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**total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation
(2019) by Tim Crouch. Performance Review**

Aloysia Rousseau

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Factual information about the show

Performers

- 1 Shyvonne Ahmmad
- 2 Tim Crouch
- 3 Susan Vidler

Creative Team

- 4 Writer: Tim Crouch
- 5 Director: Andy Smith and Karl James
- 6 Set Designer and Book Illustrator: Rachana Jadhav
- 7 Lighting Designer: Karen Brice
- 8 Sound Designer: Pippa Murphy
- 9 Artistic Associate: Adura Onashile
- 10 Casting Director: Laura Donnelly, CDG
- 11 BSL Performance Interpreter: Yvonne Strain

Production Team

- 12 A National Theatre of Scotland production in association with the Royal Court Theatre, Teatro do Bairro Alto, Lisbon and Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts (ACCA). Co-commissioned with Royal Court Theatre.
- 13 Production Manager: Siobhán Barbour
- 14 Stage Manager: Emma Skaer
- 15 Technical Manager: Hana Allan
- 16 Sound Supervisor: Neil Hobbs

Websites

- 17 Tim Crouch's official website: <http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/>
- 18 Royal Court Theatre website: <https://royalcourttheatre.com/>

Review

Figure 1



Susan Vidler, Shyvonne Ahmmad and audience members.
Photographer credit: Eoin Carey

- 19 In his 2019 play *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation*, playwright and actor Tim Crouch once again succeeds in surprising his audience by pushing theatrical conventions to their limits. Crouch's play, performed for the first time at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2019, opens with the death of a five-year-old boy after falling through ice. His parents and older sister Bonnie flee to South America where the father, Miles, turns into a guru who predicts the end of the world as we know it with

the coming of an eclipse. His wife Anna leaves and comes back fifteen years later to try to save her daughter—now named Sol—from her father’s harmful influence. The play’s originality does not lie exclusively in its content but also in its form since the audience is invited to read the play with the actors as it is being performed (fig. 1). Susan Vidler—the actress playing Anna with profound equanimity and repressed emotion—addresses the following words to the audience as she enters the stage:

Hello.

Thanks for coming. Thanks for being here.

You should all have a book. Does everyone have a book?

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?

Okay. Let’s turn to the first page, the title page.

The book is opened. (xv)

- 20 Not only is the play a collective reading experience but it can be said to take place both on the stage and on the page. The book—which is given to the audience members as they enter the theatre—is a graphic novel, or rather a graphic play, replete with beautiful illustrations by artist Rachana Jadhav (fig. 2).

Figure 2



Audience member looking at Rachana Jadhav’s illustrations.

