mention these personal facts because they both establish my lived relationship to risk as a young person and, to borrow from Spry once more, “self-reflexive critique upon one’s positionality as researcher inspires readers to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and

⁴ Brief passages within this paragraph initially appeared as part of the Director’s Notes in the program for *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*. See XXX 2015.

their interactions with others within sociohistorical contexts” (711). In order to understand how I stage risk, it is important to understand how risks have shaped me, particularly because risk as a notion straddles the realms of the physical and the cultural. Identifying my own positionality as a researcher and theatre maker whose life was fundamentally shaped by risk-taking will, I hope, encourage my readers to reflect on risk in their own lives and praxes for, as Dwight Conquergood reminds us, “[v]ulnerability and self-disclosure are enabled through conversations” (183). Sharing autoethnography is risky work, but it can also serve as the opening to the kind of conversation Conquergood encourages us to have, and that I hope to have with my readers.

Professionally, locations of childhood play began to interest me in 2012 when I relocated back to the United States after a number of years abroad and observed just how much ‘safer’ new US-American playgrounds had become, with their rubber coatings, rounded edges, and shock-absorbent surfaces. My first apartment in Tempe, Arizona had a balcony that overlooked one such playground, and I began to notice the ways in which children moved differently on these playgrounds than on those in Germany and Israel. The evolution and cultural specificity of the playground intrigued me as a potential site of youth performance, but it was not until a student at ASU sent me Hanna Rosin’s journalistic essay “The Overprotected Kid,” written for *The Atlantic*, that I learned of the term ‘adventure playground’ and started thinking about what kinds of performance could be borne on stages of risky play. Soon after, I decided to stage *This Girl Laughs* on a set built to resemble an adventure playground. And the following year I found myself performing in/on a site that was inherently filled with significantly above-average levels of risk - a train car on the country’s thirteenth-busiest metro transportation system (“Ridership Reports” 2016).

In the following sections, I offer a discussion of the definitions of risk and risky play in contemporary health and social science literatures. I then reflect on the rehearsal processes, staging choices, and efforts to manifest risk through physiological and psychological acting in both performances, but from the distinct perspectives of director, performer, and co-deviser. In so doing, I understand the descriptive sharing of my personal observations in the public forum of *Youth Theatre Journal* as another form of risk taking, and end this essay by returning to my discussion of the personal nature of risk.

Risky play and/as dramaturgy

The field of study in risky play is small but growing - most English-language research on the subject within the previous decade has come out of Europe, particularly Scandinavia, although recent studies have examined populations in North America and Australia. Researchers examining risky play as a distinct phenomenon come from a range of disciplines including public health, physical education, psychology, design and architecture, and the arts. Risk is not only culturally specific, but also varies from child to child; Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter notes that “[c]hildren differ individually in the level of risk and thrill they like and feel comfortable with. Still, most children are continuously testing themselves and their environment on their own level of competence and acceptable risk. This is children’s way of getting to know their world and to find out what is safe and not safe” (Sandseter 2011). Research findings from a number of different countries and communities strongly suggest that risk taking is a fundamental part of human development (Brussoni 2012, Sandseter 2011, Sandseter 2009, Rosin 2014). That is, although the definitions of “risk” differ from culture to culture, all humans negotiate risk throughout their lives, and a fundamental component of childhood is learning to deal with risk.

Risky play is defined as free, unstructured, thrilling play in which there is a risk of physical injury (Sandseter 2009). By defining risk as both physical and psychological (not solely psychological), scholars of risky play position this practice as one that has the potential to develop connections between the mind and body. Yet organized sports do not fall under the category of risky play in a public health context because, while these activities are accompanied by a high degree of potential for physical injury, participants in organized sports are ultimately working toward a common, predefined goal. Research suggests that risky play is a healthy part of growth and youth development, as Brussoni notes: “[t]here is evidence that children learn risk management strategies for themselves and their peers as a result of risky play experiences. Observational studies of children at play found they exposed themselves to risk but displayed clear strategies for mitigating harm” (Brussoni 2012). Additionally, studies also suggest that young people seek out unsupervised sites of risk when they are not provided with adequate sources of challenge through play in their own lives (Brussoni 2012, Sandseter 2011). Risky play is a form of applied learning - through the taking of risks within the framework of play, young people learn to assess levels of potential danger, understand the stakes at hand, gauge possible outcomes, and develop essential skills required to navigate instances of both quotidian and unusual risk.

