



Enacted Offstage Images, Reported Onstage Action, and Parallel Fictional Worlds in Dead Centre's *Chekhov's First Play* (2015) and Tim Crouch and Rachana Jadhav's *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (2019)

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Enacted Offstage Images, Reported Onstage Action, and Parallel Fictional Worlds in Dead Centre’s *Chekhov’s First Play* (2015) and Tim Crouch and Rachana Jadhav’s *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (2019)

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Abstract

This essay addresses how the collision of image, text, and speech in contemporary scripted performances discloses something significant about both being in and thinking about the theatre. It examines cases wherein recent examples of theatre practice disrupt long-standing expectations about the form and function of reported offstage action. While Tim Crouch and Rachana Jadhav’s *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (2019) literalises the relationship between text and performance by putting the play script in the hands of the audience and employing illustrations as a means of reporting that inverts established ekphrastic modes, Dead Centre’s *Chekhov’s First Play* (2015) literalises offstage presence through the audio narration of a figure named as ‘The Director’. These acts of staging literally key conceptual and practical challenges of theatrical representation work in both cases to reveal instances of mimetic disjuncture. Audiences are not sure which version of each performance to invest in: the staged action or illustrated text of *Terrestrial Salvation* and the onstage adaptation or

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The Director's critical reporting in *Chekhov's First Play*. By making available different versions of the same theatrical event, each production connects resonantly to a cultural moment wherein we are often exposed to alternative narratives but may not always recognise or acknowledge these alternate perspectives. Reviewed together, these two productions present a wide-ranging sensorial problematising of theatrical representation. They construct points of meaningful divergence through unscripted performances and the disaggregation of actor and character. Methodologically, this essay works to address these questions of representational multiplicity through a form of discursive practice that reports between the two case study examples. This approach serves to reveal the discourse of theatre and performance studies as frequently grounded in ekphrastic reportings that recount theatrical images no longer available to view. The argument marks out first how reported action and other forms of ekphrastic representation have historically been about what cannot be staged in order to propose that what comes to be unrepresentable in these examples – even as it is the means of representation – is theatrical performance itself. The essay then traces how these metatheatrical questions related to the representational affordance of these performances – in this case to do with impossibility of representing the theatre itself – ripple into wider consequences that can have substantial implications related to race, freedom, and collective endeavour.

Keywords: Tim Crouch; Dead Centre; reported action; theatricality; representation

Plays are not usually seen in the theatre. That is to say, printed texts that contain the lines spoken by characters do not normally appear on stage. Iterations where actors perform script in hand are most often the reserve of rehearsals and informal staged readings presented earlier in the research and development process of a production. The books that do appear on stage tend to function visually as props or scenery, indications of a character's interest, intellect, heritage, or aspirations. After the event of opening night, scripts are things we hear tell of via their acoustic, visual, and gestural interpretation in performance and in critical reviews that might seek to detach a show's component parts to complement, or otherwise, the various skills of its makers. In performances of *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation*, first shown at the Edinburgh International Festival and then at the Royal Court Theatre, London in 2019, the 'play is presented through the parallel worlds of stage action and illustrated text'.¹ Each actor and audience member has a copy of the script, which contains both the words and directions of the play, as written by playwright and performer Tim Crouch, and drawings, graphic renderings by theatre designer and illustrator Rachana Jadhav, that present the offstage (and sometimes onstage) action of the performance. Under the guidance of the performers, and to the accompaniment of sound design by Pippa Murphy, everyone in the room turns the pages of the text together, reads (some aloud and some silently) the script together, feels the affect of the images. The book is central to how the play is presented. It draws attention to theatre as a form that is made both off stage, over longer periods of writing and designing, and collaboratively on stage with an audience. Making available to spectators both text and performance, this distinctive mode of production collides, contradicts, and intersects affordances rendered by what is understood through the presence of the actors and what is seen in the book. Points of difference, where an actor playing a character looks unlike

1. Tim Crouch and Rachana Jadhav, *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), back cover. The show continued to tour to the Dublin Theatre Festival, Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts, Brighton, and Teatro do Bairro Alto, Lisbon in Autumn 2019.

an illustration of that figure in the text, for example, speak to long-standing representational debates concerning distinctions between the world of the play as it is depicted on the page and what we see and hear on stage. By presenting back and parallel stories as visual images, *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (hereafter *Terrestrial Salvation*) inverts conventional expectations about the form and function of reported offstage action. Instead of using speech to evoke scenes difficult to perform visually, the play employs pictures to do its reporting work and open representational opportunities beyond the directorial and performance-based interpretations of staged action. The production thus departs from established ekphrastic modes and inverts traditional theatrical relations between performance, image, and text to construct a playful investigation of the relationship between cognitive work and affective experience in contemporary dramaturgy.

This essay examines cases wherein recent examples of scripted theatre practice complicate traditional configurations of onstage and offstage space and encounter via experimentation with techniques of reported action. As a ‘rhetorical device wherein key events are revealed through what characters say rather than what they do’, reported action has historically been reserved for that which it is difficult to show.² In *Terrestrial Salvation*, any preconceived expectation about the relationship between onstage visual representation and orally narrated scenes that exceed the spatial, temporal, and logistical confines of what is staged is confounded by Jadhav’s compelling illustrations. Here, the offstage action is reported in images rather than words. In this way, the show challenges our understanding of conduits between actions and their circulation as speech and spectacle by calling on illustration to convey unspeakable events.

