



“This is you”: Encountering Shakespeare with Tim Crouch

by Sara Soncini

By general consensus, Tim Crouch is one of the most innovative theatre-makers to have emerged on the UK scene during the last decade or so. His work has attracted considerable critical attention both nationally and internationally, giving rise to a sizeable and ever expanding body of academic analysis. Starting with his multi-award-winning production of *An Oak Tree* (2005), Crouch’s plays have toured extensively and they are regularly performed in translation in a wide range of European countries, where they have been invariably hailed as a token of the vigour and vibrancy of British new writing. The fact that roughly one half of Tim Crouch’s dramatic output to date is a reworking of Shakespearean sources is a telling indication of the continued centrality of his theatrical voice on the 21st-century stage. Yet while critics usually remark upon the continuities – in terms of objectives, methods and techniques – between Crouch’s Shakespeare project and the rest of his production (see e.g. Rebellato 2016), the specific cultural meaning of his adaptations as a form of creative engagement with Shakespeare has only been cursorily addressed in the available scholarship.

This is arguably a consequence of the particular slant of the project and its perceived specialized nature. Now a cycle of five solo plays, Tim Crouch’s *I, Shakespeare* was initially instigated by a commission from the Brighton Festival to introduce Shakespeare to a young audience. The brief resulted in *I, Caliban* (2003), a retelling of



The Tempest from the point of view of Shakespeare's outcast for children aged 8+. Though not initially conceived as part of a series, *I, Caliban* was followed by another piece for upper-primary children, *I, Peaseblossom* (2004) – a version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as seen through the eyes of a childlike fairy – and by two plays for slightly older audiences of 11+, *I, Banquo* (2005) and *I, Malvolio* (2010). While designed for the same age range as Crouch's reworkings of *Macbeth* and *Twelfth Night*, the fifth and final play in the pentalogy, *I, Cinna (the Poet)*, was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company for the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival and ran at Stratford's Swan Theatre as a companion piece to Greg Doran's production of *Julius Caesar* on the RSC's main stage; marking another break with the shows that preceded it, the titular role in this case was taken not by Crouch himself but by Ghanaian-born actor, Jude Owusu, who also played Cinna (the poet) in Doran's acclaimed "African" staging of the Roman tragedy.¹

Although Crouch's adaptations have travelled far beyond their original context of production and reception, the fact that they were originally intended for young people has ultimately led to an unhelpful narrowing in critical scope. With very few exceptions, scholarly investigations of *I, Shakespeare* are underpinned by the assumption that Crouch's dramaturgical conceit only becomes properly realized through the encounter with a young UK audience, an age- and nation-specific group for whom Shakespeare is synonymous with school, prescribed education and the coerced acquisition of cultural capital (see e.g. Wozniak 2016 and Rebellato 2016). This view is patently at odds with the much wider circulation these Shakespearean solos have enjoyed and with the response they have elicited from adult and/or non-UK audiences. It also sits uncomfortably, I would add, with the stated political intents of the project and the generally acknowledged "democratizing endeavour" (Bottoms 2016: 60) that animates Crouch's take on Shakespeare – a concern that goes well beyond the rehabilitation of Shakespeare's marginal or marginalized characters to encompass a sustained interrogation of the role, agency and responsibility of spectators in the production of theatrical meaning.

In this essay I advocate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the critical and political firepower of Crouch's Shakespeare. This broadening of perspective becomes almost inevitable when one looks at *I, Shakespeare* from the vantage point of the adaptations' stage history and their proven ability for crossing generational as well as cultural barriers. It is not only a case of the plays' worldwide circulation militating against their supposed reliance on a single, predetermined mode of reception for meaningful communication with the audience to occur. As shown by the examples considered in the closing section of this essay, the broad and varied theatrical contexts in which the pieces have been performed have added new and probably unforeseen dimensions to their negotiations with Shakespeare, on the one

¹Crouch's rewrite of *Julius Caesar* has been published as a self-standing play and is not included in the collection *I, Shakespeare*, the 2011 Oberon volume than includes the first four retellings. For the sake of convenience, however, throughout this discussion the title of the collection is used to refer to the project as a whole.



hand, and with a 21st-century audience, on the other. Far from being merely an accidental or unwanted effect, the slippages produced by these “strange” encounters bring added value to the theatrical experience, allowing new meanings and possibilities to emerge.