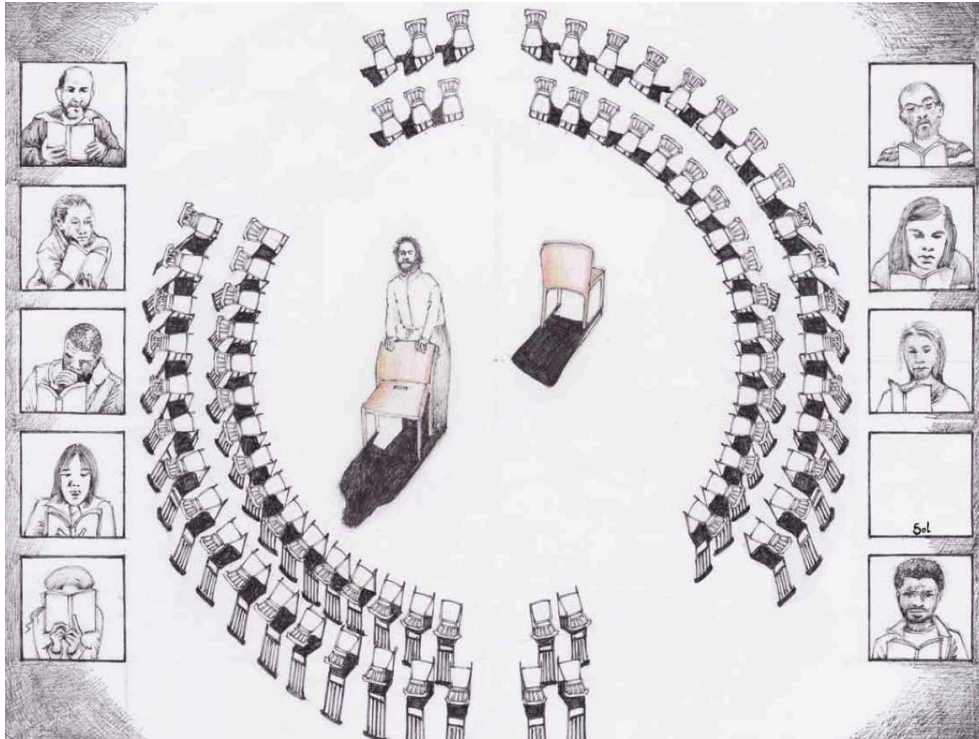
Photographer credit: Eoin Carey

- 21 These drawings are sometimes diegetic, sometimes mimetic, either telling the audience members what has happened in the story prior to the performance or mimicking what is performed on stage. The play in fact mostly stages Sol and Anna’s reunion and the

latter's attempt to convince her daughter to leave with her while the little boy's death or Anna leaving the cult are exclusively part of Jadhav's illustrations.

- 22 The fact that the audience appears at one point in these illustrations (fig. 3) is one of the many clues leading us to wonder whether we are members of an audience or disciples of a cult.

Figure 3



Miles and the audience.
Credit: Rachana Jadhav

- 23 Even though Miles is standing alone amongst empty seats in this drawing, the theatre audience is pictured, perhaps replacing the missing devotees. As was the case in his 2005 play *An Oak Tree* and in his 2009 play *The Author*, Crouch is inviting us to ponder the ascendancy the playwright has over his actors and/or audience members. *terrestrial salvation*¹ throws light more particularly on our own agency—or lack thereof—as members of the audience. Are we willing participants or puppets? There are various elements in the play that draw attention to the similarities between theatrical and sectarian strategies, starting with Tim Crouch's foreword which reads as follows:

Playwrights are also leaders—dictators, even—no matter how egalitarian they proclaim to be. For the duration of their play, the audience submits to the fictions of their manifesto. In religion, politics or art, the story can be manipulated because neither god, democracy nor Hamlet has a definitive shape. (xii)

- 24 These words leave little doubt as to the playwright's deliberately provocative suggestion—as members of the audience, we have accepted to forfeit our right to decide for ourselves and are willing to submit to the complete power of the guru-like playwright. This indeed seems to be what we are doing when attending *terrestrial salvation*, holding a bible-like book whose pages we are allowed to turn only once we have been given permission to do so and being gently reprimanded when we depart

from these rules—something that occurs quite frequently so enthralled by the plot are we. Crouch moreover revels, as always, in blurring the line between fiction and reality since he, of course, plays the part of the guru Miles, addressing us—a theatre audience—when addressing his disciples (fig. 4).

Figure 4



Tim Crouch as Miles.

Photographer credit: Eoin Carey

- 25 The play which we believe to have been written by Crouch is also Miles' creation as underlined by Sol at the beginning of the play: "He wrote all this. [...] He's seen the future. [...] On each page. [...] He's seen everything" (45). The play however exposes the limits of the guru's supposedly all-encompassing vision as some of the dialogue between Anna and her daughter is said to be taking place "off book," that is to say outside of Miles' control. The playwright has moreover decided not to give his own name to his character, as was the case in *The Author*, thus clearly distancing himself from his persona. In fact, at no point during that play did I, as an audience member, identify with the member of a cult, but of course we might argue that not perceiving yourself as indoctrinated is precisely a sign that you might have been... I would however like to contend that the reason why we are not entirely "submit [ted] to the fiction," contrary to what Crouch suggests in his foreword, is because the playwright invites us to reflect—as he did in his previous plays—on the medium of theatre and more specifically in this play on how it might be informed by the act of reading.
- 26 It seems to me that the "salvation" that is mentioned in the title is not only that of the members of the cult or of the audience but of the book itself. At a time when paper books might be threatened by their digital counterparts, Crouch and Jadhav are reminding us of the value of the book as tangible object². After watching the