In my second case study, Dead Centre’s production of *Chekhov’s First Play*, the connection between onstage and offstage action is also perplexed by acts of reporting. Whereas *Terrestrial Salvation* draws attention to the interpretative distinctions between play script and performance effective in the production of theatrical meaning through its inclusion of textual and paratextual information, *Chekhov’s First Play* recontextualises what is presented onstage via audio narration delivered through headphones. In this work, which premiered at Dublin Theatre Festival in 2015, a self-announced figure, named as ‘The Director’, voices a commentary on the staged elements of the show as it is performed live.³ While the approach in this example is aural rather than textual, the verbal narrative similarly complicates the relative status of what spectators see and hear on stage and other components of the production, which expand beyond the play as it is enacted. Considered together, *Terrestrial Salvation* and *Chekhov’s First Play* represent comparable yet distinctive ways in which contemporary theatre makers are reinvigorating classical techniques of theatrical reporting in order to draw attention to the dramatic mechanisms of dramaturgical and directorial production. Both shows make apparent representational complexities that are key to their respective theatrical traditions: director-auteur-led naturalist revival, in *Chekhov’s First Play*, and playwright-centric British new writing in *Terrestrial Salvation*.

2. Georgina Guy. ‘From Visible Object to Reported Action: The Performance of Verbal Images in Visual Art Museums’. *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 3 (2017): 339–359 (340).

3. *Chekhov’s First Play* toured extensively from 2016 to 2019 to international venues including Schaubühne, Berlin, Theatre Vidy, Lausanne, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, Northern Stage, Newcastle, and Liverpool Playhouse, as well as festivals in Brisbane, Helsinki, Modena, Bucharest, and Hong Kong. I attended the production at Battersea Arts Centre, London in 2018. Post-syndemic, *Chekhov’s First Play* has been performed at Mess Festival, Sarajevo in 2021.

One hinge connecting each of the case studies is a placeholder figure that is incorporated into the action of the performance. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, Crouch appears doubly in the guise of the writer of the book the audience and performers hold, which is both the script for the play enacted and for the fictional framework presented therein. In Dead Centre's piece, the show's co-director, Bush Moukarzel, also performs in the theatre as a fictionalised director character, while Anton Chekhov haunts the production as absent author. In both cases, the emphasis on these figures highlights the plays' relative investigations of the relationship between scripted word and stageability. A brief consideration of the figure of the Director in *Chekhov's First Play* helps make this point evident. Since the audience of *Chekhov's First Play* see Moukarzel as The Director within the auditorium at the production's opening, when he moves out of sight, as theatre scholar Karen Quigley notes, we 'imagine him offstage in the wings and picture the words in our ears coming out of the human body we've seen'.⁴ In this way, The Director's narration initially appears to constitute the offstage action of the performance; we imagine the commentary heard through our headphones to be coming from the literal backstage places of the theatre. This understanding is meaningful in two ways. First, it is significant that what is evoked by this act of oral reporting is not a fictional world beyond the boundaries of the theatre but rather an idea of the venue's operational offstage spaces, in all their practicality, functionality, and proximity. The fact that hearing the voice of The Director has the effect, as Quigley rightly suggests, of prompting the audience to visualise this figure backstage already starts to play with the usual function of reported action. What we imagine to be happening offstage is not the action reported on but rather the act of reporting itself, and the figure responsible for doing that reporting. This brings us to the second point of interest about this set up. What is reported on is not the action happening at spatial and/or temporal distance off and away from the stage. Nor is it that which cannot be conveyed visually. What The Director reports on, explains, and elaborates, is the action that we are simultaneously watching performed by the actors on stage. In a sense, then, The Director's commentary renders the events on stage, as that which is reported on, a kind of secondary action distinct from the main content of the performance. Thus, where the performance exists in this complex nexus of spoken narrative, onstage dialogue, and stage image becomes difficult to discern. It is this complexity, in both case studies, for which this essay aims to account.

Ultimately, then, the essay addresses how the collision of image, text, and speech in contemporary scripted performances discloses something significant about both being in and thinking about the theatre. While Crouch literalises the relationship between text and performance by putting the play script in the hands of audience, Dead Centre literalise offstage presence through the invisible voice of The Director. These acts of staging literally key conceptual and practical challenges of theatrical representation work in both cases to reveal instances of mimetic

4. Karen Quigley, *Performing the Unstageable: Success, Imagination, Failure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 101.

disjuncture. Audiences are not sure which version of each performance to invest in: the staged action or illustrated text of *Terrestrial Salvation* and the onstage adaptation or The Director's critical reporting in *Chekhov's First Play*. By making available different versions of the same theatrical event, each production connects resonantly to a cultural moment wherein we are often exposed to alternative narratives but may not always recognise or acknowledge these alternate perspectives. We might be alert to the pervasive presence of political polarisation, but nevertheless diametrically opposed viewpoints often surprise us when they appear. By opening points of representational divergence, *Terrestrial Salvation* and *Chekhov's First Play* present staged investigations concerned with how we make theatre and what theatrical effect the coincidence of alternative reports has on audience experience. In this way, both interrogate theatre's capacity to account for contemporary reality.

Reviewed together, these two productions present a wide-ranging sensorial problematising of theatrical representation. They construct points of meaningful divergence through unscripted performances and the disaggregation of actor and character. This essay works to address these questions of representational multiplicity through a form of discursive practice that reports between the two case study examples. By centring accounts of the plays both in their textual and performed forms, and choosing not to include either production images or details of Jadhav's illustrations, the writing seeks to re-perform some of the reporting work central to the productions discussed. This approach serves to reveal the discourse of theatre and performance studies as frequently grounded in ekphrastic hear tellings that recount theatrical images no longer available to view. The following sections thus unfold an argument that marks out first how reported action and other forms of ekphrastic representation have historically been about what cannot be staged in order to propose that what comes to be unrepresentable in these examples – even as it is the means of representation – is theatrical performance itself. The middle part of the essay addresses how theatrical strategies of control and multiplicity create spaces of indeterminacy through which each play stages important questions about the effects of being and not being represented. The essay then traces how these metatheatrical questions related to the representational affordance of these performances – in this case to do with impossibility of representing the theatre itself – ripple into wider consequences. The argument draws on the theoretical framework provided by literature and performance scholar Ju Yon Kim's writing 'Between Paper and Performance', which traces how densities of theatrical representation can have substantial implications related to race, freedom, and collective endeavour.⁵ This essay does not attempt to resolve the complexities staged in the performance examples and re-staged here. Rather, this is an account that aims to hold in tension the incoherence, disjunction, and irreconcilability that is highlighted in the performance works and also foundational to the theatre as such.

