



## TIM CROUCH'S *MY ARM*

Tim Crouch'un *Kolum* Adlı Oyunu

Sibel İZMİR\*

### ABSTRACT

This review is based on a textual evaluation of Tim Crouch's play entitled *My Arm* (2003) which was first premiered in 2003 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and performed by Tim Crouch himself and co-directed by Tim Crouch and Karl James. The play presents the story of an unnamed boy who tries to find ways to attract the attention of people around. Although there is a plot story which can be easily followed, the play completely problematizes dramatic conventions and carries postdramatic qualities because of the techniques employed in terms of representation. *My Arm* falls into the category of postdramatic theatre when its form is concerned while deep down it still carries dramatic theatre's habit of plot structure although, in the play, form is visibly more dominant and effective than content. Therefore, because of the representation techniques employed by Crouch, there occurs a discrepancy between what is said and how it is said. In other words, the discrepancy between the plot structure and the way this plot structure is presented creates tension in the play, making the audiences question the validity and fictionality of the work on the stage.

**Keywords:** Tim Crouch, *My Arm*, Postdramatic Theatre, play, literature.

### ÖZ

Bu inceleme, Tim Crouch'un yazıp ilk kez 2003 yılında Edinburgh Traverse Theatre'da sahnelenen, yazarın kendisinin performansını üstlendiği ve Karl James ile birlikte yönettiği *Kolum* (2003) adlı oyununun metinsel bir değerlendirmesine dayanmaktadır. Oyun, çevredeki insanların dikkatini çekmenin yollarını bulmaya çalışan isimsiz bir çocuğun hikâyesini anlatmaktadır. Oyunda, kolaylıkla takip edilebilecek bir olay örgüsü olmasına rağmen, oyun dramatik kuralları sorunsallaştırmaktadır ve temsil açısından kullanılan teknikler nedeniyle postdramatik nitelikler taşımaktadır. *Kolum* oyunu biçim açısından postdramatik tiyatro kategorisine girerken, özünde dramatik tiyatronun olay örgüsü yapısına sahiptir ancak oyunda biçim içerikten görünür biçimde daha baskın ve etkilidir. Dolayısıyla, Crouch'un kullandığı temsil teknikleri nedeniyle, anlatılan ile anlatılanın nasıl sahnelendiği arasında bir uyumsuzluk ortaya

\* Asst. Prof. Dr., Atılım University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Ankara/Türkiye. E-mail: sibel.izmir@atilim.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0001-7821-6328.

çıkılmaktadır. Başka bir deyişle, olay örgüsü yapısı ile bu olay örgüsünün sunulmuş biçimi arasındaki uyumsuzluk oyunda gerilim yaratarak seyircinin sahnedeki eserin geçerliliğini ve kurgusallığını sorgulamasına neden olur.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Tim Crouch, My Arm, Postdramatik Tiyatro, oyun, edebiyat.

This review is based on a textual evaluation of Tim Crouch's play entitled *My Arm* (2003) which was first premiered in 2003 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and performed by Tim Crouch himself and co-directed by Tim Crouch and Karl James.

The play presents the story of an unnamed boy who tries to find ways to attract the attention of people around. We are told that in the past, even at the age of four, he did not move his bowels for over a month to demonstrate a sort of "self-determination" (2003: 27). His brother Anthony also exercised similar acts of self-determination earlier such as keeping a piece of gum in his mouth for forty days or wearing a rubber band around his finger for over a week. The two brothers competed with each other to see who would be more successful in living without weeing or standing on tiptoe. However, none of these acts has been as effective as the unnamed boy's act of raising his arm above his head, which, as his previous acts, begins in a playful manner but then turns into an artistic one which becomes commercialized and is published in the newspapers.

As a matter of fact, none of the characters including the unnamed boy appears on the stage. As the audience members, we learn the events through the narration presented by Crouch who is talking on behalf of the adult self of the boy. Although there is a plot story which can be easily followed, the play completely problematizes dramatic conventions and carries postdramatic qualities because of the techniques employed in terms of representation. As Marvin Carlson pointed out, representation is the enemy of postdramatic theatre and postdramatic theatre is the "non-mimetic framed as it were the mimetic. Remove the frame, and not only mimesis disappears, but so does theatre itself, and what remains is life" (2015: 593). By deliberately creating a liminal atmosphere and an atmosphere full of uncertainty, Crouch's play renders mimetic representation almost impossible on the one hand and manifests some crumbs of it on the other hand. Thus, the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred in his theatre. Moreover, the way he tries to make the audience members take an active part in the play creates tension between the real and the fictional. In this respect, *My Arm* falls into the category of postdramatic theatre when its form is concerned while deep

down it still carries dramatic theatre's habit of plot structure although in the play, form is visibly more dominant and effective than content. Therefore, because of the representation techniques employed by Crouch, there occurs a discrepancy between what is said and how it is said. In other words, the discrepancy between the plot structure and the way this plot structure is presented creates tension in the play which makes the audiences question the validity and fictionality of the work on the stage.

