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Formal Experiments in Selected Plays by Tim Crouch

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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V Praze dne 2. prosince 2019

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I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used to study purposes.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Theatre of Tim Crouch: Audience, Form and Story

Audience, form and story – these three words immediately come to mind when one attempts to define Tim Crouch’s works, and they have also served as the main source of inspiration for this thesis which aims to use these three concepts to explore Crouch’s dramaturgical methods in order to define the ways he uses to address a long-neglected aspect of theatre, the passive spectators (and spectators in general, for that matter) and transforms them into active ones. The uniqueness of Crouch’s approach is based on him making the audience the centre of his works and in engaging them, but not quite in the way immersive theatre or “traditional” audience participation would, and, as will be argued further on, despite his inclination towards highly innovative forms, he honours and supports one of the oldest traits of theatre – the power of imagination.

In an interview for the *Exeunt Magazine*, Crouch explains: “I’m interested in finding forms that tell stories better – that free up the vocabulary around form and story-telling.”¹ Utilising the theoretical support of, among others, Jacques Rancière’s theory of the emancipated spectator, and two seminal texts on the matter of spectatorship, Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences* (1993) and Helen Freshwater’s *Theatre and Audience* (2009), the thesis aims to provide a survey of Crouch’s method which, given Crouch’s background in acting and educating, and the fact that all his plays build up on each other despite being separate works, might serve as a guide to contemporary audience treatment.

The following chapters will cover three of Crouch’s plays for adult audience in a chronological order and each will be subdivided into three main subchapters – audience, form and story. While the concepts of audience and form are rather clear in their focus, the

¹Miriam Gillinson, “Tim Crouch: Bare Stages, Extraordinary Transformations,” *Exeunt Magazine*, 15 June 2015 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/tim-crouch-bare-stages-extraordinary-transformations/>> 2 Sept. 2018.

subchapters on story will cover the content of the plays and the means the content complements the form and vice versa, as well as the language tools Crouch employs in order to enhance the theatrical experience. The thesis will primarily focus on three of Crouch's plays for adult audiences spanning from his first published work to his later plays: *My Arm* (2003), *An Oak Tree* (2005) and *The Author* (2009). Before analysing the specific plays, however, a brief survey of key developments in theatre is needed in order to contextualize Crouch's works and introduce the foregrounded concepts this thesis examines.

Tim Crouch is arguably one of the most innovative contemporary experimental British theatre artists.² Stephen Bottoms, for example, in his Introduction to an edition of Crouch's plays argues that: "No other contemporary playwright has asked such a compelling set of questions about theatrical form, narrative content, and spectatorial engagement."³ Crouch has a unique and multi-faceted insight into theatrical practice which is partly why his plays offer such a valuable and interesting material for academics, reviewers and theatre professionals alike. As a trained actor Crouch was not content with some of the contemporary theatre practices and decided to change it by writing, directing and performing his own works as well as frequently collaborating with other artists. In an interview for *Digital Theatre+* Crouch explains how his acting experience has helped him shape and articulate ideas for his own writing:

[I was] struggling with the processes that I had been placed in as an actor and wanting to really challenge them I think. Those processes were all around realism, psychology, naturalism maybe, trying to convince people I was not who I am ... and really there not being much attention paid to the audience... I think the audience process for me is as interesting, if not more interesting than the actor's process and I make my work in reflection of an audience process.⁴

² Crouch refers to himself as a theatre artist on his website. "About Tim Crouch", *Tim Crouch Theatre*, <<http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/about-the-company>> 2 Sep 2018.

³ Stephen Bottoms, "Introduction," *Plays One*, by Tim Crouch (London: Oberon Books, 2011) Cover.

⁴ "Tim Crouch - Interview | Role of Audience | Contemporary Performance Practice | Digital Theatre+," *YouTube*, uploaded by DigitalTheatrePlus, 14 Sept. 2017 <<https://youtu.be/nADg0UGRDOK>>, 2 Sept. 2018.

To understand Crouch's main areas of artistic interest, and his ongoing exploration of the notion of the audience, a brief overview of his published theatrical works is necessary. His first play *My Arm* was published in 2002. It is a fictitious autobiography telling the story of a boy who keeps his arm up with Crouch narrating it – keeping his arm down during the whole performance – and using various objects provided by the audience that represent the characters in the play, proving that theatre in its essential form needs very little in order to be produced and that most of it happens in the imagination of the spectators under one condition, namely the spectators mentally agreeing to accept the fact that the characters are represented in an unusual way.

In 2005 Crouch followed with *An Oak Tree* which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe. Crouch explains that the play was inspired by the eponymous installation of conceptual art created by Michael Craig-Martin which shows a glass of water presented as an oak tree, and works on the presumption that the visitors will, thanks to the power of their imagination, come to believe that what they see is an oak tree. *An Oak Tree* features two characters: one of them, a hypnotist who killed a little girl in an accident, is played by Crouch, the other, the father of the girl, is played by a different actor each night – an actor or actress who would not have read the script before appearing onstage. The play, developing ideas expressed in Crouch's earlier work, challenges ideas of representation, imagination and spectatorship, and the very concept of actors knowing the script in advance and by heart.

Crouch's next play, *ENGLAND*, first staged at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2007, has the unusual form of a site-specific piece staged in an actual gallery with the audience invited to move around the space. According to Crouch's website, the award-winning *ENGLAND* "continues Tim Crouch's fascination with the nature of theatrical experience; the communication of an idea from performer to audience – and back again."⁵ *ENGLAND* is largely

⁵ "ENGLAND," *Tim Crouch Theatre*, <<http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/shows-2/england>> 2 Sept. 2018.

based on the ideas of seeing double and offering two perspectives, seeing art within art by setting theatre into a gallery and setting a play directly among its audience.

The 2009 play *The Author* is arguably Crouch's most well-known work, receiving keen and wide interest from both audience members and critics. Crouch – again, starring in the play as the Author alongside a number of actors – focuses primarily on the idea of spectatorship and the question of ethics and values while also challenging the theatrical codes of behaviour. *The Author* also channels the 1990s legacy of In-Yer-Face theatre, particularly the idea of presenting scenes of extreme violence on stage, and the question of accepting responsibility for what is going on in a play. The play requires a special seating plan with audience facing each other and actors (who appear in the play under their real names) sat among them. There is no central stage, making the fourth wall dividing the audience and actors disappear and creating a unique, specific atmosphere. *The Author* is set and also premiered at the Royal Court in London which, given its history of staging challenging new writing works including Sarah Kane's plays, lends the production a whole new dimension.

The 2013 *what happens to hope at the end of the evening* is a collaborative piece that Crouch co-created with his long-time fellow artists Andy Smith and Karl James. The play stars two friends and follows their awkward encounter after several years of not seeing each other with one character (portrayed by Smith) being aware of the play being a play and the other (played by Crouch) attempting to present a convincing theatrical performance. The title refers to the sense of hope that the spectators feel before any given play unfolds, before they hopefully begin to understand the intentions of what is happening onstage. In an interview for the *Exeunt Magazine*, Crouch explains that the three creators “inhabit the same concerns about an audience and a connection with an audience activating the work.”⁶

⁶ Catherine Love, “Putting Hope on the Stage,” *Exeunt Magazine*, 8 July 2013
<<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/putting-hope-on-the-stage/>> 2 Sept. 2018.

Crouch's 2014 play for adult audiences *Adler and Gibb*, first staged at the Royal Court, is yet another of his productions that innovatively works with the audience on both textual and dramaturgical level. Although he did not perform in it, Crouch directed the play when it was staged. The play focuses on the lives of the US-based conceptual artist Janet Adler and her partner, also a conceptual artist, Margaret Gibb who have decided to stop creating commercially and have searched for privacy. There is a film in the making about their relationship and two actors who are about to take on the main roles are trying to learn as much about Adler and Gibb as possible. Their scenes are presented together with those about a student who is working on a project on Adler. The play asks questions about what happens to an artist's legacy once they are no longer able to influence it, challenges the commercial side of art and, yet again, addresses the idea of representation in theatre by presenting the central characters mainly through the eyes of others in a play-within-a-play. There are also additional characters played by small children who hand props to the actors and are literally building the set of the play as it develops.

Crouch's latest work for adult audiences, *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation*, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival 2019⁷, continues in the tone that Crouch had set up in his previous works. It strives to engage the spectators and make them actively rethink the way in which conventional theatre asks them to trust the playwright and the direction of a play. As in Crouch's other works, the play features a story, in this case focused on a cult, a dictator and his followers which he parallels with the mechanisms of theatre-making and the dynamics that exist between the playwright and the spectators.

Alongside his works for adults, which will be at the centre of this analysis, Crouch has also produced quite an extensive body of work for young audiences in which he also features

⁷ Tim Bano, "Theatre-maker Tim Crouch: 'If the system needs dismantling, it must be done incrementally,'" *The Stage*, 7 Aug. 2019 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2019/edinburgh-international-festival-theatre-maker-tim-crouch-if-the-system-needs-dismantling-it-must-be-done-incrementally/>> 10 Nov. 2019.

innovative methods, such as his 2003 play *Shopping for Shoes* whose main characters are represented by two pairs of trainers, and numerous Shakespeare adaptations commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company. His latest project for young audiences, *The Beginners*, was first staged in 2018 in London.⁸

As is apparent from the brief summaries of his plays, Crouch is acutely aware of the key role of the relationship between audience and artists, between theatre and representation, and he merges conceptual art with aspects of conventional theatre. He also pays equal attention to the innovative dramaturgy of his texts as well as to the textual side which results in a theatre that carefully, cleverly and effectively merges form and content. Additionally, Crouch always ensures that his plays contain a story and thus, he is not letting the conceptual and formal sides of his works, which are highly important, completely take over his plots. By doing that, Crouch provides the audience with the opportunity to actively engage their imagination and to be an integral part of a production.

Crouch's plays are designed to problematise and challenge the otherwise often passive experience of the audience. Examining Crouch's plays offers an insight into creative ways of working with audiences and presents an intriguing usage of audience participation that is conceptually nuanced, works well with both form and content, and has a deeper significance than existing purely for the purpose of being included in the play. He goes back to theatre in which there is a story being told to an audience, to a theatre where the audience matters without being forced to participate in an intimidating manner. Although Crouch is significantly shifting the fourth wall, he is not smashing it just for the controversy's sake.

Crouch's plays are intended to convey a message of a theatre that enables promoting values and concepts that go beyond one particular performance and that can help the audience understand the workings and complex function of theatre as an art form. Such a message is

⁸ All information on dates and show titles has been taken from "Tim Crouch," <<https://www.unitedagents.co.uk/tim-crouch>> 2 Sept. 2018.

particularly important in the times when the relevance of theatre in the contemporary world is constantly questioned; with the ever-increasing globalization, instantaneous access to information, and the development of new forms of media and communication, theatre is often thought to be losing its former function. Gone are the times when theatre served the purpose of catharsis and was used also as a political or religious tool, as Susan Bennett observes in *Theatre Audiences*.⁹ Or so it seems. Crouch, however, seems to be aiming to prove such conclusions wrong by asking his audience to participate in his plays and to actively engage their imagination.

Crouch repeatedly challenges the notion of naturalistic theatre which according to him leaves very little space for imagination¹⁰ by introducing overly detailed, complicated and realistic sets, props and costumes. A large portion of his plays is narrated, read or implied by objects that represent characters and the audience are encouraged to imagine the plot. In numerous interviews and his TED Talk on Autosuggestion, Crouch gives quite a detailed account of his views of theatre and he also lists his influences which will be further discussed in the following subchapter, together with a brief overview of the historical context to outline the landscape in which Crouch's plays appear.

1.2. Contexts: History, Influences, Experimental Theatre

It has been already remarked that the past few decades saw theatre face the issue of its relevance for the present day. The increasing popularity of television, internet and multimedia-based art prompted the discussion of whether theatre can still be relevant or whether it is no longer able to introduce challenges and convey thought-provoking ideas. Stephen Bottoms aptly summarizes the argument of sceptics who often see theatre as “an imperfect and limited medium

⁹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences, A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990) 2-3.

¹⁰ “The Art of the Autosuggestion | Tim Crouch | TEDxRoyalCentralSchool,” *YouTube*, TEDx Talks, Nov. 10 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pb11GYJ7wY&t=52s>> 5 May 2018.

