

The Craig Lecture 2010: Design in the fourth dimension

Central School of Speech & Drama's Craig Lecture, now in its second year, is given in honour of leading 20th Century Modernist Edward Gordon Craig, author of *The Art of Theatre*, and director of Stanislavski's epoch-defining production of *Hamlet*.

This year's speaker, Christopher Oram, explores what technology and interactivity can bring to theatre, and how theatre, not film, should be leading the way.

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama on 5 July 2010, and was presented in association with the Society for Theatre Research.

About Christopher Oram

Oram began his career straight from West Sussex College of Art and Design, apprenticing for stage designer Paul Farnsworth at the Chichester Festival Theatre. From there he went on to assist designers Anthony Ward and Ian McNeil.

Although he's worked with most of our A list directors – including Trevor Nunn,

Sam Mendes, Stephen Daldry, and Adrian Noble – he is best known for his long-term collaboration with his partner Michael Grandage. Since meeting on a production of *The Last Yankee* in 1995 (Grandage's directorial debut), they have worked on numerous high profile productions, first at Sheffield – including *As You Like It*, (2000), *Edward II* (2001), *Richard III* (2002), *The Tempest* (2002), *Suddenly Last Summer* (2004) – and latterly at the Donmar (where Grandage is Artistic Director) – *The Vortex* (2002), *Caligula* (2003), *Don Juan in Soho* (2006), *Frost/Nixon* (2006), *Othello* (2008), and *Red* (2009).

Other work includes West End musicals, as well as the costumes for Kenneth Branagh's film of *The Magic Flute* and the opera *Billy Budd* at Glyndebourne

Oram's work has gained him several prestigious theatre awards: an Olivier in 2004 for *Power*; A Critics' Circle Award (2004) for *Suddenly Last Summer*; and an Evening Standard award (2003) for *Caligula*; this year he has won the Backstage Garland award for Scenic Design for *Parade* and a Critic's Circle Award and a Tony for *Red*.

The Craig Lecture, Christopher Oram

Thank you for inviting me to deliver this lecture – I can't pretend it doesn't make me a little nervous. Designers are theatre-makers who operate behind the scenes and are not often invited to speak publicly about their work. In my entire career, this is the first time I've addressed a forum of this nature and while I'm honoured to be here today, I hope you'll forgive my lack of experience as a public speaker.

I would like to take this opportunity to explore a few issues currently of interest to me. This is less a lecture on my approach to design and more a discussion on

how the theatre design world fits into the ever-changing world around us.

Edward Gordon Craig died in the year I was born, and although this is of no *particular* relevance to anything here this evening, it did make me stop to consider the footsteps in which we all follow... of artistic legacy, and the progression and development of art.

This was also one of the main themes of John Logan's play *Red*, about the artist Mark Rothko, that I recently designed both here in London and in America. At the end of the play, Rothko's parting shot to his assistant is to go out and 'make something new'. But no work exists in a vacuum – all new work is somehow influenced by what has gone before it. And subsequently any new work, in turn, must take responsibility for influencing that which comes after it. The importance of this cannot be underestimated; we must all be as responsible to the next generation of artists as the previous ones were to us. As technology changes and develops around us, we must leave them a legacy of excellence, artistic dynamism, and intellectual idealism that they in their turn can pass on.

This country has a long and proud history of theatre stretching back to the 1500s and still has a vibrant and thriving theatre scene today. Since Shakespeare, a strong authorial voice has been at the heart of theatre and, to my mind, it remains an essentially a writers medium.

However, while a playwright shapes and steers the drama his or her play, the live nature of theatrical performance means that the prescribed is not always the inevitable, and that an audience's influence, for better or for worse, can effect the resulting performance. This is probably most obvious in comedy, where an inert and unresponsive audience may fail to ignite the performers onstage, but it is also true, though certainly subtler, in drama, in the quality of the listening. Some of my greatest moments in the theatre have been in those situations when the audience around me, without even realising it, has become so enraptured by the

situation on stage, that there is a palpable, and audible, intake of breath when the tension is deliberately, or accidentally, finally broken.

