



Gordon Craig's Production of "Hamlet" at the Moscow Art Theatre

Author(s): Kaoru Osanai and Andrew T. Tsubaki

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*Gordon Craig's Production of Hamlet
at the Moscow Art Theatre*

Translated with an Introduction by

ANDREW T. TSUBAKI

The Hamlet production at the Moscow Art Theatre staged by Edward Gordon Craig and Konstantin Sergeivich Stanislavsky was without doubt one of the major works Craig left to us, and moreover was an important production in the history of modern theatre. Despite its significance, no substantial description of the production is available in English. A memoir prepared by Kaoru Osanai (1881-1928) fills this vital gap, providing helpful details which are much needed. Before the memoir is introduced, however, it is necessary to understand Osanai's position as well as the situation of the Japanese theatre of his time in order to make his account of the Hamlet production more meaningful.

Modern Japanese theatre began when a small number of reformers abandoned traditional theatre and turned to the West not only for its ideals but also for its forms and practice. The plays of Shakespeare and Ibsen were the two major influences in launching the movement of New Theatre or shingeki. In addition to those playwrights, the ideas and methods of important Occidental directors, designers, and actors were adopted by many Japanese intellectuals who were trying their best to overtake the rest of the world. Among them Osanai was the most significant: the main flow of the New Theatre originated with him. Throughout his life as a translator, critic, novelist, playwright and director, Osanai provided a channel for introducing Western culture to Japan.

Osanai was born on July 26, 1881. He spent his college years at Tokyo University majoring in English literature. This experience naturally led him to seek materials available in English for his source. It is not difficult to imagine why Craig's ideas appealed to him. A man who refused to compromise his lofty ideals with the conventionalism of his environment was bound to be attracted by another man who stood courageously high above the security of ordinary common sense. At one time Osanai's devotion to Craig was overwhelming, although it did not last as long as his devotion to Stanislavsky.

In 1904, his adaptation of Romeo and Juliet was produced in Tokyo, marking his first venture in theatre. As early as 1908 he proposed to establish a

Mr. Tsubaki is on the faculty of the Speech and Drama Department, University of Kansas, and teaches Oriental theatre and drama in the International Theatre Studies Center there.

modern theatre completely different from the traditional one. In the same year his translation of *The Art of the Theatre: the First Dialogue* by Craig was presented in his *Engeki Shinchō* (*New Current of Theatre*).¹ The first apparent influence of Craig upon Osanai, however, appears in his article "Nippon Shōrai no Geki" (*Japanese Theatre in the Future*)² written in December, 1906.

When his friend Sadanji II (1880-1940), a well-established Kabuki actor, came back from his trip to Europe in 1909, Osanai's burning desire to organize a troupe which would be devoted to his ideals was realized. With the cooperation of Sadanji II, he launched *Jiyū Gekijō* (*the Free Theatre*) and directed Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* in November of that year. Patterned after the Incorporated Stage Society in London, their organization was active until 1919.

At *Jiyū Gekijō*, Osanai discovered the painful difficulties of converting Kabuki actors into able Western style performers, and he realized that his goal would be better achieved by training inexperienced talents in Western methods from the beginning. After some attempts and failures, he finally succeeded in materializing and maintaining a most progressive and epoch-making theatre and its troupe. This was *Tsukiji Shōgekijō* (*the Tsukiji Little Theatre*) in Tokyo, which was organized in 1924 with the financial backing of Yoshi Hijikata (1898-1959) who became one of the directors of the theatre and shared with Osanai the active leadership of the New Theatre Movement. Osanai's work, especially in the capacity of director, was brilliantly demonstrated at this theatre and elsewhere until his death on December 25, 1928. The extent of his influence and the excellence of his leadership are clearly shown in the fact that the most important leaders of the current New Theatre were brought up under Osanai's guidance at *Tsukiji Shōgekijō*.

Osanai went abroad twice. On his first trip he left Tokyo December 15, 1912, and visited, among many places, the Moscow Art Theatre and the Lessing Theatre in Berlin. While he was in Germany he was fortunate enough to meet Emile Jacques-Dalcroze at his school in Hellerau. Osanai's itinerary further included such cities as Stockholm and Christiania (today's Oslo) where he basked in the reminiscences of Strindberg and Ibsen. In London he saw Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson appearing as Hamlet in his final performance. On August 8, 1913, he returned to Tokyo rich in experiences of the Western theatre and with an increased determination to dedicate himself to the development of New Theatre.³ In 1927 Osanai again visited Moscow as a guest of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on its celebration of the tenth anniversary of the revolution.⁴

During his first stay in Moscow, Osanai not only saw the Craig Hamlet but also spent New Year's Eve⁵ at Stanislavsky's home. Later he described this occasion.

