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BETWEEN COMEDY AND CRUELTY: TIM CROUCH'S *I, MALVOLIO**

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Abstract

Tim Crouch (1964) is one of the most distinctive and important playwrights of British Theatre in the 21st century. Apart from his four plays written for adult audiences- *My Arm* (2002), *An Oak Tree* (2005), *ENGLAND* (2007), and *The Author* (2009)- Tim Crouch has also rewritten five of Shakespearean plays titled *I, Caliban* (2003), *I, Peaseblossom* (2004), *I, Banquo* (2005), *I, Malvolio* (2010) and *I, Cinna* (2012) for children. With these rewritings he aimed at teaching how to solve the puzzle of Shakespeare's plays. Crouch's fourth adaptation *I, Malvolio* is a reworking of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In the original text, Malvolio is a steward in aristocrat Olivia's house. He mistakenly believes that his lady loves him and, because of this, his actions leads to a misunderstanding, as well as, a trick being played upon Malvolio by other characters in the play. These scenes represent the humour and comic sides of the play. We laugh at Malvolio however, Crouch thinks that Malvolio is cruelly tortured for a few laughs and is humiliated because he is treated as a madman. In the adaptation, Crouch respectively threatens his audience, albeit authoritatively, trying to learn whether they felicitously hit Malvolio; when he is down, or not, or if they worry about him at all. Crouch gives Malvolio a voice, and evokes the audience to help Malvolio hang himself. Cycling between slapstick and black humour, Malvolio/Crouch arranges Shakespeare's comic play to talk down audiences.

Keywords: Comedy, Cruelty, *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio, Tim Crouch and *I, Malvolio*.

1. Introduction

Tim Crouch has come to be seen as one of the most exciting British playwrights to emerge in the 2000s. He was born in 1964 in Bognor Regis, West Sussex. He studied drama in Bristol University where his interests gradually developed in experimental theatre: "I started at Bristol University in 1982, and quite quickly discovered the more experimental methodologies. I did a lot of Grotowski-inspired work, very physical stuff" (Radosavljevic, 2013: 216). Crouch, focusing on sociable, collective and experimental theatre, put Public Parts into practice, taking theatre into non-theatre venues and, with his theatrical contemporaries, opened communities into the world of theatre. Public Parts has a particular importance for Crouch because it both shaped his understanding of theatre as well as materialised his learning and teaching of it.

Before his playwriting period, Crouch, mainly dealing with acting, staging and storytelling, has deconstructed the concept of traditional theatre. For him, creation, coproduction and an active relationship with audiences are crucial for contemporary theatre. Crouch points out that cooperation for a play develops creative thinking. Through this mind-set and of course his plays, Crouch, who is "encouraged to explore notions of humanity and humanness" (Lepage, 2012: 14), has gained growing praise from international scholars and audiences. Cristina Delgado-Garcia in her article "Dematerialised Political and Theatrical Legacies: Rethinking the Roots and Influences of Tim Crouch's Work", explains praise within two perspectives:

The first is the indebtedness of his plays to conceptual art. This legacy was originally recognised by Crouch in his 2006 online interview with Caridad Svich, examined subsequently in Stephen Bottom's article 'Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch' (2009), and expanded in Emilie Morin's 'Look Again': Indeterminacy in Contemporary British Drama' (2011), where the influence of Fluxus artists is also considered. The second aspect is Crouch's widely documented intention to promote spectators' imaginative, intellectual and ethical implication in the work. (70)

Tim Crouch especially focuses on empowering the spectator and he tries to heighten spectators' sense of imagination, creativity and intellectuality in order to enable them to authorize plays. This elaboration clearly shows the distinctive features of Crouch's theatrical tactics.

