

Je suis une montagne

Conception – creation

Eric Arnal-Burtschy

Sound creation

Thomas Turine

Scents creator

URCOM, Chimie Organique et
Macromoléculaire, Université du Havre

Technical director

Eloi Saniez

Construction

Workshop of the Théâtre de Liège

Electrical Chief

Marc Duchâteau

Programmation

Kevin Alf Jaspar & Pascal Demez
DRUW_Audio

Production

Still Tomorrow & BC Pertendo

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I often imagined I was an animal when I was a child. I was a bird, a tiger, a dolphin, a turtle, and I roamed the world in their way. I also imagined I was a tree and, because I was a tree, I was very old and had seen old kings and queens, the French Revolution and the launch of the rocket to the Moon.

Thinking back on this recently, I realized that as a tree, I hadn't seen anything, or at least not in the sense that we humans understand it, and unless all these events had happened next to me, I hadn't been able to perceive them because I'd stayed in the same place.

I'd stayed, but I had felt the passage of centuries, that the world smelled different when I was born. I have felt the passing seasons, the sun, the rain, the wind, the cold, the heat, the rumbling of the ground in a thunderstorm, the trickling of water between my roots, the fire that has passed close to me, the animals that have brushed against and inhabited me, the moss that has colonized me. I have never been afraid, never protected myself, just as an animal does not stop grazing when it rains. I accepted to be traversed by the elements because I am element, I accepted to be affected by nature because I am nature.

I imagined what it would be like to be a mountain, my heart so deeply buried under snow and rock and yet touched by the water that slowly flows through my body to reach the ground that I crush with my mass. I imagined being this water that runs through my mountain body and then I became a mountain again. On my time scale, the wind rips my body away, scattering it in deserts across the planet's surface before I assemble again. The movement of plates moves me thousands of kilometers, I carpet the oceans before rising, I'm alive, I'm closer to the sky than anyone else. I let time pass me by, for I am immortal, I no longer fear the cold, I no longer fear the rain, I no longer fear death. I'm no longer afraid of nature, I'm no longer trying to control it. I make room for it and welcome it, I let it live around me, on me and in me.

In *Je suis une montagne*, the stage will be physically inhabited by heat, rain, wind, muffled rumblings and the scents of plains and deserts. It will rain, the light will pass through the clouds to create dawns, halos, bright suns, it will coat the bodies with its strength before withdrawing and letting the night come.

Placed directly on this stage, suspended above the ground, the spectator is invited to let the elements flow through him/her, not to be active in protecting or controlling them, but rather to give them access. With his eyes closed, the spectator becomes a tree, a rock and a mountain, with the elements living around, through and in him/her. *Je suis une montagne* invites us to experience our world differently, through a prism other than our own. How would we perceive the world if we were a tree, if we were a mountain? Another world emerges, another relationship with time, the elements, space and ourselves. By inviting us to let go and commune, *Je suis une montagne* proposes an experience of the present.



Letting go and communion - an experience of the present

For *Je suis une montagne* to be effective, the audience must be able to let go, to try not to reach out for something, but to be traversed by the elements and this relationship to time. The experience of a project such as *Deep are the woods* shows that this is possible by playing on a series of criteria such as the spatial and sound context before entering the auditorium, the way in which the audience is welcomed, the way they are made to enter, or the expectation that is created. In *Deep are the woods*, people were invited to take off their shoes in a silent, dark antechamber before starting the show lying on the floor in the dark. A great deal of attention was also paid to the way in which the project was explained and the way in which the audience was guided around the auditorium. These elements, though very simple, create a transition between the outside world and the experience they're about to have, while at the same time indicating in an underlying way that the latter is going to be different from what they've already experienced in a theater or museum.

