

## **Textual, audio and physical space: Adapting Perec's radio plays for Theatre**

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## Textual, audio and physical space: Adapting Perec's radio plays for theatre

Christopher Hall

In an exploration of Georges Perec's geographies, it is important to consider the spaces of his texts and the spaces in which and through which they have been performed. This chapter examines the spatiality of two of Georges Perec's original radio plays: 'The Machine' (*Die Maschine*) and *The Raise* (*L'Augmentation*).<sup>1</sup> The layout and typesetting of these works on the page is an intrinsic component of their initial engagement and comprehension. The use of language in both creates meaning and narrative within their own separate conceptual landscapes and audio spatiality is key, particularly for 'The Machine'. The adaptation process through one conceptual and metaphorical space into the vocal area and further into the physical space of the theatre, as well as its attendant conceptual spaces, raises distinctly Perecquian opportunities and issues.

In this chapter, I discuss my own adaptation of these radio plays to the stage. 'The Machine' and *The Raise* were written for radio, for an audience to listen to in the private, informal, remote and individual environment of their own home. The first step of the adaptation process is the explicit understanding of the spatial, physical and conceptual relationships between the audience of radio listeners and how they are profoundly different from those of the theatrical audience. The process of transferring these two works from the aural to the theatrical presented to me and my collaborators a variety of opportunities and challenges as well as spaces for learning.

## 'The Machine'

One of the best, most concise summaries of 'The Machine' was written by J.J. White two years after the initial radio première and one year before the piece was published: '*Die Maschine* is a mixture of many levels of language, from the sublime to the ridiculous. From play to analysis, from destruction to political reformulation.'<sup>2</sup>

'The Machine' is written for four separate voices – Processors 1, 2 and 3 and System Control. Partially written originally in French by Perec, then further developed through collaboration with his German translator Eugen Helmlé, the original 1968 German version, when read on the page by a single person is difficult to comprehend (see Figure 8.1).

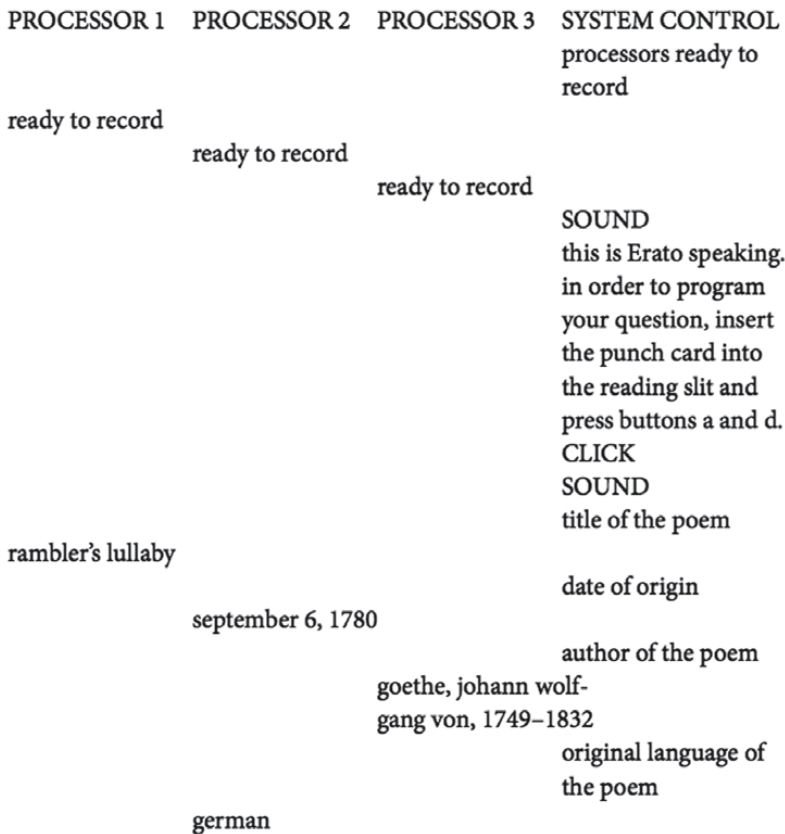
Speicher 1	Speicher 2	Speicher 3	Kontrolle
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	deutsch uber allen gipfeln ist ruh in allen wipfeln spurest du kaum einen hauch; die vogelen schweigen im walde. Warte nur, balde ruhest du auch.		

