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Citation

Burt, Philippa. 2024. Edward Gordon Craig as Teacher-Dictator. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 40(4), ISSN 0266-464X [Article] (In Press)

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Philippa Burt

Edward Gordon Craig as Teacher-Dictator

Edward Gordon Craig was a controversial and iconoclastic figure in the early twentieth-century British theatre. Underpinning his work as a director, designer and essayist was a desire to secure obedience and loyalty from the people with whom he worked and to ensure that he was the unquestioned authority. Nowhere was this ambition clearer than in his School for the Art of the Theatre, which he ran in Florence from 1913 to 1914. This article draws on extensive archival research, providing a detailed examination of the School's structure, organisation, and curriculum and demonstrating the importance that Craig placed on discipline, which became the School's governing principle. It contextualises the School's practice, discussing Craig's work in and outside the theatre and his political views so as to consider why he prized discipline above all else. In particular, the article reveals, for the first time, his intense misogyny and celebration of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s and shows how this informed his school scheme and was informed by it.

Philippa Burt is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Goldsmiths University of London. Her recent publications include the chapter 'Ensembles and Companies' in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century British Theatre* (forthcoming 2024) and articles for *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Theatre, Dance and Performer Training*.

Key terms: pedagogy, training, authoritarianism, British theatre, individualism, discipline, misogyny, fascism

The prospectus for Edward Gordon Craig's School for the Art of the Theatre, which opened at the Arena Goldoni in Florence in 1913, makes clear the demand that all students be disciplined, obedient and loyal. Under the heading 'Rules', Craig lists over thirty-five directives that students had to accept 'willingly' and abide by 'loyally' in order to gain entry to the School. These rules covered a range of matters, going from the exercises to be undertaken in class ('A student is not to ask another student how to do this or that. Each is to learn self-reliance, and how to puzzle a thing out for himself') to general upkeep of the spaces ('Overalls must be worn during working hours, and must be kept in good condition and hung in their place on the student leaving the Theatre or Studio').¹ Such rules worked to secure for Craig a sense of order and control over the

work of the students and, as I argue below, to position him as the ultimate and undisputed authority, with everyone agreeing to 'subordinate themselves and obey him promptly, without hesitation, argument, or suggestion of any kind'.²

Although it closed prematurely in August 1914 after the outbreak of World War I, the Florence School was the most successful in a series of attempts made by Craig to establish a school over the course of his life.³ Thus it was not an isolated venture, but a part of a sustained interest in training that spanned his entire career as a director, designer and essayist. He had recognised the importance of establishing his own school from as early as 1903, explaining that 'it seems more necessary and inevitable every day... it will soon be impossible for me to produce a scene of a play without it'.⁴ However, despite the clear significance that this area of work had for Craig, relatively little attention has been given it.⁵ This article, by contrast, provides a detailed examination of the Florence School in order to shed light on Craig's approach to pedagogy and how this was informed by and underpinned the rest of his work in the theatre, most notably his propensity for dictatorship. Drawing on extensive archival material, I provide a close analysis of the structure, curriculum and everyday practice of the School to highlight the particular importance that he placed on discipline and how he used it to secure the fidelity of the students and to transform them into a unified and committed group, or what he called a 'family'.⁶

The School is considered in relation to Craig's life in and outside of the theatre up to that point. In doing so, this article argues that the importance he placed on discipline was a direct response to his experiences in the professional theatre, especially his feelings of frustration, resentment, suspicion and isolation. Further, I show that discipline was a particular manifestation of his political disposition, which included his misogynistic attitude to, and treatment of, women and his strident belief in both

individualism and authoritarianism, which would go on to see him embrace fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. The article thus demonstrates how Craig's artistic practice – in this instance, his plans for a school – is dialogically linked to his politics, despite Craig's embrace of the Aestheticist philosophy of 'art for art's sake'. At a time of great political turbulence, Craig's School is presented here as a microcosm of the society that he wanted to create.

The School for the Art of the Theatre

Craig opened the School for the Art of the Theatre in February 1913 with the aim of 'infusing the life of imagination into every art and craft connected with the stage'.⁷ In particular, he wanted to train a group of craftsmen (the gendered term is intentional here) to create work that placed equal importance on each element of the theatre, including lighting and movement, in order to reassert its status as an independent art form. This emphasis on the total theatre work – or what Craig called 'the Art of the Theatre' – distinguished his school from attempts to innovate the British theatre led by George Bernard Shaw and others, which he saw to be overly focused on the dramatic text, and attempts of other theatre schools opening in London that prioritised actor training.

The decision to open the School in Florence rather than London was a way of reinforcing this distinction. Craig had been living in the city since 1908 and celebrated the sense of vitality and creativity that it encouraged. He argued that Florence was 'the true home for all those who desire to create', a place where the pastoral and urban coexist and where actors 'spring from the soil...instead of through traps in a stage or the drawing rooms of the wealthy'.⁸ The city offered an important antidote to the commercialism of London and its various petty distractions, which worked to 'weave

around [the artist] ever so gently, cloud upon cloud, fold upon fold of heavy material and atmospheric grey; and gradually the keen grasp slackens, activity becomes passivity and the mesmerism is complete'.⁹

The choice of Florence was also financially strategic and helped Craig to keep his costs at a minimum. He opened the School at the Arena Goldoni, a large disused open-air theatre and former monastery in which he had been living and working since September 1908. In addition to providing him with the quiet seclusion that he believed was essential for serious study, it gave him space for workshops, a library, and stage at no extra charge. He was thus able to open the School after a donation of £5,000, even though the sum fell short of his target of £25,000. The donation came from Baron Howard de Walden, an English landowner, writer and long-time patron of the arts, and was secured by Craig's long-suffering partner Elena Meo.