This total immersion happens when a world is created so vividly, so believably, and so completely that the real world beyond the performance arena ceases to have any impact, and the entire focus of the audience is concentrated in live engagement with the action on the stage. This immersion in a world is presumably also the goal of filmmakers and even video game makers, but it is the *fundamental nature* of what theatre is. It happens for many reasons, primarily the quality of the writing and the performance, but it is also because of the physical production, and this is where we, the designers, come in.

I trained at the West Sussex College of Art and Design in the sleepy seaside town of Worthing, but I was blessed with a great tutor whose outlook reached far beyond the Sussex Downs. Although primarily a design course, it trained us in practical skills too, including scenic carpentry, painting, costume and prop-making skills that would prove to be invaluable when dealing with builders and makers later in my career. Having an albeit basic knowledge in those practical techniques makes communicating my ideas with all the technical departments I have to deal with a more balanced two-way conversation, and often avoids my naively asking for the impractical, the unachievable, or the unaffordable....

Above all, we were taught at college to be *observant* – the single best piece of practical advice I ever had. Design is literally all around us, from a state of the art technology-crammed iPad to the simplest paper cup. A process of research, development and realisation of ergonomics, financing, and resourcing has all had to happen before that object has landed in your hand. Understanding that this process happens to all manufactured things begins then to inform every decision we designers subsequently make, and then it really does become very hard ever again to take anything for granted.

I had another education, though, that was equally important – my subsequent apprenticeship with working designers. Any worries about leaving college and finding work were resolved immediately when, on visiting my final graduation exhibition, Paul Farnsworth, who was working at the nearby Chichester Festival Theatre at the time, asked me if I could start work with him the following Monday. I worked with him on a wide variety of projects before going on to assist both Anthony Ward and Ian McNeil. With these two designers, I covered even more ground, from the first show at the newly re-opened Donmar Warehouse, to huge West End musical revivals, from the National Theatre to Broadway. It was an enviable and pretty much unrivalled apprenticeship, exposed to some of the very best creative minds and skilled technicians in their fields.

The next key thing that I learnt at this stage in my *own* development was the nature of collaboration, and the absolute necessity to be able to delegate. To understand where other peoples' strengths lie and to encourage them to use them may seem relatively obvious, but in a form such as theatre, which is seldom, if ever, a one-man enterprise, the need for harmonious collaboration cannot be underestimated.

In my career, I have been fortunate to have brilliant key collaborators across all disciplines: assistants in the studio, lighting and sound designers, costume supervisors and makers, set builders and scenic painters, directors, actors and writers. These relationships continue to grow and develop alongside the work, creating an entirely holistic approach to making any new piece of theatre.

In discussing the physical production, we should take a moment to establish a few basic parameters; some simple job descriptions that help us try to understand the exact nature of what a theatre designer does. A theatre designer is generally responsible for the look of the production. In this country, and certainly in my case, this is usually through both set and costume. As previously suggested, this is in collaboration with the director, as well as the lighting

designer, the sound designers and, more often than not these days, a video designer. It has been some time since stage designers merely provided décor for plays (beautiful as that décor often was). Now, new technologies, both virtual and physical, engender our need to collaborate even more fully to realise the potential of what can now be achieved.

I believe that any set has to do one basic thing for the production, and that is to 'create the world'. This can be overtly naturalistic, merely suggestive or totally abstract, but the designers' intention should be to guide and to steer the audience's understanding of the playwright's intentions above all else – and never to just satisfy their own whims and egos.

I have never wanted to design a *set*. My intention, upon reading a script, is always to design the *play* – and this is not something that can be done alone. As I intimated earlier, the boundaries of design disciplines are becoming increasingly blurred, and I took it as a great compliment when someone suggested a production I had worked on had no sense of where the set design stopped and the lighting design and soundscape started.