5. Ju Yon Kim, 'Between Paper and Performance: Suspicion, Race, and Casting in *The Piano Teacher*', *Modern Drama* 63, no. 2 (2020): 127–153.

Unspeakable Offstage Images and Reported Onstage Action

Both *Chekhov's First Play* and *Terrestrial Salvation* make a point of drawing attention to their own theatrical framework from the beginning of the production. In the first part of *Chekhov's First Play*, the speech of The Director is communicated through headphones, which also amplify the lines spoken by the actors on stage. The performers represent both characters in a play set in nineteenth-century Russia and the actors in a performance directed by the figure of The Director. The sound is binaural; we also hear music and sound effects, birdsong, and a buzzing fly. The stage directions tell us that the action takes place outside a 'country house estate' in Russia, and this is the set we see on stage. At the same time, The Director also verbalises and elaborates this context, telling us that the 'play is set in Russia. 1878. This is the country estate of Anna Petrovna, widow to General Voinitsev. She inherited this big house from her late husband and is now struggling to keep up the payments'.⁶ The entrance of each character on to the stage is also expounded simultaneously by The Director: 'This is Glagolyev. He's a real character. He's basically a sort of local landlord. The plot really gets going here'.⁷ Here, The Director informs the audience of the intended pacing of the scene and conveys information about place and character biography via narration rather than relying on communicative force of staging and characterisation.

The text explored by *Chekhov's First Play*, that is the untitled one by the eponymous playwright Anton Chekhov, is introduced by Dead Centre primarily in terms of the challenges it presents for theatre makers. The play has, as Dead Centre describe it on their website, 'too many characters, too many themes, too much action. All in all, it's generally dismissed as unstageable'.⁸ In her book on *Performing the Unstageable*, Quigley defines her key term as referring, amongst its many meanings, to 'things that we find technically or technologically difficult to put on stage', as well as to scenes that are challenging to encounter, either in terms of their graphic violence or the provocation they pose to social propriety.⁹ Of interest to this essay is the sort of unstageability that logistically defies physical appearance on stage. To say something is unstageable is to say it is unrepresentable visually, and reported action has long been employed to circumnavigate this complexity. If reported action has historically answered the problem of visual unstageability, then it performs a related function in establishing the opening scene of Dead Centre's production, though with details that are eminently stageable. In *Chekhov's First Play*, The Director's commentary comes to do some of the theatrical work usually practised pre-production in rehearsals and at the point of performance by the complementary components of lighting, costume, and scenic design. What is unstageable in this instance, then, seems to have something to do with theatricality itself.

With *Terrestrial Salvation*, the performance begins with one of the characters, Anna, telling the audience that we 'should all have a book' and that the 'book is part of the play'.¹⁰ On entering the Jerwood

6. Dead Centre, *Chekhov's First Play* (London: Oberon Books, 2016), 13.

7. *Ibid.*, 17.

8. Dead Centre, 'Chekhov's First Play', <https://www.deadcentre.org/chekhovs-first-play-1>. (accessed December 14, 2022).

9. Quigley, *Performing the Unstageable*, 7.

10. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, xv.

11. Ibid.

Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, the seats are set out in a circle and a dark green book embossed with a gold title is placed on each chair. Through the prologue, Anna continues to set up the function of these books. 'There are pictures in the book that also tell a story', she discloses, and momentarily 'we'll all open this book together and we'll invite you to turn the pages together'.¹¹

When I think back to my experience of the play in the theatre, I only remember there being images at the start of the book. On reading the play text after the event, I am surprised to find that the illustrations continue throughout. At the point of performance and afterwards, the first images come quietly and urgently. They are harrowing. The experience of encountering them collectively in the theatre, guided by sonic cues, is vivid. On page 5, unspoken text reads 'THIS WINTER/The present time'. A black and white pencil drawing covers pages 6 and 7. In this image, a mother with a child and a father with another child wave to each other across a frozen lake somewhere that looks a bit like Central Park. The ice on the lake, which stretches across two pages of the book, is cracked. The figures appear on the right-hand page. Miles (dad) and Felix (age 5) have their backs to us. They are holding hands and looking towards Anna (mum) and Bonnie (age 3) who face us higher on the page and on the other side of the lake. The details of their faces are not included but their clothing and gestures and place are specific. We turn the page. The next illustration shows a leg with turned up trousers marked Felix and a trainered foot that is stepping on, is cracking, the ice. We turn the page. The picture is fractured. On the left, images as seen through the ice in both directions: Anna screaming, a tear from her eye, Bonnie holding tight to her stuffed rabbit, bubbles from Felix's nose and mouth. On the right, Miles's hand reaching. Next, two images of death on facing pages. On the left, since this is the direction in which we read in English, a barren tree in the rain, crows on its branches. Beneath, figures with umbrellas above the tree roots. The adjacent page is deeper in the earth. A dark column past the roots and down towards a swathe of insects and a small coffin. FELIX lettered above in the rain and against which stand, silhouetted and holding hands, Anna and Bonnie and her rabbit. A line drawing on the bottom of the next page shows two figures, labelled Anna and Bonnie, standing together at the foot of a hospital bed. The body in the bed is labelled Miles and attached to a ventilator. The next page shows his face more closely in a haze of cosmic symbols, stars and spheres containing suns and mountains, and equations and astronomical charts. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, the back-story of the characters and the circumstances that pre-date the action of the play performed on stage are disclosed visually in advance of the present articulation of the story.

In different ways, both productions reviewed in this essay raise questions about what is staged and what is reported, visually in *Terrestrial Salvation* and via spoken elaboration in *Chekhov's First Play*. When I recall my experience in the auditorium at Battersea Arts Center, it is the coincidence of these two components of Dead Centre's production that stands out in my mind: the commentary on the onstage action articulated from offstage by this figure self-identified as The Director

and certain spectacular visual images, including a wrecking ball crashing through the set and a pneumatic drill on stage. With *Terrestrial Salvation*, turning those opening pages and reading the images is a beautiful, breath-taking, heart-breaking experience. Both pieces establish visual and spoken components as integral to what is represented, and ultimately, this becomes a vital examination of the mechanisms of theatre itself.