A site specifically designed to facilitate risky play, the adventure playground was originally developed by Danish landscape architect Carl Theodor Sørensen beginning in 1931, and the first was built in Copenhagen in 1943. Following the end of WWII in 1945, adventure playgrounds, or junk playgrounds as they were frequently called, began to spring up throughout Western Europe, and in the UK were constructed over top of war ruins and bombed-out sites. In his history of adventure playgrounds, Roy Kozlovsky illustrates the ways in which these sites

revealed the contradictions borne of regarding children's play as an individualistic biological imperative while simultaneously utilizing play as a developmental framework that begets a particular type of (future) citizen. He notes that the adventure playground was "originally part of a utopian project to reconstruct a peaceful and more stable postwar society through policies and practices directed toward each individual child... investing play with the capacity to heal society and purge itself of the wartime manifestation of violence" (Kozlovsky 2007). However he, citing Galen Cranz and David Cohen, critiques the adventure playground as being not so different from a traditional playground, with its demarcated borders and controlled spaciality, suggesting that the "playground was one of these institutions where children were made into subjects, precisely because in play they felt themselves to be autonomous and free" (Kozlovsky 2007). The anecdote at the beginning of this essay, in which I watched young adults play as part of my audition process for *This Girl Laughs*, illustrates Kozlovsky's contradiction.

This acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of (controlled) risk in the name of development is helpful in understanding how risky play functioned dramaturgically in both performances discussed here. Because risky play is free and liminally structured (Brussoni 2012, Sandseter 2011, Sandseter 2009, Rosin 2014), it is important to note that neither performance discussed here was actually an instance of risky play as it was performed in front of an audience. Both *This Girl Laughs* and our *Light Rail Play* were scripted, blocked, and structured toward reaching a goal - much like an organized sport. The rehearsal processes of both *This Girl Laughs* and our *Light Rail Play* incorporated notions and aesthetics of risky play, in large part to create blocking and choreography that had an aesthetic of risk. But once we made these blocking choices, the specific performance spaces and the level of control that the production team had over each space ultimately dictated how risky each performance was. Our production team

controlled the traditional theatre space of *This Girl Laughs*, not the other way around; while the production was developed using the aesthetics of risk taking, it was performed on a theatre set built to look like an adventure playground (as opposed to an actual adventure playground). The scripted nature of the blocking and the safety requirements of the theatre space as mandated by the university meant that the actors onstage did not experience considerably greater levels of risk onstage than normal. However, the Phoenix Valley Metro train cars-turned-performance venues in *The Light Rail Plays* differed with every performance. My performance partner and I did not know exactly what our performance space would consist of - whether and where people would be standing or sitting, how crowded the (moving) train might be, would people be loud or quiet – until the moment we boarded. With the exception of friends and family we recognized, we never knew in advance which of our audience members rode the train specifically to see the performance and which had accidentally happened upon us while taking the train. In this way, each performance was a negotiation between the scripted risks that had been devised through the rehearsal process and actual risks that we took through engagement with an audience that was sometimes unintentional and never confined in the way that a proscenium fixed-seating theatre typically restricts its publics.

This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing

Finegan Kruckemeyer's 2011 play *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing* is a coming-of-age story about abandoned three sisters. Childhood as they knew it had died with their mother's passing; their father, heartbroken by the death of his first wife and the cruelty of his second, leaves the three girls, aged twelve, in the middle of a forest. Each chooses a different path through adolescence and into adulthood: Albiene, the oldest and the girl who

laughs, goes east and becomes a great warrior and then a baker; Beatrix, the middle child who cries, goes west and finds fame, fortune, and their lost father; and Carmen, the youngest, stays right where she is, befriending the animals around her and then having her own children. Twenty years later the three meet again in the woods, in the same spot that their father had left them, but where Carmen's home now stands.

