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EDWARD GORDON CRAIG AND "THE NEW STAGECRAFT"

Three men—a German, a Swiss, and an Englishman—were to be the chief figures in the movement known as the New Stagecraft. These men, in order of their influence, were Richard Wagner, with his theories of the unified arts of the theatre, Adolphe Appia, who was inspired by Wagner, and Edward Gordon Craig. Appia, who wrote *The Staging of Wagnerian Drama* in 1895 and *Music and Stage Production* four years later, turned from opera to drama and became known for his theories on lighting, theories which were to be the obvious forerunner of Craig's techniques. Appia became one of the first stage theorists to analyze lighting and stage procedure in terms of scenery, floor, actor, and spatial relations. Although some of Appia's ideas filtered through Europe, he failed to achieve a wide circle of attention since his books were written in his particularly abstruse style of German. Had there been as many willing translators as there are available today, to procure for a man of ideas in one country an enlarged audience, his influence might have extended beyond his most interested disciple, Craig.

Clearly the most important figure in introducing the New Stagecraft to the Continent was Edward Gordon Craig. He was an extremely able pamphleteer who wrote a vigorous and flowing English which, together with his personal idiosyncracies, soon won him a considerable audience. For some twenty-five years he seemed able to produce books and essays as easily as an actress produces histrionics. Ironically, the Germans who ignored the works of Appia took some of them up when Appia's ideas were re-formulated for Germany by Craig, of whom it may be said, "His personality was his press agent."[1]

This buoyant, energetic, near-sighted gentleman, who had a message to

give and made certain that anyone vaguely interested in the theatre should hear or read what he had to say, was the son of a great actress of the Victorian era, Ellen Terry, and of Edward Godwin, a theatrical designer. Although Craig never saw his father after he was three years old, Godwin's artistic inheritance seems to have lived on in his son, as well as in Craig's sister Edith, who made a reputation for herself as a theatrical manager and costume designer. The young Edward received a conventional education at private boys' schools in England and in Germany. This was one of the few touches of convention in his life, since he was brought up in a household which was organized solely around the lady of the house, a lady who for something like twenty years was a great actress and who was the partner of an equally great actor, Sir Henry Irving.

In this atmosphere Craig gave no thought to any other career than going on the stage. He began with small parts and moved on to more important ones after his great teacher, Sir Henry, considered him satisfactory enough to take leading roles in Shakespeare and in popular works by writers of the day. In some plays Craig even played opposite his mother. After years of steady progress at his chosen profession, he did not seem to feel satisfied with his theatrical talents. His growing dissatisfaction was coupled, despite the warnings and disapproval of Sir Henry, with his marriage, a union which soon proved to be unsuccessful. As a result Craig took a position with a touring company for two years in order to escape from the heady atmosphere of theatrical London.

During his last years at the Lyceum with Irving, and for his time in the provinces, Craig began to listen to some of the critics of the theatre of his time, as well as to read avidly. "I began", he has stated, "to read books which were very critical of stage players and play-acting, and contemptuous of the theatrical. . . . If these men could speak so gravely, there must be something in what they said."[2] Until this time Craig had been exposed to little but the ideas of Irving and to his particularly sheltered childhood in the theatre, and the theatrical world had seemed one where all was perfect.

After his two years of touring, Craig decided that he had not the talent to become as great as his idol, Irving. Although deciding that acting was not to be his profession, Craig could not give up the theatre and the question of what he could do in the theatrical world therefore presented itself. It was during this time of indecision that he learned from a friend how to execute wood engravings. His illustrations were to bring in money at a time when finances were particularly low, and even after he became successful Craig con-

tinued to make graceful decorations for many of his books in this medium.

Always a person who never lacked for words, Craig found that more and more of them seemed to crowd in upon him as he thought of what he wanted in and from the theatre. One day he asked Ellen Terry how to learn to write, and as he later recalled, she replied, "She couldn't say, but suggested 'begin to write' ",[3] which he did. His early ideas on the theatre soon began to appear in weekly magazines such as the *Sketch*, and he was off on his career as designer, orator, and pamphleteer for the New Stagecraft.

For Craig the years 1900 to 1903 were a time of especially intense artistic activity, for he had a theatre in which to try some of his ideas. Admittedly it was not the theatre of the fashionable, with an estimable audience which could always be relied upon to be there. The theatres in which Craig tried his theories were in out-of-the-way places of London and in the town halls of the suburban communities, but at least he had the theatre and he had the audience, small and interested. Considering the nature of the theatres, it is rather surprising to find that such men as Sir Max Beerbohm and William Butler Yeats publicly wrote of performances in them.

