

# *W. B. Yeats and Gordon Craig: Collaborations and Rehearsals Towards the Theatre of the Future<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract:** *The artistic partnership between the Irish poet W. B. Yeats and the English set designer and theatre theoretician Gordon Craig, short though it was and limited to only a few collaborations, was important for anticipating some of the principal developments in modern theatre and reverberates until today on the contemporary scene. Although it occurred between 1910 and 1913, and was particularly intense in 1911, when some productions were staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin with texts by Yeats and a strong influence from Craig, the partnership was born long before, out of the real friendship between the two artists, and continued long afterwards beyond those joint projects. My objective here is to tell a little of this story, highlighting how Yeats's absorption of Craig's ideas had a decisive influence on the development of his play-writing, with the so-called plays for dancers, and, further, how these may be perceived as rehearsals, or laboratory experiments, for the revolution in dramatic practice that was to take place in the theatre of Samuel Beckett. This re-examination of Craig's project, known as Scene, patented in four countries in 1910 and warmly embraced by Yeats, will also make it possible to present connections with recent manifestations of the contemporary theatre, conceived as the expanded scene, in a frank dialogue with the visual arts. Thus I shall argue that Yeats and Craig, each with their own interests, was a rehearsal, at the beginning of the twentieth century, of practices and proposals which anticipate contemporary theatricality, as seen in the first decades of the twenty-first century.*

**Keywords:** *W. B. Yeats; Gordon Craig; modern theatre; plays for dancers.*

The relationship between the poet and dramatist W. B. Yeats and the actor, set designer and producer Gordon Craig, which existed in the early years of the twentieth century and intensified at the beginning of the second decade of that century, has already been the focus of many studies, principally by researchers interested in Yeats's theatre. According to one of the most influential of them, James Flannery, in one of the canonical studies about the relationship between the two artists and the theatrical experiments on which they collaborated, "the letters from Craig to Yeats about the installation and

practical use of his screens at the Abbey Theatre must be one of the most fascinating studies in twentieth-century theatre history”.<sup>2</sup> Thus it was that, as a researcher interested in the work and projects of Gordon Craig, in 2013 I came across this correspondence in the Craig papers in the National Library of France, in Paris, which also includes some letters from Yeats to Craig, to which Flannery had had no access at the time he made the above statement, and I shared his fascination as I identified a certain tension between the views of theatre practice held by the two men. More than this, the correspondence seemed to me to be the tip of an iceberg, particularly with regard to one of the most important and least studied projects of Craig, patented by him in 1910 under the title *Scene*, being relevant to texts and drawings produced between 1907 and 1922 and, above all, to a collection of small model screens created by Craig for the project and lent to Yeats in 1910, for use in the revival of *The Hour Glass* in 1911 and other Abbey Theatre productions in Dublin in the years that followed.

However, before giving details about the use that Yeats made of Craig’s invention and pointing to the decisive importance that this had in the evolution of his theatre, it is important to give a brief introduction to the *Scene* project, to which end we should concentrate on the trajectory of Craig himself, especially on the moment, in 1900, when, two years after having abandoned a promising career as an actor, he produced his first show, Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*, staged in the drawing room of the Hampstead conservatoire, in London.

W. B. Yeats saw Gordon Craig’s production for the first time in 1911. It was the second production of the same opera by Purcell, now in a double bill, including another opera by the same composer, *The Masque of Love*, in fact a section of his opera *Dioclesian*. The show was staged at the Coronet Theatre, in Notting Hill Gate. Yeats wrote several times about the deep impression that the show made upon him. He was so impressed, that he watched from the wings, together with Craig’s sister, Edith, Craig’s production that same year of Lawrence Housman’s nativity play, *Bethlehem*. On that occasion Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory:

I have learned a great deal about staging of plays from ‘the nativity’, indeed I have learned more than Craig likes. His sister has helped me, bringing me to where I could see the way the lights were worked. He was indignant – there was quite an amusing scene. I have seen all the costumes too... (Dorn 15).