The School was organised into two divisions with a clear hierarchical structure that placed Craig at the pinnacle in the role of Director or 'Chief'. The First Division comprised artists and craftspeople from such disciplines as music, carpentry, photography and design, who were taught Craig's methods and experimented under his close supervision. There were approximately ten students in this division when the School opened, including his son Edward Anthony Craig, Sam Hume (an American model maker), Leslie Brown (an electrical engineer), Richard Dennys (a former medical student) and Nino Meo, Elena's brother. That all the students were male was intentional; Craig was 'not prepared to admit women into his school'.¹⁰ Although he did not recruit anyone for the Second Division before the School's premature closure, it was to comprise fee-paying students who were taught by members of the First Division. The students who performed best in the end of year exams would be admitted to the Second Division as apprentices and, then, if they continued to pass their exams, they would

become salaried workers. Such plans would help to reinforce the School's hierarchy while also instilling a sense of competition in its participants.

However, there was also space for collaboration between students. Each member of the First Division was expected to teach 'the others something of his own particular craft, and who is himself taught by all the others'.¹¹ Emphasis on sharing expertise meant that knowledge was transmitted horizontally as well as vertically and revealed the influence of Konstantin Stanislavsky. Craig had been engaged by the Russian director in 1908 to stage *Hamlet* for the Moscow Art Theatre. During the nearly four years of intermittent work on the project, Craig visited Moscow numerous times and was deeply impressed by the structure and organisation of the Art Theatre. His diaries and notebooks from the period detail plans for the school that he developed while in Moscow, often in direct response to a conversation with Stanislavsky or his assistant Leopold Sulerzhitsky. For example, he notes that his 'experience in Moscow' taught him the following: 'Have fewer people and very few allowed to give orders. Have one spirit at the head and two friends – the man of brains and the man of method'.¹²

While he rarely praised others publicly, he described the Art Theatre as 'the best ordered theatre in Europe. It is an example of what systematic reform can do in a theatre'.¹³ In particular, he applauded Stanislavsky for creating a theatre in which the actors behaved like students 'watching every movement and listening to every word' and where the directors 'are as much students as anyone else: they are all studying all the time'.¹⁴ Following suit, Craig planned for his School to be 'a school of experiment, so that we ourselves who work in it may find out what we want to learn'.¹⁵

Movement classes lay at the heart of the proposed syllabus, with a particular emphasis on breaking movement down to its basic elements. This intention reveals the influence of Isadora Duncan, who was another key figure in Craig's life. The pair met in

1904 and, both during and after their brief, intense affair, Duncan supported Craig financially and professionally, including brokering his engagement at the Moscow Art Theatre. She was also a clear inspiration for his school plans: she had opened her own school in 1905 with the objective of ‘finding again the rhythmical and beautiful movement of the human body’.¹⁶ Like Duncan, Craig wanted to train his students to be able to understand and control their bodies and perform ‘rhythmic not regular movement because art is not living where routine has settled’.¹⁷ To achieve this, he devised group processional exercises – which he called ‘Movement Ceremonies’ – that would help to develop ‘precision, (drill), strength’.¹⁸

Craig also planned classes on lighting and sound, masks and marionettes, scene design, and lectures on a variety of topics, including different periods of theatre history. Throughout it all was the drive to strip the theatre of its artifice and, again, to develop artists who were skilled in working across the different elements and thus able to create a unity of impression. Further, the plan was for this School to exist as part of a broader scheme that encompassed work on *The Mask*, additional schools, museum-based research projects, a workshop for inventing new design tools and securing patents, and so on. In 1911, he illustrated this plan as a wheel broadly divided into three sections – past, present and future – and where each sub-division fed into, and drew from, the others to create a composite whole (Figure 1). Thus, the staging of productions (which was part of the ‘present’ work of the School) would be informed by the exhibitions that students attended (which falls under the ‘past’) and would inform their experiments (‘future’). In reality, none of these components were realised.

It is also difficult to ascertain which of the planned classes actually took place. Surviving photographs and work produced by the students suggest that the focus was on set design and model making; there is little sign of movement-based classes or the

planned sessions on actor training. Indeed, the School operated more like a workshop in which the students simply learnt and then reproduced Craig's methods, helping him on particular projects and commissions that he had received. This model aligned with the latter's approach to pedagogy and his shortcomings as a teacher, which, according to Edward Anthony Craig, resulted in 'a case of follow my leader... EGC could NOT teach. His attitude was "do what I say not what I do".¹⁹ It was thus a 'school' not in the sense of a space of education, but of a group of people brought together under a set of shared ideas and methods, all of which were determined by Craig.

A Secluded and Disciplined Community

Anthony P. Cohen argues that the existence of any type of community hinges on a shared consciousness and that 'the consciousness of community is... encapsulated in perception of its boundaries'.²⁰ In short, one's experience of being part of a group is intensified by the knowledge that there are people outside of it, with a marked distinction between the two. He continues, stating that these boundaries could be physical or geographic, statutory and enshrined in law, linguistic, racial or religious, or could be purely symbolic, where they are 'thought of, rather, as existing in the minds of the beholders'.²¹ This concept of the boundary was a key mechanism through which Craig sought to transform the members of the School into a unified group that was committed to him and his ideas.

In terms of physical boundaries, he was adamant that his students should be kept separate from the professional theatre. While in Moscow in May 1909, for example, Craig declared that actors should 'leave the stage without fear of the future... follow me into the land from the borders of which I see into its heart' and that any school should be secluded and private: 'Let 100 [sic] well-equipped actors leave the stage and together

form a college for the study of the art'.²² Basing the School in Florence was just one of a number of ways in which Craig sought to secure this physical separation.