The man who gave the impetus to these productions was the English composer Martin Shaw, later a painter in song and symphony of the English countryside (what good choir could go through the Christmas season without his *Oxford Book of English Carols?*). During this period, these two eager young artists were fortunate in that they were able to work with the same group of non-professional singers for all of their productions. Their first joint effort was *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell. Here, instead of an archaeologically correct Grecian scene, Craig created illusions of space and sky by the use of sky cloths which changed colour in each act. He also used platforms with five levels and a trellis with creepers and flowers.[3] Today this may not sound very unusual, but to a theatrical world where sentimental little drawing rooms with pretty painted walls were the vogue, Craig's technique was a shock.

Within two months of this first dual effort, Craig and Shaw were again planning a Purcell presentation, this time *The Masque of Love*. In this Craig produced an original and artistic effect through the solitary use of grey. The cloths for the back and side, and one large floor cloth, were of a uniform flat tone.[3] This would seem to be Craig's first use of the great drapes which he later sketched in his theatre designs. It was in March of 1902 that William Butler Yeats wrote in the then new *Saturday Review*,

> Last year I saw the Masque of Love . . . and I saw the only admirable

stage scenery of our time, for Mr. Gordon Craig has discovered how to decorate a play with severe, beautiful, simple, effects of colour, that leave the imagination free to follow all suggestions of the play. Mr. Gordon Craig's scenery is a new and distinct art.[4]

In the early spring of 1902 Martin Shaw and Craig produced the third of the series of musical dramas, this time Handel's *Acis and Galatea*. Of this production of Sir Max Beerbohm wrote:

In March there was a production of a little opera and masque in which Mr. Gordon Craig had made for our wonder and delight, certain strange and lovely experiments in the management and decoration of the stage. These achievements were so fresh and fascinating. It was a very serious and delightful experiment. Mr. Craig's spirit and method would be invaluable in the mounting of certain kinds of plays.[5]

These productions apparently were musically pleasing and the scenery and costumes were new and catching to the eye. Months of collaboration between musical and artistic director had gone into each of these works, and from six to eight months of preparation with the singers and principals were needed for each production. Even then the performances ran only from three nights to one week and, needless to say, there was no satisfactory financial return. But Craig was being noticed by a few leaders of the artistic theatre and those who had not seen these different, new, and exciting productions could read of them in the weeklies.

At Christmas, Craig and Shaw collaborated on a production of Laurence Housman's *Bethlehem*, and early the following year Craig designed the scenery for a production by his uncle, Fred Terry, of *Sword and Song*, designs of which critics seemed to think well. This year Craig was given the opportunity to do a large production in an important commercial theatre. His mother, Ellen Terry, appointed him her producer for Ibsen's *The Vikings of Helgeland*, to be followed by Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. Ibsen's plays were not of the type to fit Miss Terry's personality, but Craig, with his designer's visions, apparently did not take proper note of this. The play was not a financial success, but Craig was certainly noticed. In writing to Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats said, "Craig's scenery is amazing but distracts one's thoughts from the words."[4] Max Beerbohm again wrote excitedly of Craig's work and Will Rothenstein, the artist, said "So beautifully was the play staged, so nobly were the figures grouped in scene after scene, that I felt that something important had happened to the English stage."[3]

England may at last have noticed the work of Craig, but no one seemed to want to employ him and his revolutionary ideas of colour, simplicity, unity, beauty, and severity. The avoidance of naturalism in costume and scene was too daring. This was the man who believed that "scenery to appear so was to be so." In the workshop of the English scene-painter there was no room for such a revolutionary. Germany was the country where Craig first realized that his ideas were being accepted and warmly debated by the thinkers and artists of the day. In Berlin he met Otto Brahm, who gave him his first opportunity to design a production on the Continent. This was a presentation of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, which was produced in 1904 at the Lessing Theatre.

In December, 1904, two geniuses of the modern theatre met: Gordon Craig and Isadora Duncan. Before this liaison dissolved she had been responsible for his designing scenery for Eleonora Duse in Florence and the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia.[6] At their first meeting, Craig wildly accused her of stealing his ideas for the use of drapes and lights. Miss Duncan listened him out, and she fascinatedly described him as tall, with a rather effeminate face and with artistic hands which continually brushed his hair from his eyes.

The following year Craig's first essay, *On the Art of the Theatre*, was published in Germany. It later appeared in English, Dutch, Russian, and Japanese translations. This was the first influential essay that he had written, and it gave him a wide audience for his new ideas. He declared that suggestion was the supreme law of the theatre and that accuracy of detail was useless on the stage. Craig declared that by means of suggestion one could bring to the stage a sense of all things. His ideas were provocative and his drawings beautiful, but he had yet to prove whether they were practical.

