

Preface

Dear Reader,

This is a long story. I hope you will bear with me.

I started writing the text of *The People's Republic of Valerie* in earnest in the summer of 2014. The summer Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed by police in the US, the summer of the Israel-Hamas war, the summer of the rise of ISIS, the summer of the beheading of American journalist James Foley, among others, the summer of the Ukraine-Russia battle and the shooting-down by pro-Russian separatists of a Malaysian airline passenger plane in which 298 people were killed. So far, on our planet, summer still follows spring, and spring of that year included mudslides in Washington state, Chile, and Afghanistan, a tornado in Arkansas, wildfires and drought in California, floods in the Balkans, a ferry sinking in China, and the disappearance of another Malaysian passenger plane, flight 370, in which 239 people are presumed dead.

I had been writing the text already for a while, but I didn't know yet exactly what it was doing or what was going on in it. As far as I could tell at the time, there appeared to be a rather isolated narrator "character" trying to recover or heal from something, but I wasn't sure who they were, and I wasn't sure exactly what was troubling them (which seems absurd now, looking back). I was working at the time quite literally alongside my friend and colleague Tim Smith-Stewart, with whom I'd get together semi-regularly for silent companionable writing sessions. We would sit and write together in silence and then sometimes read and share what we'd done at the end. Tim was writing the text for what would become *Awaiting Oblivion—Temporary Solutions for surviving the dystopian future we find ourselves within at present*, and I was writing what would become *The People's Republic of Valerie*, which would become *The People's Republic of Valerie, Living Room Edition*.

I remember one day after Tim and I had worked together, I think it must have been the day he told me the title of his piece or decided on the title of his piece, I remember I came home and I was sitting outside under this tree and I remember thinking, No more dystopias! No more dystopias! We need a utopia! We need many utopias! And so I decided and began to re-read and re-work—or rather follow and understand—this project toward that end.

It occurred to me fairly soon after making that decision—or after having that idea, or being given that idea (I don't work so much by decision it turns out, more by intuition, or instruction, and an attempt at least at deep listening)—at any rate, it didn't take long after I got the utopia message for me to also get the message that I didn't really know what a utopia was. Nor was I a person yet capable of constructing or imagining one, much less living in one or inviting others to join me in a project that I could barely conceive.

It was clear I had a lot of work to do, and I wasn't sure what it was, but the process of writing this text, and the process of assembling a creative team, organizing a fundraiser, and rehearsing, producing, presenting, and sharing the play—both at On the Boards in Seattle in May 2017, and afterwards transforming it with my partner, visual artist Leon Finley,

to be given in living rooms in Austin, Seattle, Brooklyn, and elsewhere—as well as the process of constructing this book for your use should you wish to use it—has been and is a process of trying to understand what my work is—as a person in this world at this moment—and to do as much of it as I can to the best of my ability.

I continued to work on the text throughout the summer and for the next year and a half with my long-time friend and collaborator Paul Willis and our dear friend and collaborator Peter Ksander. We knew that the show would go up at On the Boards in the spring of 2017, and the three of us or sometimes just Paul and I would meet periodically in LA (where Paul lives), in Portland (where Peter lives and teaches at Reed College), or in Seattle or Walla Walla (where I had dual citizenship during the seven years I taught at Whitman College). Over the years we spent working on the text and trying to understand what it was and how it wanted to be enacted, Paul and I returned many times to the question of whether it needed to be a solo performance or whether it needed to be performed by an ensemble. Because of its themes of the condition of isolation on the one hand, and its aspiration toward or longing for community and collective on the other, we would go back and forth (literally from meeting to meeting) between the two modes. We would meet in LA in the summer and realize the work absolutely had to be a solo show, and then we would meet in Portland in the winter and realize it absolutely had to be performed by an ensemble.

In the fall of 2016, I was making arrangements for my sabbatical from Whitman, during which time I would live in Seattle, finish writing the text, go into rehearsal, and mount the production that was scheduled at On the Boards. Then the 2016 presidential election happened.

I'm just going to pause for a minute to reflect on that event.

And all the events and conditions that led up to it.

And all that has come after.

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Paul and Peter and I met over the Thanksgiving weekend. We rehearsed. It was hard. We were joined for one day by my friend and colleague Jessica Cerullo (with whom I taught at Whitman from 2012 until I resigned in May 2018—but that is another story). At the end of that work period, Paul was sure that the show needed to be a solo performance, and that was how we agreed to enter the rehearsal room in the spring although it filled me with dread to think of spending so much time alone. Within two weeks, for a number of reasons, the most beautiful of which (of whom?) was the recently born Augustus Jack Aprile Willis, it turned out that Paul wouldn't be able to direct the show in Seattle after all.

