

Aloysia Rousseau  
Sorbonne Université

“Let’s turn to the first page”: the page as stage  
in contemporary British drama

Abstract

By looking at a number of contemporary British plays, this paper wonders whether the play script can be deemed a self-sufficient entity rather than a frustrating first step towards a much more fulfilling theatrical experience. Are plays to be read only when we are deprived of their transposition to the stage – as in times of pandemic crisis – or is the act of reading a play a satisfying experience per se? Focusing on Tim Crouch’s plays, the second part of the essay will throw light on the emphasis placed on the script and on the figure of the reader in his work before suggesting that the theatrical experience in fact sublimates the act of reading.

In his March 2020 *Guardian* article, “All the world’s a page: the joy of scripts during theatre’s shutdown,” Mark Fisher describes Douglas Maxwell’s 2005 play *If Destroyed True* with its “chunks of text in narrow columns, ... interjections in capital letters and ... strange typographical patterns” as “a script that is a pleasurable artefact in itself, not just a blueprint for a production” (Fisher 2020). As theatres were being shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Fisher felt the need to remind the readers of *The Guardian* that a play could be read rather than watched and that one could derive satisfaction from such reading. But was he not in fact suggesting that we settle for the second-best choice at a time when going to the theatre was rendered impossible by a global pandemic? Stating that a play can be read and that such reading experience can be deemed satisfying is not akin to saying that a play should be read. We may wonder if we can truly be satisfied with reading a play when, as academics, we have relentlessly been telling our students that a play is meant to be performed and that theatre comes from the Greek *theatron* which means “viewing place.” Originally, theatre has to do with our being seated in an auditorium and

watching what happens on stage. But what about what happens on the page? This paper postulates that the play script can be considered as a self-sufficient entity rather than a frustrating first step towards a much more fulfilling theatrical experience or, to borrow Lukas Erne’s words, “a pale reflection of what properly belongs to the stage” (Erne 2003, 57). As underlined by Matthew Love in an August 2016 article, there is a strong bias against the reading of plays which is often considered as a tedious occupation rather than pleasurable leisure:

Scripts can come across as little more than two-dimensional blueprints of a production, a series of inert stage directions and scraps of dialogue just waiting for theater practitioners to bring them life. Maybe it’s the many formal contrivances of the play script itself, or the annoyance of toggling the eyes between bits of ping-ponging dialogue, but for many, plays are meant to be seen not read. After all, Hamlet did not catch the conscience of the king by dropping the folio edition of “The Murder of Gonzago” in his accursed stepfather’s mitts and pacing around until Claudius got to the juicy bits. (Love 2016)

This contempt for the play script has not always been the predominant view. A number of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century playwrights, among whom Eugene O’Neill, George Bernard Shaw or August Strindberg, have admitted to favouring the power of imagination over the actual production of a play. Strindberg went so far as to say that “there are good plays that should not be performed, that cannot bear to be seen” (Strindberg 2007, 21).<sup>1</sup> According to these playwrights and contrary to Matthew Love’s perception of a Shakespearean play as making tedious reading, “Hamlet, seen in the dream theatre of the imagination as one reads [is] a greater play than Hamlet interpreted even by a perfect production” (O’Neill 1957, 23).

As opposed to this celebration of the act of reading, the prevailing view in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that performing on stage in front of an audience is, as we have been reminded by Peter Brook, the very basis of theatre: “a man<sup>2</sup> walks across this empty stage whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 1968, 7). This act of theatre is what distinguishes a play from a novel, a short story or a poem since, as playwright Alistair McDowall has underlined in an interview given to jour-

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1 The quote is taken from Strindberg’s *Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre* quoted in a 2007 source book.