The building itself was also key in creating a clear distinction between the School and the surrounding city. As a former monastery, its architecture helped to create an atmosphere of cloistral seclusion and privacy, where, upon entering 'from the narrow Florentine street the first impression created is one of exquisite surprise... of having discovered some beautiful secret thing'.²³ Dorothy Nevile Lees, who took on the bulk of the School's administration and was one of Craig's many lovers, continues, explaining:

As the door closes the noise of the street seems to become suddenly very remote, to be separated from one by more than a stout oaken door and a few yards of dusky passage, rather is it separated by that infinite gulf which by material calculation may be but a hand's breadth... the gulf between confusion and order, restlessness and calm. One is conscious of a particular exhilarating atmosphere, [as] soon as one steps inside.²⁴

Offering a so-called 'Student's Impression', John Nicholson echoed Lees, noting how the 'whole work that is going on is shut off from the outside world, the beautiful curves of the Arena not only serving the purpose of "existing beautifully", but practically shutting out all the sound, and enfolding us in a semi-circle of quietude'. He concludes by drawing attention to the impact of this experience and how it created a sense of belonging, where 'one wonders whether one will ever want to leave School or have anything to do with anything but the Arena Goldoni and the School for the Art of the Theatre'.²⁵ There is no record of a John Nicholson having attended the School, so it is likely that this was Craig writing under a pseudonym. Still, it reveals how he wanted the School to be perceived and what he stressed to be its most important feature.

Even when they were outside the Arena, Craig encouraged the students to live and work as a hermetic unit. As part of the 'future' work of the School, he proposed sending students out to tour the country as a small group – or caravan – for months at a time in order to grow together, learn from each other and develop new work. The students would 'make summer and autumn journeys through foreign lands acting their way... They travel and live in the caravans, cook their own food, make their own plays and act them, make their own beds and sleep in them'.²⁶ Close communal work of this nature would further establish a collective consciousness and a shared way of working and shows, again, the influence of Stanislavsky. The latter famously took his actors to Pushkino in 1898 in preparation for the opening of the Moscow Art Theatre, recognising that for them to be 'gathered to live and work together for a common cause, with shared responsibilities for each and all...was enough to be a community'.²⁷ Craig developed the caravan scheme while working in Moscow, where he was no doubt made familiar with the Pushkino retreat.

In the absence of caravans, Craig urged his students to spend what little free time they had together exploring the Tuscan countryside. According to Denis Bablet, they spent Sundays travelling around the local area in a bus provided by Craig, engaging with nature, learning about Tuscany and forging strong social bonds.²⁸ In this way, Craig cultivated a culture that was incredibly insular and where students had no need or desire to socialise with anyone outside it. This approach appears to have been effective: when reflecting on the first School's term Craig informed the *Pall Mall Gazette* that while 'one is at first inclined to think that very little has been done', the key objective that had been achieved was 'to bind all the men and women together'.²⁹

The list of rules that students had to follow – literally signing their names to declare that they had 'read and understood these rules, and accept them willingly and

will abide by them loyally' – is a clear example of Craig constructing a symbolic boundary around the School.³⁰ This was particularly true of the sub-section of rules titled 'Discretion'. The emphasis here was on creating a monastic silence about the work at the School and to protect it at all times from prying outsiders. Thus, students were ordered to 'mind his business and be discreet, not to babble outside the School of what work is going on inside the School, not to express any "opinion" concerning that work'.³¹ To reinforce this point, students were told that, when outside the School, 'rather than talk about its work, methods, personalities and results, the student should *wear a mask of ignorance*. He will not prove the School a good one by chattering about it to outsiders, or even to friends and relations'. Indeed, students were banned from writing to anyone outside the School with information about it: "*I do not know*" is the one reply to make to the inquisitive'.³² Underpinning these rules was the impression that the 'outside world' was something to be feared, suspected, and avoided. Even the very existence of the rules was to be secret from those outside the community.

Such rules also served the purpose of asserting Craig's position as the ultimate authority in the School and giving him unquestioned control over the people working in it. Students were told that their opinions were not wanted and that '*CRITICISM OF THE SCHOOL OR ITS MEMBERS IS NOT ALLOWED*'.³³ Elsewhere, the rules state that students were required to dedicate all of their time to the School and not to engage in any other work, whether paid or voluntary, 'unless by special permission from the Director'.³⁴ Further, they were banned from joining any other school 'no matter when or for what reason he should leave this one' and were reminded that, if a student decided to leave, he would be '*bound in honour by the obligations he undertook when first entering the School*'.³⁵ Thus, the aim was for Craig's control to extend beyond the physical and temporal boundaries of the School.

These and other rules highlight the disciplinarian approach to education that Craig enforced at the Arena Goldoni. He argued repeatedly that discipline was essential in order to achieve any sort of progress in the theatre and to create a productive learning environment. A case in point is his decision to open the School's prospectus with a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche in which he defined 'good' education as that which is based on 'severe discipline' where 'praise is scanty... leniency is non-existent... blame is sharp, practical, and without reprieve, and has no regard to talent or antecedents'.³⁶

Craig also believed that strict discipline was necessary to transform the students into a committed and unified group, with individual members bound together by a sense of shared responsibility, shared loyalty and shared practices. He used the model of the family to explain the type of group he envisioned. Of course, this was a model that, again, placed him in the position of power with the governing principle being 'that the father shall know everything about the house, and that the sons shall not pretend to know anything until it comes to their turn to play the father'.³⁷ Still, he argued that the recognised authority of the father figure worked to dispel any sense of competition and created a state in which each individual member knew their place and where the whole group had a clear sense of purpose and direction. In short, it gave them a home and a sense of belonging.