These considerations have induced me to identify mobility as a key analytical tool to address Crouch’s Shakespeare project. A propensity for motion is already embedded in the theatre-maker’s choice of format – the eminently portable solo show – and style of presentation – the stripped-down staging approach: “Shakespeare in a Suitcase”, was the overall idea behind the original commission by the Brighton Festival Educational Department.² Even more integral to Crouch’s dramaturgy, however, is its strategic reliance on mobility as a theatrical mechanism. The monologues deploy a set of textual and performance strategies that construct the identities of Shakespeare’s characters as multiple and mutable and, in parallel, cast the audience in fluid, often contradictory roles. This results in a dramaturgy of process that refunctions the Shakespearean source as a powerful tool to mobilize the audience – to destabilize fixed modes of response, and to activate viewers as participants in a communal event.

1. REPOSITIONING “I”

The most evident feature of Crouch’s “emancipated Shakespeare”, to quote from the title of Stephen Bottoms’s in-depth examination of the five adaptations (2016), is in its sidelong glance at the plays – what Dan Rebellato, in an equally important critical contribution, describes as the commitment “to pick out the minor characters, the victims, the marginal and marginalized characters” (2016: 101) and hand the floor over to them. In his introduction to the Oberon collection including the first four retellings, John Retallack similarly endorses the view of Crouch’s work as a “counter-repertoire” in which Shakespeare is made to “speak for the under-represented” (Crouch 2011: 9). On closer inspection, however, these common categorizations turn out to be slightly problematic. They certainly fit Peaseblossom, possibly the most minor of Shakespeare’s minor characters, who graduates here from the handful of monosyllabic lines spoken in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to roughly one hour of uninterrupted monologue. The condition of being “under-represented” also easily obtains for Cinna, the innocent poet who is mistaken for his conspiring namesake and gets lynched by an angry mob in *Julius Caesar*. In Shakespeare’s play, Cinna’s tragic fate unravels in the space of a single, short scene squeezed midway into the narrative; Crouch’s adaptation opens with the Shakespearean character poignantly commenting on his parenthetical position in the world of Roman politics as well as in the source play:

Actually, I wrote a poem just now.
Scribbled it while standing in a queue for bread. Feeling not all there. Watching it
all go on, but feeling not quite part of it. Have you ever felt like that? Like brackets.

²<http://www.fairymonsterghost.co.uk/fairy_design_set.html> (30 March 2017).



(I am in brackets to real life.) Do you understand? Brackets. Brackets contain material that can be removed without destroying the meaning of the sentence. That's me. I'm a poet. (Crouch 2012: 15)

Yet while it is true that Crouch's protagonist might easily be removed from *Julius Caesar* without significantly altering Shakespeare's narrative, the same hardly applies to Banquo, the tragic hero's friend and foil in *Macbeth*. And the seemingly more viable notion of marginalization is ultimately no less disputable when referred to Crouch's appointed storytellers. As Laudando rightly notes (2013: 229n), postcolonial appropriations of *The Tempest* have amply reclaimed Caliban from the subaltern condition to which Shakespeare appeared to have consigned him.³ Similarly, the stage history of *Twelfth Night* points to Malvolio as an *utterly* represented character, an all-time favourite with star-actors of the calibre of Charles Macklin in the eighteenth century or Laurence Olivier and Anthony Sher in the twentieth. Shakespeare's bit characters, moreover, are often far more central to the general economy of the play than their marginal status might lead us to assume. This is notably the case with the unfortunate poet in *Julius Caesar*: as also signalled by its oddly climactic location in Act Three, Scene Three, the episode of Cinna's violent death epitomizes the political chaos that breaks out in Rome following Caesar's assassination, and is therefore a typical instance of Shakespeare's historiographical method, of his tendency to show the impact of "big" events on the lives of common people.