**Figure 8.1** Georges Perec, *Die Maschine*, translated by Eugen Helmlé, 1968 (page 6). The opening section of the play shows the idiosyncratic page layout of the play. © Philip Reclam, Stuttgart

To accommodate this necessary but idiosyncratic layout, the original 1972 German print edition opts for a landscape rather than a portrait layout. A larger format journal, the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, is able to accommodate this layout in portrait with Ulrich Schönherr’s 2009 English translation, referred to as ‘The Machine’ (see [Figure 8.2](#)).

It was clear that the way to begin to solve the first part of the puzzle of adaptation – whether or not the piece was going to work for a theatre audience – was to hear it, as Oliver Bray notes:

Therefore, the text needs to be spoken and requires multiple voices to reach a comprehensible form. Its realization depends on the three interrelated dimensions of performance: time-body-space.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 8.2** Georges Perec, ‘The Machine’, translated by Ulrich Schönherr, 2009 (page 36). The opening section of the English translation of ‘The Machine’ replicates the format of the German version. © Dalkey Archive Press

There are, however, irregularities in the page formatting of ‘The Machine’. These irregularities presented challenges when maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the theatrical adaptation and raised issues about the consistency of the character traits of the separate Processors. An example is the difference between the Recapitulation section on page 54 of the published version, which is formatted differently to the original unpublished translation manuscript, creating a different interplay of language and voices. Early in ‘The Machine’, establishing Processor 2 as the mischievous component, we have the line ‘Germany above everything in the world’.<sup>4</sup> Due to ambiguities in the formatting, this can be read either as Processor 2: ‘Germany above everything’ followed by Processor 3: ‘in the world’, or as Processor 2 having the whole line. In correspondence with Schönherr this ambiguity was resolved as the former of the two options. In rehearsal, the pacing and timing of the line and reaction from System Control made us feel that the latter of these options was correct for both the characterisation and to maintain the tempo and comedy of the wordplay.

These inconsistencies become important when considering the intervention of System Control during the section towards the end of ‘The Machine’ (page 82 in the English translation) defined by System Control as protocol number 4. This entails an explosion of quotes through free association, using poetry from a wide variety of world literature in an attempt to identify the essence of poetry. This intervention begins on page 86 as each of the characters, including System Control, read lines from a poem by Izumi Shibiku. We initially thought this was another formatting error. However, when considered from the perspective of System Control, this intervention is an acknowledgement of the increasing awareness that the Processors do not always strictly play by the rules laid down by the System Control. When considering the emotional arc of the play, this section begins to establish the ending of ‘The Machine’, acknowledging its own mortality.

This intervention or deviation from the Oulipian structure of ‘The Machine’ is an example of the implementation of the Oulipian clinamen: an error in the system. This conceit allows for deviation from the rigidly adhered to rules or structures. It further constructs the simultaneous, four-language passage that follows.

According to David Bellos, ‘stereophonic sound keeps the language just sufficiently apart to permit overlaid translation between German, French, English and Japanese’.<sup>5</sup> Since it was initially written for broadcast radio, the original audience for ‘The Machine’ was remote and composed of individual listeners. This was markedly different from the immediate

and communal experience of the theatrical performance. This difference is clearest when considering the ability of the stereophonic audio to split the four different languages between the two channels. Transcoding this effect and its implicit meaning into the theatrical space became an important component of the adaptation process of this section.