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2. Tim Crouch's Playwriting Period

Tim Crouch's plays can be classified within two groups: those written for adults, and those written for children. Crouch's first play written for adult audiences is *My Arm*. It was staged at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in 2003. Two years later his second play, *An Oak Tree* was premiered at the Traverse Theatre. After that *ENGLAND* opened at The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh in 2007, followed by *The Author* in 2009 at the Royal Court. Four years later, Crouch and Andy Smith staged *what happens to the hope at the end of evening* at the Almeida Theatre. His latest play written for adults is *Adler and Gibb*, first staged in 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre. In terms of accolades, Crouch has won numerous awards including the Prix Italia (2004) for Best Adaptation of *My Arm* in the Radio Drama category a Special Citation OBIE for *An Oak Tree*, a Fringe First and Herald Archangel for *ENGLAND* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (2007), a Total Theatre Award for Innovation and the John Whiting Award (2010) for *The Author* (Ilter, 2011: 394).

Apart from his plays for adults, Crouch's writing for children and adolescence, also holds an important place in his career, centring his works on the image of the child. In his plays, Crouch represents children who are assaulted, raped, killed and forced to race against society. While doing this, Crouch tries to capture these events pertaining to children in such a way that it also speaks to adults in contemporary society. In 2003, the National Theatre staged his first children's play *Shopping for Shoes* which was a romantic comedy. That same year, he started his adaptations of Shakespearean classics, collectively known as *I, Shakespeare*, and focusing on lesser known characters. Crouch first embraced the insignificant character of Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in a monologue titled *I, Caliban* in 2003. In 2004 he produced a second monologue *I, Peaseblossom*, based on the character Peaseblossom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In 2005 he wrote *I, Banquo* based on *Macbeth*, in 2010 he wrote *I, Malvolio* based on *Twelfth Night* and in 2012, he wrote *I, Cinna (The Poet)* based on *Julius Caesar*. With these rewritings Tim Crouch aimed at teaching the puzzle of Shakespeare's plays to young audiences through the eyes of lesser-known characters. John Retallack details the features of these modern characters in *I, Shakespeare*:

The characters in *I, Shakespeare* combine a mission to tell the story of their host play alongside presenting a key into a contemporary theatre landscape. These make them perfect for young readers, young actors, teachers and theatre students alike. Two of the plays, *I, Peaseblossom* and *I, Caliban*, are designed for upper-primary children ages 8 and above. With *I, Peaseblossom*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is seen through the eyes of a child; a child confused and questioning of the image of adult love presented by Shakespeare... Caliban offers the flip side of *The Tempest*- exploring the consequences of Prospero's teaching from the perspective of the classroom outcast... *I, Banquo* is an existential horror movie for 11-year-olds based on a simple request to imagine worst... *I, Malvolio*, shows a performer challenging the cruel voyeuristic tendencies of theatre... the audience is stirred to enjoy a man's downfall with the repeated accusation, 'You find this funny, do you? This is the kind of thing you like, is it?' (9-10)

Besides these four plays Tim Crouch wrote *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, which was first performed by The Royal Shakespeare Company in the Swan Theatre on 13 June 2012. The play focuses on the retelling of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* "through the eyes of a jiggling fool, a lowly poet who is having bad dreams and a man who finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time"*.

Crouch's ongoing interest in reinterpreting Shakespeare's famous plays for children through the lesser known characters lies in his childhood:

My dad was an English teacher in a secondary school. When I was 16 he took me to see *Macbeth* at the RSC in Stratford. We were not getting on too well at the time. On the way to Stratford, the car overheated. Dad took off the radiator cap and boiling water sprayed all over his face. We were both silent for the rest of the journey. When we arrived, we went on a rowing boat on the River Avon. As he paddled around, his face red and blistered, Dad started to talk to me again; to talk about *Macbeth*. And I have never forgotten it. He talked about death and friendship and guilt and marriage and superstition and ambition and theatre and language and history. Even though he was talking about a play, he was talking about REAL things, things I'd never heard him talk about before. He knew *Macbeth* inside out; he quoted lines in a way that made them sound like they were written yesterday. He told me the story! I realised that no one had ever really told me the story before. I'd like to be able to say that the RSC production was the most perfect end to the day, but I can't remember it. I just remember my dad, with a face covered in antiseptic cream, on that boat!! My approaches to Shakespeare in *I, Peaseblossom* and *I, Banquo* attempt to combine the qualities of that boat trip with my dad with the incredible force of Shakespeare in performance. My ambition is always to tell the story, but also to fire up the sense of 'theatre' in a young audience, the sense of a live act of communication. I'm not precious about the language; I steal and raid and mash together. I want a