In this way, I define carefully the conditions of the experience in my projects: what is described upstream, how people are welcomed (with what attitude, what vocabulary, in what physical proximity, how they are touched or not when they are brought in), in what space (relationship to darkness, to silence, to the loss of bearings), and so on. This, added to what is said about the project beforehand, creates a cluster of perceptions, expectations and trust that will guide, if not make possible, what is to be experienced: the public doesn't enter a blank space, they enter with the belief that something is going to happen - and it is possible to act on this expectation. And this belief is endowed with a sufficiently powerful creative power to help shape what will be experienced. In *The Will to Believe*, William James gives a good analysis of the phenomenon of performative faith, which can create a fact and, in this case, places the spectators in such conditions as to make it possible to let go, and thus to make *Je suis une montagne* possible.

Mountain

Driven by plate tectonics, mountains slowly move thousands of kilometers across the Earth's surface. They rise, reach maturity and then lose one or two millimetres a year to wind and rain. That's one kilometer per million years, like Everest turning to dust in ten million years when the Earth has 4.5 billion. A mountain is a mountain, eroding into hills, becoming a plain, carpeting the ocean floor before becoming a mountain again. Its body is renewed, moved and in motion.

A triptych about our relationship with nature and the Universe

Je suis une montagne is part of a triptych that also includes *Deep are the woods* and *Remains*. Starting with our paradoxical relationship with nature, which we perceive as sacred while at the same time protecting us from it (*Je suis une montagne*), this series of three pieces evokes its potential disappearance in the form we know it (*Remains*), opening onto a form of relationship with the void and the infinite, where only light remains, and more generally questioning our place within the universe (*Deep are the woods*).

The latest opus in this triptych has already been premiered, and has been hailed in several national press as "One of this season's must-see pieces" (RTBF - La chronique culturelle), "The must-see show of the digital season" (Le Soir - Catherine Makereel), a piece "between a quest for transcendence and a questioning of infinity" (Estelle Spoto, Le Vif - L'Express) that "explores light in a fascinating way, in a spectacular, immersive and experimental form." (Sylvia Botella - L'écho) or "A very rare experience of light, which behaves here like a body dancing in space" (Gérard Mayen, Mouvement) and a show of "Bewitching beauty" (Robin Broos, De Morgen).

Dramaturgy - a writing of elements

Spectators will be seated, suspended individually in a kind of fine net that allows the elements to pass through. The sensation is similar to that of a swing, but in a position that allows you to relax completely, while creating a sense of floating. Before entering the room, a sort of ritual of passage will ensure a transition between the outside space and the one where the action will take place. People will probably also enter in the dark or through the fog, to filter the audience's gaze and facilitate self-connection.

The dramaturgy will be based on the various sensations experienced by the spectator. What interests me, however, is not the sensation itself, but the imaginary effect it carries, in itself or in combination with other types of sensation. In the case of heat, for example, heat carried by a light moving in an arc above the viewer evokes the course of the sun. As the intensity rises sharply, there can be a kind of an exalting joy in feeling almost crushed by the power of the light, translated here as luminous intensity and heat. This imagination is different from that of a warm wind suddenly blowing through the space, or that of a global change in temperature, which evokes more the passage from one landscape to another, or from one season to another. Subsequently, working with cold-colored light (very white, almost bluish, for example) associated with a sensation of physical cold can shift the imaginary linked to this light.

In the same way, I've been working with smells. The imaginary world linked to this is of course very powerful, and I'd like to use this element to create a kind of loophole during the show: starting with smells we already know, like a powerful earth smell, it would be possible to open up to other worlds, literally. In this regard, some scientists are attempting to reproduce the scent of the Moon or Mars, based on their chemical compositions. Combined with a certain type of light and temperature, this could lead the imagination to explore worlds other than our own.

The specificity of a dramaturgy based on this type of element is the great technical precision it requires to get the imagination going. For example, we've tested different types of rainfall, which works well in principle, but in order for it to be effective, we have to be able to write down exactly where the first drop falls on the spectator, and then the temporality and location of the second: if it falls in the same place as the first, for example, it evokes a leaking pipe rather than a potential rainfall. Similarly, if the next drops arrive immediately, there's no time to feel the first drop trickling down onto the skin, even though the trickle itself carries a great deal of poetic exploration. The writing and dramaturgy of these different elements will therefore require a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between writing phases, technical trials and tests with spectators.