The link between discipline and a sense of belonging was felt by the students. As Ernest Marriott reflected: 'There are stricter rules in this school than is usual and yet, at the same time, every pupil feels that he is "one of the family"'.³⁸ Perhaps more importantly was the sense of belonging that it gave to Craig himself, even if only temporarily.

Craig as the Resentful Outsider

In order to understand why Craig placed so much weight on discipline and securing 'filial obedience' from his students, it is necessary to contextualise the School plans in his experience of working in the theatre up to that point.³⁹ Of particular importance was his growing feeling of frustration and resentment and the sense in which he was an undervalued outcast in the field.

As I have argued previously, Craig's apprenticeship at the Lyceum Theatre under Henry Irving taught him the importance of discipline and authoritarian control when leading a company.⁴⁰ His co-directorship of the amateur Purcell Operatic Society between 1900 and 1902 reaffirmed this belief. The eager willingness of Society members to follow all of Craig's instructions created ideal working conditions for the director and resulted in artistic success. However, when the Society was forced to disband due to a lack of money and growing bills, he struggled to secure the same level of control at his subsequent engagements.

Craig's work on the 1903 production of Henrik Ibsen's *The Vikings at Helgeland* is a clear example of this struggle. The production opened his mother Ellen Terry's short-lived management of the Imperial Theatre and was due to be the start of an eight-month collaboration between the pair. In this way, Terry intended to use the symbolic capital she had acquired as the Lyceum Theatre's leading actress to promote the work of Craig and his sister Edith, who designed the costumes. However, the production was marred by the constant power struggle between Craig and his actors.

He planned to honour the romantic spirit of *The Vikings* by staging it as a piece of Symbolist theatre that emphasised atmosphere and visual impression over 'star'

personalities. As part of this, he wanted the actors to be 'brought into unison with the background' and for each to 'subordinate himself to the general effect' through the use of masks and a lighting design that, at times, made it difficult to distinguish the actors from the scenery.⁴¹ This approach was largely rejected by the actors, whose experience of the British theatre's 'star' system had taught them to be visible at all times and to 'make for the spot from which he can be seen by the whole house'.⁴² Leading this resistance was Terry herself. She had her considerable reputation as 'the most popular of English actresses' at stake and so was unwilling to submit fully to Craig's experiments.⁴³ A battle for control ensued, with Terry challenging his artistic choices throughout the rehearsal process and making him feel undermined at all times.

Craig expressed his frustration in a letter to her soon after the rehearsals began, complaining that the restrictions placed on him were turning the production into something 'as unlike my work and what I have always striven for in work, as can be'.⁴⁴ He continued, arguing that 'it is not understood that you and I are doing this play together. I feel already that I am not doing it at all' and declaring that he is 'losing belief and affection for the work in hand... I do not feel responsible, I cease to worry about the work'.⁴⁵ In particular, he was exasperated by her continual interventions, which created a situation where 'one moment I am thinking of the work and the next moment wondering if I ought not to think of what you *think you want*, and so over goes the applecart'.⁴⁶ His warning that this set up was 'unsatisfactory for the production, and it will lose all unity' apparently came to pass: numerous critics complained that the production was 'too hazy and ill-defined to be effective' and that there was an 'obvious discord between the story told on the stage, and the atmosphere of the *mise-en-scène*'.⁴⁷

It was, in part, due to the frustrations experienced on *The Vikings* that Craig began planning his own school to train amateurs to work in his signature style and

follow his orders, thus replicating his experience at the Purcell. In an article for *The Morning Post*, published two weeks before the opening of *The Vikings* and issuing an oblique attack on its cast, Craig argued that the British theatre was being devastated by the 'star' system in a manner akin to if '[Pablo de] Sarasate [was allowed] to distort Mozart's work by obtruding his own excellence to the detriment of the symphony'.⁴⁸ Continuing the music analogy, he declared the need for a group of actors who could work together like an orchestra, with 'each man being nothing alone – everything when united... and obeying the command of the baton held by the master they are able to give us perfection'.⁴⁹ It was this type of group that he wanted to create through his school.

Craig planned to open the London School of Theatrical Art at the Trafalgar Studios in Chelsea in March 1904, one month before Herbert Beerbohm Tree opened the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. While the curriculum at RADA prepared students for the professional stage, placing 'special attention' on the 'all-important matter of voice production', Craig proposed training students in all the crafts of the theatre to create 'a qualified company' that 'may be fitted and in a position to produce together creditable examples of their art'.⁵⁰ However, this proposal failed to attract potential students and, with only one applicant, the scheme was abandoned.

The failure of both *The Vikings* and the school scheme was a turning point in Craig's life. These events brought into focus not only the deficiencies of the British theatre system, but also its intransigence, both of which manifested in what he saw to be an inability to recognise his genius or support his work. He detailed these deficiencies repeatedly in various publications over the course of the following decades. In an 1908 essay, for example, he derided the

hopeless inactivity of England and its stage, the hopeless vanity and folly of its stage, the utter stupidity of everyone connected with the Arts in England, the death-like complaisancy [sic] with which London thinks it is active and intelligent about these matters, the idiocy of that section of the Press which calls every courageous attempt to revive life and art “eccentric”, that lack of comradeship in London, that lust for *twopence* at all costs. The English actors have no chance; their system of management is bad: they get no chance of study or experience and dare not rebel or they would lose their bread-and-butter; so they laugh their life away as best they can, that is to say, grimly.⁵¹