* <http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/news/tim-crouch/i-cinna-the-poet>.

young audience to encounter Elizabethan language as though it was as fresh as new paint. Also I'm resistant to the 'Hero' view of history and literature. It feels right to let the main roles have a day off and let the little fellas have their say – even if the little fellas are dead (Banquo). Peaseblossom has one word in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he is present at all these amazing moments in the play. Looking at the main action through the eyes of a lesser character invigorates our understanding of the whole.**

As seen from Crouch's own words one of the main attractions for rewriting Shakespearean plays is to give minor characters a major role and make them resistant heroes. In the light of these introductory notes this paper will attempt to analyse Tim Crouch's fourth Shakespeare adaptation *I, Malvolio* which is a one-man show both written and performed by the playwright himself.

3. Analysis of *I, Malvolio*

I, Malvolio was first staged at Dorothy Stringer High School in Brighton in 2010. Crouch expresses why he chooses Malvolio as an archetypal character:

With *I, Malvolio* it felt particularly important to generate an experience that stood alone. *Twelfth Night* is a complex weave of plots and subplots that would take all my time to unpick. Instead, I have followed the themes of an archetypal character who exists for young and old alike – the self-deluded authoritarian prude, the victim of his own unbending and the cruelty of his audience, the theatre-hating zealot bullied not least by dint of his being stuck on a stage. The actual story of *Twelfth Night* is presented as an example of the excesses of woolly-headed liberalism. By following the lead that Shakespeare gave me, but by bringing my own interests to bear, I hope the work becomes an honest response rather than a pale reduction. (Crouch, 2011b)

Following Shakespeare's elements in *Twelfth Night*, Crouch creates a new and distinctive play and incorporates his own personal interests. In *I, Malvolio*, Tim Crouch retells *Twelfth Night* by focusing on the puritanical steward Malvolio. In Shakespeare's classical comedy, Malvolio is represented "as a hypocritical Puritan and overly ambitious social climber that his audiences most likely would have scorned and hated" (Kemper, 2007: 43). In the play, he mistakenly believes that his lady loves him and because of this misunderstanding, a trick is played upon Malvolio by the other characters. These scenes represent humour and comedy at the same time and we laugh at Malvolio, however the play is "about the cruelty that a spectator can enjoy" (Radosavljevic, 2013: 216). Crouch thinks that Malvolio is cruelly tormented for a few laughs and is humiliated because he is treated like a madman. In *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is "an example not of its vices but of its follies, a person to be looked upon not with scorn or hate, but with amusement tempered with respect and even with pity" (Draper, 1975: 88). In his career as an actor Tim Crouch took part as Malvolio in a performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. According to Crouch Malvolio is an unfortunate man. "He can't smile, he can't express his feelings; he is angry and repressed and deluded and intolerant, driven by hate and a warped sense of self-importance. His psychiatric problems seem curiously modern" (Crouch, Introduction: 1). Malvolio is gloat over when he is at his most helpless moment. In Becky Kemper's article "A Clown in the Dark House: Reclaiming the Humour in Malvolio's Downfall", she explains this steward's situation and his downfall:

Over the centuries, lost references and changing theatrical priorities have distorted the perception not only of Malvolio and his downfall, but also of the focus, function, and comedy of his subplot. Re-examining Shakespeare's language and the social contexts of Malvolio's downfall, and exploring original staging alternatives, refocuses the steward's subplot to reveal an ongoing domestic competition. (42-43)