¹ Kaoru Osanai, "Engeki Bijitsu Mondō" (*The Dialogue on the Art of the Theatre*), *Engeki Shinchō* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1908), pp. 1-24.

² Osanai, *Engeki Shinchō*, pp. 237-44.

³ Haruki Mizushima, *Osanai Kaoru* (Tokyo: Jiji-tsushinsha, 1961), pp. 112-22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-20.

⁵ The date is by the Julian calendar which is thirteen days behind the Gregorian.

When Mr. Stanislavsky noticed me, he came straight up to me smiling warmly and opening his arms widely, as if he was going to hold me. I held his big hand in my hands trembling like a bird with joy and gratitude.

"I can speak neither French nor English, just German. Do you speak German?"

"Yes, a little."

"That's good."

"What language did you speak when Mr. Gordon Craig was here?"

I asked him suddenly a question which had no bearing on the occasion. . . . I wanted to talk about something which would involve two of the persons whose work I most respected,

"While Mr. Craig was here, he talked to us through an interpreter. He can manage German, but naturally not as fluently as English."⁶

After Osanai returned to Tokyo, he published an account of the Hamlet production at the Moscow Art Theatre, which, although it is precise in its reported details, nevertheless conveys something of Osanai's excitement and admiration.

Some of Osanai's observations could have been made only by a Japanese. His references to jinbaori,⁷ to the bold and uncluttered nature of Craig's design, and to the light in the kitchen are the cases in point. His comparison of the effect of the light to that of tarnished gold reflects also a typical Japanese aesthetic quality called sabi. Despite these and other occasional passages, Osanai's memoir as a whole succeeds in describing the production minutely and expressively in words that can be understood by anyone. His account is not a mere review by a tourist but a record prepared by a man of the theatre with scholarly accuracy and depth, and yet is filled with the vigor and excitement of youth. Through Craig, Osanai learned a great deal about an ideal theatre and in particular about the significance of the stage director. In Stanislavsky Osanai found answers to many problems he faced. His memoir is a tribute to both theatrical geniuses.

A. T. T.

HAMLET OF THE MOSCOW ART THEATRE⁸

Edward Gordon Craig had only nine or ten occasions for realizing his transcendent ideals on the stage between *Dido and Aeneas* in 1900 and *Rosmersholm* in 1906. After these came five more years of solitary discussions, of publications, and of independent exhibitions of his works. In the winter of 1911, his ideals were finally presented on an actual stage in superb form—that is, the production of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre.

On the evening of December 28 (by the Julian calendar) in the following year, 1912, after years of longing, I finally witnessed with my own eyes, thanks to my good fortune, the completed work by the "Poet of the Stage," which was executed on the most grandiose scale.

⁶ Mizushina, pp. 115-16.

⁷ *Jinbaori* is a traditional sleeveless camp coat which extends almost to the knees. The coat was worn on battlefields by *samurai* or warriors of the feudal period.

⁸ Kaoru Osanai, "Bijitsuza no Hamlet," *Osanai Kaoru Zenshu*, VII (Tokyo: Shunyōdō, 1931), 227-37.

I have no intention of discussing here the ideas of Craig, whose concepts I greatly respect and who has already been discussed by a Frenchman, Jacques Rouché, and an Englishman, Huntly Carter, who has published a sizable volume called *The New Spirit in Drama and Art* based on Rouché's *L'art théâtral moderne*. I simply and sincerely hope that I am capable of writing down my eye witness report of Craig's profound art in a manner sufficiently vivid to convey my excitement to my friends at home and to stimulate their imagination.

