



*Spread, from left:  
The crew suffers heat exhaustion a  
week out on their coast-to-coast tour.*

*Jenny Hipscher and Alexis Camille  
by the Arizona freeway.*

*Performing "We Called it Resonance"  
at the Whitefish Bike Retreat.*

## HOW AGILE RASCAL COMBINED THEATER AND BIKE TRAVEL

STORY BY  
DARA SILVERMAN



REN DODGE

**A**t a grocery store in Paso Robles, our things were splattered across the parking lot. Our loaded bikes leaned precariously against the store's shopping carts and our bodies sprawled across the concrete, blocking access to the carts. I was having the worst time of it. My head was pounding, my skin was burning, and I was trying to not throw up.

Jenny was beside me, and Alexis was next to her. Someone — probably John Paul — had cut slices of cucumber and put them on our eyes. I can imagine, when the cashier came out to tell us to move, it might have looked more like we were having a spa day instead of a medical emergency. This definitely wasn't what I had pictured when I envisioned Agile Rascal as the first theater company to tour a play from coast to coast entirely on bicycles.

In my mind, our 105-day, 4,600-mile ride from California to New York would be a

rolling, artistic utopia. Each night, we would arrive at our campsite, tired but focused, ready to keep working on the play. As we wove moments and ideas from our days on the road into the work — the people we had met, the moments we had shared — the play would grow stronger and more defined, just as our bodies would grow stronger and more defined. Agile Rascal would bring all that energy and aliveness that riding a bicycle generates into our performances, while our artistry would infuse every mile on the bike. Our audiences would see, and feel, and understand it, just as people on the road would see, and feel, and understand it. Art and life would fall into a beautiful, synchronous cadence.

Instead, only a week in, we were already 200 miles behind schedule. Our first show in Los Angeles was in two days and we were lugging three giant, heavy baby trailers full of props, costumes, set pieces,

JOHN PAUL OLSEN





and a full kitchen including a cast iron pan down the mountainous West Coast. And we could not stop fighting.

We had used a good chunk of our “emergency hotel budget” to get a room in Salinas just a few days before because there was no way we could keep pedaling without addressing the interpersonal tensions. What had slowly been smoldering in the months leading up, as we worked to finish our play, gather our gear, and wrap up our lives — all those unaddressed tensions about power, privilege, race, class and gender; how we spoke to one another and made the decisions, and who got listened to and who didn’t — was suddenly on fire. We stayed up too late. We passed a “talking stick” around, but otherwise had no systems for communication or conflict resolution. The next morning, it felt like nothing was resolved, but at least the pressure had been released. We decided to get back on our bikes and keep pedaling. And as we journeyed down the Central Coast, we peeled off our layers, letting the sun warm our backs. Maybe the worst of it was behind us. And then I got heat exhaustion in Paso Robles.

After we were shooed off the grocery store property (and I vomited in a bush,) we miraculously found a cheap, charming hot springs campground less than five miles away. The next day, we rented an overnight U-Haul and drove all the bikes, trailers, and all seven Rascals to Los Angeles for our first show in Santa Monica. Our original play, “Sunlight on the Brink,” was about a motley assortment of travelers, thrown together in a remote location, determined to stay optimistic in the face of absurdly ever-mounting obstacles. The irony was not lost on me.



# WARMSHOWERS

At Agile Rascal’s next four shows — Encinitas to Albuquerque — we would humbly admit how badly we had miscalculated things and ask for support in hauling our gear to our next show. Thankfully, our audiences were enthusiastic and supportive, and we found help along each leg of the journey. In Denver, we found a Warmshowers host who had just moved into a nearly empty live-work space on the outskirts of town to start a chiropractic business. “Sure, you can take over my entire house for a week,” he said. Amazing.

We reworked the script, sent things home, and rebuilt the set out of gear we already had. We were figuring out in real time (and arguably too late) what it means for a play to be toured on bicycle. The gas pump, a major focal point of the set, was now constructed from a sleeping pad. We donated our trailers and hitchhiked across Kansas to make up for the lost week. Each step of the way, we were amazed by the magical fortuitousness, and incredible generosity that happens out there on the road, as anyone who’s ever been on a bike tour before can attest.

