RESEARCH ARTICLE: THEATRE APPLICATIONS: LOCATIONS, EVENT, FUTURITY

‘Playgrounds which would never happen now, because they’d be far too dangerous’: risk, childhood development and radical sites of theatre practice

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This article revisits radical playgrounds of the past to offer a productive dialogue with recent debates on how child environments can foster citizenship and community. Joan Littlewood’s playground projects are familiar examples of theatre techniques being applied to develop children’s sense of belonging in a city. This essay considers the less familiar history of the Natural Theatre Company’s Adventure Playground in Bath, an ambivalent site of chaotic transgression and community formation. Referencing the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord, the essay explores how theatre techniques of subversive role playing, carnivalesque abandon and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) (de)construction can refigure notions of citizenship and community. With this article, I hope to trouble contemporary notions of safety by highlighting the restrictions placed on today’s playgrounds and questioning whether forms of childhood development once valued can exist within the limitations of our modern ‘risk society’.

In 1972, the Bath Arts Workshop, also known as the Natural Theatre Company (NTC), asked Bath City Council (UK) to fund the conversion of a city wasteland into an Adventure Playground. The company wanted to aid the racial integration of the city’s growing immigrant population and offer a safe space for working-class children to play. Drawing from archival documents, council records and oral histories obtained from personal interviews,1 this article considers the controversial five-year history of the Adventure Playground, the tactics employed by the NTC, the community it cultivated and the young artists it fostered, including the musical duo Tears for Fears.

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RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance
Vol. 16, No. 3, August 2011, 385–402

ISSN 1356-9783 print/ISSN 1470-112X online
© 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2011.589997
http://www.informaworld.com
After situating the essay’s central terms radical, citizenship and community, I review the heralded playground projects of Joan Littlewood to establish a familiar framework for examining theatre practice within urban youth contexts. Building on Nadine Holdsworth’s article ‘Spaces to Play/Playing with Spaces’ (2007), I propose that Littlewood’s work offers a helpful model to understand Bath’s Adventure Playground as a site of radical engagement. It is useful to note, however, that Littlewood’s work was part of a larger post-war movement. Following the United Nation’s 1959 Rights of the Child Declaration, establishing play as a universal right, and responding to increasing levels of urbanisation, Britain experienced a surge in play-focused schemes which not only included projects like Littlewood’s but also the 1960s’ playgroup movement and the popularisation of adventure playgrounds. By foregrounding Bath’s Adventure Playground in relation to Littlewood’s projects, I aim to demonstrate the ways the NTC’s comparatively younger members (Littlewood was in her fifties while the Adventure Playground founders were in their twenties) maintained similar intentions to Littlewood but also, as avid members of 1970s’ counter-culture, how they pushed the boundaries of radical theatre practice to surprising lengths.

Underlying my argument is an interrogation of a cultural ethos which valued risk as crucial to child development. To develop this line of thought, the activities of the Adventure Playground are examined with reference to the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord. The paper concludes by examining how current safety standards may not only be costly and possibly unnecessary, but can discourage valued modes of childhood development. Moreover, recent governmental cuts which slashed the budget of England’s Playbuilder scheme by one-third and removed its ring fence (Learner 2010) highlight the immediate need to re-evaluate critically the intended purposes (and costs) of today’s childhood playgrounds.

**Terms**

There has been much debate within performance studies as to the use and meaning (or lack of meaning) of the terms political and radical. In the context of this essay, I embrace both terms as helpful in articulating the overarching arrangements of power (political) and subversive attempts to dissent, challenge or intervene with such arrangements (radical). In using the term radical, I draw from the definition Baz
Kershaw lays out in *The Radical in Performance*, describing *radical* as seeking

not just freedom *from* oppression, repression, exploitation – the resistant sense of the radical – but also freedom *to reach beyond* existing systems of formalised power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action – the transgressive or transcendent sense of the radical. (1999, 19)

In this sense, *radical* is less about strategic plans and practical solutions than it is about destabilising the status quo and opening up previously unrealised realities.

