

# Craig Lecture: Michael Levine on the role of the designer

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

**Our inaugural speaker is Canadian theatre designer Michael Levine who talks about the design process and creative collaboration on two very different scales.**

This event took place at Central School of Speech and Drama on 5 February 2009

**Keynote speaker:**

**Michael Levine (ML)**

**Other speakers:**

**Tim Albery (TA)**, theatre and opera producer

**Catherine Alexander (CA)**, Associate Director, Complicite and Senior Lecturer in Collaborative and Devised Theatre, Central School of Speech and Drama

**Response:**

**Prof Christopher Baugh** (CB), Professor of Performance and Technology,  
University of Leeds

**Chair:**

**Prof Andy Lavender** (AL), Dean of Research, Central School of Speech and  
Drama

**About Michael Levine:**

Toronto-based Michael Levine is a set and costume designer of international repute. Over the three decades since he studied Since studying stage design at Central St Martin's School of Art and Design, London he has designed for major opera houses in Paris, New York, Vienna, London, Tokyo, in Holland, and in Belgium. He has designed for Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera, the Canadian Opera Company, among many others. His UK theatre work includes the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic, and more. He has also designed for London's West End and Broadway. In Canada, he has worked for Shaw Festival, Canadian Stage, Tarragon Theatre, Soulepper Theatre, National Ballet of Canada, and Dancemakers.

His more recent work includes his ingenious design for Complicite's *The Elephant Vanishes* [2003], a collection of urban Japanese short stories, which facilitated an extravagant multimedia staging and a series of fantastical set-ups. His design for Anthony Mingella's production of *Madame Butterfly* at English National Opera [2005] was simultaneously sparse and lush, and staged Eastern tradition iconography within a sharply contemporary sensitivity.

The scale and scope of Michael's work is conveyed in the list of his most recent activities. He has designed *Madame Butterfly* for the

Metropolitan Opera in New York [2006], *A Disappearing Number* for Complicite for the Barbican and international tour [2007]. He has designed the *Ring Cycle* by Wagner for Canadian Opera Company [2006] and himself directed *Das Rheingold*. He designed *Candide* for the Chat let theatre in Paris [2006], La Scala in Milan, and English National Opera; *The Coronation of Poppea* for Glyndebourne [2008] and Bette Midler's *The Showgirl Must Go On*, for the Coliseum in Las Vegas [2008]. He is currently working on a new production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* for the Royal Opera House with celebrated director Tim Albery; we are delighted that Tim will share the stage with Michael at some point during the proceedings.

Michael's work has been honoured with a Gemini Award, a French Critics' Award, an Edinburgh Festival Drama and Music Award, two Dora Mavor Moore Awards, and a Toronto Arts Award. He is a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, and he is our inaugural speaker this evening: Michael Levine.



## **The set for The Flying Dutchman, ROH 2009 © Clive Barda**

### **The Craig Lecture by Michael Levine:**

Thank you to Central School of Speech and Drama and the Society for Theatre Research for organizing this Edward Gordon Craig lecture series. I am very honoured to be the inaugural speaker. I hope I can shed some light on the role of a theatre designer.

Edward Gordon Craig wrote a famous essay titled *The Art of the Theatre*, later printed as *On the Art of the Theatre*. The essay takes the form of an imaginary conversation between a stage director and a member of the public. He writes:

*The stage director says:*

*[...] the art of the theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.*

*The playgoer responds and asks:*

*Action, words, line, colour, rhythm! And which of these is all important to the art?*

*The stage director replies:*

*One is no more important than the other, no more than one colour is more important to a painter than another, or one note more important than another to a musician.*

Craig was interested in this breaking down of the barriers between the various areas in theatre. He was somebody looking for a new path in the theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century – making a break with the past. His whole notion of theatre making meant that design, direction, movement, voice,

light, and sound were to become one. Wagner, fifty years prior, called it *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which means 'total theatre', where all of the arts join together to become one great form.

