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‘The best thing I ever did on the stage’: Edward Gordon Craig and the Purcell Operatic Society

Although lasting only two and a half years, Edward Gordon Craig’s work with the Purcell Operatic Society was his most consistent and productive period of work on the stage. This article re-examines this period of Craig’s life in order to ascertain why he saw it to be the zenith of his career. In particular, it analyses his work with the amateur group to argue that it was foundational in the development of his approach to theatre making and, further, helped him to introduce the role of the theatre director in Britain. By examining this material in relation to wider contextual factors, it also shows how the group offered audiences an alternative to the dominant ‘star’ system of the early 1900s. In doing this, the article asserts the need to place the Purcell Operatic Society at the centre of any discussion about Craig. Philippa Burt is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Goldsmiths University of London. Her recent publications the chapter ‘American Invasions’ in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre of the First World War* (forthcoming September 2022), as well as articles on Harley Granville Barker and Joan Littlewood in *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Theatre, Dance and Performer Training*.

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Following his engagement in 1908 to co-direct *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre, Edward Gordon Craig exclaimed: ‘It is nearer those divine Purcell days than anything I have experienced’.¹ That the Moscow project would soon deteriorate into artistic frustration for Craig (largely brought on by his own aloofness) is, of course, well known. Of greater significance, however, is how such comments reveal the importance that the director placed on his work with the Purcell Operatic Society – a small amateur group based in Hampstead – and his perception of it as the pinnacle of his artistic achievement on the stage. This perception seems in contrast to the rather peripheral position afforded to the Society in discourse on Craig. When included, it is often presented as part of a

prelude to his more high-profile work with Eleonora Duse and Konstantin Stanislavsky, his work as a designer or the publication of countless controversial essays in such journals as *The Mask*.²

Craig founded the Purcell Operatic Society in 1899 alongside his friend Martin Fallas Shaw as a longstanding group with the intention of reviving interest in the work of 'our natural composer' Purcell as well as George Frederick Handel, Thomas Arne and other lesser-known English composers.³ Over the course of approximately two years it staged three productions: Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in May 1900; Purcell's *The Masque of Love* in March 1901, which was performed alongside a revival of *Dido and Aeneas* and Ellen Terry in *Nance Oldfield*; and Handel's *Acis and Galatea* in March 1902 alongside a revival of *The Masque of Love*. The Society went bankrupt during the latter's run and was forced to disband before realising its aim to stage Purcell's five-act opera *King Arthur* and Charles Dibdin's *Harvest Home*. However, Craig and Shaw's production of Laurence Housmann's *Bethlehem* in December 1902 can be considered an extension of the Society's work, given the fact that a large number of its members returned to perform in the production.

While professional performers were engaged to play the leading roles, each production included a chorus of between forty and seventy amateur singers from the local area, who came to the Society with no experience of performing in public. The majority returned for each production, displaying a level of commitment and hard work that was vital to the success of the Society as a whole and, as outlined below, was key for Craig's development as a director. Likewise, operating as a subscription society meant that it relied on the financial support of its members, which included not only musical enthusiasts from in and

around Hampstead, but also such figures from London's social and artistic elites as Arthur Symons, Harley Granville Barker, Janet Achurch, Alexander Mackenzie and Arthur Balfour.

The work of the Purcell Operatic Society was necessarily restricted in terms of its appeal and its immediate impact on the London theatre of the time. The productions all had extremely limited runs and were staged in small, remote theatres outside central London. The 1900 production of *Dido and Aeneas*, for example, ran for three nights at the Hampstead Conservatoire, a private music college in north London, while *The Masque of Love* and *Bethlehem* both ran for just six nights at the Coronet Theatre in Notting Hill and the Imperial Institute in South Kensington, respectively. The only exception was *Acis and Galatea*, which was staged at the Great Queen Street Theatre in Covent Garden, although the small theatre was relatively inaccessible and low audience numbers saw the production close after just six performances. Further, the Society's aim to introduce audiences to forgotten composers entailed working with obscure material that appealed to the 'sympathies of the few, not the many'.⁴ As such, the Purcell Operatic Society's audience was small and select, comprising those 'in the know' rather than members of the general public.

Given the restricted nature of the scheme, it is perhaps not surprising that it has been given relatively little attention. Yet, the fact that Craig routinely referred to this work as 'the best thing I ever did on the stage' means that it warrants further attention.⁵ As I argue below, this period of work was crucial for Craig as it provided him with a laboratory space in which to test out and develop the theories that he would soon become known for and, additionally, provided him with a sense of loyalty and freedom that he would try to recreate for the rest

of his life. Thus, in order to understand his theories on the theatre and theatre directing, it is vital to understand his work with the Purcell Operatic Society.