2 Or any individual rather.

nalist Matt Trueman, theatre has to do with bodies in motion: “Physicalising that is something theatre – and only theatre – can do,” Trueman then adding: “[McDowall] is adamant that the playwright is duty-bound to embrace theatricality and liveness. If an idea could be a book or a film, he says, don’t put it on stage” (Trueman 2014). However, it is the same McDowall who addresses his readers in the afterword to his 2013 play *Captain Amazing*, saying “I hope you enjoy/enjoyed the show, or if you’re just reading this as a script, I hope you enjoy/enjoyed that too” (McDowall 2014a, 192). This friendly acknowledgment of the reader may appear as trivial yet by implying that his play can just be read as a script, McDowall is reminding the readers that there are other means of enjoying the play than by “embrac[ing its] theatricality”. In her enlightening essay *Reading Drama in Tudor England*, Tamara Atkin demonstrates how “in the era before drama developed its strong and lasting associations with the public stage, plays were at least as likely to be read as they were performed” (Atkin 2018, 5). In the same way that Atkin refutes the claim that “England’s earliest printed playbooks functioned as scripts ‘for future productions’” (Ibid.: 3), this paper posits that a number of contemporary British plays can be considered as “distinct textual events” (Ibid.: 9). After all, as we have been reminded by Sarah Kane in *4.48 Psychosis*: “Just a word on the page and there is the drama” (Kane 2000, 11).

#### I. “*The thingyness of plays*” or the importance of the play script

It seems that many contemporary British playwrights have decided to tell us a story and to do so by bringing to the fore the way in which this story is told and the pages on which it unfolds. The page, as underlined by Dan Rebellato and Nick Holden in a recent call for paper, has “been making a comeback” as “a site of creative experiment and challenge”.<sup>3</sup> Playscripts are appealing items

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3 The conference “From Page to Stage” announced in a February 2020 call for paper was eventually merged with the June 2021 conference “Resisting Theatre: Plays, Politics and the Academy” hosted by the Centre for Contemporary British Theatre, Royal Holloway Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance, University of Greenwich Drama, Theatre & Performance Research Group, and University of York Department of Theatre, Film, Television and Interactive Media.

“printed with readerly consumption in mind” (Ibid.: 3), as can be seen in the importance given to the paratext. The book covers, paratext and the text itself become means of addressing the readers, pointing to the “the thingyness of plays – their material form as books – but also how certain material features ... construct the play as thing” (Ibid.: 69). Book covers attract the readers’ attention either by inviting them to read further or by becoming beautiful artefacts.<sup>4</sup> [BLANK], a 2018 collaboration between playwright Alice Birch and female company Clean Break, contains hundred scenes among which stage directors are invited to pick and choose. Part of the play script may therefore never be performed on stage, being accessible only to readers. The word [BLANK] and the use of square brackets on the book cover of the Oberon Modern Plays edition point to the active role of the reader who will indeed have to fill in the blanks or “gaps in the text,” to borrow Wolfgang Iser’s terminology (Iser 1974, 34). The keys and pointed finger are a reference to the prison environment of the play. They can however also be read as metatextual elements inviting us to turn the page and start reading the play to try and obtain the key to the text. Many of Alistair McDowall’s book covers can also be described as already part of the story that is about to be told. In the Methuen edition of his 2014 play *Captain Amazing*, Rebecca Glover’s naïve drawing imitates that of a child prefiguring the little girl’s drawings that will be found within the play. McDowall’s 2020 play *All of It* stages a woman telling her life story. The rather childish yet very industrious handwriting on the Methuen book cover points to the written origin of the play and to the writing process itself, once again reminding us of the importance of the playscript.

Not only do the playwrights invite the readers to open the book through appealing book covers but they maintain the readers’ attention once the book is opened by directly addressing them. It would seem that the paratext, and more particularly the playwright’s notes, are not intended only to provide information regarding the staging of the play but can also be interpreted as a playful

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4 In his book *Les Livres dans l’univers numérique*, Christian Robin underlines how the effort put into the aesthetic aspect of books is an answer to the growing number of ebooks: “Nous avons vu que les livres comportaient aujourd’hui une iconographie plus riche, mise en page de manière plus sophistiquée, ce qui donnait au lecteur l’impression d’avoir en main des livres plus ‘beaux’. L’usage des technologies numériques... est à l’origine d’une évolution notable dans la nature des produits éditoriaux : le renforcement de la composante ‘objet’ du livre” (Robin 2016, 53-54).

conversation engaged with the readers. In his 2014 play *Pomona*, McDowall has replaced the traditional dramatis personae with dietary recommendations stipulating what the “active ingredients” and “recommended consumption” of his play are (McDowall 2014b, 304). This ironic reference to what the play denounces, that is to say the overwhelming objectification and dehumanization that characterizes consumer society, is for the reader to enjoy, not the audience. In the same way, McDowall’s clarification concerning the twin sisters both named Ollie and the scenes in which they appear is to be found at the end of the play script, thus being accessible only to the readers.