Elements of *risk* are interwoven with notions of the *radical*, of course. Radical actions are essentially transgressions from normative strictures and, as such, may incur costs – be they social, economic, political or psychological. Conversely, taking risks can result in reward. Thus, radical environments which enable risk operate on a calculus of uncertainty: outcomes may be negative or positive, but what is important is the movement towards future possibilities and rearranged realities.

To situate the term *citizenship*, I borrow from Holdsworth’s article (2007) by similarly drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s idea of ‘embodied citizenship’ which carries with it many implications for theatre and performance studies. Mouffe’s primary point is that *citizenship*, rather than emphasising the rights of an individual, can also be understood as an identificatory process of communal engagement. More specifically, Mouffe argues that democratic citizenship is based on an ‘articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty’ (1992, 32). In other words, when a person develops a sense of self in a communal setting, it is based on the allegiances, commonalities and differences experienced. Mouffe believes the success of democratic systems relies on communal matrices which enable participation.

It follows, then, that how citizenship is constructed and imagined is directly related to the communities in which it is constituted. When analysing playgrounds, *community* takes on a particular reference to location (as opposed to communities of identity which can transcend geographical boundaries). Although not exclusive to such categorisation, children who attend municipal playgrounds often reside in nearby localities and thus formulate a sense of community in relation to shared
spatial experiences. A helpful example demonstrating these principles comes from the work of Joan Littlewood.

**Littlewood’s Fun Palace and playground projects**

In 1961, as an extended project of Theatre Workshop, Littlewood started plans for a children’s play complex, also known as the Fun Palace. Littlewood struggled for over a decade but, lacking funding, only succeeded in running several temporary – but nonetheless influential – playground projects. Littlewood’s work targeted youth in Stratford, East London, an area which was experiencing extensive redevelopment (Holdsworth 2007, 297). Addressing the lack of space devoted to youth, Littlewood designed programmes which reclaimed city space and developed new structures of belonging.

By employing theatre techniques and forms of ‘radical engagement’, Littlewood’s projects, according to Holdsworth, helped develop young citizens and urban communities (2007, 302). While Holdsworth’s focus is on Littlewood’s playground projects, it is also important to consider the philosophy Littlewood laid out for her original mission. As Littlewood noted in *The Drama Review*, the Fun Palace was essentially a transient endeavour that would undergo ‘desirable periods of transformation from one total configuration to another’ (1968, 132). ‘The ephemeral nature of the architecture’, Littlewood argued, ‘is a major element in the design’ (1968, 132). Thus, at the core of Littlewood’s project was a view that children could benefit from the dismantling of old structures to make way for new structures – a fundamentally radical notion.

Littlewood’s political and artistic commitments exhibited a distrust of existing hierarchical systems. The playground, for Littlewood, and as I will argue for the NTC, represented a space where radical modes of engagement could encourage new types of civic involvement. In this respect, Littlewood’s work helps place Bath’s Adventure Playground in relation to a broader national context. It also offers a template to understand the degree to which the NTC’s tactics were, arguably, more radical.

**Bath’s Adventure Playground**

Like Stratford, Bath was undergoing extensive redevelopment in the early 1970s. Adam Fergusson’s 1973 book, *The Sack of Bath* (and related news articles), documented the unprecedented widespread
destruction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings followed by the appearance of modernist structures and abandoned lots. Further attempts to urbanise Bath also included a decade-long campaign to build a four-lane motorway under the city centre. This plan would have eradicated the buildings along Walcot Street, a working-class and artisan area, also home of the NTC.

In a city which seemed unsympathetic to the preservation of its historical buildings or the infrastructure of its working-class areas, the NTC became a voice of resistance; company members performed parodies in the streets, published a monthly newsletter and built an Adventure Playground. The 1972 pamphlet for the playground announced, ‘This is the area that will suffer from the proposed motorway scheme’ (Bath Arts Workshop 1972). But, in addition to targeting the residents on Walcot Street, the playground was also meant to serve Bath’s largely ignored high-rise council estate on nearby Snow Hill. The playground’s co-founder Brian Popay explains, ‘It was mainly for the Snow Hill flats kids … they were our local kids really and Snow Hill flats, at that time particularly, it was the lower orders, to say the least: old people, single parents, kids without their dads often’.