The Emerging Iconoclast

A key reason why Craig valued the Society so highly was that it offered him a temporary respite from the two tenets of the British theatre that he fought against throughout his career, namely, commercialism and the 'star' system. From the outset, he was explicit in his condemnation of the former, stating in 1905: 'Remember how little artistic virtue is in the box-office! When we have time I will tell you some things about this same powerful usurper of the theatrical throne – the box-office'.⁶

The commercialism that Craig despised was the direct result of the commodification and gentrification of the London theatre scene in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which, itself, paralleled the slum clearance and gentrification of central London between 1875 and 1907.⁷ Through such changes as the need to wear evening dress, higher ticket prices and a later eight o'clock start time to allow people to dine beforehand, actor managers actively pursued a more affluent audience with a greater amount of economic capital to spend in their theatres. The theatre in London soon became synonymous with entertainment, luxury and leisure and catered predominantly to a middle-class audience that, according to Henry James, was 'well dressed, tranquil, motionless; it suggests domestic virtue and comfortable homes, it looks as if it had come to the play in its own carriage, after a dinner of beef and pudding'.⁸ This perception of the theatre as entertainment and a safe leisure activity that left its audiences

'tranquil' was a far cry from the idea of art and experimentation that Craig pursued.

The growing profitability of the theatre in the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a rise in the number of theatres built and managements established, which, in turn, intensified the level of competition between managements. This competition encouraged managers to prioritise box office returns and produce only those productions that were guaranteed commercial successes and which appealed to the widest possible audience. As a result, theatre seasons were often dominated by safe and familiar productions that reproduced established artistic conventions and which adhered to the fashion for elaborate visual spectacles.

Many managers turned to bankers, financiers and businessmen for additional financial support, which gave such figures an increasing amount of power and influence over the theatre. Indeed, the dominant actor managers of the time benefitted from the processes of 'gentlemanly capitalism', where wealth and capital was circulated among 'male homosocial elites... designed to reinforce social bonds, limit competition, and enact mutual aid within a closed community'.⁹ Membership of gentlemen's clubs, political parties, and fraternal organizations brought these managers into direct contact with bankers and enabled them to procure financial support. George Alexander, for example, benefitted from connections he made in the City of London, while Irving was a member of the Reform Club, where he mixed with members of the Rothschild family, among others. As his theatre and business manager Bram Stoker recalled: 'Bankers are of necessity stern folk and unless one can give *quid pro quo* in some shape they are pretty obdurate as to advances'.¹⁰ Although Stoker does not

stipulate what these banking friends expected in return for their investment, his warning indicates the extent to which Irving and other managers were dependent on the whims and favour of the financial class.

The result was a field with little autonomy and where theatre managers, producers and actors were forced to operate within a strict economic paradigm in which commercial appeal dictated artistic decision making. As William Poel explained:

The play-producing centre for the British Empire is London, and the men who control the output walk the pavement of Threadneedle Street... managers are out to produce revues, farces and sensational melodramas, because they are the kinds of plays which are marketable over the largest area of the world's surface.¹¹

A subscription society like the Purcell, by contrast, offered the chance – albeit slim – for a certain level of stability and a source of income that was separate to box office takings. It also ensured that audiences were largely made up of like-minded individuals and people who were already familiar with the work of the Society and committed to supporting it as opposed to needing to create work that appealed to the largest and broadest audience possible. Such societies thus offered a sense of artistic freedom, as demonstrated by the Independent Theatre Society (1891-1897) and the Stage Society (1898-1939), both of which were fundamental in introducing new and experimental plays to London audiences.

The emphasis placed on commerce and profitability meant that there was little support for actors, particularly those who were trying to establish themselves in the field. Without the security of a permanent company or a regular income, actors were subject to the pressures of the free market and the

principles of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and so their futures were determined by public taste and the ability to meet its demands. Michael Baker explains:

Alone among artists, the actor was now obliged to present his work to a mass audience, which paid for his services directly and in cash; his livelihood and his success or failure became dependent upon the immediate reactions of this audience... In short, the stage was henceforth a trade, providing a service to the public under the same conditions which prevailed in any other sector of private enterprise.¹²

This dependence on the reactions of the audience encouraged a strong sense of competition between actors, who developed distinctive, individualised personalities and promoted their own celebrity in order to make themselves recognisable, memorable and bankable. The 'star' system was predicated on such tactics, and those at the pinnacle were actors who successfully individualised themselves and became synonymous with, and indispensable to, the British theatre and its audience. This need to become an 'audience favourite' led to actors 'engaging in a sort of contest... designed to win applause from climactic passages throughout the play' and paying little attention to the overall intention or meaning of the piece.¹³ Indeed, George Moore complained that this practice succeeded only in leaving a play 'mutilated and disfigured *as a musical work would be if the musicians did not play in tune*'.¹⁴

As the son of Ellen Terry, a leading actress in Victorian London and Henry Irving's stage partner at the Lyceum Theatre from 1878 to 1902, Craig had close contact with the British theatre from an early age. Further, Irving engaged him as a regular member of the Lyceum company in 1889 to support his early and short-lived aspiration to become an actor. As such, he had a deep understanding and first-hand knowledge of the system and its various problems, explaining: 'I

belonged to the theatre from the moment I was born – I had not to learn it. I have, therefore, naturally loved and lived theatre everyday of my life since, developing from my early beginnings'.¹⁵ At the same time, the fact that he was the product of Terry's affair with Edwin Goodwin, and so was an 'illegitimate' child, immediately positioned him as an outsider in the morally conservative Victorian society.