As theatre increasingly finds itself measured against other contemporary art forms – be it cinema or home entertainment – the pooling of all our separate skills for the mutual benefit of the piece can only be to the advantage of our craft. More and more in the past decade, cinema technology has begun to cross over into our own medium, and the lines between these art forms themselves are becoming increasingly blurred. Recently, film companies, spurred on by the massive international success of James Cameron's *Avatar*, have rushed into production a whole raft of films (irrespective of quality) for 3-D presentation.

In the theatre, we have always worked in three dimensions. More than mere novelty value, what is the attraction of 3-D in cinemas? What is it that we have always had, that they now aspire to? Well it would seem, for now at least, we

don't need to worry about an answer – the rush to 3-D hasn't had much of an impact in the cinema as attendance this summer has dropped, while the theatre continues to reach out to more and more people. Actual 3-D, it seems, is in greater demand than virtual 3-D.

There is another, perhaps more interesting example of a modern art form with storytelling links to the theatre and to cinema. Video games, less championed by critics and intellectuals, though no less popular with the public, engage the *viewer*, who in this instance is entirely an active participant, to influence the course of the narrative, placing the authorial voice in the hands of the player.

So, who should, and who does control the narrative?

Video, or more correctly digital media, as I suggested earlier, is playing an increasingly important role in the theatre – on stage as a scenic and narrative device, but also as a medium with which to preserve and share live performance. This may seem potentially contradictory to the very nature of a performance being 'live', but access to all the arts is vital, particularly if a popular show has a limited run. There are different ways in which these digitally recorded productions may be viewed. A recent development has been to screen, as live, performances into cinemas. The audience share the experience much as they would in a theatre, though obviously without the interactivity and intimacy of sharing the actual space with the performers. These screenings do, though, have the unique advantage of being able to take the work instantaneously to a far wider audience than could ever be achieved in a theatre with only a limited number of seats.

The other digital outlet is the home DVD market. A potentially important revenue stream in an otherwise relatively cash strapped industry, more common currently in opera, but doubtless soon to follow in theatre, but one even further removed from the actual live experience itself. The ability to pause a DVD, (thus placing control of the viewing experience in the hands of the viewer rather than the

artist), would seem to me to be at the expense of the narrative flow, and certainly against a playwright's presumed hope of holding an audience's attention.

Most theatre is not written (or designed) to be viewed in bite-sized chunks watched between trips to the kitchen and the bathroom; what I feel is vital about theatre is that the audience is asked to be an active participant and to commit to the work over at least the period of its duration in order to fully engage with it.

In the auditorium of a theatre there is, without doubt, a bond that forms between the audience and the performers, a commitment from both parties – one to entertain, one to be entertained for the duration of the performance. This is unique to the live experience. Be it in a purpose-built playhouse, or a temporary or found space, a member of the audience generally has a single perspective on the stage from their seat and that audience member is his or her own sole editor, able to look where he or she chooses. A good stage director can, and often does, lead the eye specifically and intentionally to what they wish the audience to see, but this is still not the total control a camera has, to go in, and in close up. Ultimately, this is the basic difference between theatre and film.

The debate then surely is: 'Are we simply capturing a live performance on the night – potential mistakes and all – or making a *film* of that live performance?' Can it be filmed over several evenings? Does it even have to have been filmed in front of a live audience at all? Can additional footage be added in, either for narrative clarity, or simply to expand the director's vision? When does it become something different? When does it become something entirely new?

As these barriers between theatre and film break down, we must learn to exploit them, not fear them. The new High Definition cameras are merciless voyeurs of even film and television sets and costumes, and up until now most theatre has certainly not been designed, nor built, to be seen in such brutally frank close up. What this means is that we need to find a new excellence for design and execution that is able to withstand the exposure to this new world in close up –

something that small scale theatres with intimate auditoria have long understood. This is not a criticism of past standards, just an acknowledgement of a new world and so consequently a clarion call for the future....