From the extant dual mono recording of the 1968 German broadcast it is not possible to tell whether or not this was achieved effectively. The recording does reveal that the simultaneous vocal stereo separation implied in the text of *Die Maschine* (see Figure 8.3) was not performed as such and is not spoken simultaneously but nearer to the way outlined in the 2009 English translation (see Figure 8.4). This presents a formatting inconsistency since the formatting of the original manuscript of Schönherr’s translation is identical to that of *Die Maschine* (1972). In private correspondence, Schönherr made it clear to me that, despite the

SCHWEIGEN			
Tsui ni yuku	That is a road	Qu'il y ait un chemin	Dass ed einen weg gibt
Michi to wa kanete	Which some day we all travel	Qu'un jour nous de-	Den wir eines tages all
		Vions tous prendre	Nehmen
Kikishikada	I had heard before	Je le savais deja	Davon hatt' ich einst
			Gehort
Kino kyo to wa	Yet I never expected	Mais je ne croyais	Doch nie geglaubt
Omowazarishi	To take it so soon	Qu'il me faille le	Ihh selbst so bald zu
	myself	Prendre si tot moi-	Gehen
		meme	
			Narahisa*
SCHWEIGEN			

**Figure 8.3** Georges Perec, *Die Maschine*, translated by Eugen Helmlé, 1968. This Narahisa (or Narahira) section of the German translation implies that all versions of the poem – all speaking parts – should be performed simultaneously. © Philip Reclam, Stuttgart

SILENCE	
tsui ni yuku	dass es einen weg
	qu'il y ait un chemin
	that is a road
michi to wa kanete	

**Figure 8.4** Georges Perec, ‘The Machine’, translated by Ulrich Schönherr, 2009. The layout of the Narahisa (or Narahira) section of the English translation implies that the different version of the poem – the speaking parts – should be performed consecutively. © Dalkey Archive Press

formatting problems, he wished the published version of ‘The Machine’ to be viewed as the definitive English-language version. For the Crucible Theatre performance in 2012, developed through rehearsal, the performers spoke this section simultaneously.

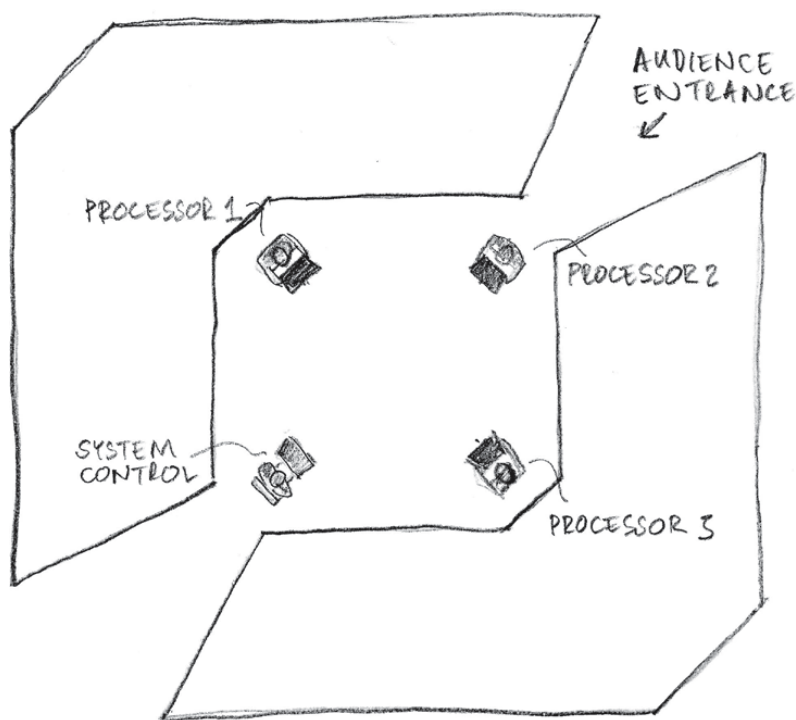
The desire to adapt this intended and implied aural stereo experience efficiently to the physicality of the theatre presented us with another puzzle, establishing an informal and conversational approach required for certain components of the comedy to work. ‘The Machine’, for all of its Oulipian constraints and algorithmic scripting, is a comedy: variously silly, broad, absurd, satirical, obtuse and intellectual. For the staging, we found no opportunity to add physical comedy to the list, though performance and character became important parts of the theatrical audience experience. One of the mechanisms that non-physical comedy uses, for example stand-up, is the informal, conversational voice, amplified. This enables members of the audience to feel that they are part of the conversation and not witnesses to a routine.