A particular point of contention was the lack of respect for the theatre and the refusal to view it as an art form, which manifested as both a lack of respect for the director and a lack of discipline. In 1905, Craig compared the theatre with a ship, noting:

Mutiny has been well anticipated in the navy, but not in the theatre. The navy has taken care to define, in clear and unmistakable voice, that the captain of the vessel is the king, and a despotic ruler into the bargain. Mutiny on a ship is dealt with by a court-martial, and is put down by very severe punishment, by imprisonment, or by dismissal from the service... The theatre, unlike the ship, is not made for 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.⁵²

He argues here publicly for the first time the need for the director to command like a despot and, further, his entitlement to unquestioned obedience. Without this level of discipline, the British theatre would always be artistically vapid. Faced with this prohibitive situation and feeling ‘broken and on my last pair of legs, dispirited’, Craig left Britain permanently in September 1904.⁵³

However, he experienced similar frustrations in Europe. Plans for him to stage work at various leading theatres quickly dissipated due to disputes over his level of artistic control. The same was true of the few occasions when these plans materialised. His work on *Venice Preserved* at Otto Brahm’s Lessing Theater in October 1904 ended

acrimoniously, with Craig accusing Brahm of acting in 'a breach of good faith'.⁵⁴

Likewise, although he was initially positive about the Moscow *Hamlet* when it premiered in January 1912, the production's rehearsal process had been fraught with disputes and Craig later charged Stanislavsky with intentionally distorting his plans.⁵⁵

Of course, Craig's behaviour was a major contributing factor in the failure of his various projects and planned schemes. He was notorious for his extravagant and incessant demands, his refusal to compromise, and his erratic mood swings and tantrums. When Laurence Housman engaged him to stage his play *Bethlehem* in 1902, the director was given free rein in all matters of staging. Yet, he continued to behave high-handedly towards Housman, which included attempting to block plans to restage it in America the following year. The latter was the final straw and Housman warned Craig that he refused to 'put myself in a position, where, if you don't get your whole way, you threaten resignation, or a withdrawal of your part of the business'.⁵⁶ His actions at the Moscow Art Theatre were in a similar vein and included his refusing to allow Sulerzhitsky's name to be listed on the posters for *Hamlet*, thus negating the hundreds of hours the latter had dedicated both to the production and to Craig. As Maria Shevtsova demonstrates, this 'dishonourable action' was the latest in a long line of egregious demands that made clear to Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky 'what kind of man Craig was'.⁵⁷

Craig, however, failed to recognise his culpability and, instead, took on the role of the abused outcast. His diaries reveal a growing anger and resentment at what he saw to be attempts to ostracise him from the professional theatre and to disregard his artistic achievements. He observed ruefully that he did not possess 'the means for making the arrogant and obstinate managers of the different theatres of Europe fit in with and assist me in my plans' and that if he were to visit 'Paris, London, Berlin, Budapest,

Petersburg, Warsaw, Krakow, Amsterdam... I should meet with nothing but opposition from the managers of the theatres of these countries'.⁵⁸ When he attended an honorary dinner in London in July 1911, he was outraged by the 'icy reception given me by my brother actors and stage fellows'.⁵⁹ This feeling of being snubbed remained with him for the rest of his life: in 1932, he reflected bitterly that he 'can be of no service to the English stage' and that it has learnt nothing from him.⁶⁰ Such comments reveal the extent to which Craig felt as if he were in exile and had to fight continually for recognition from his home country.

At the same time, this anger and resentment manifested as a deep mistrust of people, an intense paranoia and sharp feelings of jealousy. When reviewing his father's life in 1961, Edward Anthony Craig described what he called 'the Tragedy of E.G.C.', namely, that he was 'strangely jealous... and frightened!! Frightened lest some of [his] ideas won't come off... too jealous to let anyone else make them work'.⁶¹

Craig revealed this paranoia in a short unpublished story written in 1911 titled 'A True Story'. It depicts a hardworking man who has shut himself away in a tower, separated from nature and life. When a travelling group of artists appear outside the tower, he becomes inspired by their singing and dancing and, during the night, builds 'a great wall with many towers around these people not only to keep them from leaving him but also to protect them from the terrors of the nights to come'.⁶² It is not difficult to see that Craig had cast himself as the unnamed protagonist who, having finally found fellow artists he could work with, needed to shield them from the threat of the outside world.

The story concludes with the man leaving the tower having 'took from within himself his last possession – his own soul – and held it out to the people, and they all raised their hands and held his soul high over their heads'.⁶³ It was this sort of

connection or union – this feeling of a home and family – that Craig believed he would find through the creation of his school. It was for this same reason that he fought fiercely to protect the Florence School, admitting entry only to those who swore allegiance to him and making it difficult for anyone to leave, and why he was so devastated when it eventually crumbled.

The Political Dimension

The ‘terrors’ that Craig believed he had to build a wall against were not only the terrors of the professional theatre but also wider social and political problems, which he saw to be a threat to the group that he wanted to create. In this sense, the School of the Art of the Theatre can be seen to be a particular embodiment of his political disposition.