This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing was staged in February 2015 as part of ASU's annual MainStage season, which typically consists of 5-7 plays per season planned in accordance with the academic year, at least one of which is staged with young audiences in mind. *This Girl Laughs* was performed in the Lyceum Theatre, an intimate 165-seat proscenium on the Tempe campus with a large classic mid-century modern lobby. From the outset, the production team planned to build an interactive lobby installation for the audience to tie into the performance. We considered allowing the audience to come onto the adventure playground set, but ultimately decided to separate playing spaces for the actors and the audience members due to safety concerns for both performers and public.

Initially, I sought to recreate the Lyceum stage as a place of structured risk-taking. The performers and design team met frequently in the Lyceum as the set (and our understanding of how risk might function onstage) evolved organically. At our first meeting, I showed the production team (a mixture of undergraduate and graduate designers and faculty mentors) a three-minute trailer for *The Land*, a short Welsh documentary film that takes place in a supervised adventure playground in North Wales. At approximately one minute into the video, a boy who appears to be about 10-12 years old cuts vigorously into a piece of half-frozen cardboard with a saw in one hand, his other hand precariously holding the cardboard dangerously close to the blade. He slips, almost hits himself, and then without prompting or help confidently

readjusts his position to cut at a better (and ultimately safer) angle. Seconds later he holds up his creation - a homemade cricket bat fashioned from the frame of an old shovel, the aforementioned piece of cardboard, and plastic cable ties. “Hey look, I made it!” he exclaims. In the following moment, girls and boys push one another in a makeshift rope swing crafted from a huge piece of plastic pipework. “Bang him into the tree!” exclaims one girl. “You might get scared!” teases another, as a small debris fire burns randomly in the background. The design team watched the video with considerable excitement, expressed through laughter, gasps, and the audible and visual cringing of our Artistic Director (who is also the father to a ten-year-old boy). The film inspired an engaged conversation about risk and risk management in which designers, faculty mentors, production manager, and technical director, all enthusiastically supported the use of risk as an aesthetic choice, but were divided about how risky the stage should actually be. This division allowed us to think innovatively about the relationship between safety and aesthetics, and my colleague, technical director Joe Skala, became an integral part of our devising team. He sent us all manner of junk objects with which to work including heaps of tires, old furniture, broken televisions, metal carts, discarded fencing, and ladders, and he periodically came to rehearsals to work with the cast.

I began the rehearsal process with an extended period of trust building. After the customary initial read-thru, we put away our scripts for the next several weeks and dedicated considerable time to creating an ensemble through a series of physical exercises including trust falls, a complicated dual-focus game of tag, and pantomimes with found objects. We ran into nets made only of our own arms – an exercise I initiated and in which I was the first to jump. We built buildings and mountains from ladders that we then scaled. We created vehicles from spare furniture precariously piled upon platforms with casters, turned a shopping cart into a horse that

led a battle charge, and rolled about in massive old tires. These activities increased kinesthetic awareness and memory skills, formed the basis of our movement vocabulary, and to some extent altered the faculty director-college student actor dynamic. It is important to note that this was not a true reversal of authority – I still made final blocking decisions, encouraged timeliness, enforced the off-book deadline, and assigned grades for those students in the production who received academic credit. In operating within the institutional framework that is a large public US-American university, I am confident that the student actors continued to regard me as their professor and director, not a peer. However, I noticed that as I moved from behind the director's table and climbed upon the ladder, taking my own risks in rehearsal, my own perspectives began to change. I trusted my student actors more, and as I did I found myself willfully relinquishing certain elements of aesthetic control to this ensemble of actors, designers, and technicians. In this way I was not only creating the appearance of risk-taking onstage, but also taking real artistic risks with my collaborators. I began to understand the process of calculating risk as a form of trust assessment.

