

“To live is to move from one space to another, while trying real hard not to stub one’s toes.” A sentence that sums up both the mood and the project of Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces*, a book that’s part essay, part poem, and part autobiography. How does Aurélien Bory, artist of tangents and inclined planes, of weightlessness and verticality, make his this work, whose starting point is but a sheet of paper? *Species of Spaces* has been the director’s companion for a while now. He’s always been fascinated by Perec’s “typewriters,” those literary devices that allow the writer to lay out the world using only the most basic of signs: the letter. Aurélien Bory replaces the blank page with a bare stage; he uses the tools of the theatre as his alphabet, to reveal their history and potential. He thus pays homage to Georges Perec, by alluding to his work rather than quoting directly from it. An homage to his literary genius, known for its playful dimension, but also to his personal history, influenced by the loss of both his parents during the Second World War. Aurélien Bory creates a moving puzzle, subtly clever, in which interlock creative euphoria, sophomoric freedom, and awareness of an upcoming and unavoidable disaster.

AURÉLIEN BORY

Working alongside Moroccan acrobats, Chinese artists, flamenco dancers, or industrial machines, Aurélien Bory never ceases to challenge space through movement. And vice versa. Objects and bodies endure the mechanical laws of the space as much as they reveal it, bend it, distort it. A true craftsman of the stage, he uses and often hybridises its various languages (dance, theatre, circus), every single genre, from the burlesque to the tragic, and all the skills at his disposal, from traditional tools to new technologies. In addition to his own creation, he has also worked with choreographer Pierre Rigal and singer Vincent Delerm, and directed two operas. Aurélien Bory has been working on a long-time project revolving around Georges Perec’s *Species of Spaces*, in Toulouse, where he founded the Compagnie 111 in 2000. A project punctuated by three *B(r)ouillons* (rough drafts) like three pages or three stages, where he and his performers offered the audience different attempts whose lessons inform this creation for the Festival d’Avignon.

INTERVIEW WITH AURÉLIEN BORY

How long has Georges Perec's book *Species of Spaces* been a companion of yours?

Aurélien Bory: For the past ten years or so. Our relationship to space was already—and still is—the question at the heart of my shows. The title therefore caught my attention; Georges Perec's books all have great titles. I had long wanted to make a show based on it. For a while, I thought about creating a laboratory for each of the thirteen chapters of the book: the page, the bed, the bedroom, the apartment, the building, the street, the neighbourhood, the city, the countryside, the country, Europe, the world, space. But I gave up on that idea. I realised that it wasn't just *Species of Spaces* I was interested in, but all of Georges Perec's work, and more precisely the relationship between his writing and his personal history. *Species of Spaces* was for me the perfect entry point into his world.

Georges Perec is known mostly for his novels. *Species of Spaces* belongs to another genre entirely.

Georges Perec wrote novels, essays, plays, poetry, but also recipes, postcards, games: he tried to write everything. *Species of Spaces* is indeed an essay, at least at first glance. But it is actually a juxtaposition of various elements, sometimes with no apparent relationship to one another, a puzzle made up of sociological reflections and autobiographical references, some encrypted, others not. It is a reflection about space that uses notions of geography, urban planning, architecture, geopolitics, painting, and history, and links them to his own writing projects, which also have something to do with space: *Places*, *Places I Have Slept* (two projects he eventually abandoned), and of course *Life a User's Manual*, his masterpiece. *Species of Spaces* sometimes looks like a first draft, as if he were taking notes. Yet it features all the characteristics of his writing: a taste for sociology, a certain playfulness, a love of fiction, and an autobiographical aspect. All his references are there, as shown by the systematic way in which he uses quotations. In 1974, Perec is buzzing with excitement. He's been working for years on *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, his most openly autobiographical book. And the fact that all his work is in some way autobiographical is what interests me the most.

What do the drafts you mentioned consist of?

Géométrie de caoutchouc (Rubber Geometry), *Plexus*, and *Azimuth*, my last three creations, formed a cycle. I wanted to start a new one. The research I led for three years around Perec was punctuated by *Les Br(jouillons)*, public presentations of what I was working on. It was actually a little more than just that: each *Br(jouillon)* was a constraint we'd created for ourselves. The idea was to spend one week working with my team with no preparation, before presenting the result of that research over the following week. The experience turned out to be very stimulating. I wanted this long-term project to still have some sort of urgency. The method was also a nod to Perec, who experimented with the serial format for *W*, before giving up on it.

How do you make Perec's work yours?

