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The relationship between screens and actors in Gordon Craig's theatre

First of all, I must stress that I won't be focusing exactly on the kind of relationship between actors and screens in which this Journey of studies is most interested. Despite the wealth of papers focusing on current developments in the use of projecting films on screens which contemporary performances have been addressing, whether through acting between projected images and actual bodies or through the suppression of actual presence and the sole use of projections to sustain dramatic narratives, I must say that I am taking the theme proposed literally.

Actually I chose to start my speech from this suggested overview to take the idea of the screens not as a mere support for projections but as a concrete and material thing that started to be in Gordon Craig's "Scene" project an openly manipulated object on the stage. Craig's visualised the actors playing with the screens and moving them manually. In this project, the screens became to the actors almost one another player, while also establishing their own aesthetical discourse. More than that, I dare suggest, in a kind of historical revision of the western theatre modernism, that Craig's solution for the relationship between actors and screens was a forerunner of the actor's and performer's contemporary perspective. This came to be given that in most of the so-called post-modernist or post-dramatic trends, both became operators of material devices, thereby leaving the character's supportive dimension behind, while working in a performativity perspective.

To make my point clear I will have to go back to Craig's early efforts to establish a new paradigm for the theatre, namely the idea of an art 'of and for the theatre', in the first decade of the twentieth century. If we could sum up Craig's finding then, we can quote his uber-marionette and "Scene" projects.

In the case of the former, Craig was looking for a substitute for flesh and bones actors. There is not a consensus about what could have come out of that radical proposal. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to suggest - as one of the possible readings for it - that this new kind of players might truly mean actual men working with armours, or exoskeletons to be worn, inside which human bodies, very much constrained in their movements, would act according to the director's prescription having the screens as their main partners.

About the latter and most famous Craig's invention – the “Scene” project – it consisted of a long-term process developed between 1906 and early 1920s. The project was shrouded in a mist of mystery and historical mystification, but which could be apprehended more directly and distinctly in the invention Craig patented in 1910 in four countries under the label “Scene”. There is a lot of discussion whether this 1910 achievement was or not a distortion of the early “Scene” project. The ones that think so, and see it as a downgraded version, associated their view mostly with the inability of the “Scene” project to develop a device to move the so-called screens in an autonomous way. I have already written about how the automatic mobility of screens was not a key issue for Craig himself. Although he was the first to bring up the idea of failure to achieve his original aims, we might view this position as having more to do with his internal contradictions than with the issue itself.¹ In fact, for the point I'm trying to make here, it is enough to consider the “Scene” project from the patented terms. In fact, I'll try to defend that the way Craig solved the screens movement issue is exactly the evidence that he had been anticipating the actor's contemporary approach towards the stage and its potential devices.

In his patented project, Craig proposes that the screens movement would occur by direct pushing and handling of human force. A group of men performing on stage would, with their own hands, display the screens and its folds according to previous designs established by the director in sketched plans. We can immediately see in that proposal a meaningful change in the relationship between body and space, actor and scenography, one which established a new pattern in the relationship between screens and actors, causing the former to move and the latter to become immobilized. At least since the 17th century prompters have been pushing ropes in the backstage and moving up and down screens. But in Craig's program, the screens were not merely used as a support for pictures and visual narratives on a bi-dimensional surface.

¹ “So I would have given you the thing itself, not its likeness, had I been employed after having shown what I could do. But even in spite of all this indifference I have been able to take the work a step forward towards reality by taking it a step back. In this way, these etchings we can call the parent work from which another has sprung. This other is smaller – aims to do less – ask less – and in some ways resembles its parent. It was a by-product of the twenty designs at the end of the book. This lesser scene, ‘The Thousand Scenes in One Scene’, I have used once in a theatre in Moscow for a performance of ‘Hamlet’, and it has been used by W.B. Yeats, to whom I was proud to give it, in some performances in his old Abbey Theatre. But though it has been used in all, I suppose, for about five hundred performances, it has never been used as I intended it to be used, except on two large models stages which I built in Florence. On these stages I allowed it to live and it behave well. In Moscow and Dublin it was not quite free to be itself, and I cannot think it did well.” (CRAIG 1923, p.19.)