One way to overcome these seeming inconsistencies is by reframing the notion of marginality in metadramatic terms. The common denominator underlying Crouch's otherwise mixed assortment of "secondary" characters is their lack of any real agency in relation to the plot that defines them. In a piece where even the "rude mechanicals" are allowed to have a go at theatre-making, Peaseblossom is bound to a script that offers him no part to perform;⁴ Crouch's rewrite funnily underscores the irony inherent in the fairy's defining exclamation in Shakespeare, "Ready". Cinna reluctantly steps into Rome's public arena only to be mercilessly crushed under the wheel of history and rapidly ejected from the tragic stage of *Julius Caesar*. Banquo is killed and turned into a mute bystander to Macbeth's descent into evil. In *The Tempest*, Caliban's position as an outcast is in no way redeemed by Shakespeare's reconciliatory ending, which leaves him in a singularly unaccommodated position: it is unclear whether Caliban will follow Prospero to Milan as a servant or remain alone on the island, as a narrative leftover akin to the "floatsam and jetsam" (Crouch 2011: 55) that litter the stage in Crouch's imagined aftermath to the play. Driven by the need to control others' behaviour, Malvolio is spectacularly inept at enforcing order in Olivia's household; a puritanical theatre-hater, he is appositely turned into the unwitting protagonist of a humiliating farce. Crouch's abused steward shows a clear metadramatic awareness of his role as the odd man out in Shakespeare's tightly-woven plot, a ruthless, clock-like mechanism in which

³Laudando's is one of the very few critical contributions to interrogate the broader meaning of Crouch's monologues as a cultural intervention into the Shake-sphere.

⁴Shakespeare's fairy is gendered male in Crouch's version.



everything carries on. It all just carries on, it carries on, it carries on and on and on and on. Like a poorly plot-driven play. Like a comedy that nobody finds funny anymore. (Crouch 2011: 27-28)

More a physical than a discursive condition, the characters' marginality has an important metatheatrical corollary: it connotes them as spectators, more than actors, placing them in cahoots with the real-life audience. This position is clearly designated by the plays as carrying significant cognitive advantages. The major difference between Crouch's protagonists and their more direct theatrical antecedents, the eponymous characters of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967),⁵ is that whereas for Stoppard's attendant lords the time spent waiting in the wings and observing Shakespeare's tragedy unfold fails to produce any valuable insight into Hamlet's story and their role in it, for Crouch's characters marginality is a prime enabling factor that allows them come to the storytelling task with full knowledge of – or at least fully acquainted with – the events in Shakespeare's play. This is not to say that the account they offer is not biased: Malvolio's vindictive feelings, Caliban's grievances, Peaseblossom's interpretive limitations as a child-fairy all deeply affect their respective version of events; but this does not significantly detract from their eyewitness status. Indeed, the rationale behind Crouch's choice of this otherwise heterogeneous group of "minor" characters is in their ability to aspire to full testimonial credentials. Peaseblossom may not be able to understand all the intricate goings-on in the city and in the woods of Athens, but as a fairy, therefore a creature that by profession "do[es] wander everywhere / Swifter than the moon's sphere" (2.1.6-7), he can undoubtedly claim to speak from a base of knowledge broader than that of any of the lead characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Similarly, as a native to the island Caliban is privy to all its secrets. Malvolio's job is to oversee the activities in Olivia's house, a task that connotes him as an ideal eyewitness to the action. Banquo's murder turns him from a pawn caught up in dark forces to an all-seeing ghost, a condition he shares with Cinna after his brutal killing at the hands of the Roman mob.

Crouch's reconfiguration of marginality as a source of discursive entitlement carries important implications for the audience's own perception of their role and responsibility in the theatre event. The five monologues construct the characters' lack or loss of agency inside the source play as conducive to the assumption of spectatorial prerogatives; this shared eyewitness status at once prompts and validates their creative response to Shakespeare, an act of storytelling whereby they become players once more – but in a piece of their own making this time.

⁵Crouch acted in a production of Stoppard's play in the mid-1990s and has implicitly acknowledged the influence of its sidelong glance on *Hamlet* (Crouch 2016).