Popay also says the company anticipated the playground would help integrate the youth of Bath’s immigrant population, including the ‘Black kids on Thomas Street’. This is especially relevant since Bath had experienced an influx of immigrants during the 1960s (particularly from the West Indies) which raised concerns about how to best approach issues of racial integration. ‘The immigration population is high’, the pamphlet continued, ‘and although there is no obvious racial “problem”, there is a very distinct feeling of prejudice running through the white population, even to the teenage white children’ (Bath Arts Workshop 1972).

Bath’s total immigrant population was only 2.7%, no higher than the national average; but the city council also perceived a problem and convened a special study group to produce a report in 1971 on what some were calling a ‘social revolution’ (City and County Borough of Bath 1971, Appendix ‘A’). The report explained how the council intended ‘to alleviate the problems of integration’ (1971, 10) by considering, among other things, the failure of local playgroups to ‘attract small children from immigrant families’ (1971, 7). ‘No racial discrimination has been observed in cafes, cinemas or dance halls’ read the report, but recommendations were made to develop facilities for
playgroups and to provide ‘a suitable meeting place for the immigrant population’ (1971, 14).

The report also expressed anxiety about how, in cases of public housing, to ‘make every endeavour to avoid colonisation’ when implementing ‘any policy of dispersal’ (City and County Borough of Bath 1971, 4). According to the report, and a 1971 census atlas, the concentration of immigrant families in the Walcot area was among the highest in Bath, at 6–9% (Department of Architecture and Planning 1971). The report explains that if a housing offer was not located in the Walcot area, immigrants would often refuse it. Concerned about ghettoisation, the report recommended the Walcot and Snow Hill areas be monitored because, as it stated, ‘these are the only real areas of concern in the City’ (City and County Borough of Bath 1971, 4).

In 1972, Bath’s Labour Women’s Council, along with NTC member Ralph Oswick, produced a different but related report titled Parks & Play: A Survey of Play Facilities in Bath’s City Parks. It challenged the council to fund projects that would serve the city’s neglected areas, like Walcot, and championed the Adventure Playground. The playground’s organisers suggested that the site could achieve: ‘(a) less vandalism, (b) improved racial integration, (c) creative, imaginative play’ and act as a ‘catalyst for “community spirit”’ (Bath Arts Workshop 1972).

Bath City Council, however, was unreceptive. ‘Its adoption by the [city] Corporation would need a considerable financial allocation’, wrote the official parks director (City of Bath Parks Department 1972, 4). The following year, Bath City Council again denied funding for the proposed £7000 playground but did commit £790,000 to the Sport Centre (1974, 6) and £3250 to the Mayor’s new lavatory (Bath Arts Workshop 1973, 6). Playground co-founder Jacqui Popay remembers feeling how the council’s dismissals went beyond financial restrictions and recalls how one council member told her, ‘We don’t have any problem children in Bath’.

A possible contradiction therefore exists between the concerns raised in the council’s 1971 immigration report and the response received by the NTC. If the council recognised the need for immigrants – particularly youth – to have ‘a suitable meeting place’, why was there reluctance to fund the playground? Perhaps, as the report’s ‘policy of dispersal’ indicated, the playground’s plan for local integration actually conflicted with the council’s aims to de-ghettoise the Walcot area. Anxious about echoing the crimes of ‘colonisation’, the council’s programme nevertheless employed a method of geographical dispersion as a primary solution to racial integration.
The playground, on the other hand, represented an immediately pragmatic approach. The council’s lack of interest was interpreted by the NTC – perhaps wrongly – as a middle-class attempt to maintain a certain image of Bath, reifying ideological and geographical barriers which they felt continued to marginalise working-class and immigrant children. In response, the playground was to provide a counter space: a space for youth to claim as theirs, a space to build physical structures like huts and tree houses and to construct a sense of belonging. As the organisers wrote in 1972, the playground was to ‘deal not only with the physical aspects of the city’s problems, but also to make people aware of their own potential as members of the community’ (Bath Arts Workshop 1972).