We plodded east for two months. The landscape became denser and greener, our bodies became tanned and sinewy, and the show took on new depths. But our ambitious route, which demanded pedaling 350 miles per week, and our lack of systems for how to divide up responsibilities, make decisions, and care for one another, kept us always on the brink of collapse. The tension that had exploded days into our trip remained a constant, simmering cauldron of resentment that occasionally overflowed into shouting matches, threats of quitting, and — once — someone leaving the group in a huff, only to get lost for half a day. Whatever vision I had of creating an immersive world in which the process of pedaling and the product of performance fused together remained painfully elusive. We were just trying to survive.

JOE BELL







Fenner at an old gas station, much like the one the first play was set at.

REN DODGE



**B**ack on the West Coast, several months after Agile Rascal's final show in Brooklyn, my collaborator Lelia invited me out for dinner. "So, what's next?" she asked me across our bowls of ramen. I was shocked. After the grueling journey she had just endured, I was amazed she was still speaking to me, much less eager for more. But I had spent three and a half months on my bike thinking about how I could have done things differently, and now I did actually have some ideas about how to do bike-touring theater better.

That conversation ultimately led to our next projects — a regional tour of Montana in 2017, followed by a tour of Florida in 2019. For these projects, we gathered first at a residency in the region. We began by collectively creating our company agreements and sharing our life stories to build trust. Each day started with check-ins and ended with appreciations, taking turns pronouncing admiration for one another. We also created cooking crews to make sure that the responsibilities of shopping, cooking, and cleaning fell evenly on everyone's shoulders. For the tours, we whittled our journeys down to six weeks and 200 miles per week, allowing us time to perform twice per week, sometimes offering free bike-maintenance and theater workshops to local communities.

Our participants for these projects came from all over. Finding talented artists who not only wanted to bike hundreds of miles but also were excited by the challenge of living, working, and traveling collectively was a real needle-in-a-haystack endeavor,

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The crew from the Montana tour stops to pose at Adventure Cycling.

but with each project, our little company grew in team and talent. We brought in incredible actors, musicians, designers, and a magical builder who could transform the contents of a recycling bin into gorgeous, lightweight puppets. Many of our artists sported BFAs and MFAs from years of arts training. It was amazing to see the skills and professionalism our weird DIY project could draw, especially considering that, despite our best efforts, we could really only pay our artists enough for them to break even.

We entered these residencies essentially as strangers, but after five weeks of intense training, moving, researching, talking, writing, exploring, deciding, rehearsing, and refining together, we emerged as a theater company ready to tour with our new play in tow.

Our Montana play was about a small mountain town that mined for a vital resource — sound — and what happens when that resource suddenly runs out. But it was also about the tensions inherent in balancing the needs of the group with the needs of the individual; a subject that rattled its way through almost every conversation we had about how to structure our company and our tour. With plans to bike over the Continental Divide (twice!), we were careful not to pack anything extraneous — a tent became a mountain, a sleeping bag became a bear. Mighty Jaren, however, still insisted on strapping a 30-pound speaker to his cargo bike so our shows could have

amplified sound (powered by a generator that turned a spinning wheel into electricity).

We created our Florida play as artists-in-residence in the Everglades National Park. It took place in a post-apocalyptic future, when rising sea levels had turned low-lying Florida back into a swamp. Our characters were a theater company tromping through the muck (on bikes — how meta) to perform for locals who had refused to leave. In the midst of Trump's presidency and an absurd government shutdown, it was a show about how we think about the past and how to both honor those who came before us while acknowledging that the old way of doing things no longer works.

We once again weighed ourselves down, liberated from the onerous mountain climbs with Florida's flat landscape: a cargo bike and four trailers now hauled a full set, a snake puppet large enough to fit our entire cast inside, and lights to illuminate our show. We performed at night in Florida's early spring darkness.

