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The beginning of modern stage lighting design: Edward Gordon Craig and the May 1900 production of *Dido and Aeneas*

(Article for *Focus* - the journal of the Association of Lighting Designers)

The presentation of the ALD's 50th Anniversary Medal to Jennifer Tipton could hardly have taken place in a more appropriate location in terms of the history of British lighting design. The Hampstead Conservatoire of Music – now the Embassy Theatre at the Central School of Speech and Drama was the location of Edward Gordon Craig's first exploration and realisation of light in performance. As Scott Palmer explains below, the production of Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* in May 1900 marks the beginning of modern stage lighting design in Britain.

The director and designer Edward Gordon Craig is often referred to as the grandfather of British lighting design. His first major design was for Martin Shaw and the Purcell Operatic Society and his lighting for the 1900 production of *Dido and Aeneas* marked a radical shift in practice.

Craig had been inspired and heavily influenced by the artist Hubert von Herkomer who had experimented with light in his own private theatre studio in Bushey and had amazed his audiences with the effects created by electric light and gauzes. In recalling the impact of Herkomer's performances Craig observed that:

“Because of the absence of footlights the actors had looked less artificial. Herkomer’s side-lit gauzes, placed six feet or more in front of his backcloths, had achieved a depth of colour such as he [Craig] had never seen before - he only knew of the painted gauzes used in pantomime scenes. He decided that whatever happened he would have gauzes too, and side-light them with different colours, the rest of his lighting coming from *above* the proscenium.”ⁱ

Craig adapted this approach at the Hampstead Conservatoire but since the auditorium was built as a concert hall with a wide, stepped stage, it had no proscenium. In planning to use side-light and rejecting the use of footlights there was therefore nowhere to rig or conceal the lighting overhead. Craig therefore employed a local builder to create an ingenious proscenium bridge which transformed the stage opening into proportions rather like the later cinemascope ‘letterbox’. On this bridge Craig located six lime-lights equipped with gelatines in blue, amber and green. This lighting was to be supplemented by less powerful electric lights on each side of the stage which also had changeable gelatines, whilst front-light was provided from the back of the auditorium by two small projector-spotlights.

Craig’s staging of *Dido and Aeneas* was remarkable as it concentrated alone on using coloured lighting to transform a single stage setting. In stark contrast to theatrical practices of the time, Craig used light as the key compositional component, creating rhythmic movement through painting with light rather than pigment. The critical success of the production was largely due to the

beauty and simplicity of the design with its sense of infinite space: “The audience experienced a fusing of opera and ballet, dance and song, performed against a vast background conveyed by a sky cloth that went up out of sight.”ⁱⁱ

Craig, like his contemporary Adolphe Appia was inspired and fascinated by the potential of light to transform stage space and he also recognised the urgent need to change existing production practices. This was to extend beyond lighting and encompassed the shape of the theatre building itself to the role of the director who he argued should have an all-encompassing eye. Craig rejected the romanticised pictorial approach of existing performance practices, such as those created by Irving with gas-light at the Lyceum and the brash use of the new electric light by Gilbert and Sullivan at the Savoy. Instead Craig advocated a theatre in which the expressive potential of light and its ability to transform space and to liberate the imagination of the audience would assume primary importance.

The three performances of *Dido and Aeneas* at the Hampstead Conservatoire on 17th, 18th and 19th May 1900 therefore provided the first opportunity for Craig to explore his scenographic vision with light and marked a significant moment in British performance history: “one of the most original presentations of opera ever witnessed”.ⁱⁱⁱ Another contemporary critic observed that:

‘the real triumph of the setting was , however, in the use of light and shade; it was as carefully considered as in a wood engraving, and

added immeasurably to the tragic simplicity of the whole performance.^{iv}

Using variations in coloured light from above the stage and across the gauzes, Craig was able to achieve subtle shifts of light and vibrant colour combinations which created deliberate clashes. These effects, in stark contrast to staging practices of the time, created an astonishing and seemingly infinite perspective. In the last act Craig used yellow light from above to create a beautiful tragic finale: “Under the play of this light the background becomes a deep shimmering blue, apparently almost translucent, upon which the green and purple make a harmony of great richness...”^v

Craig’s evolving notions for a theatre of the future rested on architectonic scenes which responded to changing light and which, when combined with movement, created a visual, music-like counterpoint. The ability of light to evoke different moods, first established in this production of *Dido and Aeneas* at Hampstead Conservatoire created: “a distinctly new movement in stage production.”^{vi} It was to become central to Craig’s future scenographic vision, and in anticipating developments in expressionistic lighting in Europe it made a significant contribution to the development of theatrical lighting design practice in the first half of the twentieth-century.

Scott Palmer is a lecturer in Scenography in the School of Performance & Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds. His forthcoming book *Light – A*

Reader in Theatre Practice is due to be published by Palgrave Macmillan later this year.

ⁱ *Gordon Craig – The Story of his Life* - Edward Craig 1968, p.119-20 Camelot Press

ⁱⁱ *A Strange Eventful History – The Dramatic Lives of Ellen Terry, Henry Irving and their Remarkable Families*, Michael Holroyd, 2009, p.313 Vintage Press

ⁱⁱⁱ from *The Sporting and Dramatic News*, August 1900 cited in Edward Craig, 1968 p.123

^{iv} from *The Review of the Week* 11/8/1900 cited in Edward Craig, 1968 p.123

^v Mabel Cox review in *The Artist, an illustrated monthly record of arts, crafts and industries*, July 1900, p.131, cited in *Edward Gordon Craig* Denis Bablet, 1966 p. 41-2, Heinemann

^{vi} from *The Review of the Week* 11/8/1900