These creative experimentations are sometimes textual rather than paratextual. They induce new reading habits as is the case with Alice Birch’s 2017 play *Anatomy of a Suicide* and Ella Hickson’s 2019 *Anna* that we read vertically across the page.<sup>5</sup> While Birch stages three generations of women and questions whether trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next, Hickson’s play is a spy thriller situated in 1968 East-Berlin. Even though treating different subject matters, both plays display similar editorial choices since the characters’ lines appear in separate columns (up to three in Birch’s play, up to four in Hickson’s) signaling alternating or overlapping dialogues.<sup>6</sup> In Birch’s play, all three “columns” are meant to be heard and should not overlap (at least not constantly). In Katie Mitchell’s 2017 Royal Court production, the stage is divided into three distinct spaces inhabited by the three women. In Hickson’s play, the columns correspond to conversations going on at the same time, the bold writing indicating what the audience can hear as opposed to what the audience can hardly hear or not hear at all.<sup>7</sup> In performance, the use of binau-

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5 “The text has been ‘scored’ – I wrote the piece across the page, so it ought to be read as it is written” (Birch 2017, notes on the play).

6 This can be compared with the use of slashes to signal overlapping speeches in a number of contemporary British plays or with the use of brackets for words that are intended but not uttered (as in a number of Debbie Tucker Green or Alice Birch plays). Ella Hickson however takes this strategy further in *Anna* by depriving the audience of entire speeches or dialogues.

7 “Portions of the script are divided into two, three or four columns, representing simultaneous action in different places... The script should be read down the page, with any lines horizontally aligned being spoken simultaneously. The audience can hear everything printed in bold (which is *Anna*’s audio track); anything that is underlined can be partially heard or is heard at a distance; and anything that is neither bold nor underlined isn’t heard at all” (Hickson 2019, v).

ral sound system means that we indeed only hear part of the conversations since “receiving the show through the audio perspective of a single character necessitates that some of the script is seen and not heard (and other sections are heard and not seen)” (Hickson 2019, v). The readers may therefore appear as having a privileged vantage point since they have access to all conversations, contrary to the audience. Our reading experience is however quite similar to that of the audience since our eye is necessarily attracted to the bold print. It is moreover quite difficult to read the different columns as it does not correspond to horizontal reading habits.<sup>8</sup> *Anatomy of a Suicide* and *Anna* exemplify a wish to experiment both on the stage and on the page. The readers are not excluded from a theatrical revolution that would be accessible only to theatregoers but neither is the audience left out of an exclusively literary experience. These textual experiments find their visual equivalent on stage and erase the distinction between the act of reading and that of watching a play. Coming back to our initial question, what is it, then, which may account for the legibility of plays apart from the editorial innovations mentioned above? If a play is to be read as a novel, if it is to bring satisfaction prior to or without being transposed to the stage, it has to share one of the novel’s major characteristics which is its focus on narrative; in other words, it has to tell a gripping story.

## 2. *“This is where our story starts”: addressing the readers?*

The foregrounding of the play script and of the act of reading may be understood within a larger context of a return to the text in contemporary British drama. It seems indeed that we are in a “post-postdramatic era,” as suggested by Elisabeth Angel-Perez in her article “Back to Verbal Theatre: Post-Post-Dramatic Theatres from Crimp to Crouch.” This era is characterized by a return to the text or rather acknowledges the possible co-existence of drama and performance. We would like to argue – in the wake of academics and theoreticians such as Patrice Pavis, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac or Liz Tomlin – that Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of “postdramatic theatre” should be revisited so as to ack-

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<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to know whether readers more familiar with vertical style of writing – as is the case with Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean traditional writing – find it easier to read Birch’s and Hickson’s texts.

knowledge the importance of the play script and of narrative in a number of 21<sup>st</sup> century plays.