Edith Craig tried to enable Yeats and Craig to work together, but it was only eight years later that the desired partnership finally came about, even though, in 1903, Yeats had made some timid experiments in the use of some of Craig’s ideas concerning the use of curtains as a backdrop and of lights upon them, even if he had not used him as a producer, as proposed by the Abbey Theatre for a new scene. But the collaboration became more intense as from 1908, when Craig was already involved in his staging of *Hamlet* for the Moscow Art Theatre, which would open three years later, and was developing in his Arena Goldoni, in Florence, the first designs for the screens and their

respective models. It was thus a situation in which both artists shared a mutual interest in the investigation into the screens; Yeats, in search of scenic renewal for his theatre saw a new hope in them, while Craig, their inventor, was offering them to someone whom he admired and who, he was sure, would be able to help him find his own success.

At the end of this collaboration, and after various productions in the Abbey Theatre, which directly or indirectly made use of the screens and of their *modus operandi*, Yeats, one might say, was greatly benefited by the partnership. As far as Craig was concerned, even though he had received neither the financial reward that he had hoped for, nor the artistic recognition that he had craved, it was nonetheless the most successful of the uses to which his patent was put.

In fact, the three years from 1910 to 1913 when Yeats and Craig were working closely together, exchanging letters and ideas, were sufficient for Yeats to learn the structural principle underlying the operation of the screens, using it effectively in his productions and borrowing from it as much as possible, as was demonstrated by his continuing use of it in the years that followed. Even without paying anything to Craig, he employed that valuable lesson above all in his projects for dance plays, developed soon afterwards, together with Ezra Pound, based on the edition of Japanese plays organised by Ernest Fenollosa (Dorn 33). Although many commentators have perceived this evolution into the Noh as Yeats freeing himself from Gordon Craig's scenic apparatus, it is important to point out that the *Scene* project meant, beyond the use of the screens, a new concept of set design, in which the stage, stripped of realistic, representative scenography became a "blank page" for a scene of poetic statement, perfectly compatible with the principles of the Noh.

For his part, Craig was initially charmed by Yeats's curiosity and the compliments he paid concerning his invention, and was later extremely generous and sent the Irish poet a model of the screens and a notebook with the plans on squared paper for him to practice and learn, and he also designed masks and costumes for some Abbey Theatre productions. Finally, he became sufficiently careful to prohibit Yeats from touring outside Ireland with the productions in which the screens had been utilised without paying performing rights.

It should be emphasised that the whole episode reflects, in a specific and concrete manner, the general level reception that the twentieth-century theatre extended to Craig's *Scene* project. Theatre practitioners, without having to follow the precise specifications of Craig's patents, but at the same time recognising the strength of that conception of a new standard of set construction, felt free to follow the trail that *Scene* – that flexible setting for an infinite variety of scenes – had blazed without paying any charge whatsoever.

In the case of Yeats, since there was friendship and mutual artistic respect, there was also explicit recognition of the source of the ideas. There are several texts and letters, or even published articles, in which Yeats recognises his debt to Craig. More than this, there are some drawings made by Yeats in his notebook during the period when he was experimenting with Craig's model for the production of *The Hour Glass*, in January 1911, which show how deeply he was indebted to those ideas and procedures.<sup>3</sup>

Karen Dorn, who has also written about the theatrical collaboration between Craig and W. B. Yeats and detailed the profound influence of the Englishman on the Irish poet, above all in the staging of *The Hour Glass* in 1911, cites the ironic explanation of the Abbey Theatre architect, Joseph Holloway, about what he saw when he found Yeats manipulating Craig's screens in 1910:

The entire setting struck me as like peas, only on a big scale, of the blocks I as a child built houses of.. As Yeats never played with blocks in his youth, Gordon Craig's childish ideas give him keen pleasure now. (Dorn 102)

Yeats seems to have been very grateful for the pleasure he obtained playing with Craig's screens. As he wrote in his preface to *Plays for an Irish Theatre*:

All summer I have been playing with a little model, where there is a scene capable of endless transformation, of the expression of every mood that does not require a photographic reality. Mr Craig - who has invented all this - has permitted me to set up upon the stage of the Abbey another scene that corresponds to this in a scale of a foot for an inch, and henceforth I shall be able, by means so simple that one laughs, to lay the events of my plays amid a grandeur like that of Babylon. (Yeats 1911, xiii)