Musical creation - a writing of displacement

The sound is highly spatialized thanks to 16 loudspeakers arranged around and above the stage. The movement of sound masses across the stage alters its center of gravity. This, combined with the absence of a fixed reference point for the suspended spectator, creates a physical impression of being in motion, even though we are standing still. Feedback from our initial tests suggests an imaginary sense of three-dimensional space, such as that experienced when flying or underwater, with the impression of being able to move freely and change environment.

In addition to the poetic dimension, the sound score is the script of setting the spectator in motion and physically carrying him along. The proximity of the sound, the fact of being able to be immersed in it as one might be in a liquid element or in a powerful wind, with its currents, its rhythm and a power that we feel could potentially sweep us away, will be central to the writing of *Je suis une montagne*. This will be composed as the residencies progress, so as to evolve fully with the dramaturgy of the project.

Place of the body

In my work, there's a very close relationship between writing a piece for living performers or for performers who are inanimate, like the elements in *Je suis une montagne*. The terminologies used and the logic of writing are the same. In *Deep are the woods*, one of the previous projects, there are moving layers and rays of light crossing the space. The choreography of the movement of these sheets and rays depends on how the light breathes, how quickly it takes up space, how far apart the rays are, how much momentum they have: do they stop, do they hesitate, do they start moving together? How close will they be to the viewer? How close will they be to each other? What kind of writing of space will this produce, why precisely this one, in what relationship to time? Although we're talking about light, the terms and logic are the same as those used to describe the movement of the dancers.

This writing of movement is at the core of *Je suis une montagne*: not the direct movement of a performer or spectator, but that of the elements that inhabit the stage. How do they move, envelop and lift the bodies and imaginations of the people on stage? How do they take the time to fill the stage, giving breathing room? How do sound, wind and light move, spread across the floor, pick up speed, leap and fly? How do they inhabit space and emptiness? What contacts do they propose and seek out? What imaginary worlds do they raise?

I experience dance as the writing of a body in space, in the literal sense of the word. This body may or may not be animated, and if it is animated, it may or may not be alive. The nature of the body changes, but not what underlies this writing, which remains a writing of the body, time and space.

Environmental dimension

We have a kind of paradoxical relationship with nature, mythologizing it while at the same time seeing it as a resource or an element to be disciplined and dominated. One of the key issues in *Je suis une montagne* is to question this paradox, as well as the reflex we have to distance and protect ourselves from it: to cover up when it's cold, to air-condition when it's hot, to run for shelter from the rain, to kill or kick out the insects that try to enter our homes. It can rain on my body, it can be traversed by cold and heat or traversed by the wind, it is made for it even if perhaps I have forgotten it.

Je suis une montagne invites to a greater porosity with the elements: perhaps feeling the rain streaming down on me, the power of the sun crushing me or the wind caressing me can be pleasant, perhaps I can reclaim these sensations and accept going out in the rain or living in a warmer or colder environment.

Ecodesign and construction

We create projects whose quality of materials and construction will enable them to be used over a long period of time, with a minimum need to replace parts. From the outset, we also consider the question of transport, in order to optimize the latter as much as possible with more compact and lighter packaging, thus limiting the pollution emitted.

People are transported by train in Europe, and when we travel outside Europe, we work on project collaborations to maximize on-site presence.

The construction of *Je suis une montagne* will be carried out by the Théâtre de Liège workshops, which have adopted a charter aimed at reducing the ecological footprint of all the projects they build.



Estimated duration: one hour. Announced to the public (including transition time): 1h30

Type of venue: theater stage; room with ceiling poles and black-out option

Estimated audience: 40 to 60 people, depending on the size of the stage, every 1h30. The play can be performed on repeat, for example at 6pm, 7:30pm and 9pm. Daily capacity can therefore rise to 360 people.

Estimated set-up time: one day

Technical aspects

General logic: audience placed directly on stage, on seats suspended on self-supporting poles. The stage is crossed by elements such as rain, sound, light, mist and rumbling.

Type of venue :

- Theater set with poles
- Rehearsal room with poles in the ceiling and possibility of darkening.