Instead, they became tri-dimensional objects that move longitudinally and horizontally throughout the stage's space and time, having their own rhythm and meaning whereby the referent is not readily available. In the case of prompters, there is also a new configuration. They are no longer supposed to be out of the scene but are right in the middle of it, and instead of just pushing ropes they should be almost dancing with the screens, and moving them continuously and gently.

In this new stage pattern, whose development might be viewed as a follow-up to Craig's experience in Irving's Lyceum Theatre – the largest and most structured stage production machine in England at the end of the 19th century – Craig is not just making an aesthetical statement but suggesting an economic revolution for the producers of his time. This can be easily inferred from the texts Craig wrote presenting the “practical values of his instrument”.

But, considering mainly the “artistic values” of his invention, a position which he defended in his patent texts, and considering the whole project until its final formulation, in which a new pattern of scene in the theatre history emerged, the “fifth scene”, as he put in his essay “Scene” from 1922, is an actual revolution in that it becomes possible to think of the stage space in new terms, and in how staging becomes the “art of movement”.² Eventually, the stage is filled with screens and bodies and their movement in time. In this new ambience, theatre becomes thinkable without necessarily presenting a myth or a plot and suggests a new artistic arrangement between actors and screens. The actor – merely a body uncovered in the mist of shade, light and architecture – gives place to the scenic materiality as a whole. This, in turn, starts to move and act autonomously not as props in a secondary place towards the drama, but as the backbone of the main narrative, one that is at once material and abstract. Through this new displacement, the old theatrical hierarchies take on a new form and the usual actor's role changes. Besides being neutralized, be it by armours or shades to near invisibility, the actor plays the potential role of a stage

² “This then is the fifth scene – a scene of form and colour without any paint at all – without any drawing on it – scene simplified, with mobility added to it. Now for a word on this word ‘simplified’ ... Let me explain what I mean by it. The world once used reed pens – then quill pens – and then steel pens. These they dipped into bottles of ink: many times would a man dip his pen into the ink before he could write a page of his letter. Some one then invented the fountain pen. A man can write his whole letter without dipping his pen once into any bottle. The world then invented the typewriting machine. I would liken my scene to be the fountain pen and not to the typewriting machine. It is not a piece of mechanism: it is a simple device, shaped like screens – angular – plain”. (CRAIG, 1923, p.21)

operator, whereby material staging is placed as the centre of the stage poet's attention. The screens, which for centuries were stuck serving as support of backcloth landscapes, now becomes the substantive element of the scenic grammar. In this stage format, the actors could become a sort of real-life statue, perhaps like uber-marionettes, given that they are the actors could become a sort of real-life statue, giving that they are minimized by the grandeur of the screens. Indeed, the actors' bodies blend in with the bodies of prompters and technicians, who are on stage mingling with the actors and with the screens. These stage operators would move the screens to create the moods proposed by Craig and should do it smoothly in order to acquire the same desirable discretion of the old stagehand, while also performing physically as actors of sorts, or if you prefer, performers.

In a certain sense, we could say that this mixing of roles between actors and prompters anticipated the present acting patterns in contemporary trends much more than the development of techniques in the realistic field had done during the decades that followed Craig's invention. Although Craig himself didn't fully assume this confusion of roles, since he viewed operators as something other than actors and his rationale didn't allow these two roles to blend in as one, we can see clearly here a new perspective for acting that will be closer to performance art and to contemporary theatre than any other. Indeed, it is possible to find in Craig's project a continuous tension going on between these bodies sharing the stage – actors and prompters. A tension like that it is, by the way, central in most of contemporary staging.

But let's leave the conjectures aside for now and hear Craig's own voice in 1910 trying to make clear how this operation might work in concrete terms.

“The art of using this scene to the best advantage is a delicate one but acquired only with practice. The aim of the arranger is to place his screens in such a position that, by moving the minimum number of leaves, he may produce the desired amount of variety required. The change is less easy to accomplish for, in art as well in nature, sudden contrasts cause more trouble because, as a rule, undesirable.” (CRAIG, 1910, p.35)

A good question to ask as we go deeper into Craig's rationale is: Who, at the end of the day, might play the role of the aforementioned arranger? Might it be the stagehand, the actor or the director himself, who might have planned beforehand in

sketch plans and notebooks using screen models? Craig didn't clarify this but suggested, in parts of the patent text in which he addressed the matter, that the actor will always have a play role in this arrangement. We can infer this in the following quote:

“Now, one of the advantages of this invention is that should the actor feel after a few nights that he could play the scenes better in a different arrangement and if he has distinct ideas as to what he wishes an how to obtain it, he can test his ideas in the morning on the model and makes his changes that same evening. If after a month or so he wishes to change again, either because he thinks something can be improved or, in order to give himself more liberty as actor, he can again make any changes which seems to him desirable (...) If the actor feels that he cannot play his part in a certain scene he has only to go to the stage manager, and together, with the model on the table, they can work out of a new arrangement.” (CRAIG, 1910, p.41)

As we can see here, Craig describes the perspective of a partnership between the stage manager, the actor and a third party – implicitly noted in this speech – who might play the role of the stagehand, the actual force behind the screens movements. But it is Craig himself that blur the role playing in his new pattern of building scenes.

“In fact, the scene is as much for the actor as it is for the stage manager or the poet. I have spoken of the advantage, which the use of this scene offers to the actor. I believe for the stage manager also it offers something exceptional (...) To begin with the model with which he works is always ready to his hand. He keeps it in his study and is thus able continually to test ideas (...)” (CRAIG, 1910, p.41)

Despite the lack of precision about who actually might play the role of final “arranger”, it is very clear from Craig's statement that this role is central and will ultimately require a mix of human force and imagination to achieve something that, although difficult, is not impossible at all. As Craig put it,

“He who finds the greater difficulty at the outset in arranging scenes from these screens is more likely than another to produce ultimately more important results if he perseveres, but I would advise anyone to avoid if possible the feeling that there is something very, very difficult about the manipulation of it. I would suggest to them

that there is something in this scene akin to a box of child's blocks. In a way it is something to be played with, and if played with in the right spirit it will yield very good results (...) I have said of this scene that it is a living thing, that is capable of expression, and I must here add that it is so living that unless treated as a living thing it refuses to respond to the will of the manipulator or arranger." (CRAIG, 1910, p.42)

Coming back to the point I am trying to make here about the mixed actor/stagehand role in Craig's "Scene" project, which anticipated contemporary practices in the fields of theatre and performance, let us make some final considerations.

The reverberation of Gordon Craig's ideas in theatrical modernism is well known, as it was also recognized in some postmodernist 1970's's works, as Robert Wilson's, which fulfilled plentifully the aspirations of Craig's project of an "art of movement", or as Tadeusz Kantor's, who has built on Craig's research on marionettes. What is less realized today is Craig's forerunning towards more recent fields, such as contemporary theatre and performance art, which are highly structured by the so-called performativity efforts and work basically out of dramatic frames. In these new forms of mimesis, or in these nondramatic performances, whereby performers didn't wear any mask or take on any character, it is almost a consensus that the actors/performers became the actual operators of what was shown on stage. This can be clearly seen, for instance, in the works of Romeo Castellucci or Rodrigo Garcia, when we think from the theatrical field, or, perhaps more surprisingly, in the performance art tradition from the 1970s and 1980s, as can be viewed exemplarily in the recent exhibition of New York's Whitney Museum titled "Ritual of Rented Island – Object Theatre, Loft Performance and the New Psychodrama – Manhattan, 1970-1980", which was staged early this year and gathered together the works of 20 artists who converged towards some common practices in New York during that period. Those artists' works can be in a way synthesized as operational. As Jay Sanders sustained in one of the exhibition's catalogue texts,

"Some artists pursued aesthetics and intellectual illumination by nearly becoming objects themselves, radically reducing their personae and presence to that of impassive stagehands, dutifully motoring their shifting compositions of prepared

objects and props to generate paranormal sights and meaning.” (SANDERS, 2014, p.29)

The scope of the exhibition includes well-known names such as Jack Smith, Richard Foreman, Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson and Stuart Sherman, but there are other artists whose works fit better than any other with the idea of a performer/operator and echo the role of the actor/stagehand as described by Craig in his “Scene” project. These artists have in common works under the label of “object theatre”, as for example John Zorn, whose “Theatre of musical optics” was described by him as “an ‘operating theatre’ related to doctors-in-training watching over surgeries”. According to J. Hoberman, Zorn’s work was a “pure object theater”, or an “object theater for object’s own sake”. The same applies to the works of filmmaker Ken Jacobs and his ‘Apparition Theater’, whereby the artist and his family “rendered everyday real-time activity as a high spectacle within the illusionistic space of cinema screen”, offering as Sanders put it, “a film-without-film cinema of live performance as pure, slow, continuous image”, and repeating on different terms the body/screen game that Craig had suggested earlier. The “Object Theater” movement in New York in the 70s and 80s includes many other names, such as Michael Smith and Mike Kelly, who described different ways of transfiguring everyday objects into actual props, or Theodora Skipitares, the sculptor and set designer whose 1981 work “Sky Saver” was viewed by the Village Voice critic Robert Massa as “a Theater of Objects multimedia performance piece”. Theodora described her own role in another of her pieces as that of “a glorified stagehand”.