Film and stage sets are two very different things, as anyone who has had experience of both will know. Their design requires very different approaches. On stage, what may look great holistically from a distance will likely look very different on screen when viewed as a backdrop behind a mid shot or a close-up. Here's another example: costumes are viewed full length on stage, and therefore the silhouette is of primary importance. Film on the other hand, with its emphasis on the close-up, tends to favour, to quote the cliché, 'collars and cuffs'. But like all good clichés, it is entirely true, as the camera more often than not is looking at the face, or a cutaway shot of the hand.

Similarly, theatre wigs, with their need to withstand the rigors of an eight-show week, are built in a very different, and certainly more robust, way than film wigs, which is possibly not to their advantage when filmed in HD close-up.

Allowing our work to be seen by more people can only be a good thing, be it at public screenings or on home media; we just have to be ready to understand and embrace what these new technologies require of us as theatre makers. What this means simply is that we must pay more attention to the many skilled builders and artisans who create our worlds with us and offer them the ability, the facilities, and the resources to create work that now sits across these two mediums.

As well as their interest in, and the exploitation of, the new media, theatre companies are also seeking to challenge audiences' expectations of the actual live experience itself. Certainly current fashion is to challenge the notion of the performance space itself, either by reconfiguring the theatre, or finding an entirely new non-specific performance space.

Some purpose-built auditoria such as the Cottesloe at the National and the Young Vic were designed to be flexible spaces, whilst other companies housed in older, more classical, buildings take delight in transgressing the established paradigm and reconfigure the auditorium to suit the individual piece. The Royal Court remains the past master of this, though recently the Bush theatre has challenged this supremacy, though as a fringe venue above a pub it is technically a found space, albeit a long established one.

These found spaces can be broken down into two further groups: those that have been converted permanently into theatres and those that are only temporary. Many of London's successful theatres today, particularly some of the smaller-scale ones such as the Donmar Warehouse and the Menier Chocolate Factory, are buildings that started their lives in very different circumstances. All use their architectural quirks and their unique atmospheres to their advantage but have now become full-time performance spaces.

More and more companies, however, are seeking to work outside theatre buildings all together. A found space has its own footprint and its own history, which can be capitalised on to help create a unique world for a production. In reclaiming a found environment, a lot of the atmospheric creative work is already done for the design team, and this has been used to great advantage by many companies. Nothing was more exciting for me as a theatregoer than regularly attending the Almeida's residency at a King's Cross bus depot in 2001, and each time being confronted by a different auditorium accessed via a different entrance route.

This has subsequently been taken even further by companies such as Shunt and Punchdrunk, where the immersive theatrical experience extends from the arrival at the space, through the foyer and bar areas, all themed appropriately to the show, and all adding to the audience's immersion into the world, and increasing their enjoyment of the experience. So much so that it has recently been taken up

by the film industry. A company called Secret Cinema uses similar theatrical techniques, around which to screen classic films, with costumed ushers, environmental decoration and site-specific locations. They do however take this immersion one stage further though, by inviting the audience itself to attend in themed costume. This is something that the theatre, as a general policy, has not yet attempted to instigate.

In conclusion then, this immersion in a new world of interactivity would seem to be the Holy Grail of today's entertainment industry and we need to be ready to take it on and celebrate bringing our skills to it. Producers currently seem to delight in putting the audience both at the heart of, and in control of, the narrative. But in our increasingly democratised world, where more and more power and responsibility is being spread wider and wider, to more parties, with less experience, the potential cost, I fear, may be expertise and excellence. The authorial voice remains at the heart of theatre and it is absolutely vital that we never lose sight of this.

In spite of, or indeed because of, all the new technologies available to us – the ability to broadcast live performance, to reach out live even into people's homes – theatre remains a medium that can afford to *lead* and to *influence*, rather than follow and conform.

This is its entirely enviable position, and one that we must celebrate and encourage for the next generation of artists that follow.

Thank you.

ENDS