We decided to use broadcast standard radio microphones, through a studio-standard PA system in order to replicate and approximate the one-to-one immediacy and individual experience of radio. The intention of stereo separation (more accurately a dual mono) effect could not be replicated by the four performers, but the personal connection with the voices of the performers could be achieved. The performers were able to speak lower and more from the larynx than the diaphragm, at less declamatory and more conversational volume.

The originally intended staging was simple, based on radio show recording session setups and, more obliquely, boyband performances – during rehearsals the distinct individual nuances and quirks of the personalities of the Processors became evident. There was the disruptive and mischievous nature of Processor 2; the intelligence and archness of Processor 1; and there was Processor 3 trying to keep up with the game playing and speed of the other two though never quite managing it. And finally System Control, the systematic leader and implementer of the rules, attempting to corral the occasionally wayward Processors, eventually throwing in the towel and joining in the fun.

The three different venues where ‘The Machine’ was performed in 2011 and 2012 were flexible studio-style spaces as opposed to traditional proscenium-arch theatres. This flexibility allowed for an intimate audience experience. The initial rehearsals in Sheffield’s Bloc Space almost immediately inspired a change to the staging. Rather than a line of performers in front of an audience – the initial configuration – we arranged the four performers on the four corners of a square, among the audience (see [Figure 8.5](#)).





**Figure 8.5** Sheffield Theatres, Crucible Studio Theatre layout, 2016. The diagram shows the four performers (System Control and Processors 1–3) and their positions at the four corners of the performance space. © Sheffield Theatres

Through a hybrid use of the studio space, we invited the audience to anticipate an event somewhere between combat or game play, music recital and theatre performance. The audience were placed partially within the action, where they would be aware of their proximity to certain performers and their distance from others. From this point of view, audience members had the opportunity to read the text/script/score, if they should wish to do so. The field of view was constrained such that each member of the audience could see the profile of one of their performers and the faces of the other three. Through these visual constraints, we sought to emulate or refract the constraints in the text.

This first performance was in the smallest space, seating an audience of 40 people. One audience member, in the front row, sat through the entire performance with their eyes shut. This was slightly disconcerting

for the performers, but understandable if perhaps the audience member was seeking to experience the purity of the wordplay, attempting to negate the physicality of the performance and the communal experience of being in an audience. A second audience member told me that they felt like they were supporting the performer nearest to them. And, as one online commentator put it, 'The result was immersive, bringing the audience "into" the performance as avatar-like characters. Each of us was sat nearer one of the four performers in particular and felt like we were on their team.'<sup>6</sup> This comment underlines some of the fundamental differences between audience experiences of radio and theatre.<sup>7</sup>

Transposing the spoken and written text into a physical performance was an additional puzzle within the adaptation, forming an important part of the rehearsal and development process. Performers were lit only by their reading lamps. Performers could not move from the immediate vicinity of their music stands, on which their scripts were placed. Processors 1, 2 and 3 stood throughout. System Control remained seated throughout. It was necessary to make judgements on these matters because Perec did not provide instructions. On the contrary, he left it to others to decide how to stage 'The Machine'. Also, as I have explained, it is not possible to identify a single, definitive version of this play. The German version was initially broadcast in 1968; a written version, slightly different from the broadcast version was published in 1972.<sup>8</sup> The English translation was initially submitted to the publishers in 2006 only to be subtly changed by formatting errors when published in 2009. This variability and uncertainty gave us as theatre-makers an amount of licence to make decisions about how we wished to present the play, including its ending. 'The Machine' is challenging and disorientating for some audience members because it lacks conventional reference points such as narrative, plot, named characters or scene changes. Challenging plays are particularly challenging where they conclude, and any awkwardness that audiences experience may be intensified at this point.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, we sought a logical conclusion to 'The Machine'. We gave the final sound to System Control: a prolonged breathing out, heightened of course by the use of radio microphones. This ending, inspired by Samuel Beckett's play *Breath*, is described by Beckett as an expiration (see [Figure 8.6](#)).