So I thought, in the spirit of Edward Gordon Craig, I would talk a little bit about collaboration, and how collaboration is central to my design process. I don't think I could do my job without the other collaborators involved in the process, and by collaborators I mean the text, the director, the other designers, the lighting designer, the costume designer, the video designer, the sound designer... I think ultimately those collaborators are in fact what informs the design. I feel very much like a 'designer'. I wouldn't classify myself in the classical sense as an 'artist'. I never begin with a blank canvas; I always begin with a canvas that's marked. I'm never like an artist: alone in a room with this empty canvas in front of me. My canvas comes with marks on it, and the more I become involved in the process the more marked it becomes. So those initial *marks* – the text or the music or a notion or an idea – are already on that canvas. In fact, the more people that become involved in the process, the more marked that canvas becomes. So I feel like my job is one in which I'm deciphering those marks and trying to distil them into some sense of a design. And I think that exchange is in fact the most interesting part of the process. So I want to talk about that.

One of the questions that people frequently ask about design is: 'Where does it come from? Do you do what the director tells you to do?' It's about where the art of the piece comes from, where my artistry comes from. I think that collaboration is a very grey area, and I think it's very hard to know where my ego recedes and the other collaborators' egos come forward; where, for example, a directorial idea will leave off and a design idea will begin; where a designer intervenes in that process, and how much of an intervention you can make in order to give a sense of place with these other collaborators working at the same time. I feel like that's a very important part of what I do now as a designer. I don't know if that's different to other designers, but I have a sense that it's different from the way designers worked in the nineteenth century and in the eighteenth century, and in the seventeenth century... I don't think it's to

do with a difference in technique – we work in the same way, and in fact I very much share the technique of a nineteenth-century designer in that I make models and I draft, I do drawings. It's very similar to how people worked 200 years ago. Of course the technology is different: I draft at a computer, some 3D modelling is done on a computer, but essentially the basic tools are the same.

What really informs my work more than anything else is a different way of seeing. Our audiences are different from those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Of course they are. What's interesting in that way of seeing is that audiences today are very sophisticated; they're sophisticated on a visual level, they are able to read abstract symbols very, very quickly. They don't need everything laid out in front of them – you can refer to something. And I think that's a direct consequence of the visual bombardment we receive on a daily basis. In a way that's why we have this dependency on each other in theatre, and that's why I can't, as a designer, work in a different world to the director. I think that overlap is becoming much more a part of the way we work. It's that notion that the design, a visual idea, is also a directorial idea; and a directorial idea becomes a visual idea.

It feels a little bit strange talking about collaboration by yourself so I invited Tim Albery to come and speak with me, and to talk about the process that goes into working with somebody else and how that informs the design. In fact the exchange takes place with two people.

When Tim and I met up a couple of weeks ago just to talk about the design for our current production, *The Flying Dutchman* [Royal Opera House, London, 2009], one of the first things we spoke about, one of the first words that came up, was *fear*. I think there's a lot of fear in making a new production. I mean I have a fear because I have a design deadline, and so I have an allotted period of time in which to make the design. Sometimes you think, 'Are we going to make it in time? Are we going to be able to do justice to the piece within the allotted time? How will we be able to provide for the unknown later in the process (the rehearsal process)?' I don't really want to give the

impression that what I do is a great mystery; I don't go into some sort of design trance and come out the other end with some fabulous, completed design. In fact for me it's about understanding the requirements of the production, and then building on that; developing a sort of foundation of questions asked about the production. And they can be as simple as, 'How many doors do we need? How many entrances are there? Who's entering? What are they entering into?' Or they can be more complex: 'What are the psychological dynamics of the scene?' But in fact those things are the foundations upon which I begin to build the design. Also, I think one of the things that I try to do in order to make the process less fearful is to keep it as rough as possible, and to have the initial stages of the design work between the director and me as something that is very malleable and rough. I try to work in a form where you can throw things away very quickly. There's an innate preciousness that comes with designing – as designers we love our sketches, and we love our models, and they're very time-consuming. I think it's important to make that process as 'throwaway' as possible, as rough as possible. So I start with a series of sketches, but prior to that we start by discussing the piece.