A playful right to the city

According to sociologist Henri Lefebvre, ‘the right to the city is like a cry and a demand’ (1996, 158). How city space is distributed and maintained, Lefebvre argues, affects the spatial practices and possibilities of its citizens. ‘(Social) space is a (social) product’, he writes, ‘the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action’ (1996, 26). Equally important to Lefebvre’s theory is what he calls the ‘centrality of play’ which is a participatory process operating with and against the restrictions of city space (1996, 171). Citizens, he thought, define themselves by engaging, resisting or transgressing the totalising forces of organised space (1996, 171). Moreover, it is through playful rearrangements of space that Lefebvre argues individuals constitute a sense of self within a city: ‘art can become praxis and poiesis on a social scale: the art of living in the city as a work of art’ (1996, 173). In this manner, creative practices of play and art can articulate notions of subjectivity.

In spite of the council’s funding denial, the NTC formed an alliance with the University of Bath and opened the playground in a lot near Walcot Street. Drawing from Lefebvre, the site can be imagined as an acquired canvas on which Bath’s young citizens could paint themselves into the city’s cultural fabric. The site hosted 60–100 children ‘every day, even on very wet days’ who were supervised in ‘the building of huts, walls, forts, tree houses, lighting fires and cooking, tree climbing, digging, camping, as well as playing team games, painting, dressing up, modelling, reading or just doing nothing’ (Bath Arts Workshop 1972). Many of these activities were guided by and inflected with the
practices and sensibilities of theatre: building sets and props, dressing up, singing, role playing, and creating alternative worlds.

In this way, the site enabled children to experiment with new modes of engaging with each other. Jacqui Popay recalls a compelling example:

We had loads of wooden pallets and all the kids made houses so we had a little town at the end of the playground. A little shanty town... and yeah, it was the children’s idea and it actually made a little community of the kids. And every night we had a bonfire and cooked toast. It’s great, you cook toast and everyone thinks it’s a real treat. You say, ‘you mess about anymore, we won’t have any more toast!’ and they really respond!

Here, the children’s imaginative ‘shanty town’ resonates with Lefebvre’s spatial theory of the playful process of citizenship; by rearranging city waste (playing on wasteland and using detritus such as pallets), the children created new possibilities for subjectivity.

Equally, Mouffe’s concept of the identificatory process of citizenship is particularly salient in the children’s allegiances to one another. For instance, cooking toast came to symbolise a celebration of self-reliance and group solidarity. A sense of communal belonging arose from shared differences identified with the outside world, a world to which many did not want to return. Curt Smith, a child from the Snow Hill Estates, fondly remembers the playground saying, ‘I think I probably spent more time there than at home’. For many children, the playground represented a place of desire and enjoyment, especially when compared to home or school life. Thus, when the privilege of cooking toast came into question, it signalled both a violation of playground solidarity and a step closer to banishment. This, of course, establishes a new order of rules and restrictions which, in themselves, can re-marginalise youth, but for the purpose of forming a child community, the exercise succeeded in demonstrating how shared duties as child-citizens took precedence over temptations to cause internal disorder.

Jacqui and Brian Popay led children in other creative exercises including mock rock bands, fancy dress, junior commandos, pirates, and even a political parody of Bath politicians. For example, when Bath’s mayor visited the playground, he was greeted by a 12-year-old ‘mini mayor’ and, according to the Chronicle, ‘withstood an assault by junior commandos and pirates’ (Bath and Wilts Evening Chronicle 1972). In this exercise, children engaged in forms of subversive parody and protest, enacting a radical challenge to a traditional authority figure.
Although these actions were symbolic, such performative ruptures of normative social boundaries, especially with a prominent figure, can significantly dislodge fixed notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’, promoting new possibilities of citizenship and engagement (Nicholson 2005, 24). Performing a mock mutiny of the mayorship demands a degree of self-confidence and humour from participants (not to mention the mayor) and thus likely refigured, even if momentarily, perceptions of how citizenship and political engagement can be enacted on public stages.