Craig maintained this position of the outsider throughout his life, including in his quest to revolutionise the British theatre. He quickly set himself apart from other emerging voices at the time, rejecting attempts to reform the stage by such groups as the Independent Theatre Society and by such individuals as George Bernard Shaw, J.T. Grein, Elizabeth Robins and William Archer. The main problem was the tendency to focus on the literary text at the expense of the other elements involved in staging a production, which tended to be considered of secondary importance or to be overlooked entirely. Yet, by seeking only to change the content of the plays staged, these groups continued to confine theatre to its position as a by-product of literature, as opposed to encouraging a complete theatrical renaissance. Craig, by contrast, called for a Copernican-style revolution. As his friend and one-time patron Harry Kessler noted: 'He does not despise the dramatist, but he protests against the manner in which all theatre people – managers, actors, designers – rely on the dramatist. He wishes to restore the theatre as an independent art.'¹⁶

Craig believed that a new form could only emerge when the conventions of the theatre were dismantled and a level ground was created where each component was considered equal. This new form would be the 'Art of the Theatre'. A key element of this transformation was the theatre director – a role

that Craig pioneered in Britain at this time – who would supplant both the actor-manager and the dramatist and have ultimate control over all aspects of a production. To achieve this, he required the unquestioning commitment and devotion of a group of disciples, that is, a longstanding company who would willingly follow his every instruction.

Authoritarian Control in the Art of the Theatre

In developing his approach to directing, Craig took inspiration from a seemingly unlikely source, namely, Irving. Although the latter appeared to embody much of what the young director despised in the British theatre, he was an important influence for Craig, becoming something of a father figure and someone he emulated throughout his life. This lasting influence is evident throughout Craig's numerous publications, where he elevated Irving, claiming that 'the very nearest approach that has ever been to the ideal actor, with his brain commanding his nature, has been Henry Irving'.¹⁷

The authoritarian command that Craig sought as a director mirrored the aspirations of Irving, who, from the outset, believed that he 'should have a theatre all to himself – where he should be the sole master'.¹⁸ Irving achieved this when he took over the management of the Lyceum Theatre in 1878. He positioned himself as the patriarch of a large team of workers, which comprised a chorus of actors, a thirty-piece orchestra, carpenters, stagehands and many others. Taking responsibility for each aspect of the production, Irving, or 'The Governor', as some called him, placed team leaders in charge of each

'department' who reported directly to him. This organisational structure meant that he was always informed of what was happening throughout the theatre, and that he had complete control. Nothing was put on the stage without his approval.

Irving's aim was to establish an ensemble, however it was not an ensemble in the sense of a unified and collaborative company of actors. Rather, it was an ensemble derived from attention to pictorial effect, where the various visual elements and performances worked in harmony with each other. 'It is,' Irving explained, 'most important that an actor should learn that he is a figure in a stage picture, and that the least exaggeration destroys the harmony of a composition'.¹⁹ In this regard, Irving's theatre was a theatre of the individual, where the unified composition served to better foreground his role as the star. The Lyceum productions were based solely on his interpretation of a play, which he would often plan in intricate detail up to three months before the start of rehearsals. By the time of the first meeting, the production was set in his mind.

To achieve his intended vision, Irving acted as a disciplinarian and rehearsed his company rigorously. This included making the actors perform to a counted and measured rhythm to ensure that each movement was executed precisely.²⁰ Not trusting, or allowing, his subordinates to aid in artistic decision-making, Irving's word was final. The actor Edwin Booth described him as 'despotic', remarking:

He commands all points, with an understanding that his will is absolute law, that it is not to be disputed, whether it concerns the entry of a mere messenger who bears a letter, or whether it is the reading of an important line by Miss Terry. From first to last he rules the stage with an iron will.²¹

This was the hierarchical structure that Craig entered as an apprentice actor, and the time that he spent with his mentor was crucial in shaping his own approach to theatre. The strong authoritarian control Irving wielded over his company, as well as his belief in the importance of the harmonious composition, made a lasting impression on the boy of seventeen.