In the most detailed account he gave of the screens in 1910, in order to support the patenting process and argue in favour of their practicality, Craig emphasised the playfulness of his invention:

The art of using this scene to the best advantage is a delicate one but acquired with practice. The aim of the Arranger is to place his screens in such a position that by moving the minimum number of leaves he may produce the desired amount of variety. (Craig 1910, 35). [...] I would advise anyone to avoid if possible the feeling that there is something very difficult about the manipulation of it. I would suggest to them that there is something in this scene akin to a box of child's bricks. In a way it is something to be played with, and if played with in the right spirit it will yield very good results. (43)

It so happens that, in the end, that great idea with which he hoped to become rich, spread out and was suavely assimilated during the decades that followed. This was to be the principal impact of Craig's pioneering innovation, that, through the so-called screens, he opened up a new range of possibilities for theatrical space, whether for a totally abstract scene or for a more conventional and dramatic one. As opposed to the widely propagated minimisation of the *Scene* project, I would emphasise that Craig effectively realised it in a very concrete manner, despite the veils behind which he himself hid his achievement, probably because of his own internal division between his ideal, metaphysical self and the practical ingenuity with which he worked with his theatrical raw material.

However, let us return to Yeats and examine his trajectory from his first meeting with Craig through the years that followed, by means of some fragments of his correspondence, up until the cycle of four plays, known as the “plays for dancers”, in which he emulated the structure of the Noh. Up to a certain point, those specific productions, which I shall examine in more detail, may be seen as a consequence of his experience with Craig and an anticipation of Beckettian theatre, principally from the 1960s.

I wish to highlight two specific letters which are examples of a certain tension between the two projects:

Both Lady Gregory and I think you are quite right about putting off the *Hour Glass* till we have a mass of your work done with the screens. It was because we felt this that we played *Deliverer* with it, and for various reasons we don't want to bring *Deliverer* to London just now. We put *Hour Glass* on because we didn't like to seem not to value the privilege you had granted us. [...] I am also anxious to produce myself an old three-act comedy of Lady Gregory's which I admire very much with the screens, or my *Countess Cathleen*. I my pitch on this if I have to re-write much of it for the musical performance in London, but at any rate before our next visit to London I will have to manage with your screens. In fact there is a good deal of work to select from for the screens, for we have one Goldoni and possibly two. Some months ago we got the stage Carpenter to make certain doors covered with gold leaf to see how they would look set into the screens for certain kinds of comedy. Thank you very much for your plan for the *King's Threshold*. I shall set it upon the stage and look at it but I'm sure it is right. I shall be here till May 1. Then Stratford and London.

Yours W. B. Yeats

(Letter from Yeats, in Paris, to Craig, 22 April 1911, in BNF archive.)

[...] In your other letter you tell me you got your stage Carpenter to make some gold doors go into my screens. Good God, is it possible I omitted to leave an exit and entrance way in my patent. If I did so I must certainly put it right out Mister Yeats. Your Carpenter mustn't. He mustn't add or take away anything whatever [...] but if any fault is found in said screens I will always be glad to rectify it. By the way has the Court Theatre a flat stage? [...] and have you written to Miss Terry (Helen) about England and the screens? Let me know you will. We mustn't have any complications about the use of the invention. I anticipate a manager in London using it before long, and of course frontiers have to be respected over such a thing as this. Still if you want sufficiently to take the thing to London arrangements had better be made at once... but at present no one has the right to use it but my mother. You will remember I wrote you about this point a very long time ago.

(Letter from Craig, in Allessio, to Yeats, 1 May 1911, in BNF archive.)