On this point, Crouch decides to give Malvolio a chance and a voice to express his feelings, and himself to the audience, which Shakespeare does not permit. Crouch begins his play where Shakespeare ends. In Shakespeare's original text, Malvolio, after saying his last words about revenge "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (Shakespeare, 2007: 696), retires from the scene. Crouch considering what that revenge could be or mean, decides to give Malvolio a chance to speak his own mind in isolation from the main characters. In Tim Crouch's own words "*I, Malvolio* gives Malvolio, the character from Shakespeare's play, a chance to king of get his own back".* In this context, Crouch holds Malvolio as a victim to show the audiences his unfortunate fate:

If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee; but be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness threat upon 'em. Thy Fates open their hands; let thy blood and spirit embrace them; and, to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough and appear flesh... Remember who commended thy yellow stockings, and wished to

** http://www.fairymonsterghost.co.uk/extras_stories.html.

* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djI6aDF708k>.

see thee ever cross-gartered: I say, remember. Go to, thou art made, if thou desirest to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune's fingers. Farewell. (Crouch, 2011a: 13)

However, Malvolio was not born lucky so he does not have greatness. Therewith, he desires greatness and power and believes the words of a fraudulent letter. In the beginning of the play, Crouch/Malvolio shows Maria's fraudulent letter in which, he reads as the audience enters to see the play, and then he drops that letter:

I'll just drop this here, shall I? Is that what you'd do? In the absence of a bin. This thing here. Yes? Just leave it here. Dump it here. Let it rest and blow about. Let someone else pick it up, shall I? Someone else, shall I? Is that what you'd do, is it? That the kind of thing you'd get up to? The kind of thing you'd like? Is it? (Crouch, 2011a: 14)

Malvolio asks questions to the audience as to whether they "compromise members who are younger than this Malvolio or not, he treats them as an authoritarian's nightmare of the younger generation, which generates giggly rebellion" (Escolme, 2013: 29).

In this long monologue, Crouch questions audiences, their lifestyles and their ethical values and, while doing this, he tries to build antipathy between Malvolio and the audience, and Crouch usually accuses his audiences within a ridiculous situation:

Might go to the temple instead, and light these incense sticks and listen to guitars and put this dye on my forehead and wear baggy trousers and experiment with hallucinogenic drugs and go around in gangs and frighten old people and worship elephants and undermine society and vandalise this phone box and dance naked and sacrifice virgins. That what you do, is it? That the kind of thing you like? ... I'll just spill this down here and drink some more. I don't have a problem. I'm just having FUN! This is fun, isn't it? That's what you think, isn't it? (Crouch, 2011a: 16)

While accusing his audiences, Crouch makes an insinuation towards them, ridicules their situation and describes them as a cruel community who burst into laughter at Malvolio's misfortune and weakness. In the play Crouch asserts that:

Oh, what shall I do today? I don't feel like reading the bible. I don't think I'll pray today. Or sit in silence with a candle. I know! I'll go to the theatre. That's what I'll do! I'll see a play! Oh yes! A play! La la. Won't that be entertaining. A little bit of drama ... LOOK. Look at yourselves. LOOK AT YOURSELVES. With a ghastly rictus of amorality frozen on your ugly faces. This is how you look! Like this. And this. You are all as bad as each other. All of you. ALL. ALL. (Crouch, 2011a: 17)

In the course of the play Tim Crouch forces the audience to remember and think of Malvolio's situation when Sir Toby Belch accused him in *Twelfth Night*:

Did you laugh? Someone.

Someone laughed.

Laughter. There was laughter. Who laughed?

Is that what they teach you? Is it? Is that how it goes with you?

Yes, I suppose that's about right. That's about standard nowadays...