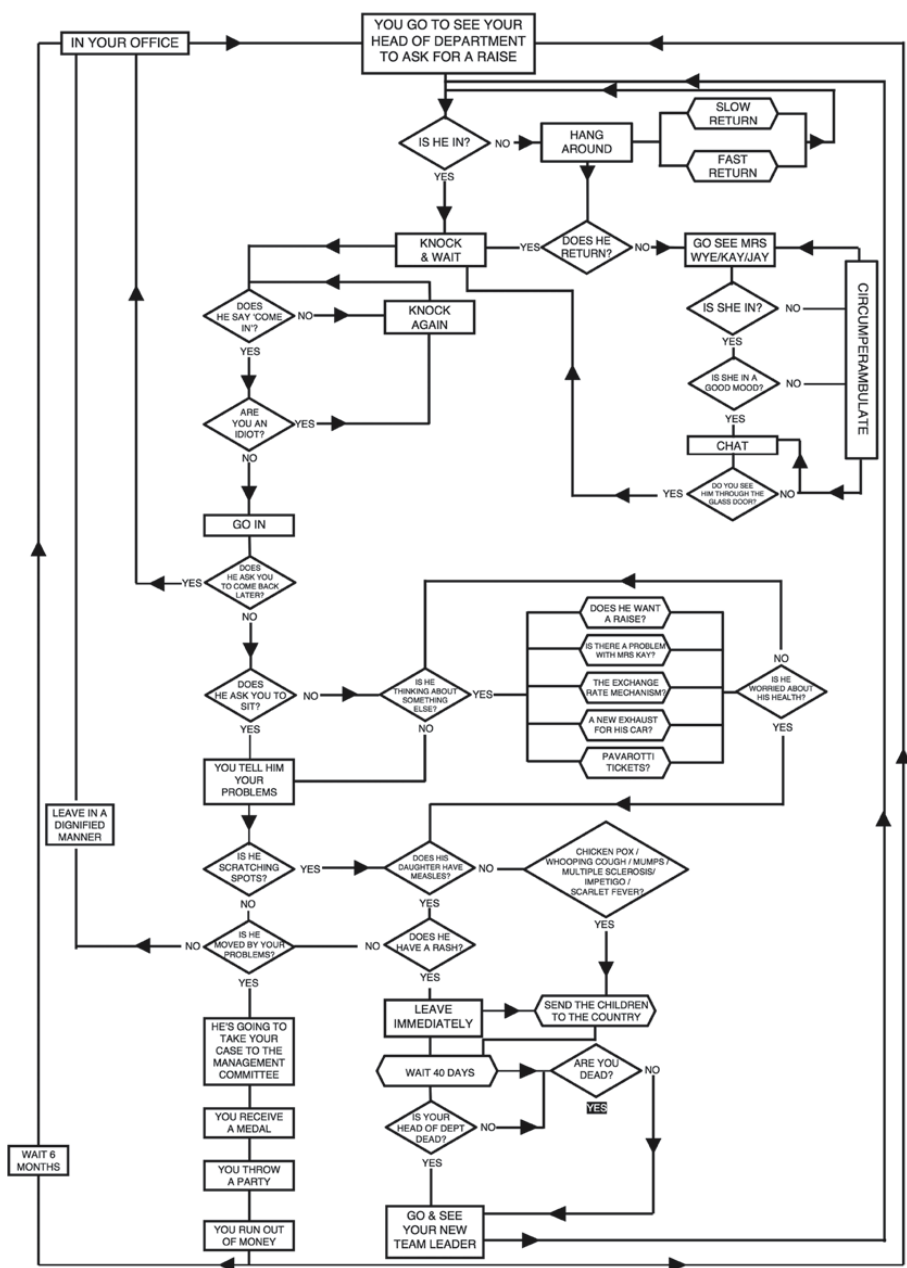
We began the play with a formalised ritual – the one-by-one turning on of the reading lamps and opening of the script – mirrored at the end by the one-by-one closing of the script and turning off of the lamps.