Core to this disposition was a clear misogyny, which informed the structure of the School and dovetailed with Craig’s focus on discipline. As noted above, he refused women entry to the School due to what he believed was their innate lack of discipline. ‘It is practically impossible’, he explained in September 1913, ‘to find a woman nowadays who is devoted with singleness of purpose to her art who follows an ideal for its own sake. Most modern women seem to be full of ambition, and ambition spoils a woman. A woman ought to have no personal ambition’.⁶⁴ If they were admitted, he anticipated that he would soon find that ‘they have chattered about each other, and have behaved like cats – or have spoiled the men – or have failed to understand what is needful’.⁶⁵

He likewise argued that progress in society ‘is only possible when woman retains her place, acting as passive communicator of the laws of man’.⁶⁶ In such comments, Craig makes clear his belief that the woman’s place was to serve, obey and bolster up the superior man. Of course, this attitude was in keeping with both the patriarchal society of the time and how Craig lived his own life, where he continually depended on the women

around him for financial and emotional support. This began with his mother and his sister Edith – both of whom used their social and economic capital to finance his work in London – and included his partner Elena Meo and the numerous women with whom he had affairs, most notably Duncan and Nevile Lees.

Craig's refusal to acknowledge his debt to these women demonstrates the extent to which he believed that this support was to be expected and was part of the 'natural' order of things. This belief underpinned the concern he felt towards the growing female suffrage movement. Despite the fact that Edith was a key figure in the movement, he blithely dismissed the suffragette as 'a woman who likes keeping a man or men in order but hates being kept in order by a man'.⁶⁷ In January 1909, he complained that it was encouraging women to forget their rightful place in society:

People bump into her in the street today. What is she doing in the street? People quarrel with her in Parliament Square. What is she doing there?... She should not come out of the house into the muddy streets and scramble in the gutters. She should ride and drive. She should cover her face as she does in the East, leaving her eyes only uncovered for her convenience. In the active world woman should not enter... She is perfect when passive. She is then Beautiful physically and psychically and her Beauty inspires man. Man has had this source of inspiration for centuries and now he is losing it.⁶⁸

He expressed such views with increasing violence over the next decades. In 1926, Craig drew on the Victorian trope of the 'fallen woman' to define an 'advanced feminist' as 'any woman who blabs about a fall'.⁶⁹ Taking this link between feminism and sexuality further, he argued that the former was a tool used by women to blame men for previous sexual indiscretions, and explained:

I see such a woman at the age of twenty-five, still quite a virgin in parts – resisting like the devil – now crying, now struggling, now coming on, now rushing off – only

submitting to positive force, then accusing her companion of brutality, possibly complaining for years about this, and shortly brightening as it dawns on her to fix a label on her sleeve “advanced feminist”.⁷⁰

This interpretation of feminism as a means of indoctrinating women and displacing men is notable not for its uniqueness – Craig could, after all, be read here as an early twentieth-century Andrew Tate.⁷¹ Rather, it is noteworthy due to the force with which the director articulates this suspicion of so-called ‘active women’ and their potential for ‘spoiling’ the men of his school.

Craig was similarly suspicious of the growing socialist movement in Britain due to the threat that it posed to the individual. One of the numerous socialist parties that emerged in the late 1800s was the Fabian Society, which drew its members from the upper echelons of British society, including Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Annie Besant and George Bernard Shaw. The Fabians sought to reform British society along broadly collectivist principles but, unlike other socialist groups, it aimed to motivate this change gradually from the top down by permeating existing social institutions as opposed to agitating workers on a grassroots level.⁷²

Such an approach was anathema to Craig, who believed that its prioritisation of collective decision-making through committees would result only in increased bureaucracy – a curse word in Craig’s lexicon – and a deadening of the individual spirit. When speaking out against the notion of municipal theatres in 1904, he declared: ‘Art is the produce of individualities. The greatest cannot fail and when they succeed they bring us a precious flower which everyone copies through admiration.’⁷³ For Craig, artistic innovation and social progress happened only when an individual was allowed

to work free from the interference of either the state or a committee. Hence the need for a single Chief at the head of his school.

Socialism also necessarily posed a threat to the hierarchies that Craig argued were innate to society and essential for its progress. In a 1909 diary entry – written under the title ‘Socialism’ – he warned: ‘God, King, masters, servants. If there is anything better than God let us put that being above the King, but don’t let us put [all] on the same level’.⁷⁴ He developed the point three years later in an article written in the middle of the Great Unrest, a period of labour revolt in Britain that saw over three thousand strikes take place between 1910 and 1914. Using the pseudonym Louis Madrid, Craig acknowledged the ‘split’ taking place in society and bemoaned its impact on social order: ‘when servants revolt, both parties lose their privileges... the masters the right to command and the men the right (and what a right!) to serve’.⁷⁵ He argued that the unrest was a result of the workers’ own failing, which proponents of socialism exploited: ‘Servants wish for nothing better than to serve... What maddens the servants into these phases of so-called Socialism, Syndicalism and so on, is that they have weighed themselves and found themselves wanting. That’s the source of rage of this kind’.⁷⁶ Through such statements, Craig argued for a society founded upon a strict and unchanging binary of prized individuals destined to be masters – those capable of creating the precious flowers – and the rest of the people who are destined to serve them.

These beliefs were bolstered up by his disappointment and frustration regarding the deficiencies of British society outlined above. Craig was similarly frustrated by its lack of moral courage and inability to meet its challenges head on, writing in 1911:

It is the English habit of being over-cautious that blights so many, many spirited ideas which only need the right support to bring them into the plane of actuality. And it is not only in withholding monetary support that Englishmen are over-cautious; it is their moral support which is so often absent, which implies that in such matters they are sometimes very much lacking in moral courage.⁷⁷

This excessive cautiousness was particularly evident in the gradualist social democracy propounded by the Fabian Society. His frustration with this approach became more acute in the aftermath both of World War I and the failure of his School in Florence.