performance of *terrestrial salvation*, I indeed left the Royal Court Theatre not only profoundly shaken by the performance but also feeling that the book that I had held in my hand was endowed with magical properties. The first thing that you want to do when the play is over—besides seeing it again—is to hold the precious object, not the one that you read during the performance since you are asked to hand it in before leaving, but another copy that contains the paratext, as explained in a note:

The other printed version of the play—this one, the one that you are holding now—contains information like biographies, production details, and this note. In this version, you can see all the lines and stage directions that don't appear in the performance book but that give you, the reader, an idea of the experience of the play with a live audience. (xiii)

- 27 I had personally bought my copy the day before and hadn't opened it for fear of spoiling the experience. Having seen the play, I suddenly came to the impression that a sort of fetish had been hiding in my bag for the last twenty-four hours. Crouch is often compared to a magician playing tricks on his audience and I would like to delve into these devices that endow the act of reading with an almost sacred aura.
- 28 In fact, what we have identified as authoritarian injunctions to read the book might be perceived as a tribute to the act of reading. Our being told when to turn the pages prevent careless browsing on our behalf and I remember scrutinizing the text and Rachana Jadhav's drawings with a devoted attention that I had not experienced since poring over Quentin Blake's illustrations in my copy of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* as a child. Without spoiling the ending, I would also like to mention how a white page turning slowly darker and gradually reverting to a lighter colour becomes suddenly highly significant and instills hope in the audience. In other words, the book is part and parcel of the performance and vice versa. 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 even Peter Brook's famous quote that "a man 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" (9) suddenly becomes obsolete. At one point, the play indeed goes on even once Susan Vidler and Shyvonne Ahmad—who play Anna and Bonnie—have left the stage, as the rest of the dialogue is read by members of the audience. The power of imagination is such that we see the two characters standing before us even though there is nothing but a bare stage.
- 29 Crouch thus succeeds in blurring the distinction between the page and the stage, making it impossible to decide whether one medium prevails over the other. Once again not wanting to spoil the ending, let me just suggest that the happy ending that appears in Jadhav's illustrations in the book might very well be cancelled by a theatrical event ... or is it the other way around, as there is no longer an exclusive version of the truth? Is the play text to be mistrusted as the guru's fantasizing? In other words, should Jadhav's drawings be considered as the only elements escaping the guru's hold or rather as the audience's wishful thinking? It is for the members of the audience to decide what to make of the ending as no single interpretation is given to them.
- 30 When the show is over, we are left with more questions than answers, wondering what it was exactly that we have just experienced but knowing with deep-down certainty

that it was theatre that transcends and regenerates theatre as we know it, in other words theatre that matters.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. 1968. New York: Scribner, 2019.

Crouch, Tim. *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation*. London: Oberon Books, 2019.

NOTES

1. This abbreviated version of the title will from now on be used.
 2. My aim here is not to deny the obvious benefits of electronic books, especially since this article was written in quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather to underline the aesthetic and affective value of paper books.
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ABSTRACTS

Theatre review of *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* by Tim Crouch, directed by Andy Smith and Karl James. Royal Court Theatre, London, 3-21 September 2019 (First performed at the Edinburgh International Festival from 7 to 25 August 2019).

Critique théâtrale de *total immediate collective imminent terrestrial salvation* de Tim Crouch, mise en scène d'Andy Smith et de Karl James. Royal Court Theatre, Londres, 3-21 septembre 2019 (Premières représentations au festival international d'Edimbourg du 7 au 25 août 2019).

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Mots-clés: théâtre anglais contemporain, Tim Crouch, Rachana Jadhav, théâtre et indoctrinement, participation du public, acte de lecture, le livre sur la scène de théâtre

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