In Dead Centre's show, The Director attempts to interject between the onstage dialogue and gets frustrated that the 'play's getting in the way of me explaining it'.¹² As the performance progresses, The Director speaks over characters' monologues. He justifies this overlay by stating that 'it's best if I just talk over this, or I'll never get around to explaining everything'. He expounds the major themes introduced by the soliloquys and then concludes that the 'speech here actually really captures this. Maybe I shouldn't have talked over it'.¹³ It is not clear where our focus should be and what should take precedence, the action on stage or this directorial interpretation. As The Director vies for our attention, his acts of describing, reporting, and narrating appear clearly, both as modes of analysis and of theatre-making. The stage directions tell us that in addition to The Director's commentary, the 'audience can also hear the "play" through their headphones, amplified from the stage'.¹⁴ Inverted commas raise questions here about what constitutes the 'play'. The production is, of course, metatheatrical; what we see on stage has something to do with an untitled play by Chekhov but the broader theatrical action of *Chekhov's First Play* also includes these aural interjections and reportings. The play is using 'the play' in part in order to conjure itself. That this remains an elusive task speaks to an instability within the representational mechanism. If the question of unstageability is a key motivation in this production, it seems that what most consistently evades staging is the theatre.

Performative Words and Definitive Illustrations

Theatre's unstageability may be related to its multiplicity. The examples in this essay intensify a dynamic that is present in most theatrical productions whereby verbal, textual, and imagistic representational registers operate in conjunction but also disjunction. For example, throughout the opening scenes of Dead Centre's production, The Director laments to the audience that 'I wanted to let you really hear it, you know? Like the way the word "audience" comes from the word meaning "to hear"'.¹⁵ Despite this stated investment in the acoustic, The Director's commentary threatens the audibility of the lines delivered by the actors on stage. 'I *could* just let them speak', The Director considers, 'But it's more the *subtext* I want to tell you about'.¹⁶ The Director claims to be reporting the unspoken meanings of the play that the performers are presenting, but obscures the *spoken* meanings. The unstageable, Quigley points out, 'constantly structures and focuses the staged and the stageable'.¹⁷ Any understanding of the unstageable, Quigley proposes, comes via an 'investigation of the relationship between text and

12. Dead Center, *Chekhov's First Play*, 21.

13. Ibid. 23.

14. Ibid. 13.

15. Ibid. 29.

16. Ibid. 22.

17. Quigley, *Performing the Unstageable*, 5.

18. Ibid.
19. Dead Centre, *Chekhov's First Play*, 12.
20. Ibid., 11.
21. J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9.
22. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 23.
- performance'.¹⁸ Here, The Director's emphasis on what is not conveyed by the embodied performance on stage simultaneously marks out the theatricality of what is shown. The intention is that the spoken narration will 'make things clearer', The Director states, before explaining, 'I'll be offstage so I won't distract you, I'll just be a voice in your head'.¹⁹ The ironic implication here, given the interruptive quality of The Director's interjections, is that the aural is not distracting; only the visual, The Director suggests, might divert the focus of our attention. At the same time, the emphasis his narration places on verbal reporting – as clarifying, informative, and instructive – makes apparent, perhaps, the primary mode of engagement for the character of the Director. 'Personally, I always like things explained to me, especially art', The Director confesses: 'I'm the kind of guy who goes to an art gallery and spends all the time reading the writing on the wall next to the paintings. I hardly ever look at the paintings'.²⁰ Even in the context of painted visual artworks, The Director's interpretive approach is text-based. This confession assumes that the audience will recognise his behaviour, either, with a little disappointment, as akin to our own encounters in the gallery or, with some uncomfortable self-congratulation, as distinct from our own capacity for visual absorption. Either way, the framing of The Director's commentary in these terms, as the textual accompaniment to the visual scenes on stage, exaggerates again the relationship between image and text, and visual and verbal modes of representation, and underscores these as significant in our thinking about (onstage and offstage) action in the theatre.
- In his book on *Illustration*, literary scholar J. Hillis Miller stresses the necessity, for the cultural critic, to 'read not just pictures and words separately, but the meanings and forces generated by their adjacency, for example in pictures with captions or in illustrated books, newspapers and magazines'.²¹ In the theatre, audiences most often respond to visual and aural images heard, seen, and presented live. It is unusual, as in *Terrestrial Salvation*, to be confronted with words and pictures on the page. After the opening sequence of images, the action jumps, in Crouch and Jadhav's book, to 'THE FUTURE', first two and then 'Fifteen years from the present time here in the theatre./This is the time in which the play is set'.²² The following pages make clear that the images are illustrations, pictorial elucidations of location and character. As The Director's commentary seeks to explain and elaborate the onstage action in *Chekhov's First Play*, which also has the effect of obscuring or diverting attention from it, so the pictures here set the scene for the present action of *Terrestrial Salvation* while opening up complex and sometimes difficult relationships between live action, verbal utterance, and printed image. Like enlargements in scientific books or instruction manuals, the illustrations magnify details of insects, surfaces, fauna, and flora within a fenced encampment at the bottom of a mountain, and introduce two figures labelled Anna and Sol. In the drawing, Anna stands, holding a book. Sol lies on the grass facing away from her open volume. On stage, Sol picks up her copy of the book, finds the page, and the shared reading of the text begins. In his constellation of approaches to the relation between the graphic and the verbal, Miller engages with

23. Miller, *Illustration*, 67.
24. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 29.
25. Miller, *Illustration*, 67.
26. Tim Crouch, 'Note for this edition', *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), xiii.
27. Tim Crouch, 'Parallel Worlds', *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), xii.
28. Stephen Scott-Bottoms, 'Authorizing the Audience: The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch'. *Performance Research* 14, no 1. (2019): 65–76 (67 and 74).
29. Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?', *Performance Research* 14, no 1, (2009): 17–28 (17).