Radical transgressions

In addition to enactments of political dissent, the playground also accommodated activities which many considered socially deviant expressions of sex and violence. Not only did children build forts and tree houses, they also burned them down, wrote graffiti, and tested the boundaries of sexual appropriateness. In recalling how the ‘shanty town’ was eventually set ablaze, Jacqui Popay concedes, ‘Yeah, children like to light fires . . . we had an angry neighbour about that’. Popay also remembers a controversial newspaper article about a child writing graffiti on a playground rooftop reading, ‘Dawn Likes It’ (referring to sex). Popay jokingly adds, ‘And Dawn did!’

It is important to note that the playground’s period of operation (1972–1977) coincided with a time when child sexuality (and its legislation) was being intensely contested. Jeffrey Weeks (1985), in his book *Sexuality and its Discontents*, argues that anxieties about children’s exposure to sex (particularly inter-generational sex) were on the rise in the 1970s. Weeks cites as examples the ‘dizzying circulation’ of pornography such as *Playboy* and the 1971 high-profile obscenity trial of *Oz* magazine for publishing the sexually explicit ‘School Kids Issue’ (1985, 23). Yet, despite the hysteria Weeks notes in the media – or possibly because of it – there was also a significant counter-movement seeking to liberalise the restrictions placed on childhood sexuality. In the book, *The Age of Consent*, sociologist Matthew Waites writes how, during the mid-1970s, ‘[a] shift from Victorian beliefs in childhood sexual innocence to an acceptance of children as sexual beings led to new conflict over the regulation of sexual behaviour among progressives and radicals engaged in a new sexual politics’ (2005, 155). Waites documents how numerous political groups sought to lower the age of consent to 14 (some seeking to abolish it altogether) and argues that the issue ‘was finding wider
support... not only within grassroots sexual movements, but also within religious organisations and liberal intellectual circles' (2005, 132–3).

In this respect, Jacqui and Brian Popay’s attitudes towards children’s transgressions were tolerant, and in many ways encouraging. As long as a child’s actions did not endanger others, Jacqui and Brian Popay embraced the children’s behaviours as valuable signs of individual expression and disregarded the stigma their actions often attracted. The playground, in this manner, took on a carnivalesque function, achieving what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as ‘speech and gesture—... liberat[ed] from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times’ (1984, 10). Radical forms of expression previously denied to children at home, in school or in other city spaces were encouraged and celebrated. As Smith confirms, ‘The Adventure Playground gave us underprivileged kids our first real taste of the arts as a form of expression’.

It is, perhaps, less surprising then that some of the children’s first experiments with self-expression included incendiary acts of destruction. Not only were they responding, perhaps, as children who may have harboured frustrations about being in the socio-economic margins, but in ‘The Sack of Bath’ era, their actions can also be interpreted as a détournement of surrounding environs. A concept most popularly championed by Situationist philosopher Guy Debord, détournement is a radicalised version of Lefebvre’s earlier idea of ‘centrality of play’. In his manifesto, Society of the Spectacle (2004), Debord positions himself as an artistic resistance fighter in the midst of a dogmatic culture war of over-determined consumerist materialism. Détournement, meaning to recoup, hijack or re-appropriate, is a method of social critique which turns old forms into new ones, or as Debord simply states, ‘the flexible language of anti-ideology’ (2004, 113). In this light, the children’s actions can be interpreted as radical expressions of a younger generation laying claim to public space, a moment Debord (1960) would describe as ‘inseparably negation and prelude in culture, at the turning point of culture’.