In Berlin, Isadora Duncan arranged meetings with Duse, who, after several enthusiastic discussions, invited Craig to come to Florence to produce Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. Miss Duncan asserts that Duse charmed Craig into this, and Craig states that his only purpose was to please Duncan. The city of Florence, full of history, architecture, and mellowness, must have charmed Craig, for he made it his city of residence for nearly twenty years. This was the only significance of his production, for in *Rosmersholm* Craig once again had one of those immensely beautiful one-night stands.

In 1908, Craig founded his only successful publication, *The Mask*, as a personal organ for his pamphleteering. His first such attempt had been the *Page*, which had appeared intermittently in England from 1898-1901, and which had contained many wood-cuts, a bit of text, excellent and historically interesting contributions by theatre people, a Coquelin drawing or two, and a unique

sketch by Irving.[3] Today some of these would surely be costly collectors' items. Craig's second attempt, *The Mask*, was much more favourably received, however, perhaps because by then people had heard his name, were interested in his ideas, and wanted to see what he had to say. Craig described *The Mask* as "a journal for the Art of the Theatre", and he contributed articles to it and preached from it until 1929.

When Isadora Duncan was in Moscow she frequently spoke to Stanislavski, director of the Moscow Art Theatre, about Gordon Craig's ideas. The result was an invitation to Craig to design and produce Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Moscow. Talks for the production began in 1908, but the production itself did not appear until the winter season of 1911. Also in 1911, and after much discussion and correspondence with W. B. Yeats, Craig designed costumes and scenery for a revival of Yeats' poetic play, *The Hour Glass*. Craig, in his belief in the beauty of extreme simplicity, designed a set of plain screens following a mathematical pattern. The screens were a success, but the costumes made from Craig's designs were very ugly and at the conclusion of the performance Yeats felt obliged to make a little speech to the audience, apologizing for them.[7]

Craig was able to use the idea of the screens from his Yeats production for his Moscow presentation of *Hamlet*. He said that a work of art should be made of inorganic matter such as stone, marble, or bronze, and that these materials should be re-usable as an artistic form. The idea of screens which would be interchangeable so as to produce endless combinations of designs and scenes was quite impracticable, as it would have required a theatre full of machinery to move the parts. For the Moscow production the screens were finally made of wood, painted and covered with cloth. They still were difficult to move, and the stage hands had to work as hard to move the screens while not being seen by the playgoers as if they had had to move a realistic set.

The production met with a great success. Some people were very enthusiastic about the artistic creations, while others excitedly criticized them. Craig's name became famous throughout Europe. But what was most important was that other theatres on the continent were beginning to absorb his ideas. Leopold Sulerzhitsky, who had been appointed as Craig's assistant for the production, wrote to Stanislavski, "Craig is a great artist. I have proved I can put up with the rudeness, irritability and confusion of this man. He does not seem to be interested in the actor very much."[8] The production as a whole had to conform entirely to Craig's own symbolic interpretation, an interpretation which he imposed upon the actors, although some of this rigidity may have been due to the fact that the Russians had poor translations of the

play and Stanislavski had never thought of going to the original text.

Hamlet was Craig's last contact with the reality of the practical stage for over fifteen years, but his restless activity found many outlets for his theatrical dreaming. In Florence he founded his school for the Art of the Theatre at the Arena Goldoni. From his pen flowed illustrations, designs, and etchings which were contributed to magazines or published as books. Among them were *Towards a New Theatre*, *Books and Theatres*, *The Theatre Advancing*, and *Scene*. From his early days in Germany and throughout his life there were many exhibitions of his drawings and theatrical art in salons all over Europe, including a show at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Germany had always been particularly interested in his work, and he was invited to exhibit in the Deutsche Theater-Austellung, in Magdeburg, in recognition of his great influence on their stage. Clearly theatres rather than art salons should be the place where the theatrical designs could show his work to greatest advantage. His designs were lofty, noble, and inspiring, and had great poetic vision, but the theatre does impose a physical limitation which Craig would not acknowledge.

In each of his writings Craig gives us much the same ideas restated in different words. He re-arranged the actor, his voice and facile expression, as well as the scenery and lighting. The key word in this re-arrangement was "non-natural", including scenery. Only inorganic materials were to be used in the making of his works of art. His wish was for more unity of scene, scenery, lighting, and costume, instead of an expert in each attempting to out-do the others. He called for a lofty theatre, beautifully built of durable materials. The size did not seem important to him, but the quality quite naturally did. In this durable theatre he hoped that there would be no attempt to produce what was called "theatrical illusion". Instead of using real objects, he wished them to be suggested by fashionable symbols which were to stand for reality. Streams of light would illumine his theatre, since daylight was the best lighting for a work of art. In this vision the artist was to work only for happiness, not for monetary gain.