2. MOBILISING "YOU"

Tim Crouch's sustained engagement with the role of the audience in the production of theatrical meaning provides the key to resolve another apparent contradiction affecting his progressive take on Shakespeare. Because of their focus on subaltern voices in the Shakespeare canon, Crouch's shows have been celebrated as "a kind of dramatic equivalent of 'history from below'" (Greenhalg 2007: 130); yet the monologues' reduction of the polyvocal presentation of the source play to the intelligence of a single point of view seems blatantly at variance with a method of inquiry that by definition aims instead to emphasize the complex, multifaceted nature of processes and narratives. While on the surface opting for a monologic rendition of Shakespeare, however, Crouch's dramaturgy manages to effectively instill an element of plurivocality into these single-focus narratives through the particular role they cut for audience members as co-participants and co-authors in the performance. Crouch's crucial move, in turning Shakespeare's plays into monologues, is to invite a perception of the events on stage as "a reality of the now, authenticated through the implication of the audience" (Lehmann 2006: 125). Accentuating the monologue's character as an apostrophe to the audience, his Shakespearean solos minimize the representational aspect of language in order to emphasize theatre as situation, a shared, interactive endeavour between a performing "I" and a receiving "you", rather than a self-contained, self-standing work to be passively consumed by viewers. In a parallel move, *I, Shakespeare* utilizes a combination of textual strategies and staging methods to effect a twin form of mobilization: to activate its addressees, and at the same time construct their identity as mobile, multiple, and subject to constant negotiation.

In Crouch's retellings, the characters' shared sense of alienation entails a refusal to stay tied to the dramatic world from which they originate. The narrators' perceived distance from their fictional selves fuels their storytelling urge and this, in turn, leads them to overstep the boundaries of theatrical representation in order to interact with spectators. The distinctive formal feature common to all of Crouch's Shakespeare adaptations is their construction as one long run of direct dialogue between the titular character and the audience. This structuring mode of address is usually built into the plays' opening line; sometimes, it is already operative before the character has even spoken, as in the case of the "*staring match*" (Crouch 2011: 55) that prefaces Caliban's monologue. Enacting another signature maneuver, the statutory "you-ness" of *I, Malvolio* becomes further accentuated through the device whereby the audience is not only addressed as a generic interlocutor but actually given a character: the play positions us as riotous, irresponsible, morally reprehensible accomplices of the conspirators who mock and victimize the puritan steward in Shakespeare's comedy.

In addition to their systematic use of direct address, the pieces rely on other forms of non-naturalistic presentation in order to foreground the constitutive role of the audience in the theatre-making process and overcome the conventional separation between those who create the show and those who view it. Throughout his solo performance, Caliban uses a number of unspecified objects to represent Prospero, Miranda, Ariel, Ferdinand and the other characters in Shakespeare's play. As Crouch



has explained with regard to his debut play *My Arm* (2003), which likewise employs objects as stand-ins for people and other elements in the narrative, this act of abstraction and arbitrary association throws into relief the audience's necessary contribution to the shared act of make-believe which constitutes the essence of theatre. In *I, Peaseblossom*, the viewers' creative agency is emphasized in a more literal way, by asking them to intervene in the performance as representatives of Shakespeare's characters. Alone on stage amidst the post-party mess following the nuptials at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in dire need of helpers to enact his version of the story, Crouch's fairy enlists audience members as co-performers by handing them place names from the wedding table and asking them to read their characters' lines on scraps of card. Peaseblossom's concern about the physical discrepancy between the part of "the mortal Duke of Athens, Theseus" and "his Amazon bride, Hyppolita" and the young actors at hand – "This is useless. (*To the two audience members.*) You don't look anything like them" (Crouch 2011: 77) – becomes doubly ironical in light of the manifest inadequacy of Tim Crouch, a tall, bald man in his forties, to naturalistically embody a Shakespearean fairy. Through the insertion of real people in the performance, the play simultaneously challenges the conventional insulation of stage space from the "real" world and playfully subverts any notion of "realness" attached to Peaseblossom's young assistants. On one level, then, through this twisted version of the mechanicals' play in Shakespeare's *Dream* Crouch continues to underscore the viewers' imaginative engagement as integral to the creative act – to emphasize watching as a form of performance. On the other hand, by replacing inanimate objects with human stand-ins this permeability of ontological borders is more directly traced to the live nature of the theatrical situation and the inevitable duality it engenders between character and performer, sign and substance, showing and being. In other words, Crouch's metatheatre invites us to acknowledge a radical instability of the boundaries of "you" and "I" as constitutively ingrained in the "experiential actuality" (Garner 1994: 42) of stage space.