TA: As a director in this collaborative process, it's great when you work with a designer who knows who they are. I have had the experience sometimes of working with designers who are very ready to accommodate what I am, but I'm not quite sure what I'm bumping into on the other side. So I think one shouldn't confuse collaboration with acquiescence or simply falling into whatever role is required on this occasion in contrast with the last occasion. The designers of which I'm most nervous are the ones who can do you anything you want: 'You want a realistic room? Here you go!' Or, 'You want a this? Here you go!' Which is not to say that their work can't be really different, but somehow there needs to be a sense that they have a kind of innate sensibility that they can bring to the process, one that won't be compromised by the notion of collaboration. So I suppose I'm just trying to put down the marker to say that it isn't necessarily about compromise. With Michael it didn't feel like each party left who they are outside the room.

We were talking the other day about situations where sometimes the roles aren't defined. I've been involved in collaborations in the past where there were three or four people who were unsure if they were the director, the choreographer, or the writer, and we were all sort of doing a bit of everything. And the danger of that is that you're never being fully yourself because you're always stepping back to allow someone else to be a bit of what you are too! That can end up in a terrible situation in which nothing truly incisive, or coherent, or indeed demanding is made. I would argue the collaboration is about Michael staying where he is and me staying where I am, and yet that somehow not being the way you look at it.

ML: It's also about a level of trust in the person you're collaborating with: you have to have, ultimately, a great level of trust in their ability to do what they do, and then the exchange becomes quite interesting. We're working on *The Flying Dutchman* at the moment. I don't do finished drawings, because I get a little bit nervous with finished drawings – it's the paper, you know, the virgin pieces of paper, I'm sort of terrified by them. And I think there's something very intimate about working in a sketchbook – it's almost like a form of hieroglyphics. It's a way of speaking, and again you have to have a director, you have to have a collaborator who will understand this form of hieroglyphics. Someone who's able to read those very rough drawings and have a kind of sense of them. And then it enables you *not* to go into a kind of precious process... You don't have to invest very much into that idea, it remains a kind of fluid idea, and then you can throw it in the garbage!

TA: Yes. We were working on *Götterdämmerung*, which is the final opera of the *Ring Cycle* and there's a moment where you meet the chorus for the first time in the whole cycle. And we were working very much in the present; in terms of this myth we had come to the present. This makes collaboration very odd because there were four directors. Michael was the first, on *Rheingold*, and then there were two Canadian film directors, and then me doing the fourth one. So that took collaboration really quite a long way because we all had to accommodate each other's desires and vision in order to allow Michael to design all four of them as a whole.



We had the idea that this kind of bureaucratic world that our main character Hagen lives in would be complemented by the arrival of all these men who look like office workers, lots and lots and lots of tables that were all identical, so you had all these kind of clones of him arriving. And eventually we decided that at the top it would be very, very ordered, and he was just one of these many people. But we also knew that later on we somehow wanted all these tables to come together to become one big table upon which Brünnhilde, who would be presented as the new wife of Gunter, could somehow be seen as an object, and all these men would sit in chairs around this huge table looking at this object on display for their approval. So this was a mighty fine idea!

ML: Yes. I had designed the tables, which were to be on wheels, and were somehow magically going to become a table. And I had begun discussions with the technical team in order to try to make that work – we were talking about magnets and strange things that sounded a little fishy to me!

TA: And this was to make 40 tables become one big table...

ML: ... that quite a lot of people could then get on top of and walk on! And we were massively over-budget – as I am a lot – and I just had a kind of notion that this idea just wasn't going to work. So in fact I flew down – Tim was in Albany – and said, 'Tim it's just not... We have to back track, we have to throw this away and try to figure out another route.'