In Russia, Hamlet is pronounced "gamlet"—just as Macbeth is called "makbet" in Germany. *Gamlet* at the Art Theatre was translated by [A.] Kroneberg. According to the program, the staging was a collaboration of Gordon Craig and [K. S.] Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky is already well known in Japan as a founder of the Art Theatre as well as a great actor and regisseur. In addition to Stanislavsky, the name of [L. A.] Sulerzhitsky is in the program as regisseur. Sulerzhitsky joined the Art Theatre after its establishment and never appeared on the stage as an actor. He works as a specialist in the field of directing. His responsibilities are similar to those of the director of acting who is often employed in Japan these days. He works mainly on the actors' characterizations. His assistant was [V. L.] Mchedelov, the costumer was [K. N.] Sapunov, the musical director and composer was Il'ia Sats, and the wig-maker was [I. A.] Gremislavsky. Except the actors, these are the only names listed on the program.⁹

I had already heard that Gordon Craig had devised a plan of staging *Hamlet* using only screens and this was essentially what I saw at the Art Theatre.

There were no cut-out trees, no painted canvas, no sculptured pillars, no arched ceiling. Everything there was represented by screens. The screens were either painted pale yellow or gilded with gold. They could be folded many times to the desired width, and furthermore each piece was made detachable. Thus, the screens could be made into a corridor which could turn diagonally, a wall which could stand up straight or pillars which could stand apart from each other. That is to say this staging consisted only of a group of straight lines running parallel to the stage and another group of straight lines crossing the stage at a right angle. I repeat that the color used was either completely pale yellow or completely gold—I believe Craig painted one side of the screens cream and the other gold so that he could reverse them when he desired.

For which scenes did he use the pale yellow and for which the gold? There seemed to be a well organized system for it. The pale yellow was always employed for an outdoor scene, the exterior of a building, the house of Polonius, etc. The interior of the Elsinore palace was always presented in gold. When the pale yellow was in use, it could be changed into grey, blue and yellow by changing the light. When the gold was employed, a wide beam of strong light was thrown downward from the ceiling crossing the space diagonally. It never

⁹ All the names related to the *Hamlet* production were corroborated by examining a program of the production which is held by the New York Public Library. The only deviation observed in this program from what Osanai described is the role of Gertrude. In his memoir, as is mentioned later in this paper, Mme. Knipper played the role, whereas N. S. Butova appeared as Gertrude according to this program which has "October 17, 1913" as the date for permission to print.

ighted up the whole stage with dazzling brightness—the intention, rather, was to create the effect of tarnished gold.

The color of the costumes was also softened. Even though the king, the queen, and the courtiers all wore costumes which had a woven design of golden thread, the thread was pliable and tarnished. The costumes for Hamlet and Horatio were of a color between blue and indigo. They were embroidered very modestly and did not show up as much as they did in the photographs I had seen. Antique material—that was my impression about the costumes as a whole.

The first scene of the first act. As Craig had frequently shown us since the time of his *On the Art of the Theatre*, this first scene presented the appearance of long shallow sky between masses of large, tall trees, using the cream-colored side of those screens. But I could find nothing which was new to me in the treatment of the ghost's entrance and its appearance.

The second scene was based on the designs which were presented between pp. 80 and 81 in his *Towards a New Theatre*. Hamlet was completely isolated at the front of the stage by a low, sagging barrier behind which everybody in the courtyard gathered. The scene was conceived of as a nightmare which was seen through the mind's eye of Hamlet. Only the sagging barrier against which Hamlet was leaning, as if he had fallen against it, was pale yellow, and the palace which spread spaciouly behind the barrier was rendered by the tall golden screens. The light was thrown diagonally from the space above upstage left down to the center—if I try to explain it in a familiar Japanese scene, it will be the morning sunbeam which peeps into the dark kitchen through the skylight—just as a wide beam of light, and the rest of the setting was only vaguely seen in the golden reflection.

We could see the high steps at the center. At the top of the steps we saw the large, smooth, semi-circular back of a chair which was painted gold. On this chair the king and queen sat wearing gold crowns and gold attire. From the foot of the chair downward a great number of courtiers filled the wide steps. Their costumes were also done in gold.

When the curtain was raised, it revealed an almost perfect sculpture of a crowd, presenting the beautiful composition of the king and queen sitting on the chair and the courtiers standing on both sides.

The crowd in the sculpture did not move at all for some time. As Craig himself explains, they only move up and down, as "the King's jaws snap on the words."¹⁰ Craig calls the scene "the grotesque caricature of a vile kind of royalty."¹¹ I was so impressed that I felt as if I were observing a great sculptor employing his chisel with exacting skill and unrelenting concentration.

