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New Stage Visions: Craig's Classical Operas

By the end of the nineteenth century, the move towards recovering the work of the Greek tragedians on the contemporary stage had made significant steps forward in Europe. If some of the translations were quaint, and some of the notions of performance unimaginatively rooted within the acting styles of the time, lip-service at least was being paid to Greek tragedy as a dramatic form rather than a literary one, akin more to opera than to the versifying of Shelley or Browning. In one area the presentation of Greek drama remained fossilised. Settings and costumes tended to be a product of belated antiquarianism, and to be fixed in some generalised stage world of reconstructed classical architecture with players in 'authentic' Greek costume.

Edward Gordon Craig, however, designer, stage director and visionary, was beginning to promote a revolutionary approach, to create a theatre which would return to the past, not in order slavishly to recreate it, but rather as a source of inspiration for the theatre of the future. His aim was to conjure up environments in which the basic essence of plays would have a higher priority than their archaeological authenticity. He became fascinated by the theatre of ancient Greece and was eventually to produce a whole series of specific Greek-inspired designs. These included the famous 'Electra' series for Eleanora Duse, and the 'Black Figures', flat wooden images of such as Iphigenia, Helen and chorus members which brought together within the same artefact the singularity of the masked performer while hinting at the physical mobility of both masked actor and puppet.

Craig's first practical stagings of work on classical themes were the operas he produced over three years between 1900 and 1902. This Paper will look, with illustrations, at his costume and stage designs for Purcell's Dido and Aeneas, and Handel's Acis and Galatea. What is exciting about these operatic productions was not only their inspirational staging, revolutionary though it was for its time, but the way in which Craig began to explore a vision of what Greek tragedy might be on stage which went way beyond the pomposity of Gilbert Murray and Granville Barker, or the monumentalism of Reinhardt. Craig was paving the way, it transpired, for a perception of Greek drama on stage which would abandon the literal in favour of the figurative, and treat Greek theatre as a proper synthesis of all other art forms, a theatre of the mask, of architecture, of music and dance.

Two design features stand out above the rest, separate but linked. The first is Craig's respect for, the significance of the supernatural. The second was to become a Craig trademark, the subordination of the human figure to the powers of nature. The world of myth would no longer need to be represented by earlier iconographies, but could better be served by its imaginative and evocative context.