– some kind of awkward half-way house between pure imaginative space of the novel and the pure visual space of the cinema.”¹¹ He argues that Crouch’s works challenge that stereotype and illustrates Dan Rebellato’s argument that “theatre’s distinctive qualities reside in its being inherently metaphorical.”¹²

The British answer to such questions appeared in the 1990s with what Aleks Sierz famously labelled the In-Yer-Face theatre.¹³ Sierz defines the work of the generation of Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh and others as “a sensibility which was characterised by explicit portrayals of sex and violence.” He adds that the writers of the 1990s “developed the legacy of experiment, innovation and imagination [...] the streams of European absurdism, surrealism and modernism wash through British theatre.”¹⁴ The authors of the In-Yer-Face generation worked with challenging and controversial human emotions and conditions; they staged never-seen-before scenes of extreme violence and the spectators were invited to be shocked, disgusted and to question their own role in the depicted events, often in parallel with governmental responsibility for political issues.

Sierz further notes that by the end of the 1990s, the once shocking means of the In-Yer-Face Theatre ceased to be able to stir debates and excite audiences anymore. Liz Tomlin in her Foreword to Vicky Angelaki’s *Contemporary British Theatre* (2013) adds that at the same time, in 1999, Europe saw the publication of a seminal text on theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatic Theatre* and claims that his ideas questioned “the continued value of the dramatic form of theatre.”¹⁵ In brief, Lehmann argues that the traditional theatrical forms have lost their importance and that theatre in its then-current form – the dramatic – is no longer able to reflect

¹¹ Bottoms, Introduction 14.

¹² Dan Rebellato, “When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?,” *Performance Research* 14.1 (2009): 17-28.

¹³ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

¹⁴ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011) 25.

¹⁵ Liz Tomlin, “Foreword: Dramatic Developments,” *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, ed. Vicky Angelaki (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) viii.

on societal problems. Lehmann also calls for themes that are still able to evoke strong reactions among the audience which caused the debate on what would happen with traditional theatre.

The changes in themes and modes of writing were not isolated from the changes taking place in theatres as institutions. Due to policies adopted by the Thatcherite government, which introduced, among other changes, limited subsidies, theatres across Britain were forced to become considerably more corporate-like and engage in efficient PR and marketing strategies that would win them the loyalty of their audience. The idea of a theatre-goer, therefore, soon merged with that of a “consumer-shopper.”¹⁶ In order to ensure their future existence, theatres were forced to produce shows that were sure to sell out rather than those that would bring about artistic challenges. In the *Cambridge History of British Theatre*, it is argued that “ironically, as the theatre experience appeared to grow richer through greater variety in theatres and styles, so the truer measure of its quality – range and flexibility in audience interaction – was impoverished.”¹⁷

Such has been the theatrical landscape that Tim Crouch the actor entered as Tim Crouch the writer, one where the echoes of the In-Yer-Face theatre has still been strongly present with all its controversies. The role of theatre, especially in the form that it has been in for centuries has continually and repeatedly been questioned by critics, scholars and even theatre makers themselves. It has been pointed out that the audience have been generally neglected and the relationship between theatre and spectator has largely been viewed as one of a business and its customer/consumer. At the same time, it has been clear that theatre as a form of expression has been eagerly awaiting a breath of fresh air, which, as will hopefully be shown in due course, Tim Crouch has been able to bring.

¹⁶ Baz Kershaw, ed., “British Theatre 1940-2002” *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Since 1985, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 312-14.

¹⁷ Kershaw 314.

In order to understand where Tim Crouch's theatre is coming from, it is necessary to get familiar with major influences that are apparent in his plays, either those that he openly acknowledges in his interviews, or those who have visibly influenced innovative and experimental theatre in general and that naturally echo in Crouch's work, be it in his view of the audience or his understanding of representation and imagination.

1.3. Jacques Rancière and the Emancipated Spectator

Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher, is the author of the influential theory of the emancipated spectator in his eponymous book first published in 2010 whose influence Crouch acknowledges in his interview with Cristina Delgado-Garcia.¹⁸ Reiterating his ideas formulated earlier in his 1991 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, in *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière focuses on the relationship between theatre and its spectators. He addresses the problem of the traditional, inevitably negative, view of spectators as a passive community. Rancière introduces the term "paradox of the spectator"¹⁹ which, put very simply, means that there is no theatre without a spectator.

Some critics, however, as Rancière goes on to explain, point out two main objections against the spectator. Firstly, viewing is understood as the opposite of knowing and, in the particular case of theatre, the spectator is more often than not unaware of the backstage mechanism of a production they are viewing. Secondly, it is also the opposite of acting, meaning that the spectator is receiving the message of the actor passively and remains intact. Summing up the general understanding of a spectator, Rancière argues that "to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act."²⁰

¹⁸ Cristina Delgado-García, "Dematerialised Political and Theatrical Legacies: Rethinking the Roots and Influences of Tim Crouch's Work," *Platform* 8.1 (Spring 2014): 72.

¹⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011) 2.

²⁰ Rancière 2.

These observations lead to two main conclusions, Rancière explains. Firstly, theatre is a bad thing, it is a scene of passivity and must be abolished. Plato even argues that theatre is a means of spreading ignorance and suggests that the ignorant theatre community shall be replaced with a choreographic one where everyone must move in accord with a fixed rhythm. Secondly, thinking of theatre involves thinking simultaneously of a spectator which leads back to the inescapable circle of the paradox of theatre. Rancière claims that there is a need for a different kind of theatre – one where action is implied, where drama happens and where bodies are mobilized to create energy and to move. Spectators in such a theatre thus become co-creators and active participants, not just passive voyeurs which, Rancière claims, is the main flaw of conventional theatre.²¹

Rancière further argues that there are two main reactions to such a switch and although they are conflicting, the reformed theatre has been capable of successfully connecting them. First of the solutions requires the spectator to identify with the character presented onstage. Witnessing a play and the motivations of its characters unfold transforms the process of watching into a scientific investigation of a kind, with the spectator being offered a dilemma to solve. The other solution is that the spectator must start to possess all their vital energies and abolish the reasoning distance. Such a state is achieved in the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht as well as Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Rancière further refers to the French philosopher Guy Debord who was also interested in the theory of the spectacle. Debord claims that the essence of spectacle is in its exteriority which also brings about the problem of the spectator and is almost impossible to cure – the more they spectate, the less they live.²²

These paradoxes can be likened to the relationship between the schoolmaster and the pupil which Rancière explores in his earlier works; while the teacher's aim is to teach the pupil and to eliminate the knowledge gap between the two of them, the teacher must simultaneously

²¹ Rancière 2-4.

²² Rancière 6-7.

remain ahead of the pupil to retain their position which shall always be superior. The French educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot, the author of the term intellectual emancipation which served as inspiration for Ranciere's study of the teacher-pupil relationship, calls such assurance "stultification"²³

Jacotot contrasts stultification with intellectual emancipation which he defines as the verification of equality of intelligence and describes the process as comparing signs and subsequently building up on them in order to be able to decode what the other intelligence is aiming to tell us; it can be likened to the translation process. Emancipation begins once we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, in this case the spectator is the pupil and the teacher is the theatre-maker.²⁴ Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator can be well observed in Tim Crouch's works as he is continually proving that audience can be the main focus of a play and argues that the spectatorial experience can be an active one, using his innovative dramaturgical method to further enhance the audience's active engagement.

1.4. Émile Coué

Another key influence on Crouch's work is the French psychologist Émile Coué²⁵ who explores the concept of autosuggestion. As is apparent from the term itself, the method is based on the assumption that one starts to believe something purely on the basis of one's own imagination. Crouch makes use of Coué's technique onstage to test to what extent it is necessary to employ costumes, elaborate sets and other concepts traditionally used in theatres in order to convince the audience to follow his play, to become invested and active, or in the words of Rancière, emancipated. To do that, Crouch employs various experimental means of representation which

²³ Rancière 8-9.

²⁴ Rancière 12.

²⁵ "The Art of the Autosuggestion | Tim Crouch | TEDxRoyalCentralSchool," *YouTube*, TEDx Talks, Nov. 10 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pb11GYJ7wY&t=52s>> 5 May 2018.

is particularly apparent in *An Oak Tree* and *My Arm*. Crouch himself explains in an interview²⁶ that after performing in *My Arm* he met a woman who asked him whether his arm was not hurting after holding it up for more than two hours during the performance during which, however, he would not move his arm at all – this is how efficient and convincing autosuggestion can be.

In his TEDx Talk “The Art of the Autosuggestion” Crouch adds that “the subconscious is stronger than the conscious, it can rewrite what we are shown. As artists I think we need to consider the subconscious, or at least play to its ability to see things that are not there. Seeing things not with the eye, the retina, but in the mind... anti-retinal art, co-authored between the artist and the audience’s mind.”²⁷ Crouch further suggests that the effect of such art created in the audience’s mind, as opposed to being readily given to them, has the ability to last longer and to have stronger impact.

1.5. Mapping Experimental Theatre

Besides listing the main theoretical influences that inspire Crouch’s work, it is also necessary to specify some of the main concepts of experimental theatre and its main figures. The selection is by no means complete but it focuses on theatre-makers whose influence on Crouch is clear in his works. One of the most significant approaches in modern theatre is undoubtedly that penned by Bertolt Brecht whose influence Crouch acknowledges.²⁸ Brecht’s epic theatre, created in the first half of the 20th century works on similar grounds to Crouch as it aims to make the spectators aware of the fact that they are witnessing theatre rather than inviting them

²⁶ “Tim Crouch - Interview | Role of Audience | Contemporary Performance Practice | Digital Theatre+”, *YouTube*, uploaded by DigitalTheatrePlus, 14 Sep 2017 <<https://youtu.be/nADg0UGRDOK>> 2 Sept. 2018.

²⁷ “The Art of the Autosuggestion | Tim Crouch | TEDxRoyalCentralSchool”, *YouTube*, TEDx Talks, 10 Nov. 2017 <<https://youtu.be/3pb11GYJ7wY?t=334>> 5 May 2018.

²⁸ Jessie Simpson, “Tim Crouch: ‘I started writing to stop moaning about the theatre I didn’t want to see,’” *Evening Standard*, 13 Mar. 2018 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/tim-crouch-i-started-writing-to-stop-moaning-about-the-theatre-i-didnt-want-to-see-a3789091.html>> 5 May 2018.

to believe that the action happening onstage is real which is typical of naturalistic theatre criticised by Crouch. Brecht's theatre aims to educate the spectator – he called his plays “Lehrstücke,”²⁹ learning plays – and is based on conveying ideas and concepts and blurring the boundaries between actors and spectators by various means, for example, by making actors address the audience directly. Brecht's spectators are engaged in the play and he aims for his theatre to have the ability to encourage people to change the world around them.

Another leading figure of the beginning of the 20th century is undoubtedly the Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold who argues against naturalist theatre. He advocates the power of the audience's imagination that is often taken away from them by overly realistic productions: “the spectator in the theatre aspires – albeit unconsciously – to that exercise of fantasy which rises sometimes to the level of creativity.”³⁰ One of Meyerhold's points against naturalism is that elaborate costumes and too much attention given to historical detail take away the element of imagination that the audience, however, find attractive. He explains that medieval drama that had no stage equipment survived thanks to “the lively imagination of the spectator.”³¹

Regarding naturalistic theatre, which Crouch also criticises based on similar arguments, Meyerhold further argues that it “denies the spectator's capacity to fill in the details with his imagination in the way one does when listening to music.”³² Meyerhold criticizes the way actors are forced to work: “The naturalistic theatre teaches the actor to express himself in a finished, clearly defined manner; there is no room for the play of allusion or for conscious understatement; it knows nothing of the power of suggestion”³³ On the related question of imagination, much explored by Crouch as well, Meyerhold claims: “in the theatre the

²⁹ Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2009) 109.

³⁰ Edward Brown and Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 30.

³¹ Both quotes Meyerhold 30.

³² Meyerhold 30.

³³ Meyerhold 29.

spectator's imagination is able to supply that which is left unsaid. It is this mystery and the desire to solve it which draw so many people to theatre."³⁴

As for the second half of the 20th century, the Austrian Nobel prize winning theatre-maker and novelist Peter Handke is another leading figure whom Crouch acknowledges as one of his direct influences³⁵, and who sparked unprecedented controversy with the staging of his 1966 *Offending the Audience*. The actors in the play challenge the audience by asking intimidating, unusual questions directed at the spectators. In an interview with Artur Joseph, Handke explains that his main idea is "making people aware of the world of the theatre – not of the outside world. There is a theatrical reality going on at each moment. A chair on the stage is a theatre."³⁶ He adds that "I wanted this play to point out that every word, every utterance onstage is dramaturgy. Every human utterance the theatre presents as natural is not evolved, but produced. I wanted to show the 'producedness' of theatre."³⁷ These are traits that Crouch promotes in his theatre too. Handke, however, does not view the story in a play important. Crouch's plays, on the other hand, always feature a story, no matter in what form and how realistic it is, since for him to convey a story is one of the key aspects of theatre.