If it were possible to summarise the internal contradictions lived by Craig from his youth onwards, and which were to accompany him into his old age as far as the

theatre was concerned, I would say that that they reside in the simultaneous cohabiting of two models of theatricality. One was the theatre dating from the time of his birth, of the Victorian theatre, the Lyceum and of his great acting model, his half stepfather Henry Irving. He abandoned this style of theatre in 1898, at the age of twenty-six, when he gave up his acting career, devoting himself initially to graphic art and, from 1900 onwards, with his staging of *Dido and Eneas*, to scenic art in general. In this new stage he was to develop a new theory for the theatre which would culminate in his *Scene* project, marked by the absolute autonomy of the dramatic scene and the dramatic fiction, something close to what Mallarmé had understood to be a new theatricality, without drama. This was the theory, because in practice Craig continued to maintain a tense dialogue with dramatic poetry. For example, one of the points about which historians are divided concerns the two distinct projects under the name *Scene*: the first, presented in the first engravings of 1907, which projected a completely abstract scene, and a posterior, more pragmatic version, which was patented in four languages and which has come to be seen in the historiography of the artist as a degradation of the first, precisely because it admitted a conciliation with the dramatic, which was why it came to be known as being focused on “poetic drama”. Without analysing the merit of the question here, I argue that there was only one single *Scene* project, which was developed over fifteen years and which, despite its practical utilisation, as I have already pointed out, represented a conceptual revolution in the modern theatre which can still be felt today. In any case, as I wish to emphasise, the project also sought to bring about an economic revolution, aiming to attract the interest of producers because of what it would mean in savings on production costs. To reconcile great artistic ambitions, which were almost spiritual, with this pragmatic, materialist quality, Craig conceded in the text of the patent application a certain compromise between this abstract scenography, sustained exclusively by the screens, and the more figurative dramatic tradition. This is made clear in the following letter:

Finally, in connection with this scene I have made several additions by means of which doors, windows, cornices and staircases, trees, hills, clouds, stars, sun, moon, and all can be placed before the audience and that without calling in a single extra man to assist the usual staff and also without the use of paint or built-on scenery. (Craig 1910, 44)

This extract is particularly interesting because it points to this tension between the abstract and the figurative or between a poetic scene and a dramatic one from the perspective of Yeats himself. For his part, the tension between the dramatic and the scenic takes on other features inherent in the literary dimension itself and in the poet’s constant internal debate between his lyrical poetry and his dramatic poetry. It is clear that, throughout his theatrical career, while these two supports of literary creation existed in parallel, exerting a mutual influence on each other and, at the same time, in permanent contrast with each other, Yeats also worked with the opposition between dramaturgy



on paper and dramaturgy on the stage. His meeting with Craig was the culmination of a process begun in the nineteenth century with his unrealised notions of a poetic scene, followed by his first experiments with new way of conceiving of a production and lighting it, borrowed from Craig, to the shows realised with the scenic techniques from the set-designer, which would then catapult him into scenic authorship, now in the minimalist model inspired by the Noh but conceptually still indebted to Craig. These arrangements enable us to identify in Yeats's militant engagement with set design one of the reasons why, a pioneer amongst his contemporary dramatists, he was concerned up until his last work, to rewrite his plays around productions, either staged or yet to be staged, thus anticipating Samuel Beckett to a certain extent, as Katherine Worth points out. This writing in-process, which has now become customary, is one of the concrete indications that the tension between the lyrical and dramatic dimensions encountered in this dialogue with stage practice was a *locus* enabling it to be clearly identified. But it is interesting to go a little deeper, to draw a contrast between this tension in Yeats's writing and what happened in the case of the French poet Stephane Mallarmé, translated into English by Arthur Symons, an incontestable influence on Yeats. In the case of Yeats the tension exists between pure lyricism and dramatic poetry and, even so, in a distancing from this which one might describe as pure drama, which in fact led some literary critics to minimise the importance of his playwriting, while leading others, like Bernard O'Donoghue, to perceive it as being ahead of its time. In the case of Mallarmé, this tension between the lyrical and the dramatic does not exist because, both in his poetry and in his radically anti-dramatic "dramaturgy", Mallarmé was always opposed to whatsoever compromise with fictionality or dramatic functionality, but never ceased to be interested in what we might describe as the performative aspects of theatricality (puppet theatre, circus, dance), and even to a certain extent created the model for, or announced, an era of generalised performativity, beyond the dramatic, in which the theatre reencountered or recovered its purely material character.