TA: And so this big table now is there from the beginning, where there would have been lots and lots of small tables in our original idea. So we started with the huge table, and we discovered in the end that it was far, far, far better. In the previous act, we had a much smaller version of that table, which was Hagen's table in a more normal kind of room – his big office desk. So this giant version of his table allowed us to see him alone in the beginning – you almost didn't know how big the table was. It introduced this other kind of mirror character. The whole scene was like his father in his head mirroring him, because his father is trying to persuade him to get the ring. A very good

way of playing out this very strange dynamic was by having identical computers – they looked very similar. It was a very powerful metaphor for that – it shows what is going on between the dead father, the father in his head, and himself. The sense of his exploding ego – because Hagen is by now pretty much insane with desire for power – the desk then accomplished that. When we went to the next scene, when he calls up the people and they arrive, it allowed us to do a kind of revolving of this table in fantastic Wagner dream music: people coming on to begin that revolving of the table. It was like a strange ballet going on with this moving of this table and out of it came the next scene. So, essentially, by dint of coming up with a huge technical problem that was insolvable, we moved to what turned out to be, we think, a much better solution.

I suppose the point of the story is very obvious: quite often practical and financial difficulties – if you can work them through, if you're not afraid of admitting that you've come up against a brick wall – can lead to a much better solution. Don't say this to management, but it's sometimes quite good if you can't afford what you wanted originally because you come up with a much more creative and simpler idea. If the bad news comes back that you're £100,000 over-budget, then that's not necessarily disastrous news! It can actually force you to re-look at what you're doing and go, 'What was that about, anyway?' or, 'Do we need that?'

ML: I think there are certain warning bells that go off when you're pushing a design idea, or some sense of the production, in one direction. And for some reason when I work with technicians there's some kind of early warning bells that go off to say, 'That's just not going to work.' And if you can catch that in time, you can actually try to subvert it and go around it, and try to make it move and work in the right direction for you. So that's a little bit about how we work.

We were talking a little bit about *Götterdämmerung*... In *The Flying Dutchman*, there's a ghost chorus that appears – that can appear – onstage...

TA: ... which normally does *not* appear on stage, although Wagner wrote that he would like it. More often that not it's sung offstage when they appear in the last act, but as the result of a lot of work, we got to the stage where we thought they should be onstage...

ML: ... and so there was a moment where we were working together where we thought, 'How do we get them onstage? Where did they come from? And, in effect, who are they?' I might just backtrack a little bit on the design here, because there's quite an interesting moment of this collaboration between the two of us.

We were working together quite closely to try and find solutions to the problems with the piece. Wagner has this very odd sense, which is that it deals with the very large emotions of the music, but also the very small-scale relation between the characters. So we were struggling with that, because you have to deal with these almost domestic scenes but in a larger picture. We'd been through, *I'd* been through, several models, lots and lots of drawing, and we really weren't getting anywhere. We were just not getting it – and of course time starts to run out, and I kept on sort of producing work, and Tim and I spent a lot of time with it and we'd sit with it and run through the scenes and work through the scenes and we were coming up against walls all the time because there was something within the design that just didn't have the sense of the music. On one level we were understanding the scene, but not achieving the proportion of the music.

So I was working very late one night in my studio, and I was playing with a metal floor. I pushed it into the model box and the corners of it got stuck in the sides of the model box and it made a curve. I thought, 'Well, that's kind of nice!' And the next morning Tim came in. (Earlier I had made lots of other models and I presented them and we worked on them.) I said that a strange thing had happened, strange but interesting.

TA: You said, 'I don't know what it is or what it's got to do with anything we've talked about so far,' and I said, 'God that's fantastic isn't it?' So then we just

pursued what this curve could be. And really it was like starting all over again, coming in and seeing this curve and thinking, 'How do you do *The Flying Dutchman* on this curve?' This became the conversation. And then it morphed gradually into...

ML: ... the side of the ship that's fallen onto the stage. You can see that along the front there's water, as you would have water along the side of a ship. You can vaguely see on the right-hand side the numbers that give you the level of the water. So we kind of started to work with this, and began to explore the scenes, and it proved quite fruitful. So there is a moment where the Dutchman's ship appears in shadow across this ship, as if there's another ship above the ocean.