One of the cast members, Sean McBride, had an eight-year-old daughter, Molly, who joined us for a number of rehearsals. On her first visit she played pantomime and make-believe games with the rest of the cast and crew (the assistant director, stage management, and designers were welcome to participate in instances of play at this stage of rehearsal). The next time she joined us, we gave Molly complete control over the rehearsal space – which she promptly left. Instead she had us play a massive game of hide-and-seek that spanned the entire three-story Nelson Fine Arts Center. Working with Molly opened the performers up to fundamentally different physical patterns of movement. Members of the cast remarked at how unselfconsciously Molly flung herself into her father in a manner reminiscent of the trust falls

with which he had begun. Her presence encouraged the performers to be present themselves. Molly played riskily – for her the darkened, largely empty, and slightly creepy university building at nighttime was a risky and unknown space – and she demanded that others play with her. Representation of risk would come later.

As we began to work within the script, designers attended numerous rehearsals, shaping and evolving their work within the frames the actors were creating. Sound designer Noel Miller created an original score, and used a circuit board invention kit called a MaKey MaKey to craft an electronic keyboard made of junk (old cans, bits of wood, wire and nails) that played sound effects.⁵ Our design and production team created a similar keyboard for the lobby, placed at kid-height, that young people could play before and after the performance.⁶ I decided that the character of the girls’ cruel stepmother would only appear through shadow, so lighting designer James Arakis joined us for a three-hour lighting laboratory session in which we played with a parachute and various lighting sources including PAR cans, flashlights, and portable clamp lights. By this point in the rehearsal process, the ensemble was comfortable moving on ladders, manipulating set pieces, and using their bodies to innovate – and I realized that representing risky play onstage was ultimately less about actual risk-taking and more about problem-solving.

I was not the only member of our team to come to a similar conclusion; for example, in a promotional behind-the-scenes interview for ASU, Emily Nash, who played Carmen, noted that many “ASU students are in a similar position to these girls... They’re on their own for the first time and they’re trying to figure out who they are. While they’re here, they’re going to have to try to figure out what’s important to them” (“Taking Risks”). This process of problem-solving

⁵ For audio excerpts of Noel Miller’s score, please see <https://soundcloud.com/nnicholssounddesign/sets/this-girl-laughs-show-content>.

⁶ For audio excerpts of Drew Miller’s composition for the lobby display, please see <https://soundcloud.com/drewnicholsmusic/lobby-play-from-this-girl-laughs-this-girl-cries-this-girl-does-nothing>.

from the perspective of a young adult was something I reflected on frequently during the rehearsal process as someone who had run away at the age of sixteen but, like the girls in the play, was given assistance from an incredible community that I met along my own journey. As such I felt it my duty to approach the girls' plight without sentimentality or pity. Through the performance of problem-solving onstage, the performance metatheatrically illustrated both challenges and the ways in which they had been overcome. We made storytelling elements transparent: actors built their own tire swing onstage, which then became a lighthouse, and a parachute was unfurled to make an ocean. An old shopping cart was transformed into a chariot. A wheeled cart piled high with old tires and a ripped sofa became a mobile bakery. Actors actually solved problems onstage as they assembled the world their characters inhabited, and this business revealed a meta-awareness of the performer's relationship to the stage. Emily reflected on this phenomenon from the perspective of her own work in the theatre as a performer: "During the process of this show, a very comfortable zone has been created for me to experiment, to try new things. I feel like it's helped me take more risks as an actress" ("Taking Risks").