Debord’s theory, which influenced counter-culture activities of the 1960s and 1970s, in conjunction with Bakhtin’s transgressive carnivalesque, help illuminate the radical activities at the playground. In their early twenties, Jacqui and Brian Popay avidly promoted counter-cultural methods of re-organising society both as members of the theatre company which resided in a commune (sometimes swapping sexual partners) and as supervisors of the playground.
Hence, it is significant that, along with encouraging socio-political transgression, the playground also represented a place of sexual liberation. Despite the children’s ages (ranging from 9 to 14), Jacqui and Brian Popay maintained a sex-positive outlook which acknowledged and even celebrated young sexuality.

The NTC would recruit children to be part of the company’s popular show *Rocky Ricketts and the Jet Pilots of Jive*, for example. A parody of rock bands of the time, the show featured several children and a number of highly sexualised adult ‘Rockettes’. Brian Popay explains:

> The Rockettes were sort of these built up women. We had three or four little boys that would come with us and they were only about twelve I suppose. Eleven or twelve. Thirteen maybe, no one over fourteen I know. And we used to dress them up as miniature versions of me, with little moustaches and greasy hair. And they would actually appear from out underneath their dresses. And of course they were very, very, sexy girls, and very hairy. It was a period when women didn’t shave much down there. And they wore really revealing pants.

Simultaneously celebrating and satirising rock and roll as a hypersexual genre, the show *détourned* notions of female sexuality by exaggerating the Rockettes’ dual position as sex objects and reproductive factories for future rock stars. But by transgressing traditional boundaries of sexual appropriateness (minors performing tabooed activities), the show raises many questions.

Depending on one’s standpoint, the children’s involvement in *Rocky Ricketts* (and other forms of sexual expression at the playground) may be interpreted less as liberatory experiences and more as forms of child exploitation. NTC members maintain, however, that although their antics seemed extreme, they were merely providing opportunities the children had sought themselves. According to Popay, the children saw early versions of *Rocky Ricketts* by peering into local pubs where the show appeared. The children began rehearsing versions of the show and expressed interest in being part of the company’s performance. The NTC’s decision to include the children suggests that company members, perhaps similar to the editors of *Oz*, were willing to take certain risks by incorporating pre-adolescents into sexually tabooed activities.

Although *Rocky Ricketts* was performed outside the playground, its connection to the site was evident by the children’s participation as well as the child groups who rehearsed at the playground. Curt Smith and his friend Roland Orzabal, who later formed the internationally
successful band Tears for Fears, were among these imitators. Not long after the playground’s closure, Smith and Orzabal formed their first band, The Graduate, named after the film which also addresses inter-generational sexuality (although of a couple both above the age of majority). Their music sets included a Rocky Ricketts cover song as well as the songs ‘Acting My Age’, ‘Ambition’ and ‘Elvis Should Play Ska’. These early choices exude, I suggest, a generational subversiveness akin to Debord’s détournement – a sensibility the playground nourished. Two years later, Smith and Orzabal formed Tears for Fears, named after the primal-scream therapy techniques of Arthur Janov and produced songs such as ‘Shout’ and ‘Mad World’. These examples evoke an expressive rebelliousness that might be perceived as akin to the Bakhtinian activities first experimented with at the playground which Smith, as mentioned earlier, credits as a seminal influence.

More importantly, Smith confirms that the playground provided a much-needed sense of community. ‘In fact’, he writes in an e-mail, ‘Jackie Popay is still a good friend as is Rose Popay (Brian and Jacqui’s daughter) and Zephyr Douglas, Jacqui’s son from her second marriage to Pavel Douglas (another NTC performer), is my godson’. In many ways, the legacy of the playground remains with its participants and the extended community it formed. Brian and Jacqui Popay take pride in the way the children integrated into Bath’s community. ‘We have watched them grow up into men and women’, says Brian Popay, ‘and, you know, have kids of their own . . . we sometimes bump into them and they do remember us, and I think they think fondly of us because in many ways we were like their mums and dads’.