TA: It was interesting because our big struggle before had been that – incredibly naively – we knew we didn't want to run away from the ship metaphor, which we could have jumped completely; we kept trying to work out how two ships kind of pass each other on the stage. And then, the moment we abandoned that, this idea of a huge shadow of the Dutchman's ship crossing the stage became a very simple solution to the problem.

It became clear that we should stay all night in this one world, and the idea of getting on the boat then becomes the metaphor for the whole evening. The community where she lives and where the Dutchman is going to arrive are actually in the same world, so we never really leave this side of the ocean for the whole evening.

ML: So in some sense the accident of me shoving a piece of card into the model produced what we were looking for – in fact the metaphor for the piece. And the joy of working with Tim is that he recognised that right away, and so we were then able to push it further and further.

We were struggling with how to make the Dutchman's crew appear, and in fact we found that they could come from inside, from inside the group, and manifest themselves. So I was able at that point to design a wall at the back

where the Dutchman crew all live. The Dutchman's crew will be able to sneak in during the previous scenes, and we expose them later.

TA: It's where we've had the party for the other crew, who've been having a very banal 'boys' night out'. They've emerged from the front of it to try to wake up the ship, and then suddenly, from behind them, they find that there's been a takeover of their world by these strange creatures! And in the model box this was an attempt to suggest lighting, that it goes into some strange kind of underworld.

At this point we're leaving out of the equation Constance [Hoffmann – Costume Designer], who should be sitting here. She kept coming up from New York for meetings in Toronto, where we were working, so we would be updating her on where we'd got to, and then carrying on with the conversation. It became clear that the Dutchman crew were all really just the Dutchman repeated and repeated and repeated; he doesn't actually have a crew, they're just like manifestations of him, multiplied. They all look identical to him, whereas the other crew were all obviously real, very individualized, people. It gave us a very good tension between these two worlds, in a quite simple way, and possibly a quite telling way.

That then led us on to the next thing which was that Senta, the woman who has fallen in love with the Dutchman, would actually end up getting involved with this group of men who were all multiples of the one that she's fallen in love with! So she has a sort of strange dream sequence in which she's bullied and abused by this group of forty men who all look like the man who she is in love with!

ML: Which Tim just staged yesterday!

TA: Right. And it echoes a dream he had earlier in the first scene in the first act where he sees her appearing with this beautiful, sort of archetypal, Flying Dutchman boat model, which is our equivalent to his portrait – there's meant to be a picture of him on the wall, of his face. He sees her when he's longing

to find this woman in his aria; he sees a dream of her arriving and putting the boat in the water at the bottom and then leaving, but at the same time she's dreaming of him arriving... So it's like two dreams happening at the same time.

And so we really have gone for the idea of this whole world, and this whole ship is a series of dreams, the self-reflecting dreams of different characters.

ML: This is the kind of work that I do with an existing text or music and something that's already there: playing off of it, trying to understand it, and trying to support it. With an opera, in a way, you're trying to dust it off and make it shine anew for an audience.

TA: At this stage in the process, Michael's coming into rehearsals, as indeed is Constance, and talking about what he sees in an incredibly tactful way, because I'm vulnerable at this stage. He's very good at just asking me a little question which implies that something is maybe not quite right, which he did the other day, and I've worked on it and I think it's a bit better now! It's really, really useful to have someone you trust coming in at a stage where you're really not ready to show it to anybody else, someone that you trust to point out where you've abandoned what we've tried to achieve in our conversations. Or to simply help you in the process. Again, it comes down to that fear thing: if you're not afraid of each other, or of speaking your mind, then it's good. I've had a relationship in the past with a design team, which fell apart because of egos. There came a point where I was afraid of saying something stupid, which of course you do most of the time, because in this process you go, 'Well what would happen if we did *that*?' And, if someone else goes, 'I don't think so,' then it doesn't work out. You just think, 'Oh God, I shouldn't have said that!' And the moment you start feeling like that – at least that's my experience – your brain just seizes up and you start monitoring what you're going to say before you say it. That's when you know the relationship is over.