The Light Rail Plays

One year later I found myself also taking risks as an actress, swinging from a handrail at the top of a Valley Metro train car while performing in a piece I had co-devised together with a youth theatre artist for Rising Youth Theatre's February 2016 edition of *The Light Rail Plays*. Rising Youth Theatre (RYT) is a community-based performance company that was founded in 2011. In the short time since its founding has won several major awards, including the City of Phoenix Mayor's Arts Award and the Zeta Phi Eta-Winifred Ward Outstanding New Children's Theatre Company Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education. RYT has

worked with a number of populations in the Phoenix metro area including a center for youth awaiting immigration hearings, an alternative high school, and a juvenile detention facility. *The Light Rail Plays* is now in its third year as site-specific theatre and fourth as an incubator for original youth-adult collaborations; originally this series premiered in 2013 under the title *First Stories*, which used a similar devising model but was performed in a proscenium theatre. In 2014 the company received a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts that facilitated the beginning of an ongoing collaboration with the Valley Metro Transit Authority, which estimates that approximately one-third of the total riders on Valley Light Rail are traveling to school (Goth 2015). Light rail stops serve numerous educational institutions including Arizona State University's Tempe and Downtown campuses, Benedictine University Mesa, Northern Arizona University's Phoenix and East Valley Campuses, the East Valley Institute of Technology, GateWay Community College, and the Arizona School of the Arts, where Quinn Pursell, my fifteen-year old co-deviser for our *Light Rail Play*, studies theatre. With its large demographic of student passengers, collaboration with Valley Metro fits well with RYT's mission "[t]o create youth driven theatre that is riveting and relevant, challenging audiences to hear new stories, start conversations and participate in their communities" ("Mission and Vision"). As I write this, the company is planning their fourth edition of *The Light Rail Plays* to be performed in early spring 2017.

The Light Rail Plays are performed on train cars and platforms with no constructed sets. The downtown Phoenix platforms feature large public artworks, and a number of the performances dramaturgically incorporate the landscapes of and around the train. Dialogue is typically minimal or nonverbal. This year, a band of three musicians traveled alongside the actors, underscoring the entire performance with live clarinet and ukulele music; some performances also incorporated

percussion, beat boxing, and recorded sound, largely determined by the acoustics and spatial allowances of each individual performance space.

RYT artistic directors Xanthia Walker and Sarah Sullivan served not so much as directors of *The Light Rail Plays*, but rather curators. Initial meetings were spent teambuilding and learning the light rail. My favorite day during this part of rehearsals was perhaps also the riskiest: an unsupervised scavenger hunt on the Light Rail. Our list included:

Close your eyes. Describe the sounds of the train. Document a sound.

Ask someone where they are going and/or where they are coming from.

Find a moment of magic. Or, make a moment of magic. Document it.

Get off the train and go to a local business. Find out three interesting things about that business.

Create a soundtrack for your journey.

What are three “unwritten” rules of the Light Rail? (Sullivan and Walker, 2016)

Our hunt took us off and on the light rail, and was just as much about the communities alongside the tracks as it was about the train cars themselves. While searching, we found myriad rules about how to participate (echoing Kozlovsky) as a citizen on the light rail - written and unwritten restrictions on food and beverage, noise, where to stand (and where not to), with whom to speak and how, instructions on how to transport pets and bicycles and purchase passes, where to place large items, whom to offer one’s seat, when to make eye contact (and when not to). Our bodies became sites on which a number of these rules were practiced as we learned the codes of the light rail. Before we began this process, taking the train was something Quinn and I did occasionally - neither of us were daily passengers on Valley Light Rail until this experience, and in the beginning of this project we were aware of our status as light rail outsiders. The way that we physically

interacted with the space as we rode evolved over the month that we devised, and by the end of the process period we had learned how to board the train in a manner that felt almost invisible - not making eye contact, we surveyed the landscape of the car and observed our fellow passengers with our peripheral vision. Some people rode the light rail just to have a warm, clean place to sit, while others were en route to a ballgame or a night out. Some were headed to or from places of work or school. Surprisingly few hid behind the invisiblizing security of the screens of their mobile devices.