YOU ARE IDLE, SHALLOW THINGS. I AM NOT OF YOUR ELEMENT. (Crouch, 2011a: 18-19)

Malvolio starts to organize his audience and force them to choose between cruelty and comedy. He asks an audience member to kick him relating to the sign on his back and after the audience kicks him, Malvolio asks a sharp-tongued question: "Find that do you? That the kind of thing you find funny?" (Crouch, 2011a: 19). Malvolio grumbles and sputters his anger; reproaching and stamping with rage: "It is all too easy, isn't it? To laugh at people. To let yourselves go. To exploit a weakness. ... To take pleasure in someone else's downfall" (Crouch, 2011a: 24). Malvolio first criticizes the audiences' laughter but later smiles and thinks about the fraudulent letter because, for the first time in his life, he believes that somebody loves him and that he is both in love and is happy (Crouch, 2011a: 25). The addressing of the audience and choosing between cruelty and comedy continues in the course of the play. On the one hand, Crouch/Malvolio questions the audience, who burst into laughter:

I am locked away in hideous darkness. Without light, without toilette.

He shows the audience his behind. The audience laughs.

Find that funny still? Is that the kind of thing you find funny?

Oh such fun, you think. A sport royal, I warrant.

You bullies. You big bullies.

Look what you have done. Look what you have allowed.

Here. In the theatre. I would whip you, every one. (Crouch, 2011a: 26)

Crouch suggests that Malvolio was punished because of Maria's letter, without being careful about either the signs or intentions. Our society represents decadence and corruption akin to Maria's and Sir Toby

Belch's own purposes in *Twelfth Night*: "Like Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night* the audience is stirred to enjoy a man's downfall. [...] Like a Beckettian clown, the more Malvolio embraces despair, the more we laugh at him" (Retallack, 2014: 23). Crouch's Malvolio actually represents a mirror for audiences to see and laugh at themselves. On the other hand, Malvolio wants audience to help him hang himself "checking with the audience if they are all right about it, if they find it funny" (Crouch, 2011a: 26). As Malvolio wishes, a volunteer accepts to push the chair under him and the other volunteer accepts to check his pulse to see if Malvolio is dead. On stage, it may be seen as comical but, at the same time, it is horrific and cruel because Malvolio continues to behave badly like the character in *Twelfth Night*. And, like in the past people still continue to laugh him because "we all enjoy dropping, litter, spitting, drinking, smoking, laughing at those who are different to ourselves, and, most repulsively to him it seems, going to the theatre, a place, he insists, where people might enjoy watching a man like Malvolio hang himself" (Escolme, 2013: 168-169). However, Malvolio laughs only once in his life, even though it is a trick:

Love and happiness. Have you ever felt that? How ridiculous. For the first time I let my happiness in. AND I SMILE. (He smiles.) And I breathe I FEEL! Sensuous. Physical. As a gentleman does towards a lady. Alive for the first time. Complete for the first time! Possible for the first time. I smile and smile and I smile because that is what I think my lady wants. My body becomes alive to my lady. The thought of her touch. (Crouch, 2011a: 26)

While people are laughing him, Malvolio for that very reason wants to hang himself. He also repeatedly claims not to be mad, "I'm not mad, I'm not mad, I'm not mad" (Crouch, 2011a: 27), and tries to show us as being mad because we help him attempt his own suicide. Crouch essentially wants to observe the audiences' laughing even if they willingly kick a man when he is down. After Malvolio gives up on hanging himself, he washes the dirt from his face and accuses the audiences directly again:

And while I sit in hideous darkness I start to think.
I think about this. All this. I think about you. All of you.
With your dead eyes and your slack jaws. (Crouch, 2011a: 28)

I, Malvolio, strongly deals with the nature of its own audience, and Malvolio suppresses his audience's thoughts during the play. He forms a "dead-eyed and slack-jawed" (Purcell, 2013:4) audience. However these audiences are neither conceptive nor self-aware as prescribed by Crouch's scenario. In any case, it seems that the play requests an audience that is ready to interrogate the moralities and ethics of their own role in the theatrical exchange.

