



# Theatre Academy

Gönderilme Tarihi/Submission Date: 10.05.2023

Kabul Tarihi/Acceptance Date: 28.08.2023

Oyun İncelemesi/Play Review

## ***Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* by Tim Crouch**

*Tim Crouch'ın Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* Adlı Oyunu

Yeliz BİBER VANGÖLÜ

Atatürk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature

[yeliz.biber@atauni.edu.tr](mailto:yeliz.biber@atauni.edu.tr)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2117-7812>

### **Abstract**

This is a review of *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022) by the contemporary British theatre practitioner Tim Crouch. Premiered at the Royal Lyceum Theatre as a part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2022, the play is a direct outcome of Crouch's experience, both as a human being and a theatre maker, of the COVID-19 pandemic and his thoughts on the death of theatre as an art form during the pandemic. This review is based on the stage production of the play at York St John Creative Art Centre as a part of York International Shakespeare Festival in 2023.

**Keywords:** Tim Crouch, *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel*, *King Lear*, COVID-19 Pandemic

### **Öz**

Bu yazı, çağdaş İngiliz tiyatro uygulayıcısı Tim Crouch'ın *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022) adlı oyununun bir incelemesini sunmaktadır. İlk gösterimi 2022'de Edinburgh Fringe Festivali kapsamında Royal Lyceum Tiyatrosu'nda yapılan oyun, Crouch'ın hem bir insan hem de bir tiyatro yapımcısı olarak COVID-19 salgınına ilişkin deneyiminin ve pandemi sırasında bir sanat formu olarak tiyatronun ölümü üzerine düşüncelerinin doğrudan bir sonucudur. Bu inceleme, oyunun 2023 yılında York Uluslararası Shakespeare Festivali kapsamında York St John Creative Art Center'daki gösterimine dayanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tim Crouch, *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel*, *Kral Lear*, COVID-19 Pandemisi

## Review

Tim Crouch's *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022) arrived at York St John University's Creative Art Centre to be staged for a single evening on April 29, 2023 as a part of the York International Shakespeare Festival. The impressions and views expressed here are based on this particular performance as well as the published text of the play. Written and performed by Crouch himself, the play, an absorbing 70-minute piece, is a response to the times of COVID-19 pandemic during which theatre "kind of effectively died or went into hibernation" (Lyceumtheatre, 2022). Crouch uses the theatrical space to inquire into the art form's survival in a world struck with diseases, a world where it has become a challenge to see a play in the presence of hundreds of others, a world in which technology allows people to stay indoors as they are urged to spend their money in the comfort of their homes to engage in daily activities. It is also a world which depends largely on a capitalist economy wherein the theatre ushers receive only £9.75 an hour when the premium central bank stalls are sold for as much as £95 and the pre-theatre dinner package for £135.50. As Crouch gives a verbal outline of how the auditorium is economically structured, he manages to enlighten and disturb, inviting thought about the theatre as an industry.

The play pulls together two different realms by applying the simple trick of the performer putting on a VR headset which does not really work but is rather used as a metaphorical device to transport him to a virtual theatrical universe where a modern-dress performance of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is in progress. While the headset metaphorically enables the writer/performer to switch between theatrical spaces, it also creates a dimension of possibility for the audience to be able to develop new insights into the issues raised by Crouch. Essentially a performance comprised of several layers based on storytelling and chatting, the play could perhaps best be described as a stand-up tragicomedy marked with sharp transitions between the real and different levels of the imaginary. In order to be able to make sense across these transitions, the audience has to actively think deeper about what is presented to them and piece them together in their own ways.

The play opens with the writer/performer Crouch appearing on a bare stage, which, as he explains in the 'Q&A' session afterwards, is all that is needed to open up a space of communication between the play/playwright/performer and the audience. To Crouch, "the best form of seeing is 'anti-retinal' (a Marcel Duchamp phrase)" and

therefore in his theatre “the visual aspect exists in tandem with the internal aspect” (as cited in Cleaves). This tendency towards simplicity seems to be set against the daily bombardment of our eyes and minds with an endless line of visual images through television, social media and internet. On the stage, there is only a microphone stand, a microphone and a stool with a glass of water on it and there is also some, though quite minimal, use of sound and lighting facilities throughout the performance. The auditorium remains well-lit throughout the play, which, along with the other dramaturgical choices (such as Crouch reminding us of the length of the play or that there is actually nothing to see in the headset), turns the whole play into a metatheatrical piece. Through the zigzags between the real theatrical space of the performance and this other virtual space which seems to start with the chaotic third act of *King Lear*, the audience is presented with glimpses of what goes on during the performance of Shakespeare’s play after the Fool abruptly leaves to come back no more.

