

Cruel and Tender



Lida Mirzaii interviews playwright Martin Crimp

Martin Crimp doesn't write to appease. His plays won't give you a social comedy you can watch leisurely after having a Haagen Daaz in the interval, and no matter how many times he's labelled as creating 'in yer face' drama, he has deftly managed to wriggle out of the grasp of dramatic stereotypes. In fact, the only label you'll find affixed to Crimp's career isn't a particularly insightful one: elusive.

Ironically, for one of England's most challenging and innovative playwrights, Crimp still remains an enigma in his own country. Go to Europe and his name is firmly in the theatrical headlights, his plays are frequently performed and he is a prolific translator of French plays. But it isn't too difficult to see the reason for the mystery: he doesn't pander to the British media's obsession with celebrity, rarely gives interviews and does not field personal questions relating to himself or his works. With his Warholesque bob and delicate, erudite features, Crimp looks at home amidst the European arts scene, a far cry from his beginnings in Kent.

Born in 1956 to John Crimp, a British Rail signalling engineer, and his wife Jennie, Martin Andrew Crimp was a precocious child, winning a scholarship to Dulwich College - one of the largest public schools in the UK. When his father was transferred to York, it was in Pocklington Grammar School, which playwright Tom Stoppard also attended, that Crimp started to engage in theatre: "I was the kind of teenager who acted in and directed and did the lights and made the sound for the school play", says Crimp. "I still find that the wings of a theatre, with its areas of flat black and props set out on tables, affect me personally in a way the stage doesn't. Perhaps because the stage is now about work, whereas that strange space in the wings takes me



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back to my adolescence."

Crimp started his dramatic career at the wings of mainstream theatre. His first six plays were performed in the small Orange Tree theatre in Richmond, his current hometown, a company that managed to survive by performing lunchtime shows. The strange space is therefore a concept that seeps into Crimp's works.

His most acclaimed play, *Attempts on her Life*, is composed of seventeen scenarios of a woman called Anne who never appears in the dramatic dialogue. She is at once a terrorist, a suicidal artist, a refugee and porn star, occupy-

ing the fringes of modern culture; she manipulates herself to the avaricious desires of a consumer society. It's a challenging play to produce and meticulously crafted.

"A play is written to be handed over," says Crimp. "Having said that, I've always had a close involvement with the director of a new piece, will discuss the play in great detail before rehearsal, and will have a say in the casting. Of course I have an image in my mind of how a play will function - although in the case of my 'narrated plays' like *Attempts on her Life* the image fluctuates. But I want the company themselves to make discoveries about the work, to find things I could not have foreseen."

Attempts on her Life received its first major revival in 1997 at the National Theatre and has been translated into more than 20 languages. It finally brought his name from the margins to the London lights, establishing his works in the leagues of great modernist theatre that addresses violence and gender in an unflinching way.

"Violent acts create a point of concentration. The stage lets us represent violence without having to suffer it. But in fact I show very little violence on stage. It is more often reported-as in a Greek play." In *Cruel and Tender*, Crimp takes the ancient translation of *The Trachiniae* by Sophocles and transplants it into a harsh modern world of emotional terrorism and international corruption. "If violence is about power...for example the modern state claims a monopoly on the use of violence, then perhaps it's not surprising if gender enters the picture."

And this is apparent in *Cruel and Tender*, where Amelia, in desperation to claim the love of her husband, takes violence into her own hands. "When I was preparing *Cruel and Tender* I read Joshua Goldstein's book *War and*

Gender," says Crimp, "which makes a very strong case for the importance of gender roles in making war: the man in uniform trained to kill, the woman at home representing both the family and the state the man is fighting for. Despite a tiny minority of women engaging in combat, I believe this remains the model."

It is surprising then, that when I mention politics he doesn't seem that enthused. Perhaps he gets asked about it all the time. "Hmm. Okay. The politics question," is his first laconic response, but he goes on, "What do most people want from the modern state? To be left alone - to be free to shop, to be free to write plays. Unless there's an emergency: then we want the state to save our banks and stop parents murdering their babies RIGHT NOW!" And Crimp addresses this paradox of modern society by tackling what is cruel and superficial in everyday life.

"I think my work is political", he continues, "insofar as it reflects the mentality of the average modern citizen, which tends to flip between sudden active engagement, and chronic indifference".

The versatility of Crimp's seventeen works is staggering, with his modernist works of theatre harking back to the classic output of Beckett and Ionesco sitting alongside translations of classical French texts such as Moliere's *Misanthrope*. *Cruel and Tender* was the first time he merged these two categories.

"All writers are looking for whatever bright shiny things they can steal from the past," says Crimp, who seems at expert at such dramatic thefts. "From Sophocles I stole many things but above all a structure which is more broken-backed than classical. A play in which the two main characters never meet, how weird is that?" **M**

**Top: from
*Attempts on
her Life***