In his 1999 seminal book *Postdramatic Theatre* (translated to English in 2006), Hans-Thies Lehmann refutes the primacy of the text in contemporary drama and identifies a de-hierarchisation of the different media, defining the text as one aspect of performance among others. Contemporary theatre can, according to Lehmann's now well-known thesis, dispense with characters' speech, creating other forms of communication. Storytelling is defined as a thing of the past, an obsolete notion having to do with a conventional, not to say reactionary, vision of theatre: "With the criterion 'suspense' the classical understanding of drama, or more precisely a certain ingredient of it, lives on. Exposition, ascending action, peripeteia and catastrophe: as old-fashioned as it may sound, these are what people expect of an entertaining story in film and theatre" (Lehmann 2006, 34). An objection we may have to Lehmann's statement is his assumption that the telling of a story precludes any form of experimentation since he considers notions such as suspense, drama and entertainment as necessarily "old-fashioned." As we have been reminded by Elisabeth Angel-Perez in her previously quoted article and by Liz Tomlin in her 2009 article "And their stories fell apart even as I was telling them' Post-structuralist performance and the no-longer-dramatic text," a play can be deemed both dramatic and post-dramatic. In her article, Tomlin argues that the sterile dichotomy between text-based and non-text-based performances has to do with academic trends and marketing choices which led to "young theatre-makers ... categoriz[ing] themselves, for strategic development purposes, as either playwrights or non-text-based artists, reducing the potential for productive cross-pollination and dissolution of the two binary positions" (Tomlin 2009, 64). In other words, the play script is not necessarily a thing of the past and the telling of a story isn't the prerogative of the outmoded well-made play. Storytelling is rather, as we have been reminded by Patrice Pavis, timeless and therefore vital to theatre:

The text... is again becoming the 'newly dramatic' if not post-postdramatic text. After the phase of the 'withdrawal of representation' (Lehmann 2006), the texts, without relapsing into being well-made plays, are again telling stories, representing elements of reality, lending themselves to character effects. This return is not a reactionary restoration, it is simply a recognition that every work of art, and all human discourse, always tell a story. (Pavis 2016, 193-194)

This return to storytelling is exemplified in a number of recent plays that are both formal experimentations and riveting page turners such as Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* (2014) or Tim Crouch’s *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (2019) to quote but a few. The last part of this paper focuses on Tim Crouch’s highly readable plays since, despite his not appearing in Matthew Love’s list of “Ten Plays You Can Read Like Novels”, Crouch does “exhibit as much imagination and literary prowess as so many of [his] verse and prose-writing peers” (Love 2016).

Tim Crouch is a playwright who constantly experiments with form and content, questioning the boundary between illusion and reality and inviting his audience members to reflect on their level of participation. Encouraging an active role on behalf of the audience is, according to Crouch, the very essence of theatre in general and of his plays in particular, this probably being best exemplified in his 2009 play *The Author* which Crouch refers to in the performance note as “a play that happens inside its audience” (Crouch 2009, 164). The audience members are seated with the actors in “two banks of seating, facing each other” and asked “direct questions that the audience are more than welcome to answer – but under no pressure to do so” (Ibid.: 164). Since much of Crouch’s theatre is based on interaction between the playwright/actor (Crouch performing in most of his plays) and his audience, it may seem surprising to consider his play scripts as possibly exclusive sources of enjoyment. This is however what Crouch’s close friend and co-director Andy Smith, known as “a smith,” implies in the afterword to Crouch’s *Plays One*. In this text, a smith defines the act of reading the plays as a journey he has undertaken with the readers:

Well. That was great! How great to be able to read all these plays printed in the order they were written. To have them collected here in one place, to be able to recognize their progress and development, to see and consider their connections. And now here we are together at the end of the book, you and me. You’ve made it to the section we’ve called the afterword. (smith 2011, 205)

a smith then suggests that the reader is an active participant in the play, despite his reading the play on his own somewhere in a space unknown to the author:

You are the reason for these plays’ existence. You are the reader and the audience. You are the most important person in the room. And even though I don’t know who or where you are, I want you to know that you have been considered – at every step of the way. I am consid-



ring you now. I want you to feel invited into and involved in what is going on here. I hope you do. (Ibid.: 206)

a smith's insistence on the key role played by the reader in the creative process and his reader/audience assimilation is a reminder that the reader should certainly not be considered as being left out of a theatrical experience which would be accessible only to those who attend the theatre.