The Fool, we are informed, is Crouch himself. He explains that “This is a live, interactive and immersive experience about my character the Fool abandoning the world of the play *King Lear* by William Shakespeare” (Crouch, 2022, p. 8). That is not all, however. Crouch/the Fool is actually talking about our world too when he says, “Abandoning the world, leaving it all, getting out, unable to endure it any longer, having had enough of it, in no fit state to continue with it” (p. 8). He tells us on more than one occasion that there are no more jokes nor anything that could be funny anymore. It is against this background that he tells the audience jokes and stories, which are, at times, quite tragic and yet they somehow also manage to be funny in a most peculiar way. One such example is when he says “We were poor growing up. So poor we had to melt the goldfish down. So poor the dog only got one rabie. I was so ugly my mum breast-fed me through a straw. So ugly everyone died. So bullied I still wash my face in the toilet” (p. 8). On hearing these jokes, the audience is left in a state of uncertainty not quite knowing if they should laugh at them; some uneasy laughter comes out, which seems to be in line with Schopenhauer’s idea of laughter as a “sudden apprehension or perception of some kind of incongruity” (Lewis, 2005, p.37). Crouch’s acting performance also echoes this style of juxtaposed opposites; this is a style that combines scenes in which the solo performer directly faces and addresses the audience members with scenes in which he steps to the far end of the stage and turns

his back to the auditorium as he gets preoccupied with *King Lear's* performance universe. All these opposing elements seem to be a reference to the chaotic and fearful state of the world after going through the pandemic and being largely exposed to and controlled by technological advancements of the day.

Crouch's stories, jokes or more generally points of discussion are delivered through a loose rap style of talking at times and at other times, slow-paced revelations. He sometimes addresses the audience directly by engaging with the individuals present there but he also sometimes stands right in front of them, talking about theatre or audiences by pointing at specific members of the audience but talking more generally about modern stereotypes that visit theatre. In these moments, he asks the audience to believe that he is referring to this other theatre where Shakespeare's play is being produced. This is another complex and experimental piece of theatre by a theatre practitioner who keeps reinventing the form in daring and refreshing ways. As with his 2007 show, *ENGLAND*, this play is a product of "Tim Crouch's fascination with the nature of the theatrical experience; the communication of an idea from performer to audience – and back again" (Tim Crouch Theatre). On that note, however, one shortcoming – equally, an achievement – of the play must be mentioned: at times, the communication between the performer and the audience felt not well-established, which is probably due to the structure of the play which rests on a mobility between various fragments and layers, sometimes rendering the connective tissue way too loose. While this is probably an intended effect, on Crouch's part, to keep the audience in a questioning mode, it causes confusion and exclusion from the world created by the play at times. But, then again, perhaps we should not feel distraught as the play simply pushes us to confront the chaotic world that surrounds us already.

Crouch makes a valid point when he expresses his concern that theatre as an art form is dying in a world tightly sealed all around by technological advancement, pushing people into the comfort of their homes to watch digitised theatre instead of making the effort to get dressed, go outside and see a play in a theatre. It has become more preferable, indeed, to satisfy one's ocular needs through streaming services which offer all kinds of entertainment while at the same time being able to order one's dinner on one's mobile phone. Yet, as Mark Fisher (2022) rightfully observes, "Theatre has a way of reinventing itself and *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel*, ironically, demonstrates the case". Despite the current state of the world threatening the

existence of theatre more than ever before, as long as theatre practitioners like Tim Crouch keep expanding the borders of theatre by unearthing new folds and layers, theatre will survive; it will be mutated, perhaps in ways we may not always foresee, but there is a good chance it will survive.

## References

Crouch, T. (2022). *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel*. London: Methuen.

Cleaves, P. (interviewer) & Crouch, T. (Interviewee). (n.d.). *Tim Crouch* [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from Essential Drama website: <https://essentialdrama.com/practitioners/timcrouch/>

Fisher, M. (2022, August 12). Tim Crouch: Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel Review – Virtual King Lear. *Guardian*. Retrieved May 07, 2023, from <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/aug/12/tim-crouch-truths-a-dog-must-to-kennel-review-virtual-king-lear>

Lewis, P. B. (2005). Schopenhauer's Laughter. *The Monist*, 88(1), 36-51.

Lyceumtheatre. (2022, July 26). Tim Crouch, Truth's a Dog Interview [Video File]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae\\_YvG5nLeI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae_YvG5nLeI)

Tim Crouch Theatre. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.timcrouchtheatre.co.uk/shows-2/england>