Replicating the example set by Irving, Craig stipulated continually the need for a single voice in the theatre, a dominating patriarchal force that controls every aspect of the production and dictates every decision with which, of course, his team of disciplined workers complied. Craig used the metaphor of the theatre as a war-bound ship, arguing that the director must govern 'his crew' with great force, bowing before no other figure and thus eliminating the possibility of a mutinous uprising:

The theatre, unlike the ship, is not made for the purposes of war, and so for some unaccountable reason discipline is not held to be of such vital importance whereas it is of as much importance as in any branch of service. But what I wish to show you is that until discipline is understood in a theatre to be willing and reliant obedience to the manager or captain no supreme achievement can be accomplished.²²

Craig argued that the director must be the master of each element of the theatre, but must be 'a man apart from any of the crafts. He must be a man who knows but no longer handles the ropes'.²³ This insistence on an objective director in the place of a subjective actor-manager was one of the ways Craig distinguished himself from Irving. He saw the implicit danger in attempting to lead a company while continuing to act alongside its member, arguing that 'a natural instinct will lead him to make him the centre of everything' to the detriment of the artwork.²⁴ While Irving's disciplinarian approach served to promote himself as a

star, Craig used it to assert his directorial vision as paramount, with the need for all other elements and individuals working on a particular production to fall into line with it.

It is not difficult to identify a strong paternalism and androcentrism underpinning this approach, which both informed and was informed by his political beliefs. Throughout his letters and notebooks of the period, Craig bemoaned the natural inferiority of women. In February 1909, for example, he notes in his Daybook that 'women must obey', before explaining that a man can only be successful 'when a woman retains her place, acting as passive communicator of the laws of man'.²⁵ Four months later he concluded that women 'fail to a great extent except as mothers and here only a small percentage reach any high standard. If this were not true we should have many more great men than we have'.²⁶ The role of the women was to serve and produce men, just as Craig's performers were there to serve him. Further, his declaration that the director should be an unquestioned and unchallenged autocrat anticipated his later interest in dictators like Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. He filled his 1933 and 1934 diaries with praise for the pair, and even went so far as to say that he should like to follow Hitler's lead and shoot the conspirators who worked against him in the British theatre: 'I should have thought that it was preferable to exterminate mean men – rats vice – than anything else'.²⁷

Bolstering up the image of the theatre director as a dictator, Craig called for the adoption of the Wagnerian-held position of 'feudal baron', namely, a director who took possession of his own theatre-home, or castle, in which he was the highest authority.²⁸ Of course, in order to play the role of supreme ruler, one

needed a theatre-home to govern, together with a group who demonstrated 'two particular qualities which are very unique ones. First, obedience; second, enthusiastic loyalty.'²⁹ In short, he required an ensemble of actors dedicated to each other and committed to following the path clearly set out by him as director. Herein lies the significance of the Purcell Operatic Society: it provided him with a longstanding group of performers he could train and who were willing to go against the conventions of the time.

The Devoted Amateurs of Hampstead

The division of labour at the Purcell Operatic Society saw Shaw take control of the music while Craig was in charge of all the scenic elements, including costumes, lighting and staging. In short, everything that was seen by the audience fell into Craig's domain and he was given carte blanche, choosing as he saw fit without having to justify his decisions. The nature of the material on which the Society was focused meant that there was also no overlooking author or strict stage directions that Craig was compelled to follow, increasing his sense of artistic freedom. At the same time, the fact that the majority of the chorus members remained with the Society throughout its short life provided him with a sense of continuity that allowed him to develop his experiments further.³⁰ Thus, with the freedom to work as he chose and with a regular company willing to follow his direction, Craig was able to realise his aim to unify the various elements of the stage into what W.B. Yeats called a 'new and distinct art. It is something that can only exist in the theatre.'³¹

Craig's positive experience was intrinsically linked to the performers with whom he worked. The lack of economic capital meant that the Society was almost exclusively composed of amateur performers, most of whom were personal friends of Craig, Shaw, Nannie Dryhurst (the Society's Secretary), or Edith Craig, who also contributed to the *Acis and Galatea* production. While it is difficult to ascertain precisely who the chorus members were beyond the names listed in the Society's souvenir programmes, given its base in the upper-class north London suburb of Hampstead, which is known for its intellectual, musical and artistic associations, it is to assume that it was a group high in economic, social and cultural capital. Further, these were individuals who had a certain amount of leisure time and were willing to dedicate it to rehearsing relatively obscure opera works.