Another important personage of the second half of the 20th century is Jerzy Grotowski and his 1968 *Towards a Poor Theatre*, is much in line with the previously mentioned theatre-makers promoting minimalist theatre. Taking inspiration from Meyerhold and other modern European theatre-makers, Grotowski's idea of theatre is strongly based on physical movement which is not that essential for Crouch. They share, however, the intention to blur the boundaries between the stage and the auditorium, and their aim to promote active spectators who become

³⁴ Meyerhold 29.

³⁵ Jessie Simpson, "Tim Crouch: 'I started writing to stop moaning about the theatre I didn't want to see'", *The Evening Standard*, 13 March 2018, <<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/tim-crouch-i-started-writing-to-stop-moaning-about-the-theatre-i-didnt-want-to-see-a3789091.html>> 5 May 2018.

³⁶ Artur Joseph, Peter Handke and E.B. Ashton, "Nauseated by language: From an Interview with Peter Handke", *The Drama Review* 15. 1 (Autumn 1970): 57 *JSTOR*, 3 Sept. 2018.

³⁷ Joseph and Handke 57.

invested in the play. Grotowski's "poor theatre" relies on the abilities of the actors rather than props and realistic, overly detailed depiction. Grotowski himself explains how he arrived at his concept:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion.³⁸

Furthermore, Grotowski argues that "The acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form."³⁹

The year of 1968 saw published another theoretical work, Peter Brook's influential *The Empty Space* where he introduced his understanding of theatre as not being exclusively venue-bound, but rather based solely on the fact that it *is* considered theatre by both the audience and the protagonist. In Brook's time such a view was a novelty difficult to grasp by many. Brook opens *The Empty Space* with: "I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."⁴⁰ Nowadays, such a technique is employed by many theatre-makers, including Crouch whose plays do not require traditional theatre settings but rely rather on minimalistic designs and on the imagination of the spectators.

³⁸ Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 19.

³⁹ Grotowski 19.

⁴⁰ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 7.

1.6. A Brief History of Audience Participation

As has been already suggested, audience and spectatorship, key aspects in Crouch's creative process, have kept escaping systematic critical attention for a long time. In the last few decades, particularly with the increased popularity of audience participation used as a tool to make theatre more engaging, even though not always successfully, the notion of spectatorship has become more prominent and even received formal coverage, such as Susan Bennett's 1990 *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, the "first full-length study of the audience as cultural phenomenon to look at both *theories* of spectatorial action and *practice* of different theatres and their audiences."⁴¹ The fact that such a study has been published as late as in 1990 is a proof of the lack of focused attention given to the phenomenon, attracting theatre-makers rather than critics and scholars. Another such study, Helen Freshwater's *Theatre and Audience* published in 2009, also presents a method combining both theory of audience participation and actual theatrical practice. Furthermore, there is also a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* wholly dedicated to theatre and spectatorship, published in 2006. Such studies provide useful theoretical basis for the exploration of Crouch's works.

Before focusing on the contemporary view of audience participation, and the specifics of Crouch's work with the concept, it is useful to summarize what spectatorship meant historically and how the past influences the theatre of today. Susan Bennett in *Theatre Audiences* looks back on the historical approaches to audience and explains the workings of Greek theatre and its relationship with the spectators. Bennett notes that theatre had a central position in Athens, both physically and socially, given that it was largely state-funded, and adds that theatre "at every level includes audience as active participant."⁴² She notes that the conventions of theatre

⁴¹ Bennett Preface.

⁴² The paragraph is based on the chapter "Historical approaches" in Bennett 2-3.

behaviour as we know it today were created simultaneously with the establishment of the 17th century private theatres and their elitist spectators which as a result brought about an increasingly passive audience.

The disturbances from the side of the audience that appeared in the first decades of the 19th century Britain encouraged the introduction of footlights, an actual barrier between the auditorium and the stage; once these disturbances settled, the persona of a passive spectator appeared.⁴³ The 20th and even more so the 21st century (audience participation became prominent in the 70s⁴⁴), however, also brought about a renewed interest in the audience and audience participation in particular.

Similar to spectatorship, which is a related concept, audience participation has not been widely covered theoretically and systematically, although a few studies have emerged recently, such as Susan Kattwinkel's 2003 *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* and Gareth White's 2013 *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*. Both authors explain the issues that are connected with the theoretical study of audience participation, which is often seen (and performed) as a highly individual experience, and highlight the difficulties that are inherent to the very definition of the term since it is a very varied concept evoking highly individual responses that cannot, for the most part, be predicted in great detail.

In her introduction, Susan Kattwinkel highlights three reasons that in her view make audience participation worthwhile in theatre. Firstly, the idea of being able to be directly engaged in a performance helps theatre regain its relevancy as it is what makes it different from television and other media, and which also helps create a sense of a community. The second point, closely connected to the first one, sees audience participation as agent of change and highlights the political power of such theatre. Her third point is that the physical involvement of the audience results in a strengthened impact of the performance.

⁴³ Bennett 3-4.

⁴⁴ Susan Kattwinkel, *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* (Westport: Praeger 2003) xiv.

The key target of audience participation is, of course, the audience which ironically further problematizes the use of the tool in theatre and it is yet to be defined what exactly it is that makes the audience often feel the way that Gareth White opens his book with:

There are few things in the theatre that are more despised than audience participation. [it] makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it on their audiences... [and is] still often seen as one of the most misconceived, unproductive and excruciating of the avant-garde's blind alleys, or otherwise as evidence of the childish crassness of popular performance.⁴⁵

Crouch's idea of audience participation, however, is different from the "traditional" understanding of the term; although he encourages the spectator to be involved when watching his plays, the involvement is not as direct and intimidating as audience participation often tends to be. Crouch's plays are scripted and, therefore, the level of surprise that is often involved in participatory theatre and that directly influences the course of a play is for the most part not present; Crouch's audience participation is less about being physically involved and more about being challenged on an intellectual level.

While audience participation is a popular tool among performers and is slowly receiving more formal recognition, it also introduces new challenges and further problematizes the audience-performer relationship, if not calling for an entirely new definition. One of the major concerns that appears is that once an audience member is in any way actively involved in the play they are attending, the boundary between them and the performer blurs and the spectator is allegedly unable to keep their distance from the performance and, therefore, objectively evaluate what they are seeing. White argues that "It feels different to the person who does it and to those who witness it. [...] It is different to the action performed by those who take roles

⁴⁵ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 1.

as performers, even if the actions they perform are in any other sense the same; and it is different to the activity performed in the role of spectator”⁴⁶ This problem will be addressed in more detail in due course.

1.7. The Discourse on Tim Crouch

Crouch’s work is popular with theatre scholars and as such has received a considerable amount of attention. Arguably, the play that appears in scholarly articles the most often is *The Author*, as it is a useful illustration of the trends in spectatorship in contemporary theatre and other related art forms. A whole issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2011, 21.4) is dedicated to Crouch and covers a large set of themes with, again, particular focus on the audience. It includes articles by Stephen Bottoms who has been continuously mapping Crouch’s development as well as by Helen Freshwater who is one of the leading authorities on theatre audiences.

The aforementioned *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* (2016, 4.2) in its special issue dedicated to theatre and spectatorship covers Crouch, too. Studies on Crouch also appear in *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre* (2014) edited by Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte, and the focus is on ethics and values. Crouch’s works also notably appear in Duška Radosavljević’s *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and performance in the 21st Century* (2013) who is concerned with the way Crouch’s works are co-authored by the audience. Gareth White in *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (2013) focuses particularly on the way *The Author* works with direct audience participation.

As Crouch is also an educator there is an abundance of material of him explaining his techniques which proves helpful when attempting to analyse his works. Besides numerous interviews it is particularly Crouch’s TEDx talk on autosuggestion in which he outlines his

⁴⁶ White 3-4.

approach to theatre. As for reviews, Crouch's most widely covered play to date is undoubtedly *The Author* which *The Guardian*'s cultural editor Charlotte Higgins dubbed "Edinburgh's most talked about play"⁴⁷ of 2010. The media attention occurred initially due to the play's concern with violence on stage in reference to the In-Yer-Face theatre, but it also managed to stir the debate on spectatorship in general. With some minor exceptions the critical response to Crouch has been overall positive and the critics seem to agree that Crouch is one of the "most exciting experimental theatre-makers working in the English language."⁴⁸ One of the few critics who offers some counter-ideas to the general discourse around Crouch's texts is Cristina Delgado-García who challenges particularly the relationship between Crouch's methods and Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator, and the notion of Crouch's art being conceptual – her views will be commented on further on.

1.8. Challenges: Performance versus Text

The most obvious problem that arises when analysing any play textually is the fact that theatre is predominantly meant to be witnessed and viewed, and even more so as there is special focus dedicated to the relationship between theatre and its audience. Although it is not possible to conduct an audience-based research on this scale, or to see the plays live, Crouch's strong focus on the textual side of his plays hopefully allows for a textual analysis without stripping the plays off their principal messages and even provides space for analysing details that would likely go unnoticed in a fast-paced staging of the plays.

Another problem that arises whenever audience participation is involved is the concept of the audience in general – as is shown also in the part dedicated to Rancière and his theory of an

⁴⁷ Charlotte Higgins, "The Author: Edinburgh's Most Talked About Play," *Guardian*, 12 Aug. 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2010/aug/12/edinburghfestival-theatre>> 5 Sept. 2018.

⁴⁸ Caridad Svich, "Tim Crouch's Theatrical Transformations, A Conversation with Caridad Svich", *Hot Review*, <<http://www.hotreview.org/articles/timcrouchinterv.htm>> 5 Sept. 2018. Similar sentiments are also voiced by Stephen Bottoms in his Introduction to Crouch's *Plays One*.

active audience, and in the chapter on audience participation. Oftentimes, the audience is understood as a rather abstract collective concept, a view which, however, ignores the fact that it is formed by individuals from all social and demographical backgrounds and with different theatrical experience. Moreover, it often appears that the audience is ignored by theatre-makers who tend to over-focus on their artistic vision while forgetting that theatre is equally made by its spectators and that without them a production would be a mere rehearsal. Crouch, however, is interested in improving the spectatorial experience and its significance; as Stephen Bottoms suggests, Crouch “opens up the possibility for audience members to make circumstantial interpretations of their own. This is part and parcel of his concern to individualise spectatorial response – to authorise his audience.”⁴⁹

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the existing discussion covering audience participation and immersive theatre is concerned with the position of spectators in plays that do engage them in any way, the role of such a spectator unavoidably becomes more merged with that of an artist to an extent. A direct involvement in a play might result in a changed ability to evaluate the impact of the play since the spectator also partly becomes a co-creator of the play.⁵⁰

Each of the following chapters will cover one of Crouch’s plays with special attention dedicated to the three themes suggested earlier: audience, form and story. Although, it would be optimal to achieve a balanced amount of attention given to each of the three, some of the plays warrant focusing on one of the themes in greater detail. For instance, *The Author* invites the discussion on spectatorship and *The Oak Tree* explores the concept of representation onstage. The analysis shall provide the ground for outlining the methods Crouch has used to enhance the idea of an active spectator with his use of creative dramaturgy.

⁴⁹ Stephen Bottoms, “Materialising the Audience: Tim Crouch’s Sight Specifics in *ENGLAND* and *The Author*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 21.4 (2011): 448.

⁵⁰ See issue 4.2., 2016 of *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* for further information.

2. My Arm

2.1 Crouch's Writing Debut

Besides being Crouch's first authorial work for theatre, *My Arm* which premiered at the 2003 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, sets the tone of his following plays and serves as the stepping ground for Crouch to introduce and explore concepts that have been at the core of his writing ever since. *My Arm* also marks a significant transition turning Crouch from a frustrated actor into a writer, performer and director. In an interview for *The Scotsman* Crouch admits he wrote the play over the course of only a few days in 2002 and he intended to use it as a platform to vent his frustration experienced during his acting years, and at the same time it follows some of the theatrical trends of the time, such as utilising the autobiographical element, albeit fictitious in the case of *My Arm*.⁵¹

In an interview for *Artist Spotlight*, Crouch explains that for him there are two key moments in the play; firstly, the connection with the audience and secondly the connection with a story that unfolds in front of the audience's eyes.⁵² These themes directly connect to other principal concepts that Crouch explores and questions in *My Arm*, such as the relationship between the actor and their audience, theatrical conventions and the notion of representation in theatre. It would be simplistic, however, to assume that Crouch's interest in metatheatricality completely overshadows his storylines, characters and overall message of the play.

Crouch's unique position is based on his three roles in the play; he is simultaneously the author, the actor and the main character as *My Arm* is described as autobiographical. He does not attempt to hide the fact that the autobiographical part is fake, saying: "I make it very evident that my works are plays"⁵³ which prevents the play from being illusionistic. It has, of course, a

⁵¹ "Interview: Tim Crouch – Theatre Director", *The Scotsman* 5 Aug. 2010,

<<https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/interview-tim-crouch-theatre-director-1-820005>> 5 Dec. 2018.