The show isn't an adaptation of the book, it is inspired by it. *Espace* is a way I found of inhabiting the text, just like the "e" inhabits the "a" or, at the theatre, human space inhabits the space of the stage. *Espace* is the result of the superposition of two words, while Perec juxtaposed them. That superposition implies layer and strata, leads to an exploration of the idea of depth. It would

be a sort of homage to Georges Perec, to the story of his childhood and of his mother, who died in Auschwitz. He talked a lot about his own story, but it's not always the part that's remembered. We tend to focus on his playful relationship to language. Yet Perec's writing was entirely built around that void. A huge inner void, a chasm. His relationship to his own history was like a game of hide-and-seek, in which the fear of being found out was as big as that of not being found out.

The death of Perec's mother is at the heart of his work. Can you tell us what happened?

Georges Perec was 5 when his mother sent him to the free zone aboard a Red Cross train. She was planning on joining him later, thinking herself protected as a war widow, but she was arrested in a raid and sent to Auschwitz on 11 February 1943. Perec was in Villard-de-Lans at the time, then moved to Lans-en-Vercors. He was adopted by his aunt and uncle at the end of the war. He became an orphan in the worst possible way: his mother just vanished. She has no grave, no date of death. In the 1950s, the French administration produced a death certificate, choosing 11 February 1943 as her date of death. How did he learn about it as a child? What was he told? What words were said? What kind of relationship to reality could he have built? Later, Françoise Dolto probably saved him as he was facing a complete breakdown. She encouraged him to anchor himself into reality through representation, suggesting he could paint or write.

In what way does *Species of Spaces*, which takes the form of an essay or a treatise, deal with this inner chasm you mentioned?

The book begins with this sentence: "The object of this book isn't exactly the void, but rather what exists around or inside it." I sort of took that sentence literally. I focused on those ideas of "around" and "inside," associating the void with writing. What's around Perec's writing manifests itself through quotations borrowed from his favourite writers. What's inside it manifests itself clearly through his obsession with letters. The inner void that haunted Perec cannot be separated from his writing. Actually, the real subject of *Species of Spaces* is indeed writing. Just look at the last sentence of the book: "Writing: to try meticulously to retain something, to make sure that something survives: to extract fragments from the growing void, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark, or a few signs."

How did you make the shift from the page to the stage?

By simply using the stage as a page. Theatre is a superposition, a palimpsest, a writing of ephemeral forms that write themselves on the traces of those that came before. *Espace* follows a sort of programme, according to four main axes: the literal interpretation, the trompe l'oeil, the disappearance, and the trace. Those devices all belong to the theatre, and I found them in Perec's writing as well. I use the void of the stage as a starting point. That "species of space" contains all forms, all shows. Like Perec and his machines made to invent stories, I first invented myself as an explorer of the machine that is the theatre: my role was to find the stories it contains to then move to another space, that of representation. To move from language to imagination, from the world that surrounds us to our own history. To move from life to death, "to pass." And to go back to this sentence by Perec in the foreword to *Species of Spaces*: "To live is to move from one space to another, while trying real hard not to stub one's toes."

AND...

WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with Aurélien Bory and the team of *Espæce*, July 18 at 17:30, Louis Pasteur site of the Université d'Avignon

FESTIVAL-AVIGNON.TV

Reports of the web-TV by young critics in Avignon about the artistic residency at the FabricA for *Espæce*

ENCOUNTER

Changement d'échelle : les arts confrontés au réel, with a speech of Aurélien Bory about *Transferts temporels et spatiaux : une question de perception*, by the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3, the Université Paris-Diderot and the Uqam, July 19 at 11:45, Conservatoire du Grand Avignon

MAISON JEAN VILAR

Round table *De la maquette au plateau. La construction du projet scénographique de la conception à la réalisation*, as part of the exhibition *Stage metamorphosis - 70 years of stage design at the Comédie-Française*, with in particular Aurélien Bory, July 17 at 11:00

Espæce is subject to a Pièce (dé)montée, pedagogical file created by Canopé.

TOUR DATES OF ESPÆCE AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- October 5 to 11, 2016 at Grand T Théâtre de Loire-Atlantique Nantes
- October 18 and 19 at Quartz Scène nationale de Brest
- November 3 at Théâtre de l'Archipel Scène nationale de Perpignan
- November 9 and 10 at Tandem Arras-Douai
- November 17 and 18 at Maison des Arts de Créteil
- December 8 and 9 at Parvis Scène nationale Tarbes Pyrénées
- December 13 to 17 at TNT Théâtre national de Toulouse Midi-Pyrénées
- January 4 to 8, 2017 at Théâtre du Nord Centre dramatique national Lille Tourcoing Nord-Pas de Calais
- January 12 and 13, at Volcan Scène nationale du Havre

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