ML: I think that, for me, a very important part of collaboration is self-censorship: you shouldn't be self-censoring in any way, I mean it's quite

interesting that the people I enjoy working with have no sense of self-censorship so they'll say *any* idea, even if it's a terrible idea! I've worked on a few shows before with Robert Lepage, and he has *no* sense of self-censorship: he just does everything, and then he allows it to happen. You look at it, and then you can decide. It's when you start monitoring what's coming out of your mind that you get into very serious trouble, and eventually you freeze up and nothing comes out.

I was going to talk a little bit about when you don't have an existing text, like the work that I do with Complicite, and I thought Catherine might come and help me out, because we worked together on a production of *The Elephant Vanishes*.

I wanted to talk a bit about the work I do with Complicite, because it's a very different scale altogether than the big pictures of the opera house. A smaller scale, basically, but it has the same grandeur in it's own way. The way Complicite works, it's kind of like a jazz band: everybody's in the room at the same time, you have the actors, Catherine (who was working as a sort of dramaturg-writer on *The Elephant Vanishes*), the lighting designer, the video designer, the sound designer, Simon [McBurney – Director]... everybody working at the same time. All the work comes out of a series of improvisations. You play games with the text or whatever you're working on, and each day out of those improvisations there might be a kernel of an idea. But what's quite interesting about the process is that if an actor feels that they don't want to speak, they can choose to say it with video, or they can choose to say it with sound. So it's this kind of overlap where the piece emerges, and in fact my job as a designer is more to observe that process and try to figure out my level of insertion within the piece. How much do I need?

We started in the character Virgil's room. Virgil, played by Simon, gets a phone call from his girlfriend who has left him and run off with all his money – it's the first phone call he gets from her. Then we have to explode out from Virgil's room: we're in a train, and we're in another train – and so you have to figure out how to be in all those places, how to move very quickly from one

place to the next. And in a way you're all quite dependent on each other, because I can't bring a train on stage, and because we're moving from train to the next scene – a discotheque somewhere in Eastern Europe. So you work to imply a sense of place. It's a slightly odd process because you don't quite know what you're doing! You know it's a ten week rehearsal process, and somewhere in the middle of that, around five weeks, you have to hand in a design, or else there won't be anything on stage! So in some sense you have to blindly feel your way into the design, and create some kind of structure on which things will grow. Originally in *Mnemonic*, the bed didn't move; the bed was stationary because we didn't know that we wanted the bed to move, and eventually the bed started to move... so you have to accommodate that amount of change.

CA: A lot of our background as theatre makers is from the Lecoq school where there's an obsession with space: the actors have a responsibility to invoke space that's probably much larger than in the traditional process. So, in the improvisations – a lot of them are storytelling exercises essentially – you're asked to invoke Japan, or invoke a particular space in Japan, or to be in a room without really any scenography, but that means the responsibility is much more fluid for a set designer in that process.

ML: That's true. One of the things that's quite interesting about that process is that the actors give you a sense of place immediately because that's what they're exploring. So my role is completely different. I'm not giving scenic solutions to problems; I'm trying to understand the level to which I need to augment what's taking place on stage.

For example, in *Mnemonic*, because it was about the ice man who was found in the ice from 4,000 years ago, I had this notion of making some sense of the frozen. So I made a fluorescent back wall with plastic in front of it. I really didn't have a sense of how we might use that, but we started to move in that direction and then when the train came out of the improvisations, I designed a black wall that had perforations in it which were the windows of the train, and then the lighting designer started to figure out a way to chase the lights, and



then of course the sound designer added on top of that – it's almost a reference to a train, not necessarily a train because in fact the train is a memory.

I think in *Mnemonic* I was like a deer in the headlights: I didn't know what I was doing, because it was the first project I'd worked on with Complicite. Then, in the next project that I worked on with Catherine, *The Elephant Vanishes*, I was able to gauge the way the rehearsal was moving and create a kind of structure on which the actors were then able to build; I could supply it to the rehearsal room at an earlier stage. Once you supply something to the rehearsal room it gets used. I mean, you know, if there's a 20cm stool off of the ground that's a certain shape that will then happen in the production no matter what.