⁵² "Artist Spotlight: Tim Crouch", MASS MoCA, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbKcNEiDE2k>> 5 Dec. 2018.

⁵³ Ilter 402.

major influence on how the play is perceived by the audience which will be addressed in due course.

2.2. Story

Given Crouch's strong interest in the formal aspect of his works it might be tempting to categorize him as a purely conceptual playwright and one might be inclined to think that stories are not important for Crouch's projects. Crouch's frustrating experience with psychologically motivated acting is well-known, but it should be noted that the frustration does not extend to his stories which, on the contrary, work closely with various psychological concepts and prompt the audience to contemplate burning contemporary issues. Stephen Bottoms deems Crouch's preoccupation with values a "central, insistent concern."⁵⁴ The story in *My Arm* revolves around an ordinary ten-year old boy who craves attention from both his family and his classmates, and to achieve his goal he decides to raise his arm for the rest of his life. What starts off as a mere childish gesture quickly evolves into a global phenomenon, even an artistic brand. The boy is initially examined by countless doctors who, however, see him as no more than an interesting subject of their experiments and he is also faced with countless attempts to make him be normal again. The idea of normalcy is of utter importance to the boy's family who do not seem to care about his general wellbeing as much as about him fitting in with the majority of his classmates. None of them seem to even remotely attempt to investigate the psychologically driven reasons that prompt the boy to raise his arm.

What is particularly interesting in this respect is the way the narrative around the boy evolves with almost no emotional contribution on his part. Crouch's character discusses a number of allegedly painful moments that he went through but there is not a single moment that indicates

⁵⁴ Bottoms, *Plays One* 16.

emotional investment of the boy, neither a description of how he felt during the process. The autobiographical account of his experiences is highly depersonalised and as the play progresses, there is not much left of him but his arm which is ironically seen as the only valuable part of him. Clearly, this is part of the strategy that invites the audience to project their own emotions and narratives into the story.

The emotional detachment of the protagonist may also point to the fact that throughout his life, the boy is ascribed value exclusively by others. His normalcy or the lack of thereof is first judged by his parents, his teachers and doctors with none of them being able to find any value in it. Eventually, it is the art dealers and critics who decide that he is somewhat valuable – and, therefore, profitable – as a piece of art, based solely on his difference, not on his personality or any other human traits. Interestingly, his own opinion of the situation is never offered, and he does not even seem to have one except for repeating what he hears from art critics and artists. The boy's detachment from what is happening to him invites a comparison between him and the inanimate objects that represent other characters in the play. He is more valued as an artistic object than a human being which becomes acutely evident particularly towards the end of the play.

His own description of how he had developed his condition reads almost like a scientific experiment rather than the story of a little boy: “Instead of going down to breakfast I positioned myself against the headboard of my bed with my arm resting up the crook of the wall. Very quickly I passed through the threshold of any pain and the discomfort became a little hypnotic” (*Plays One* 30). Such a view has been imposed on him by the constant lack of attention on the side of the adults in his life who overlook his emotions so much that it reflects even in his language – he sounds robotic and dependent on what others tell him to think.

2.3. Form

It seems fitting to open the discussion on the form in *My Arm* with a brief reflection on the play's relationship with the Postdramatic as it directly connects with the article "When We Talk of Horses" by Dan Rebellato which will be used as the main point of departure here. As has been explained in more detail in Chapter 1, Hans-Thies Lehmann's theory of the Postdramatic offers an influential study of recent developments in theatre and claims that Postdramatic theatre has shifted its focus from the conventional dramatic elements to those that challenge the traditional depiction of representation and space.⁵⁵

Representation, in particular, is a concept that Crouch questions the most in *My Arm* and yet, it cannot and should not be readily classified as a purely Postdramatic theatrical work as Crouch follows many a convention, albeit with an experimental twist. Let us, therefore, attempt to demonstrate how Crouch manages to use the Post-dramatic theatrical devices, such as non-conventional representation to prove the viability of conventional theatre that Lehmann's theory criticizes as outdated, and simultaneously to challenge the audience to become more involved in what is represented onstage.

2.3.1. Metaphor as a Tool for Theatrical Representation

Dan Rebellato provides a useful introduction to the problem of representation in theatre and its implications for the difference between the dramatic and the Postdramatic.⁵⁶ According to Rebellato, representational – i.e. what is traditionally considered the dramatic – theatre is defined by its use of metaphors as they are not "limited by any notion of resemblance,"⁵⁷ which allows the audience to employ their own imagination and create their own version of the play.

⁵⁵ David Barnett, "Post-dramatic Theatre," *Drama Online*, <<https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/post-dramatic-theatre-iiid-2516>> 10 Dec. 2018.

⁵⁶ Dan Rebellato, "When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?," *Performance Research* 14.1(2009): 17-28.

⁵⁷ Rebellato 26.

As Rebellato explains, the basic inner mechanisms of a (theatrical) metaphor are based on the non-resemblance between the message of the metaphor and its form, and the discrepancy between the two then leaves space for imagination. The smaller the discrepancy, i.e. the closer the form and the content, the less effective the metaphor. Rebellato illustrates this on the example of the first production of *Hamlet* to star a black actor; some reviewers pointed out that it was not enough for them to appreciate the depth of the character as the actor failed to convey other aspects of the role the reviewers deemed vital for it to engage their imagination, as Rebellato puts it “they couldn’t see the metaphor for the simile.”⁵⁸ Rebellato maintains that theatrical representation is “hard to explain and contains a number of counter-intuitive features”⁵⁹ but the “hermeneutics of dramatic theatre is every bit as complex, paradoxical and supple as that of performance and the Postdramatic.”⁶⁰

All of the aforementioned is well illustrated in *My Arm*. It may be argued that metaphor is one of the most prominent tools Crouch uses in the play. As has been quoted earlier, Crouch is highly aware of the line between the stage techniques and representation, and the fiction he is presenting. His point is not to hide the fact that what the play presents as autobiographical is really fictional, no matter how realistic it might sound particularly due to the use of the first-person narrative; no matter how challenging his take on the relationship between theatrical metaphor and real life might be, it is never done with the sole aim to confuse the spectator, as Crouch insists in his interview with Seda Ilter:

I am excited about the truths that are contained within fiction. I am interested in that word ‘uncertainty’ – nothing is definite [...] I am interested in it because uncertainty enables an audience to be open and allows questions to

⁵⁸ Rebellato 27.

⁵⁹ Rebellato 27.

⁶⁰ Rebellato 27.

materialise that might not otherwise materialise if there was certainty. This is different to confusion. I try not to confuse.⁶¹

To achieve the desired level of uncertainty in *My Arm*, Crouch uses both metaphors and metonymy, and these are certainly not limited to verbal ones. The most notable example is Crouch's metonymical use of various objects provided by the audience to represent most of his characters, except the arm boy who is portrayed by Crouch himself, generating both literal and abstract meanings. The unusual choice of representation has the ability to capture the audience's attention since, as opposed to conventional theatrical representation, the connection between the character and the object that represents it is intentionally random which, however, does not equal purposeless; as is apparent from the above-quoted interview excerpt, it encourages the audience to ask questions – not only metatheatrical – but also those concerning the way human brain processes perceptions and the role imagination plays within this framework.

To return to Rebellato's theory, a metaphor is more "flexible"⁶² than mere resemblance or simile. The objects provided by audience members, therefore, inevitably create an array of unique meanings for each spectator whether Crouch chooses their particular object to represent one of the characters or not. In the notes introducing *My Arm*, Crouch emphasizes the importance of randomness as he argues: "the objects and pictures are in no way representational [...] There is a measured, haphazard quality to how these objects are given aesthetic significance by the events with which they become involved" (*Plays One* 24). The only set relationship between an object and the character it represents is the doll that, together with Crouch as an actor, stands for the character of the arm boy, and it is also the first object introduced to the audience. Its involvement further highlights the discrepancy and randomness in the relationship between the characters and objects that are gradually introduced afterwards.

⁶¹ Ilter 388-399.

⁶² Rebellato 25.

A key moment that sets the tone in this respect happens shortly after the doll is first introduced: “This is the house we lived in. / *The performer presents to the camera one of the objects from the audience*” (*Plays One* 25). At this point, the house might be represented by any given object, a set of keys, a packet of tissues or a bottle of water; this is the moment the audience is invited to mentally make their own connection between the two, to impose their own meaning into it or to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation, and it also marks the moment all spectators become an active part of the play.

To completely remove the connection between characters and the way they are represented in the play might seem like a significant step away from conventional dramatic theatre as such a connection appears in the majority of plays at least to some extent. In *My Arm*, however, the gap between the two aspects serves as a major metatheatrical tool that encourages the audience to ask questions about the significance of each element that makes up a play – any play – not just the objects. As the play progresses and the audience get used to the unusual way of representation, it ought to become clear that the credibility of a character is not based on the actor’s resemblance to the character they represent, but rather on the mental images the audience are prompted to create.

As Shirley Dent observes, in *My Arm* “A camera is trained onto the desktop world of the boy’s childhood and these objects serve as stand-ins for Mums, Dads, brothers, social workers and friends. This may sound odd but it works.”⁶³ Although the principle sounds simple, it is in fact rather difficult to explain on what exact basis it works and the concept of a metaphor proves to be conveniently located on the fine, difficult-to-describe border between the abstract and the tangible. Understanding its workings is to a great extent unconscious and words more often than not fail to effectively describe it. Rebellato, therefore, proposes a useful comparison to

⁶³ Shirley Dent, “*My Arm* by Tim Crouch”, *Culture Wars*, Aug. 2003
<<http://www.culturewars.org.uk/edinburgh2003/dreams/myarm.htm>> 2 January 2019.

when people try and retell their dreams – once they attempt to materialise the story into words, the dream often loses its essence and morphs into something completely different.⁶⁴

With that in mind, let us now attempt to uncover how exactly this theory applies to *My Arm*. It has already been established that the introduction of the concept is gradual: first, Crouch – in character – explains to the audience that he will collect objects from them which he will then use at random. Then, he presents the doll that, together with him and the footage of a boy played throughout the play, represents his character. Crouch takes some time to illustrate the principle while using the doll:

Lights up. The performer removes the lens cap from the camera. The doll is revealed – via the camera – on the screen.

This is me. I'm ten years old. I'm big boned.

Here I am watching TV.

The doll.

Here I am in my trunks.

The doll (Plays One 25).

The identification of the objects as characters is made possible through the performative function of language. Crouch's character simply pronounces them to be certain characters. It is of course problematic if not impossible to put together a collective sentiment of the audience, even more so by reading the text and not seeing the play; it is, however, safe to say, referring back to Shirley Dent's review, that the concept, albeit after initial uncertainty, works largely due to the fact that the audience are allowed the time to get used to the unusual pattern, perhaps compare it with other plays they saw, and imagine the connecting features in any way they prefer.

⁶⁴ Rebellato 21.

The use of inanimate objects on stage is not a novelty, of course, as for example puppetry might come to mind. In *My Arm*, however, their involvement is significantly different from mere puppetry due to the permanent presence of the narrator who is simultaneously the protagonist, the author of the play and the operator – for lack of a better term – and who collects the objects and manages the projector. What is also different is the fact that the objects, as opposed to puppets that usually stand for themselves, represent another, animate characters. This all helps create a strong metatheatrical effect.

In addition to the aforementioned, it is also the fictitious, yet strong autobiographical element that helps make up the metatheatrical impression of *My Arm*. A similar discrepancy between reality and fiction, Crouch explains in an interview with Ilter, is present in any play, “I am just focusing on an aspect of theatre I’ve felt acutely when I was an actor.”⁶⁵ Crouch aims to “open or widen the separation in the duality. It is important for me to open up spaces between the actor and the character, between the locus of the fiction and the place where the fiction is located in the theatre.”⁶⁶ His words directly resonate with Rebellato’s aforementioned explanation of the need for such a discrepancy created mostly by metaphors.

In *My Arm*, the opening up of the spaces described by Crouch is enabled most noticeably by the obvious discrepancy between the events that are said to be or have been happening to the main character, played by Crouch, and between what the audience actually get to see onstage, represented mostly by what happens to the boy’s arm. The obvious age difference between the main character, who, for most of the play, is described to be a boy, and the actual man onstage is easily concealed by the fact that the story is being told retrospectively. Crouch’s character, however, also tells stories that would have affected the stage version of him, were they to happen to him; Ironically, he never actually raises his arm in the play.

⁶⁵ Ilter 402.

⁶⁶ Ilter 402.

In a truly Crouch-esque fashion, in one of the final lines in *My Arm*, Crouch's character says that his brother Anthony "arranged for me to give a series of talks about my life" (*Plays One* 46). Based on the play's continuous awareness of the thin boundary between the real and the fictitious it is safe to say that it is clearly designed to create another metatheatrical moment. The effect of the protagonist's words is further enforced by the pause and blackout which further enhances the image of the play being part of the said series of talks; but then, why is the protagonist's arm not in the air?