When asked to comment on the role that theatre could play in shaping the 'new civilization' in 1919, he repeated his complaint about the lack of discipline – 'There are no masters because the whole idea of master and servant has gone out of fashion' – and argued that its people were 'too Britishly timid' to enact real change.⁷⁸

Given these views, it is not surprising that Craig was one of many artists who were drawn to Adolf Hitler and, in particular, Benito Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s. He was living in Italy during the latter's ascension to power and so was subject to the propaganda of the Fascist Party. Its use of strict discipline and a hierarchical structure, where a single 'superman' ruled over the masses, resonated closely with his approach to theatre making, even while he disagreed with its promotion of nationalism and corporatism. Likewise, he celebrated the force with which it stood up to its enemies and its assertiveness in dealing with so-called 'problems', which saw the director take a more explicitly anti-Semitic stance.⁷⁹

Craig's diaries and letters of the period are replete with warm praise for Mussolini. In the days after the March on Rome, Craig declared excitedly: 'Mussolini in power. *Avanti la musica e grida Savaria...* Mussolini [has] brought order to Italy'.⁸⁰ Four years later, he stressed to his son the need for fascism in Britain, although he was unsure

that the country would rise to the challenge: 'There are 100,000 toads in London – that is why Fascism is needed, but young Englishmen are not shrewd like young Italian Fascisti so we can't get a big enough group to destroy these 100,000 toads'.⁸¹ This pessimism was only increased when he met with a representative of the British Union of Fascists, who was 'unable to say or do much...rather sad for so young a fellow'.⁸²

In this sense, fascism offered Craig hope that an alternative, disciplined society would come into being and bring with it a more disciplined theatre system. To this end, he met with Mussolini in 1934 to share his revolutionary theories and secure support for future projects, which would include a new school. However, he was left bitterly disappointed by the meeting. Not only did Mussolini not have 'the faintest notion of who this white-haired Englishman is' nor show any interest in the theatre, but he also failed to live up to expectations. Craig had 'expected Mussolini to tower above all else' when, in reality, he appeared 'rather small' and lacking authority.⁸³ 'He turned the pages of this book', Craig observed, 'like one who doesn't know which turning to take and doesn't want to ask a policeman... he looks ill – tired – all fire is gone out of him – the way he holds this book and turns the pages has no life in it'.⁸⁴ Within a year he had distanced himself from fascism, describing it as 'a selfish group, unable to be civil to people of other opinions and therefore no one need feel he owes the group any civilities'.⁸⁵

Although the Florence School had already closed by this point, Craig's embrace of fascism brings into stark relief both the authoritarian principles that ran through all of his work up to this point in his life and the strength of the anger, frustration and resentment that he felt towards the theatre field and all those who he felt had wronged him. Indeed, in 1934, he announced that he would like to 'shoot the brutes who worked against me in the British theatre in the way Hitler shot German conspirators'.⁸⁶ It is thus crucial to examine his School in relation to his artistic and political experiences, but, at

the same time, to recognise how central it was to all of his work and aspirations in and for the theatre.

Notes and References

I acknowledge with deep gratitude and affection Professor Maria Shevtsova for all of her tireless guidance, support and patience over the past seventeen years. Thank you also to archival staff at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas and the Special Collections team at UCLA.

¹ 'Rules. School for the Art of the Theatre', 1913, Edward Gordon Craig Papers, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library (hereafter UCLA), p. 5.

² Ibid., p. 6.

³ Craig first attempted to open a school in London in 1904, which was followed by further plans to open schools in 1906, 1910 and 1911. All failed due to a lack of financial support.

⁴ Craig letter to Martin Fallas Shaw, 26 November 1903, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter HRC).

⁵ For an exception to the rule, see Arnold Rood, 'E. Gordon Craig, Director, School of the Art of the Theatre', *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1983), p. 1-17.

⁶ Edward Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theatre: Forty Designs for Stage Scenes, with Critical Notes* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1913), p. 26.

⁷ 'Art of the Theatre. Mr Gordon Craig on his School at Florence', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 September 1913, p. 7.

⁸ John Balance [Edward Gordon Craig] in *A Living Theatre: the Gordon Craig School* (Florence: Arena Goldoni, 1913), p. 6-8.

⁹ Dorothy Nevile Lees in *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Anna Tremayne Lark (School Secretary) letter to unknown, 8 January 1912, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC.

¹¹ Craig, *A Living Theatre*, p. 44.

¹² Craig, 'The Alassio Notebook', Unpublished Manuscript, 1911, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, n.p.; original emphasis.

¹³ Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (Second Dialogue)' [1910] in *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 194.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁵ 'The Theatre of the Future. Interview with Mr Gordon Craig', *The Observer*, 23 July 1911.

¹⁶ Isadora Duncan, Untitled Essay on Forming a Dance School, 1906, Howard Holtzman Collection, UCLA, n.p.

¹⁷ Craig, 'The Alassio Notebook', n.p.

¹⁸ Craig, Notes Arranging Classes and Systems of Study for the School in Arena Goldoni, Florence, 1913, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, n.p.

¹⁹ Edward Anthony Craig cited in Rood, 'E. Gordon Craig', p. 11.

²⁰ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 13.

²¹ Ibid., p. 12.

²² Craig, Daybook Entry, 4 May 1909, Daybook 1, 1908-1910, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 113-5.

²³ Dorothy Nevile Lees in *A Living Theatre*, p. 26.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John Nicholson in *ibid.*, p. 48.