With each project, we were slowly figuring it out. We were learning how to create work informed by the land — its history, flora and fauna, terrain, elevation, and weather. Learning how to live and travel together on bikes, how to connect with local arts and bicycle communities, how to build a company. But there's something inherently tragicomic about bicycle-touring theater, no matter how good your

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*Above: After 105 days on the road and 4,600 miles, they made it to Brooklyn.*

*Below: Performing "Good Time Pedalers' Preservation Carnival" in Tampa.*

systems become. There's always the bungee cord snapping in the hot sun to send stilts flying, the puppets stuffed into trash bags in the pouring rain, to be aired out in someone's backyard after. There are the people on the road asking what the heck you're doing and the awkward answer: "Yes, we are a bicycle-touring theater company. Yes, I am in my 30s. Yes, this is what I've chosen to do with my life. Why? Because I like art and I like bikes." And having to hold the stupidity of this simple truth and let it hang there, between you and this stranger at a gas station, while your pit stains seep down the sides of your shirt.



I really thought about that first idea to combine theater and cycling as we moved through the pause of the pandemic. What makes this combination magical, what makes it hard, and who benefits from the intersection? I kept returning to the idea that it's the participants — the people inside Agile Rascal — who most benefit. Admittedly, you could argue the same could be said for all artistic experiences, from throwing a ceramic pot to making a Hollywood movie. The more time you spend with the thing, thinking about it, crafting it, living inside of it, the more it gets its hooks in you. Our artists were the ones who expressed having learned so much about how to live and work in close proximity to one another, who changed their relationship to the land and to their bodies, and who fell in love with biking. This should have come as no surprise, really. Riding a bike truly is a creative act. It changes how you see things. And yet, if the power of the work comes from being inside of it, then it struck me that the goal of Agile Rascal should be to bring as many people inside as possible.

Sam took a crop of nearly entirely new Rascals out to New Mexico last summer, where they built a new play replete with a giant purple puppet, musical instruments, and 30 pounds of professional theater lights. Over two weeks, they carried everything over 400 miles and 21,000 feet of elevation to perform for cities and towns across northern New Mexico. By shaving the project



**THERE'S ALWAYS THE BUNGEE CORD SNAPPING IN THE HOT SUN TO SEND STILTS FLYING, THE PUPPETS STUFFED INTO TRASH BAGS IN THE POURING RAIN, TO BE AIRED OUT IN SOMEONE'S BACKYARD AFTER.**



down to a month, we were able to make participating in Agile Rascal more accessible. We teach new artists and culture-makers the power of bicycles and how to connect more deeply with their art practice, the land, their bodies, and their communities. And we have begun talking about how to bring our unique collision of art and bicycles to an education program — to bring it into schools, and to teach young people to think outside of the black box about both transportation and making art.



I'll be directing and producing "GHOST RIDE," a play I wrote that puts the audience on bicycles here in my hometown of Philadelphia this September. The audience will follow performers on bikes, down a protected path in Fairmount Park. Cycling isn't just the form; it's the content as well. The play follows a food delivery cyclist on the day they are killed by vehicular violence and continues into the afterlife with them. It's a love song to the bicycle that also addresses issues of bicycle safety and transportation justice, as well as being a meditation on life and loss. In addition to talented performers, dreamy theatrical lighting, costumes, and scenery set against our wooded city park, it will also have live sound and an original score, fed into audience ears through headphones using a system that Nat, our sound designer, is figuring out especially for this project.

It feels no less ambitious to ride this Philly project for four modest miles compared to the 4,600 miles we put on our bikes for our inaugural project. By bringing more people inside of the creative universe that we build with bicycles, we'll show more people their incredible potential and use our work to collectively envision a different way of moving safely and sustainably through the world.

I may never arrive at my perfect, utopian union of theater and bicycles. Both things are, even separately, absurdly difficult endeavors in our world of screens and freeways. Sometimes it feels like the combination of the two is nearly impossible. And yet I have discovered that, in rubbing these two worthy absurdities together, the friction between them ignites a spark of creative exploration, complexity, and community that keeps me here.

For as long as I can swing it, here's to doing things the hard way. 🚲

*Dara Silverman is the founder and artistic director of Agile Rascal.*



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*-Freya Stark*



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