With such a unique history and cultural impact, it is surprising that the playground has escaped critical attention. Its inclusion in theatre and performance history offers an alternative model, more radical than Littlewood’s, which demonstrates transgressive modes of engagement. Naturally, such playgrounds carry with them a significant degree of risk. In the 1970s, however, the idea of risk – physical and social – was seen by many as integral to child development. The 1972 report on Bath’s parks captures this sentiment:

The success of Bath’s first adventure playground this summer has shown the value of an imaginative approach to the needs of children. Here, in an atmosphere of apparent shambles, children were given the opportunity for exciting play – even to take the risks which are so necessary to growing children. (Bath Labour Women’s Council 1972, 19)
Eventually, after transferring to two more abandoned lots, the playground was discontinued by 1978 when Jacqui and Brian Popay shifted their focus to indoor programmes and performing full time for the NTC. Jacqui Popay acknowledges how inconceivable the playground seems in today’s context. Referring to the extensive criminal record checks that adults undergo today, she exclaims, ‘We were never even vetted!’ She insists that playgrounds of the 1970s ‘would never happen now, because they’d be far too dangerous’.

‘Risk society’ and playgrounds today
Health and safety measures of recent decades have diminished the risks and freedoms children once enjoyed. According to David Ball (2007) of the Risk Management Centre at Middlesex University, perceptions of health and safety in the 1970s were epitomised by the rational motto, ‘accidents will happen’. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, Ball argues, playgrounds became increasingly associated with danger and lawsuits as a culture of compensation developed. In fact, since 1980, the number of adventure playgrounds has halved, a direct result of lawsuits (Ball 2007; Coughlan 2007).

Ball (2002, 21) reports that about 40,000 equipment-related injuries occur every year and one playground-related death occurs every three to four years. He points out, however, that such statistics pale in comparison to injuries and deaths occurring at home or outside playground environments, arguing that certain safety measures at playgrounds are misperceptions of actual risk. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) has used the term ‘risk society’ to describe a particular phase of modernisation characterised by hyper-awareness and fear of possible danger. Arguing this point further, Sean Morrissey writes that, despite living in an era safer than any in history, a ‘culture of caution’ prevails and ‘young people become the focus of risk-avoidance discourses and strategies from powerful social institutions’ (2008, 416). Under such pressures, youth environments are subject to increased surveillance and attract punitive action when they breach regulatory standards.

Since the Health and Safety Executive’s (HSE) Work Act of 1974, but particularly with the enforcement of the Children’s Act of 1989, playgrounds must satisfy stricter risk assessments, maintenance regimes and employee standards (Potter 1997, 13). Although the HSE sets playground standards, it is public liability insurance companies contracted by local authorities which apply and regulate them. Local
authorities must minimise risk to satisfy the interests of insurance companies, subsequently affecting the emphasis of playground design. Old-fashioned Do-It-Yourself (DIY) construction areas are often unfeasible because playground equipment must be in ‘reasonable condition and repair’ (Potter 1997, 13). Compared to the construction projects found at playgrounds in the 1970s aimed to develop modes of expression, citizenship, and community through improvisation, today’s adventure playgrounds function less as malleable spaces and more as safe outlets for physical exercise.

Even at playgrounds where the architecture incorporates children’s designs (a common trend), children’s involvement in construction, more often than not, is strictly limited. To appreciate how risk-averse British playgrounds are, Tim Gill (2007, 32–5) says one only need to look at Europe and Japan where many adventure playgrounds still have DIY areas and embrace risk to far greater extents. Or, as I argue here, one can look to English playgrounds in the 1970s. Lefebvre’s idea of subjectivity and citizenship, which was achieved in part through modes of spatial rearrangement, is stultified in today’s over-determined playground schemes. Likewise, such environments curtail children’s rebellious impulses which might attempt to recoup – in a Debordian sense – playground structures through destruction. Whereas the NTC incorporated the impermanence of the Adventure Playground as a creative element, today’s playgrounds are often fettered by risk-restricting controls.