In dismissing the actor, who did not seem to interest him, and with whom he found it difficult to have a working partnership, Craig agitated for the use once again of the mask in the theatre. Human facial expression, he declared, was for the most part worthless, since it so often concealed a lie. He did not wish, however, to revive the mask of the ancient Greek theatre; rather, he wanted a mask which would return to the stage to restore expression, the visible expression of the mind, and which would be a creation, not a copy.

In his enthusiasm he called the mask "that paramount means of dramatic expression without which acting was bound to degenerate."[9] Eugene O'Neill's use of the Congo mask in *All God's Chillun* may have been suggested by contemporary discussions of these ideas of Craig's.[10]

Craig's stage now seemed ready for a great theatrical artist — and in his stead he dismissed the artist to present "Gentlemen — the Marionette". This new figure was supposed to stand as the symbol of man, and he was christened the Uber-Marionette. His chief virtues were those of silence and obedience, and he did not pretend, like the actor, to be something he was not. Maurice Maeterlinck had anticipated Craig in these super-actors, but Craig certainly did not envision them as any mechanical man, but as a type of superhuman being dominated by a creative super-director. The Russian producer, V. Meyerhold, in the years immediately following the Russian revolution, came the nearest to physically presenting this idea of Craig's when he went through a stage of extreme constructivism. Craig expected much from the actor and very rarely found an artist who lived up to his high standards, coupled with his impatient nature. Perhaps the Uber-Marionette performed an important psychological function for a militant reformer.

The ideas of Edward Gordon Craig, poet with pen and paint, became widespread in the European theatre and filtered through to the American scene as well. Today much of his inspiration has been put to good use; yet he has his vocal critics who are still writing. Eric Bentley, for example, accuses Craig of leaving life in an attempt to create a high tragic atmosphere.[11] In leaving life Craig leaves the drama, as he does in his substitution of the marionette for the actor. Bentley adds that Craig's final summation of designs could not be executed since they were pretentious fantasies. Lee Simonson accuses Craig of having no conception of the variety of plastic relationships which can be established between the actor and the scenery. Craig's original ideal of the theatre was a romantic refuge, and his drawings and designs might better be used to illustrate books of poetry. Simonson's conclusion is that Craig has no place in the living theatre, because the theatre must continue to be a workshop.[12]

Was Edward Gordon Craig a man of the theatre or did his work tend to react against the basic element in the theatre, the actor? Many people feel that Craig has little place in theatrical history, but when one reads of the New Stagecraft, of the designers who helped to discard literal realism, of the workers who brought mood lighting to the modern theatre and suggestive simplicity to design, Craig's name always is one of the first to be mentioned. He gave

us a vision, and where would the theatre be without its dreamers? He wanted a unifying effect of perspective and lighting, of simplicity and the appeal to the eye, of the use of mass and spaces, and of the impact of various playing levels. The use of abstract shapes and non-representative objects and design to express mood and atmosphere may be found in good theatrical stagecraft today, and they were particularly expressed in the United States in the work of such men as Robert Edmond Jones, and to a lesser degree in the work of Norman-Bel Geddes. While in his extreme forms Craig's ideas were rarely adopted, they had an immense influence on stage decoration and played a major part in re-formulating methods of production. Although Craig was unpractical, he nevertheless set up an ideal of stage production and scene design and helped to establish the role of the creative artist in the theatre.

NOTES

1. Kenneth MacGowan, *The Theatre of Tomorrow* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), p. 78.
2. Edward Gordon Craig, *Ellen Terry and Her Secret Self: together with a Plea for G. B S.* (New York: Dutton, 1939), pp. 122-123.
3. Edward Gordon Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days* (London: Hulton, 1957), pp. 242, 229, 238, 244, 191.
4. William Butler Yeats, *The Letters* (London: Hart-Davis, 1954), letter to *Saturday Review*, March, 1902; April, 1903.
5. Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres* (New York: Knopf, 1930), I, April 5, 1930.
6. Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), p. 198.
7. Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950), p. 195.
8. David Magarshack, *Stanislavsky: A Life* (London: MacGibbon, 1950), p. 327.
9. Wladyslaw Theodore Benda, *Masks* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1944), p. 57.
10. Edmond M. Gagey, *Revolution in American Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), p. 75.
11. Eric Bentley, *The Modern Theatre* (London: Hale, 1948), p. 210.
12. Lee Simonson, *The Stage is Set* (New York: Dover, 1932), p. 344.