While engaged for financial necessity, the work with the amateurs was revelatory for Craig, who continued to assert the importance of amateur work for the rest of his life. In a 1932 essay, for example, he distinguished between the professional – who had introduced a new 'incentive to art: self interest' – and the amateur, that is, 'he who does things, and for the love of these things, acts enthusiastically, without judgment: it may be – and this is where cunning comes in – but not the low cunning of the showman – the high cunning of the workman.'³² He concludes the essay by declaring that to 'reinstate the amateur as being the most serious, the most real artist of any time, might perceivably restore to us the arts – provided there can be found those who are willing to keep the amateur from poverty'.³³

A key benefit of the Purcell amateurs was that, although the majority were enthusiastic singers, very few had undertaken any previous music training and

none had experience in movement. Shaw and Craig, therefore, had to equip their volunteers with the skills needed for the stage. While Shaw cultivated the performers' musical ability, Craig trained the company rigorously in physical exercises to increase their flexibility, co-ordination and control and developed a detailed system of notation from which to rehearse the chorus.

On the whole, the company approached these rehearsals and training sessions with a level of openness, complying with Craig's directions without notable apprehension. As an amateur group, participation in the work was, of course, voluntary and came with little personal gain for the individual performers. Those who joined did so as a sign of their strong faith in Craig and Shaw's work and as a commitment to the Society. Further, the fact that none of the troupe had any previous training meant that Craig did not have to counter bad habits or unfavourable techniques learnt from days spent as apprentice actors. The group was a *tabula rasa* for him, and he moulded and shaped the performers in accordance with his own plans and designs.

Following the same training regime unified the group further and established a shared approach to the work and a shared vocabulary of movement. Craig marvelled retrospectively at the willingness of his company to experiment and learn new techniques, becoming 'excellent in their stepping out – and far better than ballet dancers would have been – for they and I expressed something and what we said was no echo of what the theatres were at that time repeating over and over like parrots'.³⁴ As this statement makes clear, he saw the Purcell Operatic Society as the company to embody his ideals and the company with which he could develop a new form of theatre that challenged the established conventions. Although the relationship between Craig and his chorus members

was certainly not collaborative, he clearly felt that it was founded on a certain level of reciprocity, where the chorus inspired him to make new discoveries.

Among the various discoveries Craig made at this time was a method of capturing the drama and beauty of Purcell's operas in physical form while, at the same time, compensating for the slow speed at which the novice performers grasped and retained information. This included breaking elements and gestures down to an almost archetypal level and choreographing slow movements to be performed in synchrony that was akin to a Greek chorus. In his notebook for *Acis and Galatea*, for example, Craig notes the precise yet simple instructions given to chorus members to embody the emotion of grief: 'Hands above head, fingers open bent back'.³⁵ Later, he notes that the stage movement needed to be 'far more elaborated and simpler than 'Dido'. Conventionalize the actions and retain the general one-movements of the crowd.'³⁶ Elsewhere in the notebook he set out the precise stage groupings and movements of the chorus, with any changes marked according to a clear numerical pattern.

Edward Anthony Craig argues that while the movements his father choreographed would have been easy for a professional dancer, it was this need to go back to basics and to simplify everything that gave the work its artistic strength.³⁷ As the critic from the *Hampstead Annual* noted, the result was that 'for the first time, perhaps, those present saw operatic singers using gestures of real dramatic significance'.³⁸

Craig achieved such a standard with amateurs by taking the time to work slowly and methodically in rehearsals. Both he and Shaw refused to prescribe a set rehearsal period and, instead, continued working until they reached their goals. 'We decided right away to rehearse and rehearse till the thing was ready –

not to limit rehearsals to a fortnight maximum'.³⁹ This commitment to giving a production the required time and space meant that the Society spent between six and eight months developing each of its three productions. A journalist from the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* commended this approach when attending rehearsals of *Dido and Aeneas*, while also noting the precision with which Craig led the chorus:

Keeping one eye, as it were, on the conductor, and the other up the wings where Mr Craig is stationed to threaten and command, knowing when to come on and how to get off, are things only to be learned by the practice of that patience and perseverance required by the snail of the proverb on the part of the learner, and a skill and knowledge of unusual extent on the part of the teacher.⁴⁰

Working on a production without time restrictions was unprecedented in the British theatre, where the norm was – and still is – to make a production stage-worthy in the shortest amount of time possible to keep overheads to a minimum and thus satisfy theatre managers desperate for a profit. Craig, by contrast, was able to take his time *because* he was working with amateurs who were not dependent on a living wage in the way a budding professional actor was. The amateur company agreed to work for nothing, which reduced the overheads considerably and offered Craig and the Purcell Operatic Society respite from the parameters of the economic market, even if only partially.

Likewise, the amateur status of the company helped to create a feeling of community and to avoid the competitive tensions usually found in a group of aspiring professionals, where the need to distinguish oneself centralised the individual actor's interests at the expense of the production. As the Society's chorus members showed no interest in becoming West End idols, they did not

have to cultivate a personality to secure recognition from the audience. They were, Denis Bablet argues, 'neither slaves to outdated shibboleths nor eager for personal publicity'.⁴¹ Instead, they allowed Craig to direct them in any way he chose, which included stripping away the individuality and personality of the performers in his bid to create a synthesised piece of theatre in which all the elements were treated equal.