paz	paz	paz	paz
paz	paz	paz	paz
pzzz	pzzz	pshsh	pshsh
pshsh	shsh	shsh	shshshsh

**Figure 8.6** The last word of Third Angel’s production of ‘The Machine’ went to System Control, in the form of a prolonged breathing out or expiration. These final utterances are shown in this extract from the script (Perec, ‘The Machine’, 93). The final ‘sh’ could be interpreted as a reference to the sound of white noise or lack of radio frequency signal.  
© Dalkey Archive Press

## ***The Raise***

*L’Augmentation*, translated by David Bellos in an unpublished English version as *The Raise*,<sup>10</sup> was written for six separate voices. It also includes a news item with statistics about a measles outbreak. The structure of the play is derived from that of a fictional management decision flowchart (see Figure 8.7). Mapping the vicissitudes of an unnamed individual’s attempts to secure a pay rise from their Head of Department, *The Raise* exhausts every decision, action, option, choice and consequence dictated by Perec’s satirical management flowchart. Indecision, procrastination and the occasional circumperambulation around the nameless organisation’s various departments repeatedly reign and continually impede the protagonist’s progress towards their objective. The passing of time, during this drawn-out process, is reflected in changes to the Head of Department’s job title: initially Section Head, he is later known as Supervisor, Team Leader, Task Force Convener, Head of Department and finally Lord and Master. Ultimately, having negotiated a series of obstacles and opportunities, the protagonist returns to the starting point. The play includes a great deal of repetition, with many returns to the initial position at the top of the flowchart or at a key position within the chart. The six main characters consequently have names reflecting the flowchart navigation and therefore the decision-making process. The first character to speak is known as ‘1. The Position’, the second as ‘2. The Alternatives’. Each of the discrete sections – which cannot realistically be labelled scenes due to their brevity and similarity – start with the first two characters and continue in mainly numerical order. There is no apparent need for stereo signal separation, as *The Raise* lies more in the area of storytelling than the linguistic experimentation of ‘The Machine’.



**Figure 8.7** The structure of *The Raise* is derived from that of a fictional management decision flowchart. This image is taken from David Bellos's English translation of this text, originally published as *L'Augmentation*. Unpublished image. © David Bellos

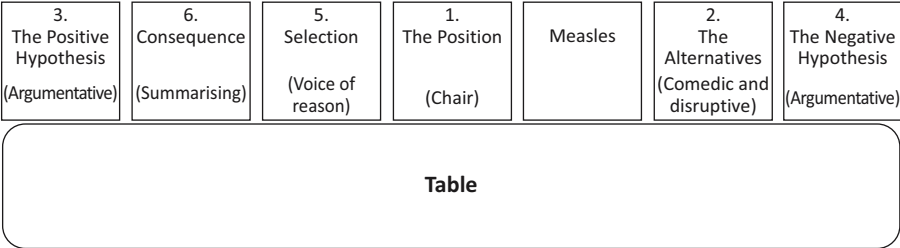
The page layouts of the German *Die Gehaltsterhöhung*, the French *L'Augmentation* and the unpublished English version, *The Raise*, provide no indication as to the manner in which the text should be spoken, not even a hint. The sole indicator, used by all three versions, is a five-pointed asterisk in the German version, a five-pointed star in the French, and a six-pointed asterisk in the English translation, between the different sections.

The prose adaptations, beginning with Perec's original 1968 version *L'art et la manière d'aborder son chef de service pour lui demander une augmentation*, are a single unpunctuated monologue. From a theatrical perspective this would seem to hint at approaching *The Raise* as an almost Beckettian piece of rapid train of thought, as exemplified in *Not I*.<sup>11</sup> For a piece that can last somewhere between 40 and 60 minutes, following the pace and intensity of *Not I* would be more difficult for an audience to absorb and find entertaining. As well as being a denial of the humour inherent in the repetition and minor changes to the repetitions, this approach would have stifled any character development that the six separate performers could engender. The layout of the text of *The Raise* gave no hint as to how the piece could be adapted for theatre or indeed any indication of the general aural experience of the audience. There is no indication that the initial German broadcast of *The Raise* experimented with the stereo audio signal. The broadcast used expressionless voices, rhythmic regulations, almost intolerable repetitions.<sup>12</sup>

Adapting for a live theatrical physical performance, the audience seeing the performers and consequently making judgements about those performers, whether or not the vocal performance is expressionless, we set out to delineate the characters of the different functions and gain comedy of frustration from the repetitions.