Crouch's staging methods for mobilizing the audience's identity are encoded verbally in the plays' ambivalent use of deixis. In *I, Malvolio*, the speaker's repeated line of insult to the audience, "This is you", is only misleadingly univocal in its construction of participants' identities. The second person pronoun is indiscriminately employed by Malvolio to denote both the real-life addressees and the fictional revellers in *Twelfth Night*, thereby undermining the purported objectivity of the demonstrative pronoun "this". To even more displacing effects, in *I, Banquo* the speaker's interlocutor is simultaneously cast as the contemporary audience and as Macbeth. Driven to the storytelling task by an urge to make sense of Shakespeare's tragedy, Banquo periodically steps into his murderer's shoes and speculates about whether he would have behaved in the same way – whether he, too would have acquiesced in the witches' script, or tried to resist its fateful pull. As he engages in self-questioning, he repeatedly invites the audience to make the same imaginative leap and close the distance that separates "I" from "you":



Imagine you *were* my best friend. My closest friend.
(...) And now imagine that your reign of terror truly begins. What went before was nothing. You will accept no threat, however slight. And because the apparitions warned you of Macduff, the firstlings of your heart become the firstlings of your hand. The castle of Macduff you do surprise, give to the edge of the sword his wife, his babes, and all the unfortunate souls that trace him in his line.
And imagine that I see these deeds and I see myself. I look at you and I see myself.
(Crouch 2011: 49).

Banquo, whom Shakespeare's plot turned into a mute bystander, acquires here a new form of agency through his empathetic response to Macbeth's story, imaginatively shifting from the role of victim to that of perpetrator. This transition is visually underscored through Banquo's dipping of his hands and then arms into a cauldron full of blood which he splatters on the large blank "*causeway of paper*" (Crouch 2011: 37) that covers the floor and back wall of the stage.

While already implicit in the image of Banquo literally getting his hands dirty through his act of witnessing, the deep imbrication of looking and doing is elevated to a central theme in *I, Malvolio*. Driven to the brink of insanity by the nasty joke engineered by Toby Belch and his cohorts, Crouch's steward decides to kill himself by hanging. Light comedy gives way to a far more uncomfortable theatre of cruelty as Malvolio, bitterly marvelling at the mirth we derive from his misery, enlists two volunteers in the audience to assist him in the proceedings. Through Malvolio's harangue, the collaborative staging of the character's death is unequivocally presented as a practical demonstration of the degree of agency involved in watching:

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 2011: 26; emphasis added)

Malvolio's addressees are not only asked to imagine themselves as perpetrators, as happens in *I, Banquo*, but to actually perform as such. Crouch's stage directions, however, make it clear that the audience's contribution to the scene can only be predicted, but never fully controlled. Just as it is ultimately up to viewers whether to laugh or not at Malvolio's plight, there exists a very real possibility for them to refuse to cooperate in the hanging and steer away from the scripted performance.⁶ This element of indeterminacy in the construction of the audience's role is a key tool for interrogating the ethical responsibilities that are attendant upon their co-authorship in the process of theatre.

⁶The fundamental unpredictability of the audience's role is framed in these terms in the conclusive stage direction: "*The momentum is lost. [Malvolio] gives up. Each time this sequence ends differently as the audience is coaxed to consider its pleasure*" (Crouch 2011a: 27).



The blurring of the line between spectator, actor and author is made even more manifest in the fifth and final of Crouch's one-person play. The key theatrical conceit of *I, Cinna (the Poet)* is in the speaker's transfer of authority and authorship to his interlocutors. Audience members are primed with pen and paper and encouraged to translate into textual form their individual response to Cinna's performance of witnessing. At first, the writing is very directed, but spectators are progressively invited to "find their authority" (Crouch 2012: 14) in relation to the task they are asked to perform until they are ready to assume the role of emancipated storytellers. The eventual handing over of authorial prerogatives is symbolically marked by the disappearance of the titular "I" at the close of the play. Cinna leaves the stage without notice as the audience write "END" at the bottom of the poem they have composed, and the show is over with no curtain call. The story of Cinna's tragic death has lost its sanctioned teller and it now rests with each individual audience member to give it meaning and substance: "Tell my story. Write your poems. Send them out." (Crouch 2012: 50), is the protagonist's parting plea to his fellow authors.