Stéphane Mallarmé's rejection of illustration noting that the 'words on the page have a performative power of evocation', the capacity to call into being what is narrated and described.²³ This is what is investigated by *Terrestrial Salvation* in terms of its plot. The story situates the author of the book, held both by actors and by audience members, as a self-proclaimed prophet. His words foretell an end to the world, and what we hear read on stage is the 'last chapter' in the prophecy, wherein, as Sol recites, 'everything is described'.²⁴ It is the work of words, here, not to summon and recall to mind, nor to report actions already past; that is the work of the images. Rather, the text is written to be performative and effect action, on stage for Crouch and in the world of the play for this spiritual leader, who is Miles. Images, for Mallarmé, threaten the performative potential of text. 'The word invokes', Miller encapsulates. 'The illustration presents'.²⁵ If text operates through performative invocation, then images seem to have a connection to theatrical presence. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, the illustrations establish both the backstory and the present scene of the play. They have affective power via their unexpected presence on the page within the theatre.

There are two versions to the book form of *Terrestrial Salvation*. In his written introduction to one construction of the play text Crouch explains that one of the editions is designed for use by actors and audience in performance while the other, the iteration in which the writer's note is included, contains additional information like biographies and production details.²⁶ Crouch also asserts in this text that here, on its pages, Jadhav has 'drawn the definitive shape' of the play and, in rendering its setting and characters, 'fixed the parallel world'.²⁷ The foregrounding of the illustrations by the playwright as determining and absolute differs wildly to positions articulated by Crouch in interviews and previous productions, as well as to the precisely drawn indeterminacy between word and image enacted in the stage production of *Terrestrial Salvation*. In 'Authorizing the Audience: The conceptual drama of Tim Crouch', theatre scholar Stephen Scott-Bottoms cites Crouch's belief in the word as the 'ultimate conceptual art form', quoting the playwright's interest in 'telling and letting the showing happen inside the audience's head'.²⁸ Crouch's established emphasis on audience imagination counters or complicates the stated authority of Jadhav's visual forms. The inclusion of the illustrated play text within the construct of *Terrestrial Salvation* as it is staged as performance raises big questions about how we receive and image visual information in the theatre. Playwright and academic Dan Rebellato has astutely articulated a series of provocations about this particular problem fundamental to the discipline of theatre studies as concerned, most often, with plays in performance rather than on the page: 'When we read a play what is the nature of the mental images necessarily and appropriately formed? [. . .] When we go to the theatre, what are we looking at? How does that relate to the fictional world being represented?'²⁹ In *Terrestrial Salvation*, audience members obtain information about the world of the play from a number of multiform sources. The fictional realm is communicated both, and variously, via the words and images on the page and by the dialogue and gestures of the performers. As Rebellato expresses,

30. *Ibid.*, 22.

‘what happens on stage is simply a source of information about the fictional world’ and differs from the verbal information communicated in a book only, or predominantly, in being performed.³⁰ Neither text and illustration nor dialogue and action represent the ‘definitive shape’ of a play, which is always negotiated via the editing process by which audience members assimilate the details received. These negotiations are often structured and given guidance by director, performers, stage designers, and others, but their final resolution cannot be given in advance. This is what both examples in this essay emphasise.

Misperformed Directions and Off-Book Scriptings

If multiplicity is one key to navigating the unstageability of the theatre charted in this essay, questions about control and authority are another. As alluded to above, in *Terrestrial Salvation* and in *Chekhov’s First Play* it is not always clear whether to give priority to text or stage action. The spoken commentary in *Dead Centre’s* production works to highlight specified flaws in the staged representation by articulating how this enactment differs from The Director’s stated concept. According to The Director, the actors on stage forget their lines, skip past pages of the script, and flunk their delivery. Throughout part one of the play, The Director bemoans that ‘he’s forgotten his lines’ or that’s ‘not her entrance’ and offers alternative line readings as he tells us that the actors have, according to his vision, ‘underplayed’ or ‘*over*-played that – always looking for a laugh’.³¹ The performed frustration of The Director mounts until he finally pronounces the staging as ‘just so far from what I imagined’.³² As there is disparity between individual conceptions of the fictional world and what the audience sees and hears on stage – not least, as Rebellato also points out, in the disregarding of the technologies of theatrical effects – so there is discrepancy between the stage production and the director’s conceptualisation, which is playfully underscored by The Director’s reporting on the action in *Chekhov’s First Play*.³³ This disconnection, either between expectation and performance or performance and reception, is identified too by Nicholas Ridout in his book about *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*. Ridout writes that ‘within the theatrical set-up, either the act of delivery or the act of collection is always compromised’ and that the ‘certain failure of relation in this encounter lies at the heart of the theatrical experience’.³⁴ The misalignment might manifest as some form of miscommunication caused by unintended, uncontrollable, or unscripted performances and, for Ridout, it is these moments of breaking character, corpsing, and stage fright that reveal the particular theatricality of the scenario. Following Ridout’s terms, it is precisely the ineptitude of the actors in *Chekhov’s First Play* that allows the metatheatricality of *Dead Centre’s* production to be performed. What is important to underline in this example, of course, is that the misperformances are fictional. The cast of *Chekhov’s First Play*, as a conceit that includes both the onstage adaptation and the offstage commentary offered by The Director, deliver their misdemeanours skillfully as part of the

31. *Dead Centre*,
Chekhov’s First Play,
20 and 24.

32. *Ibid.*, 26.