In an interview with Stephen Bottoms where Crouch talks about his inspiration sources, he explains that he wanted *My Arm* to be autobiographical as it had been the prevailing – and for him frustrating – trend in theatre when he wrote the play,⁶⁷ but warrants mentioning that the element is fully fictitious and the narrative does not attempt to conceal that; there are various passages that give away the unreality of the supposed autobiographical elements, such as the moment Crouch's character mentions a finger he had to have amputated, yet it still appears on his hand: "I conceded to having this finger removed – / *The performer presents their finger.* / because it was dead. My blood pressure was 180 over 130." (*Plays One* 39). Such moments can have an almost ridiculous effect about them which undoubtedly keeps the attention of the audience active and engaged throughout the play. The metatheatricality of *My Arm* and its overlap with the notion of audience provides a useful bridge to the next subchapter which will focus specifically on that issue.

⁶⁷ Stephen Bottoms, "Authorising the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2009, 74.

2.4. Audience and Actors

In addition to the commercial and economic factors that have been discussed in the previous chapter, actors are usually cast according to their physical or other resemblance to the character they are set to portray. Furthermore, the context within which the particular actor works is also considered as well as the type of roles that is generally regarded as suitable for them. By engaging random objects in place of actors, *My Arm* changes such a narrative; the attention is taken away from actors and allows the focus to be on the storyline, or rather on the awareness of the storyline. When there is a meta-connection made by any individual audience member regarding any of the object, it is based on their individual experience, not on prefabricated suggestions made by the artistic team.

With all that said, it is intriguing to learn how Crouch himself came up with the specific idea to cast random objects. In an interview with Duška Radosavljević, Crouch explains that during his acting workshops, he would “take actors out of a scene and replace them with objects and the actors delivered lines to the objects.”⁶⁸ The method proved to be eye-opening for Crouch:

I became very excited and moved by what could be achieved through this act of abstraction. I, as a spectator, suddenly became more important and needed in the way that I didn't feel needed when actors were in a workshop or a rehearsal room, acting. I had to be present to join one thing with another, I was a necessary contributing factor to the creative act as an audience member, and that was really exciting for me.⁶⁹

Abstraction is undoubtedly one of the key tools that, coming back to Shirley Dent's review, allow *My Arm* to work which brings about another element of Crouch's ongoing and signature

⁶⁸ Duška Radosavljević, “Appendix 3: Tim Crouch – Interview” *Theatre-making, Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 218.

⁶⁹ Radosavljević 218.

frustration with theatre being too focused on actors and, consequently, losing its connection with the spectators. The commercial aspect and impact of such a practice has already been discussed. What needs to be considered in addition to that is the actor-focused – at times also producer or director-focused – approach adopted by most pieces of conventional theatre, something that Crouch has experienced first-hand and from multiple angles as an actor, educator, director and producer, as well as writer and audience member, and, therefore, is able to reflect upon from an informed point of view.

Conventionally, the audience members only become involved once the play ends to applaud the actors. In *My Arm*, however, the play literally depends on the audience's willingness to cooperate with the performer. Inviting the audience to contribute in such a way is a simple and easily conveyed, yet highly effective gesture that ensures the spectatorial involvement throughout the whole play without being too intrusive; the audience is taken onstage rather symbolically, without the need to feel intimidated as is often the case for projects that require the audience participation to be more intense.

Crouch's method can additionally be understood as an educative tool for actors as well. As has been previously pointed out, the play is the result of Crouch's frustration with the amount of attention that popular theatre-making gives to hyper-realistic and psychologically accurate pieces. Such productions require an extreme personal investment on the actors' part and there is little to no attention dedicated to building and maintaining the relationship with the audience which results in the loss of theatre's many unique traits, such as the fact that it is created live at a given moment in time, in a particular setting and that without the audience there would be no difference between a live performance and a rehearsal where the actors are encouraged to focus on themselves.

2.5. Coué and Rancière

My Arm is largely based on the use of metaphors which in fact is close Coué's concept of autosuggestion often used in psychotherapy and it is fruitful to observe how Crouch effectively incorporates it into his theatrical practice. The method, undoubtedly innovative and perhaps even controversial in its time will appear as less of a novelty for today's reader, particularly with the contemporary preoccupation with self-help books and the popularisation of psychology. The method is rather complex and Coué provides a number of examples from his own practice but what is key for connecting the method with Crouch's theatre is the basic premise that enables its success, i.e. the relationship between imagination and the patient in Coué's case and imagination and the audience in Crouch's.

Although people generally tend to believe they can achieve their goals through their strong will alone, Coué argues against it claiming that it is in fact imagination that grants the fulfilment of our desires and that where imagination and will appear next to each other, it is always imagination that is usually more substantial of the two. The successful presentation of Crouch's theatre is made possible through the very same principle as autosuggestion. The primary input is indeed created by Crouch's character but the response to it is individual for each audience member. Again, we might turn to Coué for explanation of this phenomenon. He distinguishes between suggestion and autosuggestion, defining the former as "the act of imposing an idea on the brain of another person."⁷⁰ Regarding autosuggestion, Coué argues that if the unconscious "does not accept that suggestion, if he does not digest it, and transform it into autosuggestion, no effect is produced."⁷¹

The principle of autosuggestion is key for a successful staging of *My Arm*. It is vital that the audience accept the suggestions made by Crouch and subsequently transform them into their

⁷⁰ Émile Coué, *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion* (Memphis, TN: General Books, 2010) 21.

⁷¹ Coué 21-22.

own rendering while engaging their own imagination. Once the audience do that, a simple set of keys provided by a fellow audience member can easily be transformed into any character and any situation suggested by the narrator; it might be imagined in any way the spectator chooses without the restrictions conventional theatre often produces by its use of elaborate props and realistic, detailed depiction of characters. Autosuggestion is a tool that Crouch works with continually, or to be more precise, he encourages his spectators to engage with it, but *My Arm* appears to be the play where both autosuggestion and imagination have the most essential role and where it is the most apparent to the audience as well.

The heightened imagination prompted by the acts of autosuggestion then naturally leads towards an activated audience as proposed by Rancière who argues that the spectators seize their power back through the performer and the energy the performance generates.⁷² In *My Arm* the spectator is entrusted with major creative power and is actively asked to use it in order to create their own version of the play while being made aware of the process by Crouch's careful guidance. Although the renewed power that Rancière considers key for the survival of theatre is one of the most prominent elements in *My Arm*, it remains considerably subtle rather than being imposed forcefully on the spectators. Such a rendering is powerful exactly because of its subtlety which is, arguably, one of Crouch's most powerful devices resulting in the activation of the audience.

While it is true that the progression of the play would not be possible without the contribution of objects coming from the audience, the story conveyed by the play is not influenced by the nature of the objects or by any specific acts carried out by the audience. In this sense, ironically, *My Arm* is in fact rather conventional. The audience are not pressured into uncomfortable situations which enables them to focus on engaging their imaginations rather

⁷² Rancière 3.

than on the stress that usually arises with forced audience participation. A rather similar concept is developed in more detail in Crouch's next play, *An Oak Tree* which will be discussed in the following chapter.

3. An Oak Tree

3.1. Story

True to Crouch's signature approach to theatre, *An Oak Tree* presents a thought-provoking connection between form and content. While it is an independent play, some of the themes and concepts previously explored in *My Arm* are present in *An Oak Tree* in an extended form which allows Crouch to focus on that one element in more detail. *An Oak Tree* follows the aftermath of a car accident in which Crouch's character, the Hypnotist, kills a young girl. The second character, played by a different actor each night, is the girl's father who meets the Hypnotist after the accident, hoping to find answers to his questions regarding the tragedy, but whose mind has been transformed into a state of ongoing confusion and chaos due to his enormous grief.

The storyline offers numerous digressions to the past, scenes from the father's post-tragedy life and, as Crouch informs the audience right at the beginning, the story happens one year from now with the frame setting for it being a performance of a second-class hypnotist in a pub in Oxford. A cursory reading of the play's reviews reveals a repeating key word, loss, which is explored from many angles throughout the play. Similarly to *My Arm*, the play focuses on a family tragedy as perceived solely through the point of view of one of the family members, this time through the eyes of the grieving father and his peculiar way of finding consolation in believing that a nearby oak tree has been transformed into his daughter.

Although the storyline of the father who lost his daughter is the central and most easily recognized one, it is constantly being intertwined with a number of others that offer metatheatrical experience and that the audience are encouraged to follow, such as the odd dynamics between Crouch's character and the second actor which is constantly being highlighted by Crouch handing pieces of script to the actor and by him feeding instructions into an earpiece. The audience are constantly being reminded of the peculiar practice as Crouch

makes a point of not hiding the earpiece at all. This is the part of the narrative that, although being scripted, changes with each actor depending on how they cope with their performance. Simultaneously, there is also a storyline that captures the aftermath of the accident where the father seeks the Hypnotist in an Oxford pub a year from now. There is a wide range of emotions reflected in *An Oak Tree* that are inherent to the situations depicted in the scripted scene, but their actual expression depends both on the adaptability and understanding of the actor portraying the father and the personal investment of the spectators.

While, understandably, most attention is likely to be directed at the second actor due to the obvious challenges they face, the character of the Hypnotist plays an equally important role in conveying the play's message. As Crouch's character establishes at the very beginning, the audience are naturally inclined towards the father not only because they feel sorry for his loss likely caused by the Hypnotist, but also because Crouch's character has the benefit of having had the opportunity to perform in the show multiple times before and because, having created the play, Crouch's character is in a certain position of power, in addition to which his character is also a highly skilled manipulator. The character of the Hypnotist has multiple layers, each contributing to a different storyline introduced earlier; the obvious, literal one, is related to the crucial part he has played in the death of the young girl, as becomes apparent throughout the play.

The second, undoubtedly the more interesting formally, is the parallel that can be drawn between hypnosis and theatre which is much related with what has previously been established regarding the importance of theatrical metaphor in Crouch's work and with the notion of autosuggestion as detailed earlier in relation to *My Arm*. The character of the Hypnotist possesses a significant portion of control over the piece and the actor as he feeds them the lines that he or she is to say. The Hypnotist literally invades the father's mind – which he even admits in one of his lines – and suggests to him what he ought to think, which the father confusedly

follows, not being much aware of what the Hypnotist has done to him. Neither the actor nor the character they represent have any power that would allow them to influence the direction of the story which openly symbolizes the way in which actors are approached in conventionally devised plays. The second actor is literally in the hands of the Hypnotist as he is handed the pieces of script from him throughout the play.

Unlike the second actor who does not need to fit in any specific description other than being an adult and agreeing to performing, the Hypnotist is considerably more defined, wearing a cheap-looking silver vest and, as watching any excerpt from the play reveals, appears to be every inch the quirky pub entertainer which reflects both in the way he speaks – the text itself might not make this aspect of the play obvious – dresses and performs his scripted hypnotic performance. His humorous remarks delivered in a voice of a hypnotist are in a stark contrast to the uneasiness the father is enduring. The nature of such a performance might be seen in analogy with how conventional theatre is sometimes perceived – as a manipulative, illusory medium which does not depict reality as it is but rather strives to make the audience believe some of its false, cheap illusions. Early on in the play, the Hypnotist promises that he would never lie to the audience which, again, highlights the play's multiple metatheatrical levels as when the playful and falsely witty tone of the Hypnotist's performance is considered, it is clear that what in fact happens is the exact opposite. When the Hypnotist is understood as a metaphor for theatre, then his claim makes complete sense as its credibility works on its own principles.

As the storyline of the father's loss unfolds slightly more and the Hypnotist's guilt becomes more apparent – although the Hypnotist's part is then questioned in scenes that point to the extremely thin edge between reality and fiction – it is natural to expect a closure of the story that would enable the father to come to terms with the loss at least to an extent. The closure, however, is not provided as, paradoxically, the storyline becomes increasingly less graspable with each piece of information added to the story. In the final scenes of the play, the

distinction between the two characters becomes blurred since the Hypnotist takes on the role of the father's wife. In the final exchange, moreover, their roles merge almost completely as the father adopts the Hypnotist's way of communicating and the two become almost indistinguishable which raises questions about the sheer existence of the character of the father.