By placing the audience at the heart of the response, *I, Cinna* and the other plays in the cycle resolutely locate the creative moment in the constitutionally mobile field of performance and its ability to generate new meanings, rather than merely reproduce those deposited in the dramatic script and supposedly authorized by it. On one level, this gesture as well as the more general emancipating drive that animates Crouch's Shakespeare project are traceable to the educational context for which the monologues were initially written. To the extent that it is addressed to a young audience, *I, Shakespeare* can be seen as specifically targeting the centrality of Shakespeare in prescribed education in the English-speaking world and, more broadly, the "Shakespeare as school" approach and its continued influence on contemporary ways of producing and receiving Shakespeare. As commentators have not failed to observe, Shakespeare's unrivalled status as *the* pedagogical object across the Anglosphere is largely responsible for the still dominant notion of Shakespeare as cultural capital to be packaged and delivered by institutional interpreters and consumed by audiences who have been induced to submit to his work in a reverential and fundamentally passive way. In Rebellato's apposite summary, "The mixture of coerced attendance, the rules about behaviour, the institutional frames (of theatre and school) are the conventional norms that Crouch seeks to complicate and address in his work for young audiences" (2016: 92). This is clearly reflected in the recurrent pedagogical trope whereby authoritative and often authoritarian teacher figures are challenged (Prospero), undermined (Malvolio), or removed outright (Cinna) while, in parallel, the plays celebrate a transfer of authority from the Shakespearean work to its users.

While this is undeniably the original meaning of Crouch's insistence on ways of learning – and especially *unlearning* – how to engage with Shakespeare, I also wish to suggest that this emphasis on the constitutive power of performance can have wider implications for our way of conceptualizing the highly mobile cultural signifier that goes by the name of "Shakespeare". With their way of challenging the formal division of labour in the production of theatrical meaning, Crouch's one-handers promote an



understanding of Shakespeare as an “aggregated web of cultural forces and productions which in some fashion lay claim to the label ‘Shakespearean’” (Lanier 2014: 27), rather than a body of texts that we have come to attribute to an individual authorial figure. In this respect, the “poems” written by spectators in response to Cinna’s performance are of a piece with the growing critical perception, fostered by contemporary adaptations studies, of Shakespeare as “the sum of the critical and creative responses generated by his work” (Massai 2005: 6).

In one of the more comprehensive studies on the changing face of the contemporary stage to have appeared of late (Radosavljević 2013), Crouch’s work is discussed as a paradigmatic example of the relational turn in 21st-century theatre-making. In order to better delineate Crouch’s particular brand of dramaturgy, Radosavljević invokes the notion of “porosity”, a term she uses with reference to “the artwork which has interactivity and/or co-creativity in its structure and which seeks to produce a community between the audience and the makers” (191). It is a distinctly porous image of Shakespeare that Crouch’s pentalogy reflects back to us.

3. STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

In Crouch’s project, Shakespeare is refashioned as a relational field in which the roles, positions and prerogatives of the multiple agents involved in the process of theatre are put into a productive tension and communally negotiated. Perceived binaries of “you” and “I”, spectator and spectacle, text and performance become unsettled, opening up new spaces of creativity and co-creativity. To some extent, however, the dialogical quality of *I, Shakespeare* rests upon strategies that were specifically designed with an age- and culture-specific audience in mind. What happens when Crouch’s dramaturgy of process addresses audiences that are significantly distant from the one Crouch originally intended? How has the international mobility of these Shakespeare adaptations impacted on their ability to produce the forms of theatrical and conceptual mobility I have charted so far? Even from the very sketchy evidence presented below, the stage history of *I, Shakespeare* shows that the monologues’ encounters with foreign audiences have triggered further adaptational practices which appear to be integral to Tim Crouch’s emancipated and emancipating approach to Shakespeare’s work.