33. Rebellato, ‘When We
Talk of Horses’, 22.

34. Nicholas Ridout,
*Stage Fright, Animals,
and Other Theatrical
Problems* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University
Press, 2006), 31–2.

scripted action. Dead Centre are astute in recognising, as Ridout cites from Alan Read, that when things appear to go ‘wrong’ on stage this often results in an ‘increased level of attention and participation from the audience’ and in *Chekhov’s First Play* the company use this to their theatrical advantage.³⁵

35. Alan Read, *The Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 53–54.

In the context of cultish control and predestination, which constitutes the plot and gives purpose to the presence of the play text in *Terrestrial Salvation*, any hope for the future comes when the characters, rather than the actors, go off-book. In the opening lines of the play, Sol reads aloud the expectation, for members of the cult following Miles’s scripted prophecy, and for members of the audience participating in the theatre, that we must keep to our place in the script and ‘not skip, never skip’.³⁶ In his textual note within the published version of the play text, Crouch explains how the pages of this text reveal certain mechanisms of how the play operates in performance. This version, Crouch writes, includes ‘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’.³⁷ These additional lines and actions, indicated in the text by the descriptor ‘(off book)’, signal some of the divergences both between the two printed editions of the play and the words spoken and read in performance. Though the performers on stage recite most of their lines from the script also held by the audience, some of their utterances are unrecorded on the page so as to appear improvised by the characters and signal moments within the narrative of the play wherein Anna and Sol break away from the restrictions of Miles’ prescribed dialogue. An example of such a departure comes in relation to concurrences that appear throughout the play in order to make apparent that, before the accident at the lake, Sol’s name was Bonnie. As the characters read the dialogue, Anna employs this name and Sol resists, the implication being that Miles has foreseen this exchange between them and, in this knowledge, Sol should confidently refuse the attentions of her mother. The unprinted lines centre around the ocularcentric metaphor of limited vision and clear sight. Throughout the script, Sol complains about her eyesight, criticising her eyes as ‘disappointments’.³⁸ As the text progresses, Anna asks Sol, in a published line, if she used to wear glasses. The early images in the playbook show that Bonnie did. A few pages later, Anna collects a pair of glasses that she has previously entrusted to the care of a member of the audience and offers them to Sol. Speaking off book, Anna encourages Sol to try the glasses, promising to break them if Sol is not happy with the result. As Sol puts on the glasses and looks from Anna to the book, Anna encourages her, again off book, to ‘read ahead’ and ‘*SOL skips to the end of the book*’ just for a moment before returning to her place.³⁹ It is such exchanges of unpublished words that grow the characters’ relationship and the possibility for change within the scripted world.

36. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 31.

37. Crouch, Tim. ‘Note for this edition’, xiii.

38. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 30.

39. *Ibid.*, 80.

If the skipping of lines by characters in *Chekhov’s First Play* lends itself to the metatheatricity of the performance, then the addition of lines in *Terrestrial Salvation* opens space for urgently needed (if fictional) improvisation. In Dead Centre’s piece it draws attention to the gap

between what is shown on stage and the theatrical world represented and in Crouch's play it undermines Miles's fiction. In both cases, the deviation from the script, visible to audience members in *Terrestrial Salvation* and referenced by The Director in *Chekhov's First Play*, is determined by the company in advance so as to highlight the theatricality of what is staged.

Anna has presented the glasses to Sol earlier in *Terrestrial Salvation*. At the point of this first offering, Sol explains that optical devices are not permitted in the camp: 'No lenses. No distortion'.⁴⁰ The irony of the misleading vision presented by Miles's prophesy is, of course, apparent. Anna assumes the outlawing of spectacles to come from the character of Miles as leader of the fictional sect and asks in response to Sol's communication of the prohibition, 'He says?' 'It says', Anna corrects, alluding to and reading from the book Miles's has written that supposedly predicts the end of the world and dictates 'all the words' his followers will speak until then.⁴¹ In this way, Sol displaces responsibility from Miles to his text. When Miles appears on stage later in the play and closer in the narrative to the aforementioned cataclysm, he speaks to the audience, who sit in place of his supporters, via direct address and without script in hand. This, we read, is the group's final meeting. 'Look at what we've done. Look at what we've created', Miles implores his listeners, before asking, 'Can I hear someone say yes?'⁴² Throughout this section of the performance various audience members oblige and support the endeavour of the scene, providing the affirmations that Miles's requests and standing to deliver aloud readings that seemingly come from his scripture. It is significant that this spiritual leader, Miles, is played by the writer Crouch. The parallels are conscious and identified on the backcover of the text where we are told in advance that *Terrestrial Salvation* tells the story of someone who 'manipulates a group of people to sit in a place together and believe in something that isn't true'. This speaks, of course, to certain definitions of theatre and highlights that questions of control are not limited to the content of the narrative but to the metatheatrical investigation that underpins the production.

Ridout, in the previously cited text on *Stage Fright*, observes how direct address, 'at least in the modern theatre, in which the conventions of illusionism are firmly established, tends to signal some disjuncture between actor and role'.⁴³ The identification of both Miles and Crouch as scripters of the book we encounter in *Terrestrial Salvation*, one fictional and one a maker of theatre, is underlined by the presence of the playwright onstage. Correspondingly, and as previously discussed, in *Chekhov's First Play*, Bush Moukarzel, who is also the co-director of Dead Centre's production, performs the role of The Director. This casting conceals the gap between The Director as an onstage character and Moukarzel as the director who is performing. In terms of his spoken exegesis, Moukarzel's professional identity works to expand the usual way in which direct address functions in the theatre to emphasise, as Ridout suggests, the duality of performer and character. His commentary, instead, serves to introduce and mark out a triple identification for the performers in *Chekhov's First Play* who appear simultaneously as

40. Ibid., 56.

41. Ibid., 56 and
backpage.

42. Ibid., 94.

43. Ridout, *Stage Fright*,
70–71.

fictional players, characters, and actual actors. In both of these productions, then, layers of theatrical devices both reveal and conceal the mechanisms of control that are central to theatrical representation. Once again, theatre is deployed to expose the theatre, which it is only ever partially able to do.