Such foregrounding of the reading experience may account for the many readers who appear in Crouch's plays. The audience sometimes enter the auditorium with an act of reading already occurring on stage, as is the case with Malvolio's reading of Maria's forged letter at the beginning of *I, Malvolio*, or they are given a book as they enter. In Crouch's 2019 play *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* – which will be analysed in depth in the last part of this paper – audience members are given a book that is “part of the play” (Crouch 2019, xv) and that they will read with the characters. The script is a recurring prop in Crouch's theatre, perhaps meant to remind the live audience that they are not the only addressees. When Caliban throws his useless stack of books “into the sea” throughout Crouch's 2003 play *I, Caliban*, it is because he's “finding it hard enough to pronounce the word ‘book’, let alone read one” and wants to set free from Prospero's control over him (Crouch 2003b, 59). He is however also throwing these books “out over the audience” (Crouch 2003b, 55), reminding them of their position as audience members and potential readers. In *An Oak Tree* (2005), the character of the grieving father who has lost his daughter is played each night by a new actress or actor who discovers the text as she/he is performing, either by reading the script on stage or by being told her/his text through a headset. Crouch's 2014 play *Adler & Gibb* stages a student giving a lecture and therefore reading a paper throughout the play while the other characters are performing. *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening*, written with Andy Smith that same year and included in the Oberon edition of *Adler & Gibb*, is referred to as a “final draft” with large black dots near the spine, giving the impression of a draft script indeed, the two actors reading from the script from beginning to end.

When they are not reading from a script, Crouch's characters are often telling us a story, be it a fictitiously autobiographical one as in *My Arm*, a fictitiously biographical one as in *Adler & Gibb*, an intertextual one as in the *I, Shakespeare* series or a metafictional one as in the children's show for the

“grown-ups” at the end of *Beginners*: “This is where our story starts. / Our story starts here” are Child Joy’s words before their performance (Crouch 2018, 59). Crouch thus refutes Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic theatre and the latter’s belief that this form of theatre “puts an end to the axioms of dramatic plot and story” (Lehmann 2006, 59). Crouch indeed highlights, in an interview given to Séverine Ruset in 2016, his “devotion to narratives”:

In all my pieces, there is a devotion to narratives. I believe we are still able to tell stories and I still want my work to tell stories – and not just a story about not being able to tell stories. A story is capable of being extremely complex and postmodern whilst still being a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. (Ruset 2016, 185)

By pointing to his stories as not just “about not being able to tell stories,” Crouch distinguishes himself from other theatre makers, such as Samuel Beckett, Martin Crimp or Caryl Churchill, whose plays have shown how the construction of a coherent narrative is doomed to failure in the aftermath of the Second World War. As George Steiner asks in *Language and Silence*, “should the poet cease? In a time when men are made to pipe or squeak their sufferings like beetles and mice, is literate speech, of all things the most human, still possible?” (Steiner 1967, chapter “K”). The foregrounding of storytelling in recent British theatre may be interpreted as trying to transcend such impossibility, implying that the time of healing has come. Perhaps this is where the “future of drama”, described by Steiner as “immense” (Steiner 1967, chapter “Literature and Post-History”), lies. As opposed to Crimp’s narrators in *Attempts on Her Life* or *Fewer Emergencies* whose tone is often cold and distant, mimicking the media’s detached treatment of atrocious events, Crouch’s storytellers take us by the hands and completely immerse us within the fiction despite, quite paradoxically, the constant metafictional nature of these narratives. Pointing to the making of the story does not in any case make that story less spellbinding, as Stephen Bottoms underlines in his 2009 article “Authorizing the Audience. The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch”:

Crouch’s plays further trouble the already troubled distinction because their ‘ungluing’ of representational elements contributes centrally to his creation of compelling dramatic narratives, rather than functioning to undermine ‘the dramatic paradigm’... Viewed in these terms, Crouch’s work offers a powerful reinvigoration of dramatic traditions rather than a step ‘beyond’ them. (Bottoms 2009, 67)