3.2. Form

The form in *An Oak Tree*, similarly to *My Arm*, complements its content to further enhance its message. It seems fitting to begin with the explanation of how the title of the play is reflected in the storyline and the form. The oak tree in the title is a piece of visual art by Michael Craig-Martin based on a premise that a glass of water is transformed into a grown oak tree simply by the artist pronouncing it to be so. Crouch's nods to visual art appear in most of his works, for instance *ENGLAND* is even set in a gallery, and are an inspiration not only for his characters and narrative but he also transfers some of its more abstract qualities into the conceptual and dramaturgical frame of his plays. References to art appear throughout both his dialogues and monologues, such as the often-quoted phrase "Art is anything you can get away with" which appears on a placard in *My Arm* and "remains visible to the audience for the rest of the performance" (both *Plays One* 36). In the context of *My Arm* it refers to visual arts but Crouch follows it in theatre, too, and proves that the definition of theatre can indeed be a similarly flexible and fluid medium as that of the visual arts. David Lane observes that in *My Arm* it is the artist who decides what is to be considered art and that "this rearrangement of priorities regarding creation, definition, ownership, value and meaning is something theatre in the mainstream – particularly writer-led theatre – is yet to embrace fully."⁷³

Crouch continues to further explore the notion of what is and is not considered art, again specifically in connection with the visual arts while applying the concepts to theatre as well.

⁷³ David Lane, "A Dramaturg's Perspective: Looking to the Future of Script Development," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2010, 130.

The premise seems to be that if it is possible to make such a transformation in the visual arts, then it should be possible in theatre as well, and indeed one of the two main characters does make an almost identical transformation when his dead daughter takes on the physical appearance of an oak tree. The question is: how exactly is such a transformation possible? Crouch provides the answer throughout his works which all rely on the audience's ability to transform suggestions from the theatre-maker into mental images in their minds. In fact, in the play it is not only the oak tree which, in the mind of the father, is transformed into his daughter. The transformation is much more complicated for the audience as all they have physically available in front of them is a piano stool which, for the purposes of the play, stands for the oak tree.

Again, autosuggestion on part of the audience plays a vital role in the successful conveying of the play's message, as the audience need to accept to the distorted reality of both characters in order to be able to follow the play. If it can be so strong that the audience members are able to form a believable image of a fictional character's dead daughter – even though the clarity of the image undoubtedly varies – why would it not be possible for it to work the same way for the father and help him cope with his loss. When this and Crouch's several other hints in the play are considered, *An Oak Tree* becomes even more layered and offers a myriad of possible explanations regarding the father's storyline.

Crouch introduces *An Oak Tree* with a quote by Arthur Koestler⁷⁴ regarding the difficulty to distinguish fiction from reality which seems to be relating not only to theatre but also to the father whose reality becomes severely distorted after the death of his daughter to the extent that he is even able to be hypnotised into a state where he believes that he had killed her himself. If the Hypnotist, however, is able to do that, further questions undeniably arise – is the

⁷⁴ “The distinction between fact and fiction is a late acquisition of rational thought – unknown to the unconscious, and largely ignored by the emotions.” *Plays One* 54.

daughter even real? Has she ever existed? Crouch feeds this possible alternative narrative line into the story several times, one example is when the father talks to his wife who accuses him that: “It’s like some abstract intellectual fucking concept for you, isn’t it. She never existed for you in the first place, did she? She was just some idea. The idea of a daughter, just as I’m the idea of a wife. We don’t exist for you, do we, not in flesh and blood” (*Plays One* 98). A truly metatheatrical moment occurs in one of the final exchanges between the father and the Hypnotist where they both seemingly step out of their roles to talk about the course of the play. As everything else in the play, their exchange is scripted of which the audience are aware:

Hypnotist: Do you get the story?

Father: About the girl?

H: I suppose so.

F: I get that she’s dead. Or is that all in his mind?

H: Whose?

F: Mine. The father’s.

H: No. She really is dead (*Plays One* 93).

The out-of-the-role exchange continues with the father asking about his other daughter’s age. The Hypnotist replies: “I don’t know. Whatever you think” to which the father says that “it feels like she’s about five” (*Plays One* 93).

Not only is the Hypnotist able, however, to make the father believe what he wants him to believe, he also creates a number of other, imaginary, volunteers who are represented only by the chairs they are imaginarily sitting on, behaving according to what has been scripted for them, just like the father, which ultimately prompts the question of his existence, too. In another exchange with the father, the Hypnotist suggests that the father’s other daughter “appears as a chair” (*Plays One* 93) which resonates similar ideas to those expressed in *My Arm* with objects being fully acceptable as representations of characters. This approach indicates that in theory

there is only an insignificant difference between characters portrayed by actors and those represented by objects as the key process of imagination happens in the minds of the audience members.

A device that will surely not go unnoticed by the audience is the ear plug that enables Crouch's character to feed instructions directly into the father's ears without the audience hearing it. As far as the story and characters go, the device is thought to not be noticed by them, but at the same time it is clear that the characters make no attempt to hide its existence from the audience. The audience might indeed not hear what exact (scripted) instructions are being said into the headphones, but they can clearly see it being done. In this respect, *An Oak Tree* cannot be accused of being illusionistic as the audience are encouraged to notice it. This method ensures that the Hypnotist (i.e. the author of the play) has a high degree of control over how the play unfolds.

The audience know how the play is being built and yet their view is constantly challenged by the conflicting happenings onstage, both visually and by what is being said out loud by the characters. It should also be noted that the original play is designed to feature Crouch in the role of the Hypnotist, but there have been multiple stagings since the original run in which Crouch did not appear. The inclusion of a different actor in the leading role provides an additional layer of metatheatricality for all involved depending on how much context is available to them prior to seeing the play; some audience members who are aware of Crouch's involvement in the previous stagings might still imagine him playing the role.

3.3. Audience

The role of the audience might not seem as prominent as in the other plays as they are not involved as visibly as in for instance *The Author*, or as directly as in *My Arm*. Similar sentiment is expressed by the Hypnotist at the beginning of the play when he says to the audience: “I’m just going to talk to them. I won’t be a second. / Ladies and gentlemen. In a short time I’ll be asking for volunteers from the audience but I’m not asking you. I’m asking some people in a pub a year from now. So please don’t get up. (*To the father.*) That’s them dealt with” (*Plays One* 60). His address to the audience is designed to sound very brief and more as a side note to the story that would follow. In the context of Crouch’s attention to the audience, it might appear humorous and ironic as he always ensures his theatre is very audience-focused and the idea that one of his plays would have the audience “dealt with” during the initial scene is highly unlikely.

As has been pointed out, the multiple story lines that appear in *An Oak Tree* encourage, if not demand, the audience to stay focused throughout the play. Since the time frame is not linear and the main fictional story covering the death of the little girl is presented during multiple, non-chronological flashbacks, the audience need to reconstruct the story piece by piece and understand the multiple storylines the play unfolds. The form which often jumps from one seemingly unconnected scene to another is much in line with the unstable confused and grieving mind of the father. In this respect, the fact that there is a different actor for each performance could be seen as another representation of the father’s mentally confusing world as he struggles to come to terms with what has been happening in his life since the car accident.

Precisely due to its fragmented nature, *An Oak Tree* is a good example of Rancièrè’s previously discussed argument that as the spectators watch a piece of theatre they should feel as if they were on a journey of investigation as they put the evidence provided by the performers together in order to actively understand the play’s message. In close connection with the use of random objects in *My Arm*, *An Oak Tree* also invites the spectators to project their own images

and experiences into the play. This is enabled not only by the formal devices used by Crouch, the stage design, for example, is, yet again, kept to a minimum in order to engage individual imagination, but also by the shifted role of the second actor who, to some extent, blends with the audience.

Conventionally, actors are in a position which grants them a thorough knowledge of their role as they attend numerous rehearsals, know the script by heart and work on the development of the play with various theatre-makers and fellow actors. Crouch explains for *LA Stage* what effect *An Oak Tree* and the way it is performed should have on the actors involved: “They won’t be transformed because of a lengthy rehearsal process; they won’t be transformed because they went through a whole checklist of psychological research; they’ll be transformed because of the context they’re in and the information the audience gets and the effect the audience has on that actor.”⁷⁵ By including a different actor each night, Crouch signals that although the play’s script is set and would not change with the involvement of a new actor, the response would never be the same as each actor brings individual qualities into the process. It is a parallel to the audience who also change each night, bringing with them their unique dynamics and creating individual images based on their experiences. By replicating this spectatorial process into the core of the play via the presence of the second actor, Crouch simultaneously legitimizes each individual response of each audience member.

Crouch himself explains his choice of not having one actor play the character of the father as part of his frustration with typecasting which makes an actor’s job incredibly difficult. In his “Diary of An Oak Tree” feature for *The Guardian*, Crouch argues: “An Oak Tree is consciously designed to resist the notions of superficial typecasting that pervade the acting profession like a disease – a world where people have to look like their characters, rather than

⁷⁵ Janet Thielke, “Tim Crouch’ An Oak Tree Leads Actors into the Unknown,” @*This Stage Magazine*, 7 Jan 2010 <<https://thisstage.la/2010/01/tim-crouchs-an-oak-tree-leads-actors-into-the-unknown/>> 27 Apr. 2019.

their characters just happening to look like them.”⁷⁶ The fact that Crouch’s second protagonist only learns more about their role as they act in it makes them in a way closer to the audience rather than to the character of the Hypnotist who does know the script and whose role does not change each night. Crouch’s character even addresses this directly when he talks to the father: “But don’t worry, X, they’re on your side. It’s me they’re after” (*Plays One* 60). This line does not only refer to the plot line about the dead daughter and the fact that the Hypnotist has hypnotised the father to think that it was him who killed her in the car accident, but clearly also to the fact that the audience naturally have compassion with the actor. The choice of the actor might even seem randomized to an extent as there are no criteria regarding their look or gender for them to fulfil which helps shrink the gap between the audience and the second actor even more significantly.

Moreover, such a choice points at an aspect which is unique for theatre as an artistic form, i.e. its organic nature which enables it to convey meanings that other, static forms, such as film, would not be able to provide; it is another proof that theatre indeed instils an active element into the spectatorial experience. The changing actors also highlight the different, unique experience that the audience will have each night depending on the particular actor, the awareness of which also brings about another important aspect, the dependence of a particular night’s success on the choice of the actors, which Crouch himself acknowledges in an article for *The Guardian* where he discusses his experience performing *An Oak Tree* in New York for three months. The actors were announced beforehand and so when he had famous stars such as Joan Allen or Frances McDormand appear in the cast, their nights would sell out immediately. On other days when the play featured less known actors, “it was back to 40, with another self-

⁷⁶ Tim Crouch, “Diary of An Oak Tree: part 1,” *The Guardian*, 12 Feb 2007
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/feb/12/diaryofanoaktreepart1>> 27 Apr. 2019.

doubter,”⁷⁷ Crouch explained. Given Crouch’s attention to detail, it is safe to say that this is an aspect he had been aware of when creating the play, and that it serves him as another tool to bring attention to the way theatre works and how much it can be affected by external factors. The perception of the play, however, does not depend solely on the chosen actors, but to a large extent on the audience’s willingness to accept and agree to the conceptual and more abstract elements of the play.

⁷⁷ Tim Crouch, “One night stand,” *The Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2007
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/jan/17/theatre2>> 27 Apr. 2019.

4. The Author

4.1. Form

Before proceeding to the analysis of the play, a short note on the structure of this chapter is needed. Unlike the previous two chapters which both include subchapters dedicated to story, this chapter will have slightly different structuring: Form, Audience and Actors. The idea of the story will not be omitted, quite the contrary – as with other plays, it is such an integral part of Crouch’s narrative and of all the following subchapters that it would be impossible to single it out. The notion of the story will, therefore, be included in all the subchapters. *The Author* in a way concludes the observations made in chapters on *My Arm* and *An Oak Tree* so this way of structuring appears more fitting.

The nature of Crouch’s previous works and the response it has received makes it almost impossible to approach his plays without the wider context of his works and writing philosophy in mind. Out of all Crouch’s works, *The Author* has, however, catalysed the most heated debates and continues to inspire general contemplations on audience participation in contemporary theatre ever since its 2009 premiere. A significant amount of the play’s powerful influence, and, therefore, its value for this thesis, is based on the fact that it complicates a number of aspects forming the relationship between all major participants of any theatrical production – from actors through to audience members, the author and the theatre staff – and does so in a seemingly simple way by laying bare the very foundations of such a relationship which conventional theatre strives to make unnoticeable. Another reason for the play’s ongoing success, as many of the responses to the play prove, is that *The Author* does not end with the final scene. Its message encourages, if not even requires, further debates and contemplation, as it can provide a starting ground for wider discussion on theatre as a mode of expression.