Divergent Representations and Theatrical Incoherence

The fictional Director of *Chekhov's First Play* is frustrated by the gaffes of the actors on stage and seeks a higher level of verisimilitude in the production. It is important to remember, however, as Rebellato points out, that even 'representational theatre is not illusionistic' because in illusions we have 'mistaken beliefs about what we are seeing. No sane person watching a play believes that what is being represented before them is actually happening'.⁴⁴ Even without the direct address of The Director, audiences are always aware simultaneously of the performers we see in the theatre being both performer and character because we do not confuse stage action with everyday life. It is understood that what we are watching in performance is mimetic, or as Rebellato proposes, 'metaphorical'.⁴⁵

In Part Two of *Chekhov's First Play*, an audience member is directed onto the stage via guidance communicated through their headphones, which now play a different soundtrack to that heard by the remaining spectators still seated in the auditorium. The stage directions that communicate this action in the play text explain that this audience member is 'receiving private instructions. They are Platonov'.⁴⁶ The dialogue heard by the rest of the audience is now pre-recorded and lip-synced by the performers. Within the action of the adaptation staged in Part One, the arrival of Platonov has been much anticipated. This spectator is, of course, not Platonov. They are someone who has come to the theatre one evening to watch a performance. On the night that I saw the show at Battersea Arts Centre, they are a theatre student, someone recognisable to a colleague in my party of theatregoers and so, we are sure, not a plant or seconded member of Dead Centre's company. The audience member is, we might say, following Rebellato, a metaphor for Platonov. In metaphor, Rebellato writes, 'we are invited to see (or think about) one thing in terms of another thing' while simultaneously recognising the two entities as separate.⁴⁷ In *Chekhov's First Play* we understand that the audience member is simultaneously a spectator, like us, while thinking of them in terms of the character they represent onstage. Similarly, we appreciate that the actors on stage refer to specific characters and the fictional players who perform these roles within in the construct of The Director's play, while, at the same time, maintaining their identity as actors. This, Rebellato suggests, is how theatre operates: when we see a show we are 'invited to think of the fictional world through this particular representation. Theatrical representation is metaphorical'.⁴⁸

Metaphor as layered representational field helps account for a central motivation of *Terrestrial Salvation* as well. The idea of a performance as just one representation of a given fictional world is integral to its

44. Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses', 18.

45. *Ibid.*, 25.

46. Dead Centre, *Chekhov's First Play*, 38.

47. Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses', 25.

48. *Ibid.*

- complexity. In his note to the published edition of the play, Crouch underscores the distinction between text and performance by making clear that actors on stage do not always physically perform the actions that are described on the page. When, early in the dialogue, Sol reads aloud a verbal reporting of her own actions, she may not adopt the postures the script denotes, though the latter part of the account that a ‘girl kneels on the ground and reads from her book’ is certainly being performed. ‘This girl is me. Described as me here’, Sol says.⁴⁹ Like the actors in *Chekhov’s First Play*, the identity of the girl described is, at least, threefold. She is the character of Sol and, we learn as the play progresses, also Bonnie, as well as the performer playing these parts. Reading the published play text, I cannot remember if the actor knelt on stage in correspondence with this reported action but I might imagine her to do so from the textual narration. This highlights again that what is shown on stage is simply one version of what is also played out through the book’s pages and in the mind of each reader and spectator.
- A further complication to the figure of the girl and the way in which she is described is also introduced through the illustrations. As well as appearing on stage, and as previously discussed, the characters are also graphically signified on the page. As Crouch notes, Jadhav has ‘drawn the people in that world – even if the actors look nothing like them’.⁵⁰ Here, another dissonance appears as audiences in the theatre encounter two visually dissimilar representations of the same character within the production. In most cases, the differences are striking. Writing about *Terrestrial Salvation*, Scott-Bottoms notes, for example, that ‘Jadhav’s drawings of a tousled, bearded Miles remain cognitively dissonant with Crouch’s clean-shaven baldness’.⁵¹ The difference between the physicality of the performers and that of the characters as they appear in the book is marked and works to underline, and expand further, the simultaneous presence of performer, interpretation, and character. We are used, in the theatre, to receiving details both visually and aurally. Rebellato notes that we are able to process both verbal and image-based information without feeling that there’s a massive discontinuity in the nature of the fictional world’.⁵² Instead of viewing either the version of a character presented on stage or that given on the page as definitive, we might instead attend to the discord between these models in order to locate the specific complexities of *Terrestrial Salvation*.
- The consequences of the layered nature of representation and its refusal to finally resolve or cohere extend beyond the walls of a particular theatre, even as they condition any one audience member’s (or performer’s or writer’s or director’s) experience. Through her subtle reading of US playwright Julia Cho’s *The Piano Teacher* (2007), Ju Yon Kim teases out a ‘model of how the intimate relationship between paper and performance in drama might capture the contradictions of post-racial discourse’.⁵³ In production, Kim observes, the play ‘generally discourages considerations of how racial stratifications might affect the relationships among its characters’, while the published casting notes give detailed racial and ethnic identifications within the list of characters’.⁵⁴ A similar disparity is apparent in the illustrated and staged forms of *Terrestrial Salvation*. In the 2019 production at the Royal Court, an actor likely to be identified as white
49. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 31.
50. Crouch, Tim. ‘Note for this edition’, xiii.
51. Stephen Scott-Bottoms, ‘Playing in the Dark: Tim Crouch’s *Total Immediate Collective Imminent Terrestrial Salvation*’, In *Crisis, Representation and Resilience: Perspectives on Contemporary British Theatre*. eds. Clare Wallace, Clara Escoda, Enric Monforte, and José Ramón Prado-Pérez (London, Bloomsbury, 2022), 193–208 (200).
52. Rebellato, ‘When We Talk of Horses’, 22.
53. Kim, ‘Between Paper and Performance’, 127.
54. Ibid.

