

Who is Gordon Craig?

Notes in support of a partnership project between Stevenage Arts Guild and Stevenage Museum to highlight, celebrate and explore the life and work of Edward Gordon Craig 50 years after his death.

As a research academic and design practitioner I was very excited and interested to learn of this proposal. EG Craig has been a valuable source for me in both my research work and creative practice. Furthermore as a lecturer, his work and underpinning theories have been of enormous significance in designing and delivering innovative and effective curricula for drama, design and visual arts students in the UK and Ireland at degree and post graduate level.

Craig suffers somewhat from a somewhat tacit engagement with his legacy in that at all levels of design and drama education and practice he is believed to be important but the exact reasons can be difficult to express or frame effectively .

I am therefore extremely supportive and highly conscious of the need to create content which effectively unveils Craig's thinking and work . It is important to understand here that he not only represents an aesthetic revisioning of theatre through his own work – which is in itself of value – but equally – perhaps more importantly - he presents a vital and rigorous way of thinking about theatre making and understanding theatre in performance. He occupies a creative, critical and conceptual space which is concerned with the mutuality of the visual, the textual and the performative , a pioneer of a highly blended approach to theatre making which we now take for granted but which enables a variety of creative domains to interact in a shared understanding of practice.

Through a study of Craig we can discern the inter related creative motivations which multiple 19th/20th century creative movements including expressionism, naturalism, realism and modernism sought to explore. He is in many ways a key to understanding how to define and identify these practices and remains a valuable creative inspiration in approaching contemporary theatre making.

The challenges and opportunities

In Education

In the final stages of secondary education, AS /A level students are beginning to engage with the core concepts of their chosen disciplines. An effective understanding of Craig is therefore essential to drama/visual arts/design students at this point. Craig's is key to 20th century theatre and visuality overall because he asks us to use our eyes intelligently and to consciously engage with the process of receiving and making meaning. These are absolutely the values of KS 5.

Critical Studies

The opportunity to marshal Craig's multiple adventures in theatre practice and theory into a form which educators and students can productively investigate is a really exciting one. From an historical perspective he exquisitely expresses the visual revolution that separates modernism from its predecessors and provides a potentially highly interactive set of methods through which to explore visual theatre making and performance.

Craig's numerous writings can be difficult, and his various interpreters tend to be focussed on an undergraduate or postgraduate audience. An accessible and appropriately pitched interpretation of his key ideas and the context he was working within would certainly be valuable and could drive more able students or those wishing to specialise towards extant texts and analysis whilst clarifying his achievements for the general viewer.

Research and investigation

There is no single archive of Craig's work. Models, writings, drawings, prints and artefacts are distributed over a number of museums, universities and galleries. A single portal would be of enormous value in beginning to signpost available collections and resources and potentially offer a means of reassessing the canon of work.

The Educational Resource Pack

A practical understanding of Craig's staging strategies is often not possible in a school setting. However guidelines on modelling stage space and stage lighting using basic art and craft approaches can be presented which enable students to quickly and effectively re construct Craigian staging styles and approaches. Where modest theatre production is a possibility guidelines and exercises can be developed which look at Craig's visual style more practically .

Looking forward

As design literacy grows as a concept at all levels of education and society, curricula must become more blended and our approach to creativity increasingly strategic and media rich. Craig stands as an excellent example of cross disciplinary thinking. He is by definition a mould breaker who dissolved the boundaries that had defined theatre practice for 200 years and created a way of seeing which contracted the viewer and the artist in a wholly new way. His impact in drama, design, architecture and visual art is amongst the most significant of the 20th century. This 50th anniversary is a timely opportunity to celebrate, reconsider and disseminate one of the great creative legacies of the 20th century.

I look forward to the remarkable opportunities this project presents.

Liam Doona

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