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Author(s): Walter Mennloch

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THE ART OF GORDON CRAIG*

By *WALTER MENNLOCH.*

GORDON CRAIG was born into the theatre and into tradition associated with the name of Henry Irving. His development has not been connected with acting or play-writing, but through the side of the theatre connected with decoration. He has made inventions in lighting which renders footlights obsolete and brings back shadows to the stage. We have seen in Dublin one production according to Gordon Craig's methods—"The Hour Glass" as it was last performed in the Abbey Theatre. The lighting and the decoration certainly added beauty and dignity to the production. Last autumn, in London, I saw an exhibition of models and drawings for his production of "Macbeth." The dramatist who saw them studied those models and designs would certainly approve of them. The form of drama is action, but drama itself is a moment in an action—it is an expectation, a cry, a heart-throb. The feeling for that moment was in all the designs for "Macbeth." For instance, there was the scene after the murder was accomplished, when Macbeth had neglected to bring back the daggers. The scene is narrowed to compression and agony; behind is a corridor, behind that a laticed doorway, behind that the room in which the light still burns. But having regarded the scenes again, a questioning spirit would rise in the dramatist. Mr. Gordon Craig's art is in competition with the play; it is vital and dominating, and always threatens the dramatist's creation. Now that he has published his manifestoes in this exciting book, "The Art of the Theatre," I understand why my instincts were against his designs. Mr. Gordon Craig would make the theatre independent of the art of the dramatist. He would inaugurate a movement that would have for its end the play without words. Gordon Craig would first do away with the actor. "The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure—the Uber-Marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name."† He would not have words written for these marionettes. "Is it not permissible to give an idea whatever form the artist chooses?" the Stage-Director ask in the first dialogue,‡ and having gained our assent he goes on: "Since you have granted all I asked you to permit, I am now going to tell you out of what material an artist

*The Art of the Theatre. By Edward Gordon Graig. London: Heinmann. 6s.

† The Art of the Theatre, page 81.

‡ The Art of the Theatre, page 179.

of the theatre of the future will create his masterpieces. Out of ACTION, SCENE and VOICE. And when I say *action*, I mean both gesture and dancing, the prose and poetry of action. When I say *scene*, I mean all which comes before the eye, such as lighting, costume, as well as scenery. When I say *voice*, I mean the spoken word or the word which is sung, in contradiction to the word which is read." Previously the Playgoer had said "the play will certainly not exist if the poet or playwright is not there to write it." And the Stage Director had replied: "There will not be any play in the sense in which you use the word."

The Marionette Theatre which Mr. Gordon Craig hopes to create will be of more interest than significance. No one will mistake it for the theatre of the future. The truth is, that Mr. Gordon Craig is a man of the brush and the pencil. He is obsessed by the convention of the picture. Now the picture is a bounded thing and the play is an unbounded thing. Gordon Craig wishes to impose the bound of the picture upon the play.

"The Art of the Theatre" is a stimulating book. The illustrations give an insight into the writer's proper art. They are full of invention, and, from the point of the stage-producer, of excellent good sense. Thus, for the opening of "Electra" of Sophocles there is a vast and forbidding doorway—and as the artist wisely remarks, "a vast and forbidding doorway still remains the best background for any tragedy." And in the Forum scene in "Julius Cæsar" we see Mark Anthony addressing half Rome. A hundred thousand citizens are seen at the back. Mark Anthony leans towards them and away from us. In the front, nearest to the audience, the conspirators wait. "All I felt was the crowd and the two parties: I had to bring all these in and divide them so that we should feel the division clearly. I put the crowd farthest off because, although a hundred thousand voices can drown one voice when it is between you and the speaker; still, a hundred thousand voices make an excellent background to the voice of a personality. For instance, I never knew distant thunder, however mighty it was, to interrupt a conversation. The man who is persuading the crowd is in the middle distance. Those against whom he is persuading them are in the foreground. The silence can be felt."