“Manners Matter,” reads a prominent Valley Metro sign on a number of train cars, and it outlines behavioral guidelines for passengers. These rules of the light rail - and our perceptions of and relationships to them - became the central focus of our collaboration. Quinn, observing our quotidian experience through a lens influenced by classic dystopian literature, was quick to point out the ever-present surveillance under the guise of security. At an early rehearsal he played a recording taken from the platform: “Your safety is our number one priority,” repeated by a robotic male voice encouraging passengers to report suspicious activity to the authorities. As we developed our performance, Quinn and I talked frequently about the myriad ways in which ostensibly protective surveillance might actually work to undermine community, and wondered about the fine line between respect for society and fear of authority. We talked extensively about the curious nature of Phoenix itself, an alternately beautiful and sprawling manufactured metropolis in the Sonoran Desert that social and cultural analyst Andrew Ross has called “the world’s least sustainable city” (Ross 2011). These examinations led Quinn to exclaim one day that “[w]e don’t need to make a dystopia because we already live in one!” As we began to play with costumes and props on the train, our fellow passengers sought us out, eager to join our rehearsal through engaging and sharing with us unsolicited stories of their love of performance, or their

homelessness, or their own children. We listened. Ironically, by exploring Phoenix as our dystopia, we began to understand Phoenix as our community.

After a few weeks of riding, thinking, and playing on the train, Quinn and I finally had a plan. We would turn the Phoenician dystopia upside down, throwing a clandestine dance party for the audience community that began at the Central/Osborn platform and traveled south until the stop at Central/McDowell, approximately seven minutes down the track. We filled a large cardboard box with a hundred masks, noisemakers, streamers, silly hats, bouncy headbands, tiny drums, and a huge balloon. After an assistant stage manager repeated the Valley Metro announcement, “Your safety is our number one priority,” we let loose. I threw the lid off the box and out flew the balloon, musicians struck up a quirky sort of klezmer-pop tune, and we raced through the train car, handing every single person we could reach some sort of prop. Quinn and I danced with one another, then danced with random audience members. Sometimes we paired passengers to dance with one another. At other times passengers were loud and wanted special attention; a small number appeared to be intoxicated and verged on belligerence. Inviting them into our party by handing them a prop and smiling at them, thereby validating their presence, served to include them in the piece without fail. Once, a security officer came through the car to check passenger tickets during our performance. Immediately we put a silly hat on him and encouraged him to stop checking tickets and instead dance with us - an inversion of power in which he was thrilled to participate. In so doing we created a subcommunity on the train that cut across typical sociological lines of demarcation – to be a part of this community, all you had to do was ride the train.

Quinn and I always ended the party one stop before the end of the actual planned audience departure stop of *The Light Rail Plays*. Hurriedly we beseeched our audience members-turned-

conspirators to hide their props and masks in our party box, then we raced off the train as soon as the doors opened. Immediately after our departure the same assistant stage manager walked back through the train car, repeating “Your safety is our number one priority; if you see something suspicious please call 9-1-1.” This line typically got a hearty laugh that we could hear from the platform. However, on our final performance, the train doors remained open after we left. Officers from the Phoenix Police Department boarded the train, searching where we had just performed, looking for actual suspects of a crime. Immediately offstage, Quinn and I watched this performance of daily life together through the train car windows. Afterward, my fifteen-year-old collaborative partner noted how the ways in which our *Light Rail Play* had collided into daily occurrences - such as this one with law enforcement - highlighted for him the close but largely unseen relationship between our civic practices, rules both written and unwritten, and the risks we take daily.

Conclusions

Conquergood reminds us that “[m]oral and ethical questions get stirred to the surface because ethnographers of performance explode the notion of aesthetic distance” (2). My own understanding of risk evolved significantly over the course of these two performance projects, in large part because of the elimination of distance from my role as director to the role of performer. Utilizing risky play in the rehearsal process for *This Girl Laughs* meant a significant redistribution of directorial authority, an experience that I believe ultimately made me a more effective collaborator on the *Light Rail Play*. I thought going into this project that risk was the goal, an end unto itself, borne of thrill seeking and dangerous aesthetics. I was mistaken. This journey in risky play both offstage and on the train allowed me, as a director who works both

with young performers and in the creation of performance for youth audiences, to see the extent to which I (as an adult) frequently use risk (or more frequently the aversion of risk – ‘we can’t do that,’ ‘they wouldn’t allow us to do this,’ ‘we could never get away with saying those things on a youth stage,’ etc.) to negate and control the spaces in which I (claim to) seek to enable empowerment and action. Engaging with risky play made me reflect on, in the words of William Blake, my own “mind-forg’d manacles” that inhibit my adventurousness, riskiness and vulnerability as I work with youth at both secondary and college levels. I hope that my colleagues in the field might look to risk as a means through which to further examine our own roles in the structures of power and inhibition that shape our actions within the rehearsal room and the theatre.