Towards the end of the play, while Crouch/Malvolio carries on with his retelling of *Twelfth Night* to audiences, he asks an audience member to help him remove his filthy yellow stockings in order to put on a clean shirt, white stockings and britches. Finally, upon putting on the clean black tail jacket and waistcoat, he concludes the play by explaining to the audience exactly how he will execute his revenge on them:

I will leave you sitting here. Sitting here with nothing to do. Sitting there. With the lights on. With the blood in your backsides. Waiting for someone to show you out. Waiting for the dust to settle. Feeling a little foolish. Turning to your companion and feeling a little foolish. Starting to talk a little with your companions. Feeling a little stupid. (Crouch, 2011a: 34)

Crouch, leaving audiences to question why they came to this play and asserting that he is going "to fetch something to show you" (Purcell, 2013: 6), he exits the stage, and leaves the audience, without giving any clues whether the play has finished or not. 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" (Bottoms, 2011: 448) and the audience has to decide when and how to stand up and leave the theatre.

I, Malvolio is normally a solo performance but it contains two characters: Crouch and the audience. These two characters form the play and, for that reason, the audiences are extremely important for Crouch. He especially chooses young audiences for his play. In an interview, Crouch explains why he chooses youth:

... if we think of an audience made of young, I think *I, Malvolio* is targeting an audience of 11+, something like that, they will come and see the piece, they will get the story of *The Twelfth Night*, but in addition to that they will also get I think a fairly contemporary piece of narrative, story-telling and also a slightly contemporary theatre as well.*

Crouch adds that he "wanted to show young people that there are other stories than the Great Man side of history" (Healy, 2013). With young audiences, you can balance between art and the future and if you choose Shakespeare, this balance requests not only connection with the future but also with the past.

Through *I Malvolio*, Crouch represents a key unlocking a hidden side of Shakespeare. With *I, Malvolio*, Crouch deconstructs the roots of the theatrical canon and forms "a counter-repertoire work" (Retallack, 2014:

* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djI6aDF708k>.

9) representing the minor character and rejecting the motif of the great-hero and the grand mechanism in Shakespeare's plays. Thus, the young audience can experience the original play from a completely different perspective. Crouch supports his expressions when he states: "children and teenagers don't easily relate to stories about kings and dukes, to tell only stories about kings and dukes is to ignore regular people. It is important for me, politically, to see that theatre isn't just about the powerful". (Healy, 2013)

Crouch's objective is to introduce audiences to Shakespeare alongside extrapolating key issues that are attractive to young people. Also, Crouch refers to the importance of young people learning because Shakespeare continues to shape our modern world and its contemporary characters. Crouch expresses this modern sense:

His work still influences how we think about ourselves as human beings. (...) This is why it's necessary to keep him alive in our culture and this means making him especially relevant to young people. (...) His characters are early archetypes for how we see ourselves now. Malvolio, for example, feels like a very modern character - an authority figure, a pleasure-hater, a religious bigot, a clown, a disciplinarian. It's good for a modern young audience to know that these kinds of people have always existed. (Jelltt, 2014)

Apart from showing that kind of character to audiences, Crouch focuses on children in theatre because, to him, theatre should include and make children feel part of an adult community which can be easily represented through these archetypal characters. Within this context, Crouch asserts that "a child is dignified if they are treated as being part of the world in all its complexity, not protected from it. Shakespeare is a rewarding and vital complexity" (Crouch, 2011b). According to Crouch, children's own contemporary concerns and problems should be equally questioned and furthermore children should themselves have a chance to face and address these concerns within a societal context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focuses on Crouch's choice of a looser as a main character over a hero as the main character. He understands the potential of theatrical communication and rewrites the original, presenting it as an adaptation. In this adaptation, Crouch takes into account identifying both Malvolio's comic and brutal sides. This adaptation is shaped into two categories. On the one hand, Crouch revives Malvolio; on the other hand, he represents his own interpretation of Malvolio to audiences. He gives a voice to Malvolio and tries to represent a different comedy containing corruption and cruelty. We laugh at Malvolio because he isn't us. We laugh because he is lower than us and Crouch, stating "Find that funny still? Is that the kind of thing you find funny?" (Crouch, 2011a: 26) invites us to interrogate our laughter. He also states that we laugh at Malvolio in his most vulnerable moments which, in turn, gives Malvolio an opportunity to take his revenge on the community by confusing his younger audiences in his play.

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