Crouch's plays are known to challenge theatrical conventions even before the actual performance commences and *The Author* is no exception. The theatre space is arranged in an unusual way as there are two banks of seating opposite each other which results in the audience facing each other. Such a seating plan is set to design an intimidating, yet exciting feeling of uncertainty and curiosity as the audience members begin to settle in. Given that there is no stage and that the actors are seated among the audience, there are peculiar dynamics being generated the moment the spectators enter the auditorium. Similarly to Crouch's previous plays, the beginning is dedicated to allowing the audience to get accustomed to the new, unusual principles that will govern the course of the action. This is achieved through the character of Adrian (whose name changes depending on the actor portraying him in different productions) who represents an audience member. It soon becomes clear that he is a theatre enthusiast, a character perhaps not unfamiliar to many of the audience members. He is a member of the Royal Court's Friendship Programme and tells his fellow audience members stories about waiting by the stage door and hoping to meet his favourite actors.

Adrian's character is clearly designed to make the audience feel comfortable in the space: he asks them a few factual questions, such as their names, to which they are not obliged to reply, but they should feel comfortable answering them as they would in any other everyday conversation. As Adrian is the first character to speak, he serves as both a metaphorical and literal bridge between the audience and the other actors, between what is meant to be a (albeit scripted) casual conversation before the play starts and the scripted dialogues that follow. Depending on the willingness of the audience members in a particular performance, his initial address will feel either like a monologue or a dialogue with fellow audience members, but it is important to keep in mind that the course of the play does not depend on the answers provided by the spectators.

In some respects Adrian's character is the voice of the audience. He expresses some concerns they are likely to feel before the play properly begins: "What are we supposed to do, I wonder? Do you know? Sounds good, doesn't it? Does it?" (*Plays One* 166). All this, however, is part of the script and Crouch's intention to make the audience feel at ease – and undoubtedly to make them aware of the fact that this is happening. As Adrian goes on, he touches upon more complex matters surrounding the notion of spectatorship (although still in a very light tone) particularly the way the audience are being imagined by theatre makers: "sometimes the most fantastical – the most made up thing in the theatre is us! Don't you, ___? ... I remember thinking, 'that writer has imagined me.' I've been imagined! Poorly imagined! The audience has been badly written. We're all going to have to pretend ourselves!" His comments are of course partly ironic as his very character represents an imagined audience member. A key to Crouch's handling of the problem of imagined spectators can be found in an article by Crouch's long-time co-director Andy Smith who explains the process of writing and directing *The Author* particularly with regard to the audience.

To describe their joint approach – together with another co-director, Karl James – Smith offers a useful metaphor suggested to him by Stephen Bottoms, i.e. of removing all possible obstacles between the audience and the actors.⁷⁸ The creative process involved the three of them reading through the play's draft provided by Crouch, imagining themselves in the role of the audience members. Such a perspective allows them to remove all parts of the script that they find disturbing to the audience while keeping their core ideas in the spotlight. Ensuring that the spectators "feels included," Smith explains, happens by "gently taking away, removing and revealing things, and sometimes putting them in different places."⁷⁹ What Smith calls "gentle acts of removing" is highly apparent throughout the play and includes many tools that Crouch

⁷⁸ Andy Smith, "Gentle Acts of Removal, Replacement and Reduction: Considering the Audience in Co-Directing the Work of Tim Crouch," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2011, 411.

⁷⁹ Smith 412.

has been using throughout his other works, such as minimalistic props or changing the idea of character representation. By shuffling the conventions, all participants are constantly being made aware of their role in the production and are encouraged to embrace it in a productive way.

Although, as both Crouch and Smith make clear from the beginning, the play is not meant to be confrontational towards the audience, the notion of seeing and being seen is an integral part of it on many levels, not just in the most obvious sense of an audience watching a story unfold. *The Author* invites all participants not only to see each other but also to be aware of each other's role as well. Due to the unusual seating plan, the audience members are watching the actors as well as fellow spectators, and for some audience members the fellow spectators are more easily viewed than the actors. What is even more unusual is the fact that the writer is also present in the character of Tim Crouch. Depending on the particular production, it is often Crouch playing himself which creates a sense of a blurry border between reality and fiction, another prominent feature of Crouch's theatre. In the performance note, Crouch explains his intentions saying that "it is hoped that the audience will eventually feel encouraged to dispose of the need to look at whoever is speaking and enjoy their own company" (*Plays One* 164). Again, he relies on the fact that once the audience are exposed to something for long enough, they will ultimately get accustomed to it and ideally it should even become comfortable for them.

The issue of the representation of reality in theatre continues is one of the key ones for Crouch. There are two major ways in which Crouch accomplishes that in *The Author* and which shine through even more significantly if also similar concepts from the previous two plays *My Arm* and *An Oak Tree* are considered. Crouch repeatedly opposes the strive for an overly realistic theatre and similar sentiments are expressed by the characters in *The Author* who talk about their experience rehearsing the fictional play-within-the-play, explaining how the need

for Stanislavski-like identification with the characters they portrayed has caused uproar from audience members which resulted in a (fictitious) violent accident between a spectator and an actor. The actors also talk about typecasting which rules out acting opportunities for them based on their looks which is something Crouch has been rejecting in both *My Arm* and *An Oak Tree* by including objects in place of characters and by involving different actor each night respectively.

4.2. Actors, Audience and Author

What should not be omitted when contemplating *The Author* is the pressure the innovative form poses on the theatre-makers and the possible reasons some find it more comfortable to not involve their audience directly at all. The relationship between theatre-makers, playwrights, directors and actors, and the other side of the theatrical spectrum, i.e. the audience and critics, is complex, as has been shown earlier. One would not exist without the other, and yet, oftentimes the idea of the fourth wall is acutely real and tangible, reaching far beyond its metaphorical meaning. This issue appears in various forms in a number of articles published as part of the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* dedicated to *The Author*, and continues to be central in other studies covering the relationship between theatre and its audience with some of it covered here in the introduction.

To complicate the relationship between the audience and the theatre-makers even further, there is also the aspect concerning the difference between spectatorial community and individual spectator which is one of the most discussed issues in theory of spectatorship, and which largely contributes to the general misrepresentation of the audience. Crouch hints on it in the previously quoted passage where Adrian talks about the spectators being poorly imagined. Although the character of Adrian attempts to involve the audience as much as possible and he is in a way a spokesperson for the spectators, having him voice some of their

concerns is a sign of a writer-imagined spectator which does not necessarily reflect the reality of being an audience member. To be fair, however, it should be noted that his speech is in no way definite, quite the contrary, he ensures that the audience are at ease with whatever reactions they might be experiencing regarding the play, as he is merely suggesting his thoughts rather than making concrete assumptions about individual spectators. Adrian's character thus successfully highlights both the sense of community and the individual responses that the play encourages the audience members to perceive and perform. Not only is this notion encouraged verbally by the actors, but additional support is provided by other tools available to Crouch. To name but one, the audience is "beautifully lit" (*Plays One* 164) which imaginarily removes them from the safe space of the auditorium into the spotlight next to the actors and consequentially makes their position equal to that of the actors. Moreover, the unconventional seating serves as a mirror for the audience to observe themselves in which is highly symbolic of what the play aims to achieve in terms of self-reflection as will be shown later on.

Together with the audience and actors, *The Author* also challenges the notion of being an author, too, as the playwright himself finds himself, or perhaps rather situates himself, into a non-traditional and very prominent role. It is not usual for the author to visibly appear in the front line of their own production, and even less so to discuss their experience – even if it is partly fictional – with the audience as a scripted part of their play. Crouch's character is arguably the most ethically complicated as he is the one who wrote both the imaginary play-within-a-play full of violence as well as the actual play. In his contribution to the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Crouch explains his intentions through his letters to audience members who have voiced objections to the play, and says that "I felt unable to give it to any other actor than myself. I found it very hard to perform."⁸⁰ This opens one of the key issues

⁸⁰ Tim Crouch, "The Author: Response and Responsibility," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2011, 417.

discussed in the play, i.e. the question of responsibility; the responsibility for what authors choose to depict, the responsibility for what theatre-makers choose to stage and the importance of being able to justify the use of controversial scenes other than using them as a shock value.

In the previous chapters, much attention has been given to the effect of imagination in theatre and the power of autosuggestion which is key in *The Author*, too as none all the violent scenes play in the audience's imagination only – there is never a point when these would be in any way depicted by the actors themselves. From the aforementioned letter that Crouch received from a disturbed audience member, it is apparent that the depiction of violence and other similarly controversial themes in theatre is a highly sensitive topic, and although it might appear that there are no more taboos in contemporary theatre and that the audience are open to previously disturbing themes, there are numerous theatrical productions which have caused scandals in recent years. Although the peak of In-Yer-Face theatre is well over, the legacy of its controversies continues to resonate in theatre and is something that *The Author* tackles and can be understood as a starting point in the debate on the ethics of staging such pieces as well as the ethics of being among the spectators watching them. *The Author* is highly metatheatrical and extremely aware of external circumstances connected to staging violence in Britain, and the references to it are poignantly apparent. Although the play provides some flexibility as for the character names and audience involvement, the setting of the play is always the Royal Court with all its long history of staging the controversial plays by Sarah Kane and other theatre-makers who have completely changed the perception of onstage violence of all kinds.

The play-within-the-play presented in *The Author* is a fictitious contribution to the In-Yer-Face theatre and once again, Crouch demonstrates how powerful words are in theatre; as the play progresses and the audience get comfortable with the unconventionality of it, the character of Tim begins to describe disturbing images of, among other, sexual violence, beheadings and paedophilia. The intimate setting heightens the increasingly pressing

atmosphere of the play. The theme of seeing and watching in the context of spectating introduced at the beginning takes on a whole different meaning once the character of Tim begins to tell the story of him watching child pornography and advocating its harmlessness which is put into sharp contrast with the accounts of the other actors who discuss the effect the fictitious play has had upon their lives outside the role. Tim's character is explicitly written in a way which implies that he is the one to blame: the actors talk about their experience rehearsing the fictitious play under his auspices, he is the author of the script and the one who ultimately forces Karen, the abused character from the fictitious play depicted by Esther, the actress, to talk about her traumatic past. All this inevitably evokes feelings of blame for him and the subsequent realization that the blame might be equally put on the spectators as it has been made clear that the play had been created specifically with the audience in mind.

4.3. The Ethics of Being an Active Spectator

Ultimately, *The Author* is designed to alert the audience and others involved in the creative process to how problematic it is to depict violence and other controversies with the sole intention to shock the audience and how real the consequences of it might be. As the play progresses, the bigger picture materialises and the themes of spectating, individual responsibility and ethics coalesce. The continued encouragement towards the audience urging them not to limit themselves to passive voyeurs translates into making them aware of the part they play in the staging of controversial themes. By making the audience an inherent and consensual part of the production – there are multiple occasions when Tim asks the them whether it is acceptable for them if he continues telling his story and there is also a staged walk-out to ease the pressure on possible real walk-outs – they are also alerted to the fact that the choice is theirs and they are not obliged to remain seated and continue hearing or watching disturbing stories.

At this point, it is important to return to the play's prominent theme of watching and being watched. Stephen Bottoms in "Materialising the Audience: Tim Crouch's Sight Specifics in *ENGLAND* and *The Author*" considers the scene where the character of Tim resorts into his private life to talk about disturbing child abuse images and makes it intentionally difficult to tell whether he is the actual abuser, or whether what he talks about is watching videos. Bottoms argues:

What appals here is the sense of detachment in the narration – the idea that one could maintain any kind of observational distance on such a scene. It is difficult to draw any viable moral distinction between watching paedophilia for pleasure, and the actual act of child abuse. But if seeing and doing are functional equivalents in this case, then are they not in others? And if so, what exactly have we got ourselves into?⁸¹

Here, Bottoms aptly sums up the uneasiness evoked by the contrast between the shocking scenes described and the language that Crouch uses to do so which is reminiscent of *My Arm* where the detached narration creates a significant portion of the play's effect. Furthermore, Bottoms reiterates the central question of the play, the moral difference between watching and acting and the personal responsibility for both. As a consequence, it brings about the idea of whether it is morally justifiable to use images of human suffering for someone else's entertainment for, inevitably, theatre is a form of entertainment and, it should be added, a commercial one, particularly with regard to the London theatre scene which the play makes numerous references to. Continuing to watch, or rather listen to it, generates feelings of guilt mixed with the idea of how powerful theatre can be in conveying complicated issues. Commenting on Crouch's way of connecting the context of In-Yer-Face theatre in Britain and child pornography, Clare Wallace in her essay "Playing with Proximity: Precarious Ethics on

⁸¹ Stephen Bottoms, "Materialising the Audience: Tim Crouch's Sight Specifics in *ENGLAND* and *The Author*," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2011, 462.