It was swiftly decided that Paul Budraitis, a Seattle director I'd known for many years and with whom I'd crossed paths recently at Whitman where he directed a smart and elegant production of *The Seagull* with students, would enter the process and steward the project to its opening at On the

Boards. I took the opportunity of the change in directors to make an executive decision that we create an ensemble production, and I insisted that we do our best to assemble a creative team that included more female or female-informed than cis-male, more POC than white, and more LGBTQ than straight artists. We didn't achieve this exactly in all areas, but what I learned from even attempting to create a company with this kind of representation has forever changed the way I make and view performance. Our company included, in alphabetical order: Matt Aguayo, Paul Budraitis, Mary Anne Carter, Jessica Cerullo, Leon Finley, Alexandra Harding, Anna Kasabyan, myself, Peter Ksander, Tania Kupczak, Evan Mosher, Brandon J. Simmons, Kelly Morgan Stevens, and Ray Tagavilla. Our rehearsal and design process was challenging and confusing, weird and beautiful, mysterious and rewarding. It's impossible for me to speak of the production because I was in it (and much of the time I was lying on the floor, which was great!), but I've seen pictures. And fragments of video. And everyone's brilliant and essential contributions are present, there, sparkling. And people who saw it still tell me sometimes that the production was meaningful to them, that it did something for them, at that time, in that moment. The show closed on May 7, 2017. *The People's Republic of Valerie* was presented in the same On the Boards season as Tim Smith-Stewart's *Awaiting Oblivion*. *The PRV*—the work of it, and the work it did on me (and continues to do on me when I have the opportunity to give it again)—owes a great debt to Tim, and to his project, and to my resistance of the word dystopia. (Although, as it happens, the act and action of his play was more focused on the temporary solutions of its title than it was on the dystopian future we find ourselves within at present.)

I had many feelings after the show closed. Exhaustion, immeasurable gratitude, some great quantity of humility (if humility can be quantified and still be considered humility), depression (as in *the action of lowering something*), and the not uncommon feeling at the apparent end of a massive project that has required an enormous amount of time, energy, labor, and other resources from innumerable humans and several institutions—that something was amiss.

I just looked up the word amiss in the dictionary. It says, *not quite right; inappropriate or out of place*. I love the dictionary.

The thing that was not quite right was that while the production had been meaningful to many, it had still not, as far as I knew, done anything explicitly to change or positively alter or impact any of the crises, circumstances, concerns, or conditions out of which it grew. It occurred to me that if I wanted it to have some direct impact or be of some clear benefit to at least one actual person's actual physical, material life, or at least one place's stability, vitality, reconstruction, or repair, the work might be inappropriate or out of place in a conventional performance setting. I was given another idea: Take it into the living room. Do the solo version in living rooms and give it for free or by donation to raise money for a local organization that is providing relief for people experiencing hunger and/or homelessness.

So that is what we are doing now, more or less, and what we hope you will join us in doing in a living room (or two!) near you, for an organization, community, tract of earth or water, species, or situation that moves you and could use your help in the form of a small donation or simply by boosting the signal of their need.

I'll just say a little more about how the *Living Room Edition* evolved—because it did evolve, and again it evolved with generous input and hospitality from others.

I've known John Kazanjian and Mary Ewald since 1993. I've been a devoted audience member of New City Theater (the independent Seattle company they've been sustaining since 1982), and I've had the privilege of working with them on several projects over the years. I consider John Kazanjian one of my most important mentors (if not my most important) and Mary Ewald one of the country's finest actors. In 1997, I attended their living room production of Wallace Shawn's *The Fever*, directed by John and

performed by Mary. In 1990-91, I saw Wallace Shawn perform it at Dixon Place on East 1st Street in NYC and again at La Mama E.T.C. All three of these experiences left an indelible impression on me, and they came to mind as affirmations when I was given the idea to adapt *The People's Republic of Valerie* for living rooms. I reached out to John and Mary, and also to Brandon J. Simmons, to help me think through the idea and determine if it was viable. (In addition to performing in *The PRV* at OtB, Brandon and I had been in a New City production of *Hamlet*—with Mary playing Hamlet—in 2014, so the four of us shared some history, vocabulary, and mutual respect.) We gathered in John and Mary's living room one late summer evening in 2017, and the three of them let me read through the entirety of the text that had been performed at On the Boards. It took about 90 minutes, and they all thought it was viable—though they had some questions! And some suggestions. John agreed to go into rehearsal with me to begin the adaptation process. We met and met and met, worked and worked and worked. It was hard. I struggled again with being alone on stage. Mercifully, I was given another idea. (If you are still bearing with me, I thank you. I promise I am almost out of ideas! This story, for the purposes I'm telling it to you now, is almost over.)

I met Leon Finley at a Sarah Schulman reading at the Seattle Public Library in January of 2017. He was sitting in front of me, and I noticed that we were nodding emphatically—like, with our whole bodies—at all the same lines from the book (*Conflict is Not Abuse*), and at all the same points in the conversation between Schulman and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore that followed the reading. Naturally I wanted to meet this person who agreed wholeheartedly, and whole-bodily, with everything I agreed with, so I introduced myself to him after the event and we exchanged contact information. That exchange led to many things, including the *Cartography of The People's Republic of Valerie*, a series of thirty drawings Leon made in response to an audio recording of me saying the text. The drawings were installed in the vomms at On the Boards for the audience to encounter as they entered the theater. As I was working with John, and struggling with being the sole performer and focal point of the *PRV, LRE*, it occurred to me to invite Leon to make something for the audience to contemplate with their eyes while I spoke. I didn't know what it would be, only that it should be something simple that could be easily installed in a living room. Leon accepted the invitation.