These practices are especially noticeable when the plays are performed outside the Anglosphere and therefore come in touch with audiences that are both culturally and generationally out of synch with Crouch’s imagined addressees. The Italian circulation of *I, Shakespeare* is symptomatic in this respect. Its first encounter with an Italian audience dates back to November 2011, when Tim Crouch toured *I, Malvolio* to Sesto Fiorentino. The performance, in English with Italian surtitles, was one of the highlights of the 25th anniversary edition of Intercity Festival at the Teatro della Limonaia, a venue that can boast a time-honoured record as the Italian home of experimental European drama. Established by the late Barbara Nativi, Intercity has had a crucial function in introducing British new writing to Italian audiences: Martin Crimp,



Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Philip Ridley, to name but a few, all had their Italian premieres at the Limonaia. In this context, *I, Malvolio* was neither perceived nor advertised as theatre for young people, and the same applies to the Italian production of the entire cycle by Accademia degli Artefatti, a Rome-based theatre company that has likewise made a reputation for importing cutting-edge UK theatre-making (Crimp, Kane and Ravenhill are flagship authors in their repertoire, too). The first Shakespeare solos to be produced by Artefatti, *I, Banquo* and *I, Peaseblossom*, made their debut at Rome's Teatro Belli in April 2013 as part of Trend, another important annual showcase specifically devoted to Anglophone new writing. The two pieces were presented alongside Artefatti's earlier and widely acclaimed production of Crouch's play for grown-ups, *My Arm*, under the significant blanket title of "Crouch a pezzi". Later that year, *I, Banquo* was staged at the 42nd Venice Biennale, within a markedly Shakespeare-inflected edition of the international theatre festival.⁷

As Stephen Purcell (2013) conclusively shows in his case study of *I, Malvolio* and its audiences, children tend to be in short supply in UK productions of the plays, too. Even Jan Wozniak (2016: 93), in a book that looks at Crouch's adaptations specifically as Shakespeare for young people, is forced to concede that "as Crouch's profile increases and the links between his plays for adults and those for young people become of academic interest, audiences are increasingly comprised as much of adults as young people". Drawing attention to considerable variations in audience response across UK performances of *I, Malvolio*, Purcell remarks on the tendency of the predominantly adult audiences at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and at the RSC in Stratford to react in ways that seemed to directly contradict the identities required of them by the play. These slippages are the rule in Italy, where Crouch's pieces have been seen by overwhelmingly or perhaps even exclusively adult audiences. The examples discussed here show that the attendant need to negotiate different discursive identities has resulted in heightened textual mobility, on the one hand, and in the emergence of new modes of relationality, on the other.

Both aspects are present in Artefatti's Italian version of *I, Cinna*. Commenting on the RSC production in Stratford, Tim Crouch has explained that "The request to its audience to write makes *I, Cinna (the Poet)* the most age-specific of my Shakespeare pieces".⁸ In Crouch's intentions, it is the fact itself of the audience responding to the invitation that counts, rather than the actual outcome; the problem with adults is that they tend to become too self-conscious about the quality of their writing, leading to an unwanted shift in focus from process to product. The Italian production sought to navigate this obstacle by undermining the seriousness of Cinna's pedagogical endeavour. In his interpretation of the titular poet as a slightly clownesque intellectual, battered yet still sprightly in his measured desperation, Gabriele Benedetti made no mystery about the playful nature of his directive to audience members to produce a

⁷In December 2016, the entire pentalogy played for ten days at Milan's teatro i as part of the Shakespeare400 theatre festival.

⁸This was in response to Kate McLuskie's negative remarks on what she saw as the play's strained educational interactivity (McLuskie 2012).



poem about his death. As he stepped down into the auditorium to check on their progress, this Italian Cinna exploited to the full the leeway for improvisation afforded by Crouch's dramaturgy as he picked up, read and amusedly commented on the bizarre doggerel concocted by his interlocutors. More than through discursive entitlement, the community between theatre-maker and theatre-goers was ensured here by the reconfiguration of self-expression as an act of resistance that is meaningful in itself, regardless of its ability to actually produce a particular result. This perception found a visual hook in the iconic footage of the Unknown Protester standing up to the column of advancing tanks on Tiananmen Square which was screened on the back wall of the stage as a prologue to Benedetti's performance.⁹