As all the courtiers retired and left Hamlet alone outside of the sagging barrier, the curtain, which came down like quietly falling fog, hid the entire scene behind the barrier. Then came Hamlet's long monologue, and when it was over, Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo entered and joined Hamlet.

The third scene, at the house of Polonius, was done completely in pale yellow. The stage was very small. A high bed-like object which was placed at the left was whitish in color.

¹⁰ Edward Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theatre* (London, 1913), p. 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The fourth scene was similar to the first, although not quite identical to it.

The fifth scene was the one which presented Hamlet talking to the ghost. Here, too, Craig used the pale yellow screens and the shallow stage. The stage picture was composed of three triangles: the first unit of steps which extended from stage right to stage left at a forty-five degree angle; the second set of steps which continued from the top of the first steps to the right at the same angle; and finally the triangular sky above the steps. The lower portion of the sky was lighted with purple. The upper portion was at first blue and later changed into red. Here, Hamlet made notes of what the ghost of his father told him.

The first scene of the second act was the same as the third scene of the first act. The room in the palace of the second scene was made simply by using the gold screens. The light came from up stage left.

The third scene which began with the entrance of Hamlet at the end of the second scene gave the impression of a wide corridor which extended along an arc from upstage to downstage made by placing the tall pale yellow screens opposite to the tall, golden ones. Craig was always fond of an arrangement of this kind. We can find a similar example in his design for *The Hour Glass* by Yeats. The light in this scene was red. An uneasy air filled the scene because of this red light and its reflection on the pale yellow and the gold screens. Hamlet walked down the corridor from the upstage end reading a book (the book looked like the note-book he was using for taking down the words of the ghost in the fifth scene of the first act). This business of walking down the corridor along its arc impressed me strongly. The appearance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who entered in fear, shoulder to shoulder and looking closely at each other as if they were puppets being manipulated by the king, was also carried out effectively. The entrance of the players was skillfully done. Accompanied by classical music, they appeared in a row with a gay air about them, some carrying cut-out pieces of decorative trees, some holding wig boxes high above their heads, and some bearing costume luggage on their shoulders.

The first scene of the third act was the same as the previous scene except that the light was yellow instead of red. When Hamlet said to Ophelia, "Get thee to a nunnery," he said it in a very low voice and he came up close to Ophelia, as if he were going to bite her. It was not a poisonous abuse, but a whisper of love, no longer sweet but sour.

The second scene was divided into two: the first set in the dressing room of the players, and the second in the great hall where the play was presented. The pale yellow screens, which stood up straight and spread wide in a simple manner, formed the dressing room. Some of the players were busy with their preparation. Some others were absorbed in their voice exercises or in going over pantomime. A white dressing table which had an interesting shape was placed within the screens and formed the background for the scene between Hamlet and the first player.

The scene of the great hall which followed turned out to be the most elaborate one. The center of the stage was made into a rectangular low level which extended almost to the full stage width and depth. An actor could walk down the steps from the apron to this low level which was so low that only

his head could be seen by the audience. He could then ascend the steps at the upstage end of the level until he reached the foot of the throne at the center. On each side of the throne there was a narrow passageway extending to both sides of the stage, thus providing access to the throne other than the steps at the center. Naturally the scene was totally gold. The throne was similar to the chair shaped like a "rising sun" which was seen in the first act. The king and queen seated themselves on that high, remote throne facing front. The group of players acted their scene on the narrow front stage with their backs to the audience. Between the old play, which seemed like a torturing-rod, and the shuddering throne, there lay the wide steps which went down and then up like a deep abyss with a gaping mouth. Hamlet stood behind the throne on which the brother of his mother's husband and the wife of his father's brother sat, putting his hands on the circular back of the chair. Little by little, he put his face closer and closer to them, as if he were trying to perceive their ugliness. At the moment when the play within the play came to its climax, Hamlet's head reached the top of the chair's back and he looked straight down oppressively at the faces of the king and queen. The king and queen flew along the narrow passages at the sides of the gaping abyss, revealing their naked fear. The regisseurs' originality impressively exposed the conflict between the pathos of Hamlet and that of Claudius.

The fourth scene was the bed-room of Hamlet's mother, which resembled the house of Polonius. The white bed was placed at the left side of the recess which was provided at the center of the pale yellow screens.