Playground procedures of risk reduction also include the UK’s vetting of adults through the Criminal Records Bureau as part of an attempt to reduce child abuse. Gill (2007, 47) argues that such procedures, although important in some cases, have reached a scope disproportionate to the actual problem of playground safety and suggests resources be redirected to domestic settings where child abuse occurs far more often. Further, Gill warns how such schemes not only discourage a culture of volunteers but also ‘undermine the very bonds of mutual trust that make communities welcoming, safe places for children’ (2007, 48).

Although Gill (2007) recognises recent aims to relax some HSE policies, it is clear that England is still seriously afflicted by risk aversion, particularly when it relates to young people. The creation of the recent Adventure Play Park in Gullock Tyning (10 miles from Bath), for example, incorporated many risk-prevention elements including the installation of CCTV cameras (Connect 2010, 9). The prevalence of CCTV cameras and, more broadly, the recent introduction of high-frequency ‘mosquito’
sound devices intended to repel children in civic landscapes, point to increasing anxieties which fixate on modes of surveillance and discipline as solutions to perceived risk. In such an atmosphere, it is not discordant to have a recent survey by the Good Childhood Inquiry report that 43% of adults believe children should be 14 years of age before being allowed outside by themselves (Connect 2010, 9).

With the steady decline of traditional social structures (religious and civic), many argue that outdoor risk-taking environments offer ever-more important spaces for forming notions of identity, responsibility and community. If as Morrissey (2008, 414) suggests, there is a dearth of literature focused on the connections between risk-taking, pleasure and youth development, how might playgrounds of the past which engaged in risk-seeking endeavours contribute to current discourses primarily focused on limiting risk?

Conclusion

To suggest Bath’s Adventure Playground is an exemplary model of child environments is not the purpose of this essay, nor is it the view of the NTC. It is relatively easy to disparage the site for its many oversights and one must remember it took shape during a specific counter-cultural moment in Bath. What is important are the lessons that can be drawn from the way the company used radically interactive modes of theatre practice to engage children in new forms of expression, citizenship and community. The legacy of the playground’s subversive activities and the company’s struggles with Bath’s city council provide a dynamic example of how theatre practitioners can reshape a city’s spatial order and create a sense of belonging for a city’s marginalised youth.

Similarly, Littlewood’s mission was important because it relied on an experimental and haphazard phenomenology. After all, Littlewood advertised her Fun Palace in The Drama Review (1968) as a ‘Non-Program’ which is much in line with Debord’s ‘flexible language of anti-ideology’. Littlewood’s mission, much like the NTC’s, was to formulate a radical alternative to existing systems. With a utopian aim of discovering better forms of community, playground projects like Littlewood’s and the NTC’s sought to reclaim city space and engage local citizens.

Effective social change, Debord (1960) argued, arises from what he called an ‘illness of culture’ or as he clarified, ‘a positive illness in the sense that it terminates something and opens on other dimensions, real or claimed’. Extending this metaphor, Littlewood and the NTC
self-diagnosed what ailed their communities, and in the process of redefining city space, attracted others who similarly identified with that ‘illness’. It was the improvisational and radical qualities of the playgrounds which spoke to and attracted young participants, who in turn, were willing to engage in novel experiments to discover possible remedies.

Although current conceptions of what ails society have since changed, and such playgrounds could indeed, ‘never happen again’, they nevertheless offer provocative models which highlight the value of risk. As we struggle into the future as an economically burdened ‘risk society’, with unprecedented levels of surveillance, radical playgrounds of the past deserve revisiting. Above all, they can remind us of our ability to imagine and reach towards what has yet to be realised.

**Keywords:** playgrounds; risk; citizenship; radical theatre

**Note**

1. All quotations herein from Brian Popay, Jacqui Popay and Curt Smith are taken from transcribed interviews conducted by the author in 2009. Further details and dates of this material are listed in the references under the name of the interviewee.

**Notes on contributor**

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**References**