Stage in the New Millennium” remarks that “the juxtaposition of these two provocations, (one ‘acceptable’, one despicable) and the implication of their connectedness create an electrifying sense of proximity. The result is a type of ethical short circuit in the comfortably generated communication space the performance has so subtly engineered.”⁸²

Similarly, Rancière contemplates the demanding issue of the depiction of morally complicated issues in art in his essay “The Intolerable Image” where he provides examples of such works from across art forms. He opens the essay by asking two questions: “What makes an image intolerable?” and “Is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?”⁸³ Rancière goes on to explain the principles that enable “the image to produce its political effect” concluding that when witnessing intolerable images, the spectator must “feel guilty about being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it. In short, she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt.”⁸⁴

Rancière provides an apt description of the workings of politically-engaged and provocative theatre which applies to *The Author*. The spectators are first gently convinced that the play they are about to see is focused merely on them and are only faced with the wider context later on in the play. By that point, however, they are such an integral part of it, that the sense of guilt is inevitable and even though Tim does not blame the spectators explicitly, it is apparent that they play a part in what they are witnessing as they have previously given their consent to watching it.

⁸² Clare Wallace, “Playing with Proximity: Precarious Ethics on Stage in the New Millennium,” *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), ed. Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte, 129.

⁸³ Rancière 83.

⁸⁴ Rancière 83.

Helen Freshwater in her essay “‘You Say Something’: Audience Participation and *The Author*” contemplates why exactly *The Author* was able to evoke such intense reactions from while the play did not in fact *show* any actual disturbing images and the violent scenes are *told* by the actors. Part of the answer to her question might be found in an essay by Wendy Hubbard entitled “Falling Faint: On syncopated spectatorship and *The Author*” where she describes her personal experience of seeing the play as highly, unbearably physically challenging and disturbing and poses the interest in an active audience member next to what she calls syncopated spectator. The syncope that she has experienced is, she argues, partly caused by the constant change in the theatrical rhythm in *The Author* which alternates electrifyingly challenging moments with scripted silence, leaving space for the spectators to fully emerge into their consciousness. She recalls her experience as follows:

In these beats of inaction a nervy, self-conscious audience watches itself, abandoned in a pliant waiting, exposed and expectant, reacting, receptive and increasingly wary. As I begin to feel uncomfortable and know that my consciousness is at risk, I find myself inside a theatre-machine that seems to be designed to demonstrate the fragility of my self-possession and to draw attention to the power of the performance to affect me.⁸⁵

Hubbard’s account offers an example of how effective the auto-suggestive images produced by the play can be. She goes on to say that in the end she had left the auditorium during the play only to find out – to her further distress – that it was exactly the reaction the creators expected to happen. Based on her experience, which as is apparent from her article, was not a pleasant one, Hubbard suggests that contemporary criticism should take this aspect into consideration when promoting an active audience. I would argue that what she had

⁸⁵ Wendy Hubbard, “Falling Faint,” *Performance Research*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2013, 23.

experienced is not something that Crouch aims to promote with his theatre but is rather something that he, too, finds problematic and aims to alert people to.

With that in mind, let us now consider Helen Freshwater's initial question regarding reasons for such strong reactions to *The Author*. Firstly, as should be apparent from the analysis so far and from Hubbard's account, Crouch purposely leaves a lot of space for personal input of each spectator by letting them engage their imagination which is the main vehicle in the play. In this way, they can project their own images into those suggested by the characters which immediately makes the play's material more relevant. There is, therefore, not one definite conclusion to the play which generates curiosity and helps to keep the play individualised. With that being said, however, it needs to also be noted that simultaneously with the individual dimension of the play, the macro-message regarding the ethics of spectating is equally important and made visible.

Secondly, Crouch slowly and strategically prepares the audience to take action, or at the very least contemplate it, but not completely which intensifies the conflicting feeling between following theatrical conventions and watch the whole play, and that of leaving the theatre because the images become intolerable. He builds up expectations and tension by changing the rhythm of the play, as Hubbard explained, and by constantly making the audience and actors alike aware of their surroundings which might result in a state of confusion for some, but which is designed to provide space and opportunity for the spectators to create their own images and make their own conclusion.

Within the theatrical encounter with its set of unwritten rules and conventions, audience participation can in fact serve as a very tangible representation of violence as the emotions surrounding it might stem from similar roots. Therefore, audience participation is the most extreme form of spectating as it can physically invade the presumably safe and usually purposely invisible, private space of the auditorium and intertwine it with that of the performers.

This can result in confusion at the very least, but it can also evoke feelings of physical distress and stage fright which some individuals might find extremely challenging to cope with, and which reach far beyond the auditorium, as has been made apparent by Wendy Hubbard. Creating such a challenging atmosphere and combining it with telling the stories of violence then inevitably results in heightened sensitivity and even physical distress.

To conclude, no discussion on *The Author* would be complete without recognizing its satirical quality which pervades even the most intense scenes and, therefore, adds interesting dynamics to the rhythm of the play. Most of the scenes are balanced with satirical remarks which help convey the overall message of watching, being watched and being responsible for what we watch as laughing at the actors often equals laughing at oneself and highlights the idea of self-reflection even further. Furthermore, laughing at some of the darker references intensifies Crouch's point about being responsible for what we are watching as laughter might signal approval, even if it is a guilty one, makes the connection between the audience members and the production even more visible, and is one of Crouch's tools for encouraging an active audience.

5. Conclusion

The three analysed plays – *My Arm*, *An Oak Tree* and *The Author* – offer a valuable insight into the formal constitution of Crouch's theatre. As complex as his approach to theatre is, the basis of Crouch's techniques is rather simple – instead of aiming to hide the fact that what the audience are watching is indeed theatre, he partially dissolves the fourth wall. It should be noted that the key word here is dissolves, not destroys. Crouch challenges, one by one, the principal conventional theatrical techniques and concepts, such as representation, spectating and the depiction of reality, by, as Andy Smith puts it, gentle acts of removal; he does so to suggest how all such conventions might be shifted, moved or given a prime position in order to transform all aspects of theatre into an engaging and dynamic contemporary art form that is able to keep up with the latest development by keeping up to date while not losing its original attractive attributes.

In *My Arm*, it is predominantly the concept of representation that is challenged as the idea of an actor is simultaneously randomised and individualised by engaging objects provided by the audience. Instead of inspecting the accurateness of the actors' likeness to their characters, the spectators are prompted to engage their own imagination to form their own vision of the play. To facilitate that, Crouch uses Émile Coué's psychological method of autosuggestion, a concept that appears throughout Crouch's works. Crouch's next play, the highly metatheatrical *An Oak Tree* takes the issue of representation one step further by breaking another convention where the idea of actors presenting a previously rehearsed performance is replaced by an actor whose appearance is not important for the course of the play, and who is different each night. This figuratively breaks the wall between audience and actors and, in addition, challenges and questions the role of an author. Crouch also further develops his interest in the borderline between reality and fiction which he clearly uses to keep the audience alert to the difference between the two and, therefore, constantly active. Finally, *The Author* merges many of Crouch's

earlier ideas together and in a way, can be understood as a loose conclusion to the previous two as all participants of the theatrical event are challenged in specific ways which have been drafted in *My Arm* and *An Oak Tree*. *The Author* is undoubtedly the most ethically charged play of the three as Crouch questions the personal responsibility of the spectators watching controversial pieces of theatre.

In all three plays Crouch works towards not only an active spectator but perhaps a more accurately towards an idea of what could be called the theatre of awareness where, ideally, everyone involved is asked to be aware of each other's role in the encounter and the consequences that follow. Audience members are prompted to invest their personal views and images based on their experiences, actors are asked to interact with their spectators and the author is made to face the consequences of his authorial choices. All this appears highly disturbing and effective despite, or perhaps due to, the nearly absent stage design and Crouch's minimalistic approach to theatre in general – the often-disturbing scenes are based predominantly on the power of imagination rather than hyper-realistic staging as is often the case in mainstream theatre.

Given the increasing popularity of audience participation in contemporary theatre and the relative lack of substantial theoretical coverage of the phenomenon, Crouch's extensive background as an educator and the way he incorporates theoretical concepts into practice, his works might serve as a solid basis for further systematic exploration. What makes Crouch's contribution even more unique in this respect, apart from the innovative ways of treating theatre and its audience, is the fact that he also considers the wider context of recent theatrical history, particularly the legacy of In-Yer-Face theatre and as a result the complicated issue of the ethics of spectating. From the engaged responses to Crouch's works, it is apparent that his theatre possesses an educational quality which invites critics, reviewers and academics alike to contribute to the wider debate on the state of contemporary theatre and to evaluate its

significance within the wider context of arts. What might prove fruitful for future research would undoubtedly be a complex survey among the audience which is unfortunately not possible within the scope of this thesis as, ironically, although the thesis is largely dedicated to Crouch's focus on the audience, the research itself is not able to provide individualised responses of the said spectators.

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Thesis Abstract

The thesis provides an analysis of three plays – *My Arm* (2002), *An Oak Tree* (2005) and *The Author* (2009) – by Tim Crouch, one of the most prominent contemporary British theatre-makers. Particular attention is paid to Crouch's use of innovative dramaturgical methods in order to activate his audience. Despite its increasing popularity, audience participation has been a rather neglected area of theatre studies, therefore the thesis includes a brief overview of the discourse as well as an introduction of related concepts and movements, such as experimental theatre and In-Yer-Face theatre. The focal points of discussion are, among others, spectatorship, particularly the theory of *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008) as proposed by Jacques Rancière, and Émile Coué's concept of autosuggestion, both very prominent in all three plays. Essentially, the main focus of the work is on the specifics of Crouch's treatment of the audience and the methods, both theoretical and practical he utilises to achieve an activated audience while keeping the said participation meaningful. Crouch argues against using dramaturgical tools purely for their shock value and offers a vision of theatre where imagination and autosuggestion are significantly more impactful than elaborate props and overly realistically-looking characters which he achieves through continuously challenging his audience, as well as actors, to become active co-creators of the theatrical event particularly by asking them to use their imagination in order to visualise the scenes and to create a personal connection to the play. The involvement is prompted by various methods ranging from the use of random objects provided by the audience members as representation of characters (*My Arm*) through to establishing a sense of sympathy between the audience and the actor by involving an actor who has not had the chance to read the script (*An Oak Tree*). Becoming a co-creator, however, comes at a price, as Crouch alerts the audience to in his most discussed play *The Author*, a disturbing reinvigoration of the legacy of In-Yer-Face theatre where he engages with the challenging notion of ethics and personal responsibility in theatre.

Abstrakt práce

Práce analyzuje tři divadelní hry jednoho z nejvýznamnějších současných britských dramatiků Tima Crouche, a to: *My Arm* (2002), *An Oak Tree* (2005) a *The Author* (2009). Důraz je kladen na způsob, jakým Crouch užívá inovativní dramaturgii za účelem aktivizace publika. Přes rostoucí popularitu je divácká participace poměrně opomíjenou součástí divadelní vědy, a tak se práce věnuje také stručnému uvedení do problematiky včetně představení souvisejících konceptů a směrů (experimentální divadlo, In-yer-face divadlo). Hlavními předměty diskuze jsou publikum, především pak za použití teorie emancipovaného diváka (*The Emancipated Spectator*, 2008) Jacquesa Rancièra, dále koncept autosugesce, jehož autorem je Émile Coué. Stěžejním cílem práce je věnovat se konkrétním metodám, jak teoretickým, tak praktickým, jichž Crouch užívá tak, aby dosáhl aktivního, či přesněji aktivizovaného publika, a zároveň aby divácká participace byla opodstatněná. Crouch se ohrazuje proti divadlu, které užívá některých dramaturgických metod pouze s cílem šokovat publikum, ať už jde o zobrazení násilí nebo diváckou participaci ve své extrémní formě. Namísto toho nabízí divadlo, v němž představitost a autosugesce mají mnohem větší význam než komplikované rekvizity nebo přehnaně realistická podobnost mezi postavami a jejich představiteli. Toho dosahuje tak, že diváky i herce neustále podněcuje k tomu, aby byli aktivními spoluvůrci představení tím, že využívají vlastní představitosti pro to, aby si nejen vizualizovali jednotlivé scény, ale také si díky tomu vytvořili ke hře osobní vztah. Zapojení diváků se odehrává na mnoha rovinách, od použití náhodných předmětů poskytnutých obecnstvem a reprezentujících jednotlivé postavy (*My Arm*) až po vyvolání sympatií s hercem, jenž si neměl možnost předem přečíst scénář (*An Oak Tree*). Crouch ale následně ve své nejkontroverznější hře *The Author*, která silně vychází z britské tradice In-yer-face divadla, že takto zapojený divák musí také převzít část odpovědnosti za to, co se na scéně odehrává, a poukazuje tak na etiku a osobní odpovědnost, jež by se s fenoménem diváctví měla podle Crouche jít ruku v ruce.

Key Words / Klíčová slova

Audience participation / divácká participace

Contemporary British theatre / současné britské divadlo

Drama

Experimental theatre / experimentální divadlo

Form / forma

Jacques Rancière

Spectatorship / publikum

Tim Crouch