In Tim Crouch's *My Arm*, from the very beginning of the play, the concept of representation is put into question since the audience members are requested to give in everyday objects such as wallets, IDs, travel cards, key rings, etc just before the play. On the stage, there is a table with a camera on it and a chair by the table. "The feed from the camera is shown on a television that sits at the side of the stage" (2003: 24). At the back of the stage, there is a much larger screen onto which film sequences are projected. As it is written in the play script, "apart from a doll that represents the performer, the objects and pictures are in no way representational. They should be any kind of object chosen at random" (2003: 24). Even the performer on the stage is not self-representative. He is represented by a doll. Thus, the performer on the stage is reduced to a physical body, a mere text-bearer, who functions to narrate the story. The remaining persons in the story such as the unnamed boy's brother Antony, his father and mother, his friend Simon, the psychiatrist etc. are represented by randomly-chosen materials. This random-referencing method by use of objects may remind one of children's games taking toys and saying "this is you and this is me". In a similar way, the play begins with the performer's self-introduction by showing the doll: "This is me. I'm ten years old. I'm big boned. Here I am watching TV. *The doll*. Here I am in my trunks. *The doll*. Here I am with my brother" (2003: 25). Soon the performer presents objects by selecting them at random to introduce the characters who have a place in the story. However, unlike the unnamed boy who is represented by a doll at all times, the other characters are represented each time by randomly-selected objects. The performer narrator, after setting the scene, begins to tell the story again by way of presenting objects. The unnamed boy, as a new way of gathering attention, decides to raise his arm above his head. Here, it should be pointed out that the performer never raises his arm. Instead, he "raises the doll's arm up above its head where it stays until the end" (2003: 29). Through the narrator's account, we come to learn that the boy soon succeeds in getting the attention he has desired for. The boy expresses his feelings:

I can't begin to describe my sense of definition and power. I realised for the first time where I ended and the rest of the world began – I felt sharp, delineated. For the first time in my life, the air I breathed had an edge. I was setting the rules. I had a special place in school assemblies so as not to confuse visitors. I was excused PE. I spent break time with the school nurse. I was appointed a social worker. People stared at me in the street. No one knew what was going on. They felt threatened. I became the focus of aggression. I triggered insecurities (2003: 32).

Surely, the boy soon experiences major health problems. He begins to lose his fingernails, the muscles around his shoulder have atrophy, he has intense pain and one of his fingers gets removed. Soon, however, first with the offer of his brother Anthony, and his friend Simon, he becomes a major figure in contemporary art circles, which suggests “a critique of modern commercialised art and consumerist celebrity culture” (Ilter, 2011: 394–395). Art has become such a commercialized and commodified concept that the boy takes an offer from one of the foremost American art dealers: The offer covers 2 hundred 50 thousand dollars plus all his medical and living expenses until he dies on the condition that the boy in return would sell him his arm after his death and the art dealer would have unrestricted access to his terminal decay. We do not know if the boy has accepted the offer or not as this is the closing scene of the play.

As mentioned before, in this play the way the story is told is as striking as the story itself. Having worked for years as a professional actor, Crouch believes in the power of attracting the attention of the audiences through storytelling. He notes that all his plays “subscribe to the Aristotelian unities, in terms of the nature and structure of the narrative, and that's very important” for him (qtd in Bottoms, 2009: 67). As a matter of fact, as Stephen Bottoms points out, rather than going “beyond” dramatic traditions, Crouch's work delivers a potent reinvigoration of them. His goal is to further integrate the audience members into the process of story production rather than to “dis-integrate” the dramatic aspects as described by Lehmann “by asking them, in effect, to ‘fill in the blanks’” (Bottoms, 2009: 67). As Crouch explains in his interview with Bottoms: “I'm very excited [...] about liberating the authority of the audience to see their own thing. For me that's very important: it's about relinquishing control from the stage” (qtd in Bottoms, 2009). As Bottoms further elaborates, Crouch does not write to “highlight his authorial presence as

a writer, or even to provide himself with vehicles in which to give authoritative performances, but because he wanted to explore ways to authorize the spectator's participation in the performance process" (2009: 67).

Although Bottoms has a valid evaluation, he seems to ignore the fact that the way the audience is filling in the gaps and write the script in their minds is one of the core assumptions of postdramatic theatre. In postdramatic theatre aesthetics, as Karen Jürs-Munby asserts, 'open' or 'writerly' texts for performance "require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning" (Jürs-Munby, 2006: 6). Although the narrator/performer presents a plot structure that can be followed easily, the strategies employed decrease representation to a minimum degree possible. The more representation is rendered impossible, the more the spectators gain power. As Crouch explains: "'I minimize what's happening on stage so I can maximize what's happening in the audience. If I maximized what was happening on stage, I feel there's an inverse dynamic which reduces the role of the audience'" (qtd in Bottoms, 2009: 69). This becomes possible when a performance problematizes the logic of representation and in this respect *My Arm* is a stunning production blurring the frontier between fact and fiction. The play destabilizes boundaries between fact and fiction, form and content, performer and spectator, creating a thought-provoking theatrical experience. In doing so, *My Arm* not only questions the nature of representation but also redefines the possibilities of storytelling in contemporary theatre.

## References

- Bottoms, Stephen (2009). "Authorizing the Audience: The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch". *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 14(1): 65-76.
- Carlson, Marvin (2015). "Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance". *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença*, 5(3): 577-595.
- Crouch, Tom (2011). *Plays One*. Oberon Books.
- Ilter, Seda (2011). "'A Process of Transformation': Tim Crouch on *My Arm*". *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21(4): 394-404.

Jürs-Munby, Karen (2006). "Introduction". *Postdramatic Theatre*. Hans-Thies Lehmann. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. Routledge.

The following statements are made in the framework of "COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors":

**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:** The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.