Thus one might say that Yeats, as a result of his circumstances, and through the sheer necessity of drawing up a dramatic project in his first contact with the theatre, spent his life distancing himself from it but, at the same time, never abandoning the presence of the two dimensions in tense coexistence, unlike Mallarmé, in whose work there was a separation and a radical distinction.

In the case of Craig, a confessed disciple of Mallarmé, but who, as has already been stated, was also familiar with the kind of tension that Yeats was experiencing, torn between the demands of functional drama and his lyrical aspirations, it was possible to break with the dramatic more radically, even if he never ceased to orbit around it (the perfect example of this indissoluble link being *Drama for Fools*, Craig's unfinished series of plays for puppet theatre), which enabled him to draw closer to Yeats, or at least to comprehend the conflicts the poet underwent in his theatrical experience.

I wish to reflect now on the tensions underlying the shock between Craig's scenic poetics, which for him implied the hegemony of the scene as musical architecture over Yeats's dramatic poetics, which sought a lyrical enunciation and, while not failing to

concede a central place to drama, nonetheless invaded the scenic space and was inscribed in the stage directions - just as Beckett would do five decades later, as in *Play*, for example, in 1963. This writing of the theatrical poet, which insisted on the lyrical in language but juxtaposed it to physical presence and volumetric movement, became apparent above all in the leaning towards the Noh. Let us focus directly on the *Four Plays for Dancers: At the Hawk's Well*, staged in 1916, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), and *Calvary* (1920). What defines them, above all, more than the themes, or the dialogue, both somewhat similar or reminiscent of those of the plays of the two preceding decades (lyrical, cryptic speeches referring back to Celtic mythology), are their stage directions and the spatiality and temporality established by the scenic indications, which go beyond a characterisation of the fictional environment, and are much closer in their development to an objective, material definition of the scene itself.

The initial stage directions of *At the Hawk's Well* read:

*The stage is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen. A drum and a gong and a zither have been laid close to the screen before the play begins [...]*

*The First Musician carries with him a folded back cloth and goes to the centre of the stage towards the front and stands motionless, the folded cloth hanging from between his hands. The two other Musicians enter and, after standing a moment at either side of the stage, go toward him slowly unfolding the cloth, singing as they do so [...]*

*As they unfold the cloth, they go backward a little so that the stretched cloth and the wall make a triangle with the first Musician at the apex supporting the centre of the cloth. On the back cloth is a gold pattern suggesting a hawk. The Second and Third Musicians now slowly fold up the cloth again, pacing with a rhythmic movement of the arms towards the First Musician and singing.*

*(Song for the folding and unfolding of the cloth)<sup>4</sup>*

Yeats is here explicitly emulating the ritual procedures of the classical Noh theatre, but he is also employing Craig's notion of an empty space to be filled with neutral forms in order to constitute an abstract materiality. In this case the crucial element is the folded cloth, whose unfolding and utilisation to hide the action at times was to become the unvarying constant of the four plays. In this economy of resources, and of support – any intimate space whatsoever could be used for a performance with the “audience” in a semi-circle – Yeats was taking a step that none of his contemporary dramatists dared to take, held captive as they were by a scenography which, if not realistic, was at least anchored in contextualising referentiality. Between the almost religious practice of the Noh, always evocative of the ghosts of dead characters and propitious of dialogue with this metaphysical dimension, and the combinatory game of the screens, with abstract volumes constituting ludic spatial syntaxes, Yeats's four plays dreamed of a new theatre. But they were capable of creating this almost autonomously, depending on very little beyond three musicians and a few actors. Thus, if we accept what has been



argued, that Yeats's theatre is always situated at a tense point between the lyrical and the dramatic, the dramatic poetry of the previous plays being the specific *locus* of this tension, perhaps one might say that with these plays and with his assumption of the role of scenic author, or, better, stager, his *poiesis* or production came to constitute scenic material. Or, since this came about principally as a result of the partnership with Craig, as the poet of a scene and no longer of a speech, one might suggest that now, in this authorial scene this tension became apparent in the show itself, in the way in which its concreteness predominated and roughly accommodated his poetic discourse.