While the idea of stripping away the personality of the actor reached its apotheosis with the publication of Craig's controversial 1908 essay 'The Actor and the Übermarionette', in which he apparently called for the replacement of actors by inanimate figures, he can be seen to be testing it out with the Society's chorus. This is particularly true of his decision to limit and slow down the actors' movements as much as possible and to design the performers' costumes to ensure that they merged with each other and became part of the scenery. In *Acis and Galatea*, for example, he used the same strips of ribbon for the chorus's costume as those used for the scenery, which created the sense of a single 'writhing, living body' as opposed to a collection of individual actors.⁴² Again, Craig's motive here was to serve the production and his vision. His success in doing so was acknowledged by critics such as Haldane Macfall, who concluded: 'No posturing actor took the limelight in order to show off his personality or advertise his necessity. The main scheme of the play was the main thing – it was never anything but the main thing'.⁴³

It is difficult to verify these accounts of the unquestioning compliance of the chorus, given that there is little archival evidence of their reactions and their thoughts on the work. The *Express* journalist's use of the word 'threaten' to describe Craig's behaviour in rehearsals above, along with the director's own

demand for discipline, is indicative of a strict and uncompromising working environment. Yet chorus member Hannah Gutmann confirmed the friendly relations between the director and his company. In a letter to Craig in 1951, she thanked him for the positive experience and celebrated 'the atmosphere of the old happy Purcell days with all the enthusiasm that you created in us, when everything one did seemed so worthwhile.'⁴⁴ Shaw similarly celebrated the love and devotion felt between Craig and the chorus, and praised the latter's unique and unparalleled work ethic:

Anything like the enthusiasm and loyalty of this devoted body of amateurs it has never been my good fortune to meet either before or since... They had to sing their choruses crawling, leaping, swaying, running – any way that Craig fancied... Most of them had no stage experience at all. Perhaps that was well, for I am sure a Covent Garden chorus would have struck at the first rehearsal.⁴⁵

Craig also openly acknowledged his affection and respect for the company members, or his 'friends', as he called them. For example, he dedicated the 1901 revival of the *Dido and Aeneas* to 'the Chorus and a few others these'.⁴⁶ When he received payment for his work on *Bethlehem*, he split his fee into golden half sovereigns and distributed them amongst the chorus as tokens of his gratitude for their hard work and devotion. They, in turn, reciprocated his great esteem and affectionately called the sovereigns their 'medals', signifying the great pride they had in the work and their love for Craig and Shaw.⁴⁷

The pair was not able to sustain the Purcell Operatic Society, however, and as the abilities and the commitment of its members grew, so, too, did its economic and administrative problems. While their commitment to autonomy created the laboratory conditions vital for artistic development, Craig and Shaw were not

able to secure the economic capital necessary for survival in the field despite their constant attempts to increase the Society's membership.⁴⁸ The group's long rehearsal periods, its amateur status and the remote location of its productions were not conducive to increasing audience numbers and the productions were all financial failures: *Dido and Aeneas* cost £379 2s 1d to stage in 1900 and took approximately £370 at the box office; *The Masque of Love* cost £534 6s 8d and made £533 6s 4d.⁴⁹ Although the chorus did not need payment, Craig and Shaw struggled to cover their various other expenses, including rental fees for performance spaces, electricity bills, and so on.

In his close analysis of the field of cultural production, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the only way to exist outside of the governing economic paradigm was to have an external income or inherited economic capital, which 'is one of the most important factors in the differential success of avant-garde enterprises'.⁵⁰ In the Society's early days, Ellen Terry acted as this independent source, covering Craig's various unpaid bills and sustaining the scheme. When she stopped her financial support in 1903 – telling Craig: 'you must *finish* this *bill paying* by yourself... my patience is fast going' – Craig and Shaw had to find an alternative source of income.⁵¹

Like Irving and other actor-managers, the pair – along with Edith Craig – approached wealthy and influential figures from London society for support, but their advances were denied due to the experimental nature of the work and its unprofitability. Among those approached was soon-to-be Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, whose Private Secretary, Wilfred Short, responded:

[Balfour] has heard, however, from persons in whose judgement he has confidence, that the attempt to turn [*Acis and Galatea*] into an acting drama has been a doubtful success from an artistic point of view; and he is hardly in a position to give substantial aid to further attempts in the same direction.⁵²

Unwilling to compromise their artistic vision and unable to raise the required funds, Craig and Shaw disbanded the Society in March 1902 during the *Acis and Galatea* run. Craig wrote to a friend immediately after and explained: 'We are forced to close the theatre. We must reopen or the whole scheme and art versus theatre and commerce gets a smack in the eye.'⁵³

Life After Purcell

The accuracy of Craig's warning and the uniqueness of his experience with the Purcell Operatic Society was made clear a year later. Having taken over management of the Imperial Theatre, Terry commissioned Craig to direct Henrik Ibsen's *The Vikings at Helgeland*, seeing it as an ideal opportunity for him to present his ideas to a large, more mainstream audience. However, while he attempted to use the same directorial approach he had developed at the Society, the trappings of the professional theatre soon frustrated him. Although she admired his work with the Purcell group, Terry was a member of the theatre establishment and so was unwilling to risk her name, position and money on similarly experimental work at the Imperial. She challenged his artistic choices throughout the rehearsal process, and her supporting cast – which comprised both established members of the profession and future 'stars' such as Oscar Asche – followed suit.