The tendency of physical mobility to generate augmented textual mobility is likewise attested by my second example, this time involving Tim Crouch's own touring of *I, Malvolio* to Poland. Of all the plays in the pentalogy, Crouch's rewrite of *Twelfth Night* is the one that is most dependent on the audience's predicted, yet unpredictable, response for the theatrical mechanism to work. It is of the essence that the audience laugh at Malvolio so that the victimized steward can chide them for their callous insolence and question the ethics of their response; indeed, their laughter provides the indispensable cue for Malvolio's repeated refrain, "Find that funny, do you?". As could be expected, the stage history of *I, Malvolio* shows that an adult audience will be less likely to identify with the protagonist's (mis-)characterization of his interlocutors as an unruly, disrespectful and mischievous bunch of youngsters and, crucially, will fail to laugh at appropriate moments in the performance. As a general rule, when audiences resist their scripted identity Crouch allows what he terms "faultlines" in the dramaturgy, i.e. variations in the text and/or visual gags that are designed to elicit the required reaction; as a last resort, he turns to explicit coaching, adding a line that explains the mechanics of the piece and the kind of cooperation it requires (Purcell 2013: 6, 9).

The Polish journey of Crouch's performance attests to the level of adaptability required by these negotiations. *I, Malvolio* played for two nights in Gdansk in September 2014, as part of a series of British Council-sponsored events that accompanied the grand opening of the Gdansk Shakespeare Theatre in the Baltic city. A video clip on YouTube¹⁰ documents an unexpected twist in the performance of the hanging scene. The volunteers who are being instructed to hold the rope and push the chair are, respectively, a grown-up man and an angelic little girl called Linda. For once, and most unexpectedly in this particular theatrical context, a young person has materialized to collaborate on the staging, but Linda is just too young and too sweet for the role of Malvolio's executioner. Visibly concerned about upsetting the girl, Crouch ad-libs at length as he takes pains to reassure her; at the same time, he

⁹The visual reference to the Tiananmen Square demonstrations reads as an externalization of Cinna's anguished question, "What use is poetry when the tanks are in the streets?" (Crouch 2012: 49). My account is based on the video recording of the 28 March 2014 performance at Rome's Teatro Biblioteca Quarticciolo, online at <<http://www.e-performance.tv/2014/04/i-shakespeare-i-cinna.html>> (26 April 2017).

¹⁰<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfFrxiFiNdM>> (15 March 2017).



capitalizes on his uneasiness and succeeds in getting the Polish audience to laugh about his predicament as a performer, rather than at Malvolio as a character.

Andrew Dickson's account of another moment during the same performance provides further evidence of the "breakages"¹¹ that can result from the tense negotiations between the play and its audiences, but also of the flexibility of Crouch's dramaturgy and its aptitude to accommodate new discursive identities and adjust to each new context of reception. Dickson reports a lukewarm response during the first part of the show – a consequence, he somewhat patronizingly surmises, of flouted audience expectations that this would be yet another reverential take on Shakespeare. The breakthrough comes when Crouch transforms his ineptitude with surtitles into a "running metatheatrical gag, checking the screen for what he was supposed to say next, then attempting an outrageously poor Polish pronunciation" (Dickson 2015: 90). Using a trick that he seems to have borrowed from *I, Peaseblossom*, where spectators are co-opted as performers and asked to read lines that they have had no time to rehearse, Crouch turns language barriers into a valuable resource for drawing his audience into the (co-)creative business of theatre-making.

This readiness to go transnational *and* translational strikes me as a powerful indication of the productivity of Crouch's creative engagement with Shakespeare. The forms of mobility that inform his dramaturgy of process simultaneously illuminate and enhance the kinetic quality of Shakespeare's work, while at the same time pointing to the specific dimension of its reception. As such, they appear very relevant to our joint commitment, in this collection of proceedings, to a better understanding of the processes and practices that have facilitated the unparalleled global dissemination, and enduring youth, of our common friend Will.

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¹¹This term is used by Tim Crouch to express his dissatisfaction with the amount of ad-libbing required to interact with an older audience. For him, these departures from the script are potentially detrimental to "the integrity of the piece" (Purcell 2013: 9).



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