In order to reach a conclusion which contemplates what is proposed in the title with regard to the future, or, in other words, contemporary art, it is necessary to recapitulate the elements of Yeats's theatricality which may be considered to be anticipatory, or which serve as legacies that can be recognised in theatrical practice over the past fifty years. In summary, these elements are the idea of writing in process, the constant revising and rewriting in the light of the scenic evidence and, also, the text contemplating scenic materiality via stage directions which are more defining, rather than being merely supportive. Both these characteristic features of Yeats's theatre were to reappear in possibly the twentieth century's most radical author, Samuel Beckett, in the sense that a rupture with the dramatic pattern on the basis of which one could still speak of drama, effectively became the perspective of an anti-drama or post-drama.

Jonathan Kalb contrasts Beckett's televisual poetics with those of another great producer of the contemporary theatre:

The works startle for the same reason Robert Wilson's stage productions do: because the author/director makes every framed moment answer to impeccable standards of precision like those we expect in painting [...] Beckett differs from Wilson, though, in the same way Caravaggio did from most of his sixteenth-century contemporaries: the window, or camera lens, turns inward on particular psychologies rather than outward on epic panoramas. Beckett's interiority provides all the spectacle necessary to hold audience interest, especially when he accentuates in his directing through specificity, repetition and enlarging. Unlike Wilson, and like Caravaggio, he has both remarkable insight into the psychology of his characters and a visual artist's skill at communicating that understanding in graphic terms. (Kalb 116)

With regard to this proximity between Beckett and Yeats I would like to mention the pioneering work of Takahashi Yasunari. In articles like 'The Ghost Trio: Beckett, Yeats, and Noh' (*Cambridge Review* 107/2295, 1986, 172-6), he relates one of Beckett's television plays to Yeats and the Noh. In fact, since the 1970s, Yasunari has been drawing attention to the significance of the Noh in Yeats's theatre, principally in his eagerness to overcome realism and move beyond symbolism. A particularly interesting point raised by Yasunari, with regard to the alternative represented by the Noh for the poet's

unsatisfied desires, is the explicit presence in those dramas of something that lies at the very root of their structure, the figure of the ghost. If Yeats's earlier plays already dealt with situations of the dramatic meeting of the living and the dead, his plays for dancers consist of ghosts and dialogues situated between the dimensions of life and death, a theme that is also present in Beckett's television plays and in his final short pieces.<sup>5</sup>

Xerxes Metha comments on the growing obscurity that marks this final phase of Beckett's work, which he describes as "ghost-plays", because the root of their strength is in their spectral quality. In order to acquire this quality these last works require a rigorous control of their lighting. In them, darkness is not only part of their syntactical fabric, but is also the most important element in rendering the image effective. (Metha 171-2).

It is here that a final and curious point of comparison between Yeats and Beckett arises. While in the former, as also in the Noh, there are ghosts which are narrated and spoken. Beckett presents them materialised in the thickness of darkness, as concrete entities on stage. They are not figures, they do not represent a particular referent, but they are present, they are black holes which attract and dissolve all the light and all the sight that would see them. They are neither flesh-and-blood ghosts, nor are they evanescent. They are invisible.

## Notes

- 1 Translated from the Portuguese original by Peter James Harris.
- 2 Flannery, James W., "W. B. Yeats, Gordon Craig and the Visual Arts of the Theatre", in *Yeats and the Theatre*, O'Driscoll, Robert and Reynolds, Lorna (eds.), London: Macmillan Press, 1975. 100.
- 3 Karen Dorn reveals how, working with Craig's screens, Yeats completely changed the first staging of *The Hour Glass*, from 1905, in the 1911 production, and even the dramatic version of the text, in the second staging with the screens, in 1912 (Dorn 23-33).
- 4 Yeats, W. B., *The Yeats Reader: A portable compendium of poetry, drama and prose*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 219.
- 5 Takahashi had earlier authored two other provocative works that trace the relation between the Noh and Beckett, 'The Theatre of Mind: Samuel Beckett and the Noh' (*Encounter* [April 1982]: 66-73) and 'Qu'est-ce qui arrive? Some Structural Comparisons of Beckett's Plays and Noh' (in *Samuel Beckett: Humanistic Perspectives*, edited by Morris Beja, S. E. Gontarski, and Pierre Astier (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983).

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