CA: Can I just tell the radiator story? On *Disappearing Number*, Michael got this beautiful, hundred-year-old radiator and, for facility of bringing it on and off stage, created a set on a really lovely little trolley with wheels. It moved beautifully. Michael just envisaged it coming on, and being a static radiator on scene, and then of course the minute it came into the room, the actors were skateboarding on it and playing with it, and it ended up being the train, the tube train that ran over Ramanujan. It took on a life of its own! I remember you were getting quite frustrated and cross, weren't you?

ML: It wasn't built to do that! It looked terrible! But then it in fact morphed into something else. In *A Disappearing Number*, there's the radiator in the background – sweet little radiator that it was. In the corner of the room there's a sound booth that performers can go into and record a piece of text which will then be played back to them within the process of an improvisation. So I supplied some spinning blackboards, which weren't used as blackboards should be used. I was able to provide the structure of screens passing and televisions moving. I was able actually to put that into the rehearsal process at about the six-week stage, so that enabled everybody in the room to have those things – sort of jerry-rigged together – but they had them in the process, and then they were able to build on top of that. Then I could go back into the

design to re-work it to accommodate the changes that were taking place in the rehearsal room.

CA: It was even before that because in London we had an area with a flying rig, because we knew we wanted to fly. So across the centre of the rehearsal room was this big, horizontal line, which I think inevitably creates a really visceral sense in an actor about how to move in relation to that line. And we had the shoji screens that moved very, very early on.

ML: Yeah, we introduced shoji screens... they started to move in this direction naturally in the rehearsal process, and I was able to then build replicas. The structure of a lot of these pieces comes out of this game that Complicite plays. It's a ball game.

CA: Nine-Square!

ML: And, because the grid is marked out in tape on the floor, it becomes a kind of a natural area for playing. People will use that square and it will begin to delineate scenes. With Complicite, everything that's in the room becomes a part of the production! You have to try to get in early enough and understand the process, so that it grows outwards in some sense. There was a fantastic improvisation that a group of actors did where they gave us the perspective of the elephant's eye using video cameras from on high; watching that I thought, 'Oh, well, we'd have to have some form of projection.' So you were seeing both what the elephant sees and the eye of the elephant.

AL: May I say thank you to Michael first of all, and introduce Chris Baugh. Chris is Professor of Performance and Technology at the University of Leeds, and a scenographer in his own right. He is vice chair of the Society for Theatre Research and has published extensively on scenography, has written on and lectured on Edward Gordon Craig, and on contemporary theatre design as well. We've asked Chris to make the response this evening.

## The response:

CB: Even more coincidences or connections: we're actually in the building, which was the Hampstead Theatre conservatoire. Obviously, it didn't look like this, but you can see the remains of the Victorian building down the wall. It was a concert hall basically: flat floor, an organ at the back, seating, space around for a chorus and things like that. This is the actual space where Craig did some of his most exciting experiments: *Bethlehem, Dido and Aeneas* - those things that he did with Martin Shaw in the very, very early years. It is interesting that you started with a quotation from Craig because about a page later, the director goes on and gives an agenda for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in which he says:

*Today [meaning in 1907] they impersonate and interpret, tomorrow they must represent and interpret; and the third day they must create. By this means style may return.*

This is a really interesting agenda for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, beginning with this idea of imitating and impersonating – naturalism if you like. Then moving on to interpretation – sort of representations of reality. Then moving on to a world where, particularly in the final example of *Complicite*, we actually begin to create. I think you have given a really fantastic demonstration this evening. I have jotted down all sorts of random things, and I'm very aware of the time, so I'm not going to keep you long.

It seems to me that you have illustrated perfectly the idea of scenography. Now Craig didn't know the word scenography, we didn't know it really until [Josef] Svoboda made us think about and use it in the 1960s. It is interesting to think of the Greek origin, *scaena graphos*, but not drawing *for* the stage – as you said you didn't like doing, drawing pictures of what's going to happen – but trying to draw *with* the stage; treating the stage as a malleable, complex, compound, multimedia activity that you actually try and draw, with sound, with

light, with movement, with music, etc. Particularly with Complicite, you're playing within an open forum.