- plays the character of Anna. On the page, Jadhav's illustrations present Anna as a character likely to be identified as black. Such a distinction, as Kim proposes, 'dramatizes not how race *appears* on stage but how race is asked to *disappear* on stage' in 'colour-blind' performance practices premised on the speculative disaggregation of the racial identifications of actor and character.⁵⁵ Kim charts a nuanced account of the ways in which *The Piano Teacher*, rather than presenting a plot concerned with colour-blind racism, invites spectators to 'abide by its logic' while, in the offstage version of the play contained in the published script, including character descriptors that call this position to task.⁵⁶ In *Terrestrial Salvation*, the illustrated text-based and performed versions of the play are available to the audience simultaneously. Encountered in the theatre, Crouch's words and Jadhav's illustrations exploit what Kim calls the 'contrapuntal experience of theatrical performance, during which two (or more) worlds interact together'.⁵⁷ Spectators are aware of both the performed and illustrated interpretations of the play's action. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, as Kim explains through *The Piano Teacher*, the bodies of the performers on stage might, then, come to 'mark the point where the relationship between the world dramatized in the play and the world of the audience becomes uncertain'.⁵⁸ What is significant to understanding the questions of representation explored in *Terrestrial Salvation* is not the coherence of text and performance but rather their difference.
55. Ibid. Italics in original.
56. Ibid, 141.
57. Ibid, 144.
58. Ibid.

Multiform Characters and Parallel Worlds

Towards the end of *Terrestrial Salvation*, Anna and Sol appear in one further physical manifestation. The performers who have played these characters on stage thus far approach two members of the audience and ask, respectively, 'Could you read me?'⁵⁹ For the rest of the scene, the two spectators stand and speak for the principal characters. They deliver an exchange wherein Sol and Anna discuss whether Sol will attend the final meeting of her father's cult, and what will happen if the coming eclipse does or does not bring about a new world and if Sol escapes the compound with Anna. The two performers leave the stage and, at this point in the play, the action in the script and performance diverges most notably. The characters are, we understand, simultaneously escaping their pre-scripted roles and on stage performing them. The conceit is that the spectators are reading what Miles has written while Anna and Sol break out of the enclosure but they also, as is the case with the audience member who plays Platanov in *Chekhov's First Play*, are now the characters in the production. This returns the audience's attention once again to the multiplicity of representation staged in these plays. Platanov *is* Platanov, as well as a spectator. Anna and Sol are simultaneously and varyingly represented by two performers, two spectators, and in Jadhav's illustrations in the play text. At the same time, all of the performers are also actors working in a theatre and the audience members are players too, performing Miles's followers and, occasionally, other parts.

59. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 84.

60. Ibid., 86.

61. Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses', 18.

The spectators speaking as Anna and Sol might concurrently be playing members of Miles's sect. In the section of dialogue read by these two audience members, Sol explains to Anna that her father had told her that her mother had died when she attempted to breach the enclosure. Anna responds that she is 'here now. In an altered form'.⁶⁰ Anna's representation is multiform, in how her character is represented by Miles's narrative and how her figure is depicted across performance and drawing. Listening to the lines spoken on stage by the two audience members, the remaining spectators are reminded once again that, as Rebellato writes, there is a 'difference between what we see and what we imagine or understand to be happening in the represented world'.⁶¹ In *Chekhov's First Play*, The Director playfully underscores this distinction by drawing attention to inconsistencies of interpretation and staging, as well as by claiming to offer insights into the performers as actors, the rehearsal process, and cast-director relationships and power dynamics. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, the continuity of the text read aloud by the spectatorial stand-ins on stage makes clear the discontinuity between what we are watching and hearing performed and the escape we imagine to simultaneously be taking place somewhere else beyond the theatre but within the narrative, aided in our visualisation by Jadhav's illustrations.

Following the lines attributed to Anna and Sol and spoken by spectators in *Terrestrial Salvation*, the graphic and staged representations of the action seem briefly to cohere. The last assembly of Miles's followers is underway in the theatre and Sol is absent, depicted only in the script's illustrations, which are interspersed with the performed action. The images in the book show a spectacled Sol and Anna embracing, climbing through wire fencing, on a bus and then a plane, holding hands. It seems that the character has made her choice. But then the performer playing Sol re-enters the stage and reads her final lines within the enacted iteration of the pre-apocalyptic meeting. The illustrated Sol flees but the performed Sol remains. The status of what constitutes the action of the play is once again complicated.

In *Chekhov's First Play* the stakes of what is happening on stage are called into question by The Director's narration, which simultaneously comprises the offstage action of the performance and situates the enacted production as such by reporting its events. Throughout *Terrestrial Salvation*, the offstage action, rather than being unrepresentable, has been depicted visually in Jadhav's illustrations. The opening pages provide a graphic history to the current action of the play. As we turn the pages of the script, the images come next to offer an alternative rendering of the same encounters we see on stage. Operating in this way, as is also the case in *Chekhov's First Play*, the onstage and offstage action are concurrent. In *Terrestrial Salvation*, they diverge to offer different versions of the same fictional world. In the final scenes of the play, the story being told fractures, not only into alternate depictions of a shared plot but into multiply existing collateral endings. Crouch defines in his introduction to the published script that plays are 'parallel worlds that live alongside our own'.⁶² Earlier in *Terrestrial Salvation*, when actors perform the

62. Crouch, Tim. 'Parallel Worlds', xii.

63. Crouch and Jadhav, *Terrestrial Salvation*, 76.

64. *Ibid.*, 112.

principal characters, Anna asks Sol about the world to come. Sol explains, in words that pre-empt her mother's later answer, 'It's us in altered form'.⁶³ Where the play takes us then, perhaps, is towards the passage into 'infinite worlds' that Miles has promised his supporters.⁶⁴ In *Terrestrial Salvation*, this infinitude refers not only to the world of the play and that outside the theatre, or to the multiple representations of the play offered in the text and images on the page, in production, and via the expectations and receptions of the creative team and audience. Rather, there are multiple versions within the play itself, including parallel and alternate finales. This is perhaps to be expected. After all, we are, as signified by Ridout's 'disjuncture', Rebellato's 'metaphorical', and Kim's 'contrapuntal', in a place wherein, as an audience, we await to encounter irreconcilable interpretations and imaginings across visual, aural, and fictional registers. We are in a theatre.

Notes on Contributor

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