In the fourth act, as was traditional, only the fifth scene was presented. At stage center there stood two square pillars, which were painted pale yellow, and a little upstage of them was placed a throne for the queen. The stage was surrounded with the golden screens which formed a circle. Beyond the screens there was a space which looked like the dark corridor used in the third scene of the second act.

When the curtain was raised, the queen was discovered seated on the throne. In front of the throne twelve court ladies stood wearing similar costumes which had checkered patterns. (The costumes were also similar to those of the dancers in the opera called *Acis and Galatea* which Craig designed.) Four of the court ladies stood in a row on each side of the throne from upstage to downstage. Two others stood outside of each row, forming a line which stretched diagonally outward. Each of them held a music book in her hands and was singing a song. Then mad Ophelia ran into the scene, as if she were trying to flee from something, and hid herself behind the rows of ladies as though fearing somebody.

The ladies who had exited came on stage again when excited Laertes caused a disturbance, and they composed a beautiful sculpture of fear surrounding the queen. Around the ladies the Imperial guards stood solemnly.

Ophelia had put on an old dress of woven silver thread and over that wore a torn gown of black silk gauze. The silver color became somewhat grey through the black silk gauze. Only a few leaves and pieces of ivy clung to the skirt and she had no flowers either in her hand or in her hair. The entire scene became more pitiful when she talked about flowers, stretching out her empty hands as if she were holding a bouquet.

The first scene of the fifth act was a churchyard. This scene was also formed with pale yellow pillars and steps in addition to the grave which was opened downstage like an evenly cut box. The grave diggers threw each bone dug out from the grave into a small rectangular basket. And one of the grave diggers carried this basket away with him when he made his exit. There was nothing on the stage which might realistically remind us of earth or mud. It was ground which had been swept and purified. It was the sacred earth on which lay the body of Ophelia.

I do not remember anything particular about the funeral procession.

The second scene, that is to say the most catastrophic scene of the play, was the same as the picture which appears on the last page of *Towards a New Theatre*. It differed from that picture only in that the upstage center consisted of the pale yellow screens which appeared to be the wall of the castle and of the blue sky above it, whereas in the picture only dark space filled this area. I am not sure when that picture was taken, but the stage I saw at the Art Theatre was quite different in both light and shadow.

It was interesting to note that in the scene in which Hamlet had the duel with Laertes, there was no one else present except the king, the queen, Horatio, and Osric. It was also interesting to watch Fortinbras' men filling up the stage gradually after Hamlet's death, like a rising tide. The men all wore coats something like the Japanese *jinbaori*. The banners which were brought up one by one on the shoulders of the men consisted only of white, black, and indigo lines. The designs on the coats and the banners reminded me very much of our simple Japanese design arrangements.

Even after a great many banners had entirely covered the sad corpse of Hamlet, innumerable spearheads at the outside of the castle wall at stage center were kept moving, and they created the illusion that the rest of the army was still marching up. Thus the curtain fell on the *Hamlet* of Craig, Stanislavsky, and Sulerzhitsky.

In [V. I.] Kachalov's Hamlet I could observe the results of a great deal of study, especially in his attitudes toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius and Ophelia. [V. V.] Baranovskaia's Ophelia gave me the impression of a quiet, deep, small lake with her deep eyes which seemed to look far beyond life, and with her impassioned heart which reminded me of a spider's wet nest swaying in the rain. [V. V.] Luzhsky's Polonius was a perfect caricature of an "ordinary man" who spread the odor of "common sense" everywhere. The queen of Mrs. Chekov, [O. L.] Knipper, did not seem in the least conventional. She never made any big gestures with her body. She showed her crying and agony only with her soul.

Of all the things I saw in *Hamlet* at the Art Theatre I was most moved by the art of Gordon Craig, as I had expected to be. Although I had been moved and stimulated frequently by his idealistic theories, I had doubted at the same time whether they could be put into practice. But these doubts have been cleared from my mind once and for all by seeing his *Hamlet*.

His ideals are *not* "impossible." "Simplicity" in Craig's conception is simplicity in expression and not in content. In his simple composition of straight lines there lies undeniable power. It is not too much to say in Craig's case that art is not an imitation of facts but is the creation of facts.

September 18, 1913