The omnipresence of the script or the foregrounding of the storytelling process in his plays debunk Lehmann's indictment of the text, positing the telling of stories as the essence of drama. But what about the (private) act of reading? Crouch's characters often point to the aural and collective quality of storytelling as something that is shared between actors and audience members within the theatre's space, as underlined by Andy's address to the audience in what happens to the hope at the end of the evening: "I don't know about you, but this... this is one of my favourite things to do in the whole world. Just being together with some people in a room like this. A space like this, you know? A space where we can really be together, sit together and listen to a story" (Crouch and Smith 2014, 2). These stories are sometimes addressed to the "real" audience, as in the *I, Shakespeare* series in which the members of the audience are constantly taken to part, sometimes to a fictitious on-stage audience even if composed of only one audience member as in *Beginners*. Maddie's "I'm here" (Crouch 2018, 55) – as opposed to all the other adults who have gone to the pub and are not here to attend the children's show – is a reminder that one person watching a performance is indeed "all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 1968, 9), bringing us back to an understanding of theatre as a visual medium.

I would however like to argue that Crouch's stories are addressed to readers as much as to audience members through various narrative strategies. In his article "Staging Plays in the Theatre of the Mind", Herbert Grabes argues that a number of readers have "the impression that dramatic texts read less fluently and more slowly than narrative prose, that they contain more obstacles to being quickly absorbed" (Grabes 1991, 96-97), this being due to "inserted stage directions [that] are clearly so many stumbling blocks during the process of reading, because they continually divert attention from the sequence and linking of the verbal exchanges" (Ibid.: 99). Crouch's plays are highly legible thanks to a spontaneous flow of words seldom interrupted by stage directions. His plays do contain a number of stage directions describing the setting and the characters' actions but very few that describe the characters' speech and moments of silence. As opposed to his contemporaries, Crouch makes very little use of 'pauses,' 'breaks' or 'beats,' leaving it to the reader to decide the rhythm of the characters' dialogue.

Allusions to the body also figure prominently in Crouch's plays. Not only do characters often refer to their physical attributes, as the title *My Arm* exem-

plifies or as can be seen with Caliban’s repeated insistence on his ugliness in the opening lines of *I, Caliban* (Crouch 2003b, 55), but the bodies that are evoked are in fact absent from the stage. In other words, the text does not frustratingly allude to a physical presence that the readers do not have access to but it creates a body that is absent from the stage. The most striking example of this textual and fictional corporeality is Crouch’s 2003 play *My Arm* which relies on constant contradiction between what audience members are told and what they are shown. The deictics “here” and “this” repeated ad nauseam in the opening lines of the play – “Here I am watching TV,” “Here I am in my trunks,” “This is the house we lived in,” etc. (Crouch 2003a, 25) – do not correspond to any objective reality since the audience is presented with a doll or objects supplied by spectators as these words are spoken. The body is as absent from the page as it is from the stage, challenging the idea according to which the readers have to use their imagination to make up for the materiality of performance. Very often in Crouch’s plays, readers, audience members and even characters have to use their ‘mind’s eye,’ as Caliban puts it in *I, Caliban*, addressing the audience: “My mother. I see her in my mind’s eye, sitting there, where you’re sitting” (Crouch 2003b, 63). These fictional bodies replace the usual frustration that characterizes the reading of plays with an equal treatment of readers and audience members whose creative imagination is stimulated. This equal treatment reaches a peak in Crouch’s 2019 play *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* – which will from now on be referred to as *Total Salvation* – in which the audience members are simultaneously watching and reading the play, as well as performing in it. The play thus suggests another way of interpreting the omnipresent script in Crouch’s oeuvre: rather than throwing light on the readability of Crouch’s plays, *Total Salvation* shows how performance can re-invigorate the act of reading.

### 3. “We’ll all turn the pages together”: reading as performance in Tim Crouch’s *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation*

*Total Salvation* premiered at the National Theatre of Scotland in July 2019 and was transferred to the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in September 2019. The play tells the story of Miles, a father turned guru who, after his son’s death, has taken his daughter Sol (originally Bonny) away with him to South