*The Raise* is primarily a story told to the audience and the adaptation puzzle was how to get the audience to feel just the right amount of challenge, entertainment and comfort. With the 2016 production of *The Raise* at Leeds Beckett University Drama Studio, the audience needed to feel invested in the nameless protagonist 'you' – enough to be able to project their own feelings onto the character. Allowing the performers to inhabit the studio space logically, comfortably and in accordance with the text was, as with 'The Machine', a relatively straightforward process. The stage was set with chairs and tables, aping the form of one of the keystones of the bureaucratic process, so important in understanding *The Raise*: the committee meeting (see [Figure 8.8](#)).

Once the structure of the committee was established, the characters of the separate functions were allowed to develop and the enjoyment lay



**Figure 8.8** *The Raise* stage layout as performed at Leeds Beckett University in 2016. The layout was designed to be reminiscent of a committee meeting or a television panel show allowing the verbal interplay between the characters to have the arduous repetition of bureaucratic processes and gaining humour from the same repetition and the impact of different decisions. © The author

in the exhaustion of the myriad permutations. *The Raise* becomes a conversation/argument/meeting between the committee members in which the audience have little space to feel like participants, as they do in ‘The Machine’. They are observers, passengers on the journey down the corridors of bureaucratic procedures and happenstance.

The seventh performer seated at the committee meeting plays the role of Measles: a role that has only two lines. We explored the idea of using video projection to deliver the statistics that Measles says. The comedy value of a performer remaining still and quiet throughout the piece, only to deliver two dryly comic lines, was too good to turn down. The sole physical constraint for the performers was that they should remain seated and defer to the chair, ‘1. The Position’. The major intervention into the studio space was that of acknowledging the algorithmic nature of the piece by projecting the flow chart on which *The Raise* is based, or including it in the programme notes (Figure 8.7).

If the audience members were listening to and engaging empathetically with the ‘you’ of the story, then the flow chart would allow them to recap, anticipate and work out the ending in advance of the protagonist. There would have been little in the way of surprise or delight gained from the circumperambulations of the protagonist’s story.

The ending of *The Raise* is clear. The character known as ‘6. The Consequence’, the performer who related most directly to the audience by summarising the sections, has the final line: ‘Or by circumperambulating the diverse departments which together make up the whole or a part

of that august Enterprise to which you have given, these many long years, the best part of your life ...'.<sup>13</sup>

The English translation ends with a stage instruction, CURTAIN, both the German and French with the ellipsis.

## Notes

1. I draw in this article upon audio recordings of the 1968 Saarländischer Rundfunk production of *Die Maschine* (1968), the Third Angel production of 'The Machine' (2012) and the Third Angel production of *The Raise* (2016).
2. White, 'Goethe in The Machine', 129.
3. Bray, 'Playing with Constraint', 44.
4. Perec, 'The Machine', 54.
5. Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 382.
6. Barker, 'Amusement Arcadia'.
7. Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, 7.
8. Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 381.
9. Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, 29.
10. *The Raise* is a translation of the *L'Augmentation*. *L'Augmentation* is itself an adaptation of an earlier piece by Perec, *L'Art et la manière d'aborder son chef de service pour lui demander une augmentation*, published in 1968. This prose piece was translated by Bellos as *The Art and Craft of Approaching Your Head of Department to Submit a Request for a Raise*, 2011. While *The Raise* is highly segmented and structured in its layout, *The Art and Craft* ..., without punctuation or pause, uses a single narrative voice in one continuous sentence for over 100 pages and, as with *The Raise*, attempts to exhaust all of the options presented by navigating the fictitious management flowchart (Figure 8.7).
11. Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 376.
12. Bellos, *Georges Perec*, 423.
13. Perec, *The Raise*, 31.
14. Other sources in the text include personal correspondence with Ulrich Schönherr and David Bellos.

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