I think the thing that I shall really remember, and thank you for, most is a really interesting collection of metaphors. You started off talking about marks, that you need marks to respond to. You've got marks of the text or the marks of the theatre, or the marks that the actors bring... In other words, you're not starting with a blank sheet. I thought you gave a lot of really interesting examples of the way that you confront marks, play with marks, and the way marks develop and become new marks. The curve of the piece of metal pushed down becomes a new mark. 'Hey, what have we got here, how do we then use that?' That becomes a new starting point, and as it becomes the side of the ship, as the Plimsoll Line of the numbers emerges, a whole series of solutions move on from that, which I thought was really quite exciting. It's a challenge.

I've been here this afternoon talking with some post-graduate design students at Central School, and inevitably this is a burning issue: how do you work with other people without it becoming 'design by committee'? You can't all sit down and each put in your two-penneth and come up with a production concept, otherwise where is the strength? Where's the power of art within that? It's going to be cheapened by satisfying everyone's particular ideas. So I thought it was particularly interesting the way Tim talked about the need for the egos. One of the first things you said to him was you wanted to work with a designer who knew where they were. Not someone necessarily who was, 'Yeah I can do that, I can do that, tell me what you want, I can do that.'

I also liked what you said about the lack of self-censorship. The fact that you want a director to be able to turn the model upside down and say, 'Actually, could we do it like that?' without the whole world erupting. You want that sense of confidence, which I thought was really important. The interface of egos is something young designers are very concerned about; the director comes in and they've got this really strong idea. 'Do I have to listen to it? Do I have to take it on board? Do I just fight it?' How do you manage those egos?

I don't think you gave an answer but I think you gave some really interesting things for young designers to think about when you said working like Complicite was a bit like a jazz band. The idea of improvisation, the idea of collective creativity, to produce something very powerful, which is very much not a piece of music designed by a committee! And presumably that works because each person is highly skilled. You've got a very skilled saxophonist, you've got a very skilled bass player, you've got a very skilled trumpeter, you've got a very skilled actor, a Lecoq-trained actor who is aware that they are making space. You've got an actor who is aware that they can make noises, they can make sounds, they can write their own texts as it were. I love the idea that the radiator becomes a new mark, which begins to take on a life of its own and it acts – it's one of the things I remember about Complicite. I remember seeing their *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* [1994], and a row of people having breakfast at a long table. Suddenly someone starts telling a story, they push the table over and suddenly it's a canoe and they're going up the river. I think, 'Hey that's a piece of wood!' But it's not – it's suddenly a canoe. The radiator is a radiator, an object within its own right, but suddenly it becomes an actor, and it becomes something that runs somebody else over. I think in a way like arriving at the curve, the metal curve as a mark, the radiator become a new mark that you then deal with.

I was interested in the time-scale because one of the frustrations of young designers is that they're very excited about a product, they're firing on all six cylinders but the director, quite rightly, wants to wait until they get into rehearsal. The designer comes up with a good idea and says, 'Hey lets do it like that,' and the director says, 'Well I would wait a minute!' I suppose I'm amazed to hear that you can actually bring that level of cooperation into an opera, where typically you are working many, many months in advance, where you have to deliver designs for the workshops to build etc. long before you can even get into the process. I was interested in how that worked for Complicite.

Can I echo Andy's thanks for giving us such a lot of really powerful metaphors to think about, a lot of ideas. You can't define collaboration, but I think in some of the language you have used, and in some of the examples, you've given a tremendous sense of optimism that it is possible to collaborate without dumbing things down to a 'camel' – a horse designed by committee.

**More information:**

The Royal Opera House, London  
[www.roh.org.uk](http://www.roh.org.uk)

Complicite  
[www.complicite.org](http://www.complicite.org)

ENDS