America and predicts the end of the world as we know it with the coming of an eclipse. When Sol's mother Anna comes back ten years after leaving the cult to bring her daughter home, the question is whether or not Sol will acknowledge her father's indoctrination and leave with her mother. The plot is thus a highly riveting one based on mounting suspense, the very definition of old-fashioned, conventional drama according to Hans-Thies Lehmann – everything that the play is not. The word “page turner” takes on its full meaning since the story is performed on stage as well as read by the actors and audience members. We are invited to turn the pages of the book as the story unfolds, both through dialogues and through beautiful illustrations by theatre designer and illustrator Rachana Jadhav that indicate what is occurring or has occurred off stage. The first twenty-seven pages of the book consist only of Jadhav's drawings telling us what happened fifteen years before what we are shown on stage, that is to say the death by drowning of Anna and Miles' son, Miles' coma, the family leaving to South America where Miles becomes the guru of a cult, up to Anna arriving to fetch her daughter. It is only later on in the play that we will be told about “the breach,” that is to say when a number of disciples, among whom, Anna, left and the years that followed during which Anna was unable to reach her daughter. The books containing these illustrations, dialogues and stage directions are given to the audience as they enter the theatre and are then transcended, or ‘transformed’ by the performance, to borrow George Poulet's words in his article “Criticism and the Experience of Interiority”: “Books are objects. On a table, on shelves, in store windows, they wait for someone to come and deliver them from their immobility... They wait. Are they aware that an act of man might suddenly transform their existence?” (Poulet 1972, 56). This act of man that transforms the books' existence is that of Tim Crouch the playwright as well as that of the actors and audience. It is a collective act of transformation, as Susan Vidler, the actress playing Anna, suggests in her opening words:

This book is part of the play. It's part of the play.  
There are pictures in the book that also tell a story.  
In a minute, we'll all open this book together and we'll invite you to turn the pages together. We'll all turn the pages together.  
At some moments during the play we'll invite some of you to read aloud. Is that okay?  
Are we good? Are we ready?  
Okay. Let's turn to the first page, the title page.  
The book is opened. (Crouch 2019, xv)

Through the repetition of “all” and “together”, Vidler throws light on the collective nature of the act of reading and storytelling. She also alludes to the book as “part of the play” which has a double meaning. The play is indeed part of the performance since we are reading it as the play unfolds but it is also part of the plot as Miles, the guru, has supposedly written all the characters’ lines (which accounts for Crouch’s name not appearing on the book cover). Our reading the play implies that we have become members of the cult, inviting us to wonder whether we are indeed spectators, actors or characters in Crouch’s play.

Moreover, despite *Total Salvation* being published and therefore existing as an autonomous entity, it is the performance which gives its full meaning to the book. Crouch indeed refers to the “two printed versions of this play” in his note for the Oberon Books edition: “One is exclusively used by the actors and audience in the performance”, “the other ... give[s] you, the reader, an idea of the experience of the play with a live audience” (Ibid.: xiii). The performance copy exists only for the duration of the play; the act of reading becomes as transient as the theatrical performance.

The book is part and parcel of the performance, leading us to wonder whether the “salvation” that is mentioned in the title is not only that of the members of the cult or of the audience but also of the book as object.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Poulet’s statement that the object book “is no more, or at least it is as if it no longer existed, as long as I read the book. For the book is no longer a material reality” (Poulet 1972, 57), Crouch’s play engrosses the audience all the while bringing our attention to the materiality of the book. During the performance, we are allowed to turn the pages only once we have been given permission to do so and we are in fact gently reprimanded when we depart from these rules. These seemingly authoritarian injunctions to read the book may be interpreted as a tribute to the act of reading. Our being told when to turn the pages prevent careless browsing on our behalf and encourages us to scrutinize the text and illustrations with a devoted attention which is, according to Jan Baedens and Hugo Frey in *The Graphic Novel, An Introduction*, the aim of a good page layout:

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<sup>9</sup> I have addressed some of the points in these paragraphs in a performance review of the play: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/27127>

A good page layout helps readers to strike a good balance between interest in the story (which pushes them to leap to the next panel, to turn the page, to try to finish the book as soon as possible in order to find the answer to the story's enigma) and interest in the images and the tableau (which invites them to abandon the narrative thread and to lose themselves in contemplation of the work). (Baedens and Frey 2014, 132)

We are indeed encouraged to lose ourselves in the contemplation of the work, especially since Jadhav scatters small magnifying glasses throughout the drawings, as though we were watching the illustrations under a microscope. These close-ups invite the readers to see beyond what is immediately visible and remind us of the active stance of the reader.