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- ²⁶ Craig, Daybook Entry, 8 June 1911, Daybook 2, 1910-1911, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 207.
- ²⁷ Maria Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 22.
- ²⁸ Denis Bablet, *The Theatre of Edward Gordon Craig*, trans. Daphne Woodward (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. 167.
- ²⁹ 'Art of the Theatre. Mr Gordon Craig on his School at Florence', p. 7. Craig is likely referring to the female administrative staff, since there were no female students at the School.
- ³⁰ 'Rules', p. 11.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 7; original emphasis.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 6; original emphasis.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10; original emphasis.
- ³⁶ Nietzsche quoted in *A Living Theatre*, p. 43.
- ³⁷ Craig, *Towards a New Theatre*, p. 26.
- ³⁸ Marriott in *A Living Theatre*, p. 46.
- ³⁹ Craig, *Towards a New Theatre*, p. 26.
- ⁴⁰ Philippa Burt, 'The Best Thing I Ever Did on the Stage': Edward Gordon Craig and the Purcell Operatic Society', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (August 2022), p. 258-69.
- ⁴¹ "'The Vikings". How to Reform the Drama. Mr Craig's Aspirations', *Daily News* 15 April 1903, n.p.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ 'Imperial Theatre. "The Vikings"', *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 25 April 1903, p. 292.
- ⁴⁴ Craig letter to Ellen Terry, 8 March 1903, Edward Gordon Craig Papers, UCLA.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; original emphasis.
- ⁴⁷ 'The Imperial Theatre. Miss Terry in "The Vikings"', *The Standard*, 16 April 1903, p. 3; 'Imperial Theatre. "The Vikings"', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April 1903, p. 7.
- ⁴⁸ Craig, 'Of Theatres and Actors', *The Morning Post*, 1 April 1903, p. 7.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ E. P., 'Flashes from the Footlights', *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 9 March 1904, p. 5.
- ⁵¹ Craig, 'The Theatre in Russia, Germany and England' [1908] in *On the Art of the Theatre*, p. 134; original emphasis.
- ⁵² Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (The First Dialogue)' [1905] in *ibid.*, p. 171-2.
- ⁵³ Craig letter to Martin Fallas Shaw, 16 June 1905, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC.
- ⁵⁴ Craig letter to Otto Brahm, 31 December 1904, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC.
- ⁵⁵ For a detailed discussion of the production process for *Hamlet*, see Laurence Senelick, *Gordon Craig's Moscow Hamlet: A Reconstruction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).
- ⁵⁶ Laurence Housman letter to Craig, 24 November 1902, Edward Gordon Craig Papers, UCLA.
- ⁵⁷ Shevtsova, *Rediscovering Stanislavsky*, p. 135.
- ⁵⁸ Craig, Daybook Entry, 21 January 1909, Daybook 1, p. 63; original emphasis.
- ⁵⁹ Craig, Daybook Entry, July 1911, Daybook 2, p. 305.
- ⁶⁰ Craig, Daybook Entry, 10 September 1932, Daybook 5, 1930-1933, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 45
- ⁶¹ Edward Anthony Craig letter to Lee Freeson, 4 February 1961, Edward Carrick Papers, UCLA.
- ⁶² Craig, 'A True Story', Unpublished Manuscript, 1911, Edward Gordon Craig Papers, UCLA, n.p.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ 'Art for Art's Sake. Mr Gordon Craig Says "Ambition Spoils a Woman"', *Daily News*, 5 September 1913, p. 5.
- ⁶⁵ Craig quoted in Rood, 'E. Gordon Craig', p. 15-6.

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- ⁶⁶ Craig, Daybook Entry, February 1909, Daybook 1, p. 84.
- ⁶⁷ Craig, Daybook Entry, August 1910 in *ibid.*, p. 70. Among her many contributions to the suffrage movement, Edith Craig was an active member of the Actresses' Franchise League and founded the Pioneer Players in 1911.
- ⁶⁸ Craig, Daybook Entry, 16 January 1909 in *ibid.*, p. 45; original emphasis.
- ⁶⁹ Craig, Daybook Entry, October 1926, Daybook 4, 1920-1929, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 82.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Andrew Tate is a controversial British-American social media personality and influencer who produces explicitly misogynistic, homophobic and racist commentaries. See, for example, Shanti Das, 'Inside the Violent, Misogynistic World of TikTok's new star, Andrew Tate', *The Observer*, 6 August 2022.
- ⁷² For more on the relationship between Fabianism and the theatre, see Philippa Burt, 'Granville Barker's Ensemble as a Model of Fabian Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (November 2012), p. 307-24.
- ⁷³ Craig, 'Municipal Theatres', Unpublished Manuscript, 1904, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, n.p.
- ⁷⁴ Craig, Daybook Entry, 16 January 1909, Daybook 1, p. 45.
- ⁷⁵ Louis Madrid [Craig], 'Socialism... Syndicalism... Realism...', *The Mask*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (July 1912), p. 4.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Craig, 'The Art of the Theatre (Second Dialogue)', p. 220.
- ⁷⁸ Craig, 'The Theatre and the New Civilization', *Theatre Arts Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1919), p. 3-4.
- ⁷⁹ For one of many examples of Craig's anti-Semitism, see Daybook Entry, 5 May 1933, Daybook 6, February-November 1933, HRC, p. 38.
- ⁸⁰ Craig, Daybook Entry, 30 October 1922, Daybook 4, p. 51.
- ⁸¹ Craig letter to Edward Anthony Craig, 30 July 1927, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC.
- ⁸² Craig, Daybook Entry, 23 April 1934, Daybook 7, 1933-1935, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 38.
- ⁸³ Craig, 'Meeting with Mussolini', Unpublished Manuscript, 1934, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 2.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.
- ⁸⁵ Craig, Daybook Entry, 25 November 1935, Daybook 8, March-December 1935, Edward Gordon Craig Collection, HRC, p. 107.
- ⁸⁶ Craig, Daybook Entry, 6 July 1934, Daybook 7, p. 50.