Craig's insistence on visual unity at the expense of 'star' turns was a particular point of contention. Shaw, who wrote the musical score for the production, explained how

all through rehearsals the actors made difficulties. The light was the chief cause of trouble. They complained bitterly that the audience could not see them... in those far-off times actors were not educated up to such a pitch of realism and self-sacrifice, and thought that their facial expressions were the most important thing in the play.⁵⁴

Trained by the 'star' system to foreground their own personalities at all costs, the actors were unwilling to subordinate their egos to either the overall vision of the production or Craig's command. These protests undermined the latter's position and created an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt, which prevented him from establishing the level of artistic control he had enjoyed at the Purcell Operatic Society. Like Shaw, he was frustrated by the lack of discipline in the cast:

My feelings about the *Vikings* are just yours. But I feel convinced that no *Vikings* can be done unless each character will listen to the stage manager and hear what character he is to play... You did the *Vikings* – and I did the *Vikings* – and the rest were doing jokes – and never got rid of their skins, much less into any others.⁵⁵

The production received mixed reviews, with many criticising Craig's failed attempt to achieve the unified impression that proved artistically successful with the Purcell Operatic Society. The critic from *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, accused Craig of combining 'stirring action and virile passion with a baffling and irritating air of mystery and unreality', which resulted in an 'obvious discord between the story told on the stage, and the atmosphere of the mise-en-scene'.⁵⁶

Craig blamed this failure on the fact that he was forced to fight for artistic control at each stage of the process.

This experience reinforced the need to work with amateurs who he could train to follow his instruction and who would give him the obedience and loyalty that he demanded. In lieu of the Purcell Operatic Society or a similar amateur company to call his own, Craig turned his attention to establishing a school, first in London in 1904. He had started giving classes in movement and performance in 1900 to go alongside his work with at the Purcell with the 'intention of training a perfect company of performers'.⁵⁷ The school, which was to be called the London School for Theatrical Art, would provide a more formal and permanent setting for him to continue this training of amateurs, who would become a company performing in his signature style. As *The Pall Mall Gazette* explained: 'His purpose is to prepare [the students] in all that is necessary for their development, and then to provide them with opportunities to exhibit their powers under his direction'.⁵⁸

Rooted in Craig's idea of the Art of the Theatre and in contrast to the Herbert Beerbohm Tree's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, which opened in April 1904, the plan was for the students to be 'individually trained in all the separate crafts which are necessary for their equipment, and no pupil will be permitted to take up any special study at the entire expense of another'.⁵⁹ Through such schemes, Craig did not want to train students 'that after two or three terms... will be able to accept London or provincial engagements'; rather he wanted to train students able to help him transform the London theatre field entirely.⁶⁰ However, the plan to open the school on 28 March at the Trafalgar Studios in Chelsea had to be abandoned due to a lack of interest, with Maud Douie – a

former member of the Purcell Operatic Society – being the only applicant.⁶¹ This marked the end of his plans in London.

Craig did go on to establish his school in Florence in 1913, although it closed after one year due to the outbreak of World War One. The school's programme borrowed heavily from the 1904 plans and, of course, from his experience of working with the Purcell Operatic Society. As such, it is just one of the many ways in which this period of work in Hampstead had a profound impact on Craig's practice, theories and trajectory, and so it must be given its rightful place at the centre of any writings related to him.

¹ Edward Gordon Craig letter to Martin Shaw, June 1909, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

² The notable exceptions are Michael Burden, 'Purcell's Operas on Craig's Stage: The Productions of the Purcell Operatic Society', *Early Music*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (August 2004), pp. 442-58; Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 37-70.

³ Martin Fallas Shaw, 'Purcell Operatic Society' in Unpublished Notebook, 1901, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴ 'Purcell's "The Masque of Love" and "Dido and Aeneas"', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 1901.

⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, *Index to the Story of My Days* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 235.

⁶ Edward Gordon Craig, *The Art of the Theatre* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1905), p. 41.

⁷ Richard Cross's 1875 Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act pioneered the redevelopment of some of the poverty-stricken areas of London and the demolition of famous slums such as the Rat's Castle in St Giles, Bermondsey's Jacob's Island, and those close to Drury Lane, Westminster Abbey, the Savoy and the Strand.