Minimum dimensions: 6x6m, minimum height 3m. From the first half of 2024, 10mx10m, minimum height 3m. In residence, we can emphasize certain elements depending on technical conditions. Ideally, however, we want to be able to work with all these elements, as the imaginary world of the project is built up through the composition of these elements (e.g. heat + a type of rain + a type of sound + a smell).

Lighting: 12 PAR dimmable one by one on console or computer.

Sound: ideally 16 speakers and 4 subs for spatialization.

Rain: we bring the necessary equipment. If necessary, we can bring a small swimming pool to protect the ground.

Fog and smoke: ideally machines using a non-oily product to limit the smell of smoke. Depending on the machines available.

Specific equipment: to be discussed depending on the stage of work and what is available.

Calendar

At each residency, a group of people is invited to experiment with us. The size of this group varies from residency to residency, and also fluctuates over the course of the residency, with time spent individually, in small groups or collectively. This is part of the creative process and is not recalled for every residence.

January 2023 - Experimental residency - Period 1 - 10 days - workspacebrussels- Concept testing, testing of initial raw elements (generation of different categories of cold, heat, wind, rain, audience seating, sound spatialization, odor diffusion), experimentation with initial dramaturgical materials, public feedback.

June 2023 - Experimental residency - Phase 2 - One week - Ménagerie de verre - Refinement of initial elements, if possible of the seating and the relationship to sound.

Summer 2023 - Dramaturgical residency - One week. Deepening of the general line following the sensitive experience acquired during the first two residencies. Refinement of the range of elements.

Autumn 2023 - Experimental residency - Phase 3 - Two weeks.

- Dramaturgical, sensitive and technical feedback.
- Refinement of set-up
- Adaptation of initial prototypes.
- Dimensioning of set-up.

November 2023 - Technical residency

- Prototype testing
- Choice of components
- Finalization of the device in preparation for construction
- Finalization of sizing

December 2023-February 2024 - Finalization of device and construction plans.

January-March 2024 - A one-week dramaturgical residency. Refinements following the experimental residencies, preparation of the general schedule.

March 18-29 - Construction - Ateliers du Théâtre de Liège

Calendar - continued

March-April 2024 - Creative residency 1 - Two weeks

- Residency with a maximum number of seats (minimum 12) for the seats, to take account of perspective lines.
- Technical adaptation of the set-up.
- First draft of the set.
- One session in complete groups to test reception.
- Test of a possible outfit?

April-May 2024 - Creative residency 2 - Two weeks

- Continuation of creation
- Finalization of dramaturgy
- Technical adjustments, general reliability of the device
- Device automation tests
- Precision about how the audience is welcomed
- Tests with audiences in small groups

May-June 2024 - Dramaturgical residency - 1 week

- Adjustments following public feedback

June-July 2024 - Creative residency 3 - Two weeks Continuation and finalization of creation

- Finalization of automation
- Final testing of how the audience is welcomed

September-October 2024 - Creative residency 4 - Two weeks - Rehearsals under real conditions with several public openings

- Final adjustments to creation
- Dramaturgical adjustments
- Finalization of public reception protocol
- Technical run-in

November 2024 - Creation

Conversation with Eric Arnal-Burtschy

How would you define the place of the body in your projects? Could you specify this question of writing? What distinguishes your projects from an installation?

I would say that it is the relationship to time and the logic of writing. I create shows where the dramaturgy follows a temporal unfolding which passes by a writing of the movement and the space. There is a construction of the imaginary which allows to bring different layers of meaning successively, to nuance them, to reveal them again or differently.

Depending on the project, this narrative thread can be purely visual and sensory, as in *Deep are the woods* where there is "only" light running through the space and the bodies of the spectators, without text or sound. This can also be done through text and movement carried by a human body as in *Why we fight*, a performance where I am on stage.

In *Je suis une montagne*, this construction will pass by elements like heat, rain, wind... which will pass through the spectator. The physical sensation that this brings is only a sensation, what interests me is the imaginary that this sensation will carry and which will be built in the assembly and the dramaturgy: how these elements will carry a universe through their writing, with tilts, revelations, contrasts.