As I mentioned earlier, perhaps the most significant finding for me regarding risk and risky play is its problem-solving quality. I now see risky play to be largely about the development of skills in assessment, analysis, and solution-building – essential tools for self-confidence that I believe to be of particular significant in a youth performance context. For example, during the talkback for *This Girl Laughs*, a young woman in the fourth grade quickly raised her hand to answer the question of which character she related to the most. She offered the name of Abilene, the warrior, “because I’ve been through a lot of things in my life and I was brave, too.” Staging risk, and risky play, allows audiences to see challenges be met. It can create community through collective problem-solving - both in traditional theatre formats and site-specific interactive modalities of performance. It eschews sentimentality and pity for applied and active solutions performed by agents of change. It can highlight and reveal the invisible ways in which we are always/already taking risk through the practice of daily life. And using

autoethnography in performance studies, as I have here, helps me to understand this from within
– from the perspective of a woman who once was a girl who had to be brave, too.

Bibliography

Brussoni, M., Olsen, L. L., Pike, I., Sleet, D. A. 2012. Risky Play and Children's Safety: Balancing Priorities for Optimal Child Development. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 9, 3134-3148.

Conquergood, D. 1991. Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics, *Communication Monographs*, 58 (2), 179-194.

Cools, G. 2014. Re-Membering Zero Degrees. In *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, ed. Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane. New York: Bloomsbury.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., Hunter, J. 2003. Happiness in Everyday Life: The Uses of Experience Sampling. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4: 185-199.

Davis, E. 2015. *The Land*. New Day Films.

Ellis, C; Adams, T. E. & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10.

Goth, B. 2015. Ahead of Prop. 104, a look at who uses Phoenix transit. *Arizona Republic*, August 15. Online: <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2015/08/05/phoenix-transit-tax-prop-104-demographics/31111575/>

XXX. 2015. Director's Notes. *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing* ASU School of Film, Dance and Theatre MainStage. Program.

Kozlovsky, R. 2007. Adventure Playgrounds and Postwar Reconstruction. In *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children; An International Reader*, ed. Marta Gutman and Ning de Coninck-Smith. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kruckemeyer, Finegan. 2011. *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*. Unpublished script.

“Mission and Vision.” Rising Youth Theatre. Online: <http://risingyouththeatre.org/aboutus/mission-and-vision/>

“Ridership Reports.” Valley Metro. Online:

http://www.valleymetro.org/images/uploads/ridership_reports/Valley_Metro_Regional_Ridership_Report_February2016_-_Web_Version..pdf

Rosin, H. 2014. The Overprotected Kid. *The Atlantic*, April. Online:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/04/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/>

Ross, A. 2011. *Bird on Fire: Lessons From the World's Least Sustainable City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sandseter, E. B. H., Kennair, L. E. O. 2011. Children's Risky Play from an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology* 9(2), 257-284.

Sandseter, E. B. H. 2009. Affordances for Risky Play in Preschool: The Importance of Features in the Play Environment. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 36: 439-446.

Sandseter, E. B. H. 2009. Children's Expressions of Exhilaration and Fear in Risky Play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. 10(2).

Sandseter, E. B. H. 2011. Children's risky play in Early Childhood Education and Care. *ChildLinks. Children's Risky Play*, 3, 2-6.

Spry, T. 2001. Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 706-732.

Sullivan, S., Walker, X. 2016. Light Rail Scavenger Hunt. Unpublished Document.