⁸ Henry James cited in Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 27.

⁹ Tracy C. Davis, *The Economies of the British Stage, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 286.

¹⁰ Bram Stoker, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), p. 433.

¹¹ William Poel, *What is Wrong with the Stage* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1920), p. 10.

¹² Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), p. 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: David Nutt, 1913), p. 175, original emphasis.

¹⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, 'Untitled', Undated Annotated Typescript, Edward Gordon Craig Biographical Box, Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Archive, p. 18.

¹⁶ Harry Kessler cited in Burden, 'Purcell's Operas on Craig's Stage', p. 453.

¹⁷ Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 12.

¹⁸ Madeline Bingham, *Henry Irving and the Victorian Theatre* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 120.

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- ¹⁹ Irving cited in Russell Jackson, 'Henry Irving' in *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 175.
- ²⁰ Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 13.
- ²¹ Booth cited in W. D. King, *Irving's Waterloo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 70.
- ²² Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 172.
- ²³ Craig, *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 48.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, Daybook 1, November 1908 – March 1910, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, p. 84.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 134. While the Purcell chorus included men and women, he wrote to Shaw in 1905 with plans to create a new company that would have 'No women in it, boy. Just comrades'. Edward Gordon Craig letter to Martin Shaw, 5 August 1907, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. His School for the Art of the Theatre in Florence had only male students during its brief lifespan.
- ²⁷ Edward Gordon Craig, Daybook 7, November 1933 – March 1935, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, p. 50.
- ²⁸ Craig, *The Art of the Theatre*, p. 50.
- ²⁹ Edward Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theatre: Forty Designs for Stage Scenes, with Critical Notes* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1913), p. 25.
- ³⁰ Edward Anthony Craig, *Gordon Craig: A Story of his Life* (New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 1968), p. 154.
- ³¹ W. B. Yeats, "'Acis and Galatea" at the Great Queen Street Theatre', *The Saturday Review*, 8 March 1902.
- ³² Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Value of Amateur Drama', Annotated Typescript, 1932, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, n.p.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Craig cited in Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 72.
- ³⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, *Acis and Galatea* Notebook, 1901-2, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, p. 10.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 22.
- ³⁷ Craig, *Gordon Craig*, p. 121.
- ³⁸ E. Greville and Ernest Rhys Matheson, eds., *The Hampstead Annual 1900* (London: Sydney C. Male, 1900), p. 138.
- ³⁹ Craig, *Index to the Story*, p. 226.
- ⁴⁰ "'Dido and Aeneas". The Purcell Operatic Society's Forthcoming Performances', *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 12 May 1900.
- ⁴¹ Denis Bablet, *The Theatre of Edward Gordon Craig*, trans. Daphne Woodward (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 54.
- ⁴² Irène Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement and the Actor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 38.
- ⁴³ Haldane Macfall, 'Some Thoughts on the Art of Gordon Craig, with Particular Reference to Stage Craft', *Studio*, Vol. 23, No. 102 (September 1901), p. 255.
- ⁴⁴ Hannah Gutmann letter to Edward Gordon Craig, 30 December 1951, Eton College Archives.
- ⁴⁵ Martin Shaw, *Up To Now* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 26.
- ⁴⁶ Edward Gordon Craig, *Dido and Aeneas Performed by Members of the Purcell Operatic Society. Programme* (London: Priory Press, 1901).
- ⁴⁷ Craig, *Gordon Craig*, p. 165.
- ⁴⁸ Regular advertisements were published in the local newspapers stating that 'all lovers of music in Hampstead are asked to become members'. See, for example, 'The Purcell Operatic Society', *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 6 October 1900.
- ⁴⁹ Craig, *Index to the Story*, p. 226.

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- ⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: The Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emmanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 84.
- ⁵¹ Terry cited in Craig, *Gordon Craig*, p. 149, original emphasis.
- ⁵² Wilfred Short letter to Martin Shaw, 19 March 1902, Eton College Archive.
- ⁵³ Edward Gordon Craig letter to anon., March 1902, Eton College Archive.
- ⁵⁴ Shaw, *Up To Now*, p. 35.
- ⁵⁵ Edward Gordon Craig letter to Martin Shaw cited in Craig, *Gordon Craig*, p. 171.
- ⁵⁶ “‘The Vikings at Helgeland’ at the Imperial’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 1903.
- ⁵⁷ ‘The Purcell Operatic Society’, *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 6 October 1900.
- ⁵⁸ ‘Edward Gordon Craig School’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 February 1904.
- ⁵⁹ ‘London School of Theatrical Art’, *Morning Post*, 23 February 1904.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Arnold Rood, ‘E. Gordon Craig, Director, School for the Art of the Theatre’, *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1983), p. 2.