How do you define the experiential work that you are once again seeking in Je suis une montagne?

When I work on stage to create a new show, I have always been marked by the difference between watching performers on the stage and being on the stage: in the first position, I am a spectator of my own creation, in the second there is a relationship to sensation, to feeling from within the rightness of what is being created. In the first case, I accept or not the truth according to what I see and perceive, in the second I feel the truth, I can approach it in a more interior way. I would like to offer this same possibility.

The projects I create are not participatory projects in the sense that the action of the public is neither solicited nor required: there is only the possibility of a participation. But this possibility confronts the spectator with his own freedom, with what he allows to himself and to others. This reformulates the question of freedom through that of free will. I have confidence in the ability of the spectator to take the distance required to exert it. These projects are a proposal to seize our reality by the sensitive and the fact, in complement to the analysis that he/she will have in addition.

What are you trying to create in the audience in Je suis une montagne?

In Je suis une montagne, there will be a specificity in the relationship to time, in the idea of no longer trying to count time, of no longer trying to reach something, but to accept that we are present and that it is enough. A detail or a very simple sensation can then carry the imagination. It is this relationship to presence that interests me.

In the background there is also this question about nature, about the environment. We spend our time protecting ourselves from the elements, when it's cold we cover ourselves, when it's hot we put on the air conditioning, when it rains we take an umbrella, when there's an insect in our home we either kill it or put it outside. We spend our lives putting nature outside of us. This project is an invitation to feel that yes, it can be hot or rainy but that it is not a problem. It can rain on us, we can be cold for 10 minutes, there is no problem, our human body is made to be in such elements. It can even be pleasant. We have taken the reflex to say to ourselves that we should protect ourselves, but do we really need to? This is an open question for me. And behind this is the question of how we heat or cool our homes, for example, which has a strong ecological impact. The purpose of this project is the relationship to presence, to time and to our society today.

"A writing that fuses visual and living arts."

Marie-Juliette Verga, Parisart

"A fascinating, spectacular, immersive and experimental form."

Sylvia Botella, L'Echo

Eric Arnal-Burtschy

"I found that evening the magic of the great evenings when the show becomes what is most beautiful in the world in its fragility, its wavering, its surprises, its enchantment."

Michel Nuridsany, Revue Rendez-vous

Eric Arnal-Burtschy studied history, philosophy and geopolitics before turning to dance and visual arts. He creates immersive experiences in the form of stage projects, performances and installations. His work, based on research into the physics of the Universe and a questioning of the human being, is presented in theaters, festivals and museums such as the Louvre Lens, Kanal Centre Pompidou, Hong Kong Arts Center, SPAF in South Korea, ImPulsTanz in Austria, La Bâtie in Switzerland, the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels, La Gaîté lyrique in Paris, on national stages and CDCN or at the Philharmonie de Paris.

His creations are considered as "close to a new artistic form" (Aude Lavigne, France Culture), "generating artistic, scientific and technological innovation" (Timour Sanli, L'Echo) and "of a bewitching beauty" (Robin Broos, De Morgen). Regularly invited to give lectures and participate in conferences on research related to his work, he collaborates with many creative places, universities, research centers and industrial and technological companies.

He is an associate artist at 9-9 bis Le Métaphone (2023-2025), a companion artist at the Théâtre de Liège (2024-2028), and an artist in residence at workspacebrussels and the Théâtre de L'L (Brussels). He was previously an associate artist at the Rose des vents National Theater (2019-2022) ; associate artist at the Halles de Schaerbeek (2015-2019) and associate researcher at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) with the Institute for Advanced Studies of Marseille and the Research Institute on Out of Balance Phenomenas in 2019 and 2020. Always interested in geopolitical and strategic issues, he is in parallel a reserve officer in the French army.

Contacts

Eric Arnal-Burtschy
pertendo@gmx.fr

Touring
Anna Giolo
Ad Lib · Support d'artistes
contact@adlibdiffusion.be
+32 (0) 477 49 89 19

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