The performance thus reinvigorates the act of reading. Neither medium makes sense without the other and it is only once the performance has started that the act of reading is invested with an emotional charge that it was deprived of before. Conversely, the act of reading enables the performance to occur and contributes to renewing dramatic form since the play goes on once the actresses have left the stage, making Peter Brook's previously quoted definition obsolete:

ANNA and SOL approach two audience members.

SOL (Off book.) Could you read me, Sol?  
ANNA (Off book.) Could you read Anna?  
SOL (Off book.) Start when I say 'Okay'.

All of the following text is read by to audience members.

[...]

The two actors leave the circle.

The two audience members continue reading. (Crouch 2019, 84-86)

As Susan Vidler and Shyvonne Ahmad leave, after asking two members of the audience to read their lines, the "act of theatre" is still engaged, even though there is no one "walk[ing] across an empty stage whilst someone else is watching him" (Brook 1968, 9). Theatre becomes an aural rather than visual medium. The readers are here active participants in the story yet their position later on evolves from actors to authors.

Towards the end of the play, there are six pages of illustrations devoted to Anna and Sol's departure. The illustrations show mother and daughter sha-

ring an ice cream, leaving on a plane and holding hands which corresponds to the happy ending envisioned by Anna in a previous conversation with her daughter: “I imagine you’d have some questions... We’d talk it through. On the bus. We’d stay in a hotel. A meal. Some ice cream” (Crouch 2019, 86). The pictorial happy ending is however soon followed by an alternative dramatic ending, the stage direction stipulating that “Sol enters with her book” (Ibid.: 111). Sol indeed appears on stage and returns to her father, therefore refusing to leave the cult. Crouch offers two possible endings, one in which Sol escapes her father’s harmful influence, the other in which her father keeps his hold on her. It is for the members of the audience to either accept these alternative endings or decide whether one prevails over the other. As such, the audience member – who is also a reader, an actor and a character in the play and in Jadhav’s drawings – here becomes a figure of the author. This is very much in keeping with Crouch’s vision of theatre as collaborative storytelling:

Audience participation is about giving the audience authority. It will not be the case if I do everything myself and the audience feel they have nothing to contribute. As I come from the theatre, I love to see a performer at the top of his/her game. But I do not think theatre is about that. It is about creating an open space where the storyteller tells an open story, not where the story is told to you in a way that encourages passive disassociation. (Ruset 2016, 182)

We are, as members of the audience, co-authors of the play and giving a book to audience members is a means of materializing this co-authorship. We are of course readers but we also both literally and symbolically have the story in our hands. Even though we are not invited to “write [our] own poems,” as is the case in Crouch’s *I, Cinna (The Poet)* (Crouch 2012, end of book), we are invited to participate in the making of the story. Rather than Crouch’s, Jadhav’s or Miles’ name, perhaps our own name may fill in the gap left on the anonymous book cover.

Crouch and Jadhav succeed in blurring the distinction between the page and the stage, leading me to qualify the hypothesis offered at the beginning of this paper. Rather than considering play texts as autonomous entities, we may identify a new trend in contemporary British theatre, one that posits the importance of text and narrative within the performance. The play script is not outdated but exalted when transposed to the stage, as is the case in Crouch’s *Total Salvation* as well as in other recent theatrical productions such as American theatre company Elevator Repair Service’s 2010 *Gatz* – an eight-hour



performance/reading of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* – or British company Forced Entertainment's 2014 word for word delivery of Ágota Kristóf's 1986 *The Notebook*. Quite strikingly, all these productions foreground the “bookness” (Collins 2020) of books all the while being “insistently, even defiantly, theatrical” (Babbage 2018, 64).

Even though we have tried to demonstrate that a number of contemporary British plays make for highly enjoyable reading, it may be argued that performance becomes the means through which to celebrate and sublimate the act of reading, inviting us to re-evaluate our position as either readers or audience members.

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Aloysia Rousseau is Senior Lecturer at Sorbonne Université where she teaches British and American literature and drama. Her research interests are contemporary British theatre, audience response and ethical criticism. She has authored several articles on the plays of Martin Crimp, Tim Crouch and Dennis Kelly and published a monograph on Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (Atlande, 2011). She has also recently co-edited *The Renewal of the Crime Play on the Contemporary Anglophone Stage* (RADAC, 2018) as well as a volume of French journal *Théâtre/Public* on contemporary British and Irish theatre and performance (n°241, 2021).