Meanwhile (I promise it's almost over), my dear friend of 20+ years, Steve Moore, had invited me to do a residency, supported by his theater company Physical Plant, in his backyard shed in Austin, TX, in March 2018. It was my goal to use the residency to memorize the text and return to Seattle ready to rehearse with John and present the *PRV, LRE* at his and Mary's house in May. Leon, by now my partner in art and life, joined me in Austin, where I continued to struggle until I was, finally, given my last idea: Leon should be *in* the *PRV, LRE*, and that the visual component should come into being in real time and unfold for the audience in the same way that the audio component (me speaking the text) would. I had some bad ideas about the materials Leon should use to enact this visual component—including an impossible number of green post-it notes—but fortunately for me, Leon is decisive, and attentive, and attuned—to his work as well as my own—and pretty soon (within like 15 minutes of our first rehearsal), he knew that he would draw on an overhead projector using the vocabulary from the *Cartography of The People's Republic of Valerie*. Within an hour of Leon knowing we needed an overhead projector, Steve and his good friend Thomas Graves (of The Rude Mechs, whose space we were rehearsing in) had found and delivered us our dream technology.

As part of the residency, Steve had organized an informal work-share for me with friends from the Austin community. When he asked me what we were planning to do, I said I could share the whole text, which would take about 90 minutes, or I could just share a few sections that would take about an hour. He voted for the hour. So I instinctively (and impulsively) decided to skip two of the six sections that comprised the original text (the two that were giving me the most trouble in rehearsal), and Leon and I set about working on the other four. Instinctively (and impulsively), Leon knew exactly how to adapt the cartography vocabulary for

this new iteration of the work, and we haven't looked back or changed it since the first run-through. We gave it for the first time on March 22, 2018, in Steve Moore and Virginia Honig's living room on DeVerne Street.

When we returned to Seattle and began to work again with John Kazanjian (who was totally game to incorporate Leon into our proceedings), it was clear that the piece had a will and a life of its own that had found itself. It would take no further direction! John and Mary invited us (or we maybe invited ourselves) to give the piece again in their living room, which we did on May 25, 2018. Since then, we have given *The PRV, LRE* as a performance duet, for free or by donation to benefit Path with Art, an organization in

Seattle that offers free art classes to people coming out of homelessness or recovering from other forms of trauma or addiction. We hope you'll be inspired to do something similar.

We ask only that:

- At least 50% of the donations from your edition go to a non-profit or cause you believe in
- Either you or the good people who are hosting the show provide snacks and drinks (this is what we use the other 50% of the donations for) and make space for socializing for 30 minutes before and 30 minutes after the event
- The event is a collaboration between a Reader/Speaker, a Visual Artist, and the living room they give the work in
- The Reader says all of the words in the script, doesn't memorize them, and doesn't act them*
- The Reader and the Artist are both physically present and co-creating the event live
- The Artist makes or animates something in real time for the audience to contemplate with their eyes—preferably something that is separate and distinct from the bodies of either the Reader or the Artist**

Things we like to do that aren't required are:

- Gather an audience of people who don't all know each other—we like to invite half of the audience and ask the host to invite the other half, more or less
- Send thank you postcards to the good people who hosted the show in their living room/s
- Make the donation to the non-profit or cause in the name/s of the good people who hosted the show in their living room/s

Things we recommend are:

- The Reader uses a music stand
- The Artist sings during the song***

A few notes on the above:

*I wondered for a long time whether I should memorize the text. I asked my friend Joshua Beckman, who had come to one of the editions, what he thought and he said, Definitely not! I said, I think so too! But why? And he said, Because if you're reading it, then it's like something any of us sitting there could do. But if you have it memorized then it becomes about that, about you being able to do that, which most of us couldn't do.

As far as acting goes, it just seems unnecessary here and would only foreclose possibilities. The text itself takes a toll on the Reader because it is long and there is much to move through. Best not to weigh it down with anything extra but just to give yourself to each image, rhythm, and line completely—then move on when you can. Which isn't to say you don't need to rehearse! I recommend it. Highly.

**One of the things that's beautiful about the overhead projector (and the music stand for that matter) is that they are both practical objects that we stand behind. (For the most part we stand behind them.) This has the effect of de-centering us in favor of the audience having a listening and looking experience for their own imaginations. (We're there if they need the work to be about us, but we're not in the way of it being about them. At least, that's the goal.) So it can be nice when the visual component is drawing the eyes away from the Reader and the Artist, though it is possible for the elements to overlap. (For example, during one section in our edition, what Leon is drawing on the overhead is being projected onto my body, onto my clothes and skin, and that's nice too. But it's not necessary. It doesn't need to be projected onto me. It came out of the limitations and the possibilities of the space and the materials we were working with.)

***There is a recording of the song if you'd like to listen to it or use the original melody. But you are welcome to make up your own.

That's it! Thank you so much for your patience and attention. I really appreciate it. And I hope you will use this book.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I'm pretty easy to find.

Sincerely,
Kristen Kosmas