I would like to close my talk by stressing that, although it might seem slightly anachronistic to project Craig’s vision in contemporary performances, it is quite clear that Craig’s “One thousand scene in one scene” ideal has emerged upfront in the modernist visual art’s framework. Be it in the way it creates an aesthetic “place” out of the dramatic environment, by the dialogue it opens with notions such as the emptiness of the stage space, or yet in the way it started to project in it objects as abstract volumes. If we bring it forward to contemporary arts, when frontiers have merged and specificities blurred between visual, theatrical and performative arts we can see that the role of the operator is now fully developed, devoid of any character or well-defined mask against a backcloth that is no longer meaningful. If we accept that

the stagehand/performers operated Craig's screens, although discreetly, not as a secondary task, but as the real makers of the main stage's poetics, it seems plausible to recognize that his project anticipated contemporary practices, generically named in the English speaking countries as 'Live Arts', where the present materiality of the objects and bodies gain in relevance over plots and characters. One hundred years after the interruption of Craig's successful screen research, with the closing of his Florence laboratory – the Arena Goldoni – caused by the World War I, we pay tribute to this artist by recognizing his unparalleled contributions also in this field of the "live arts".

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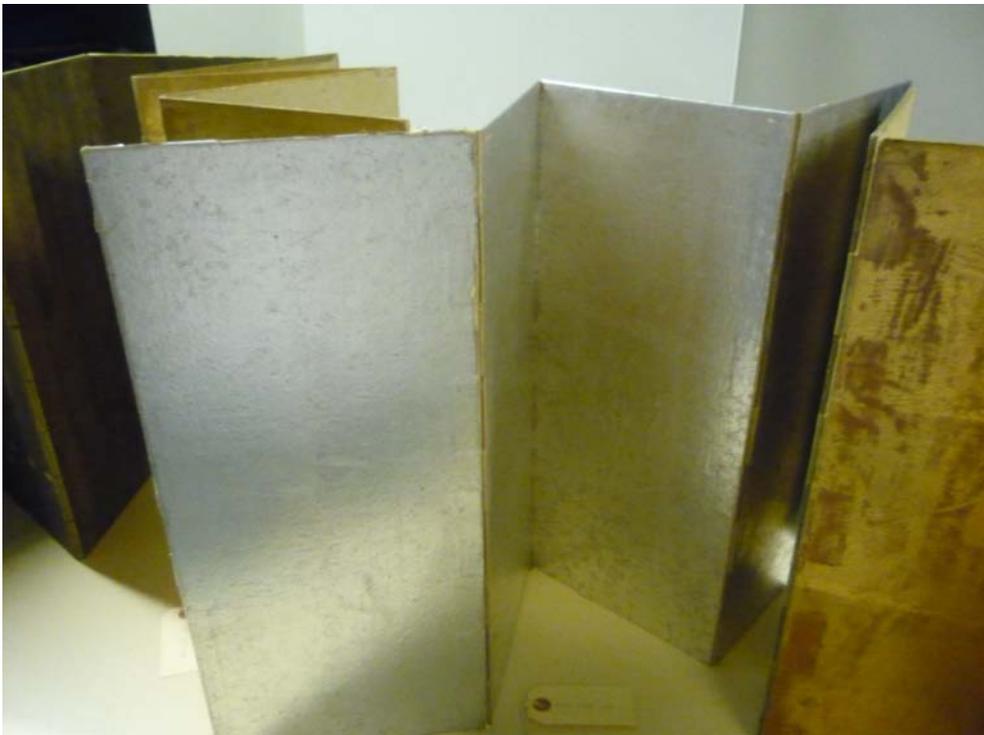
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Pictures



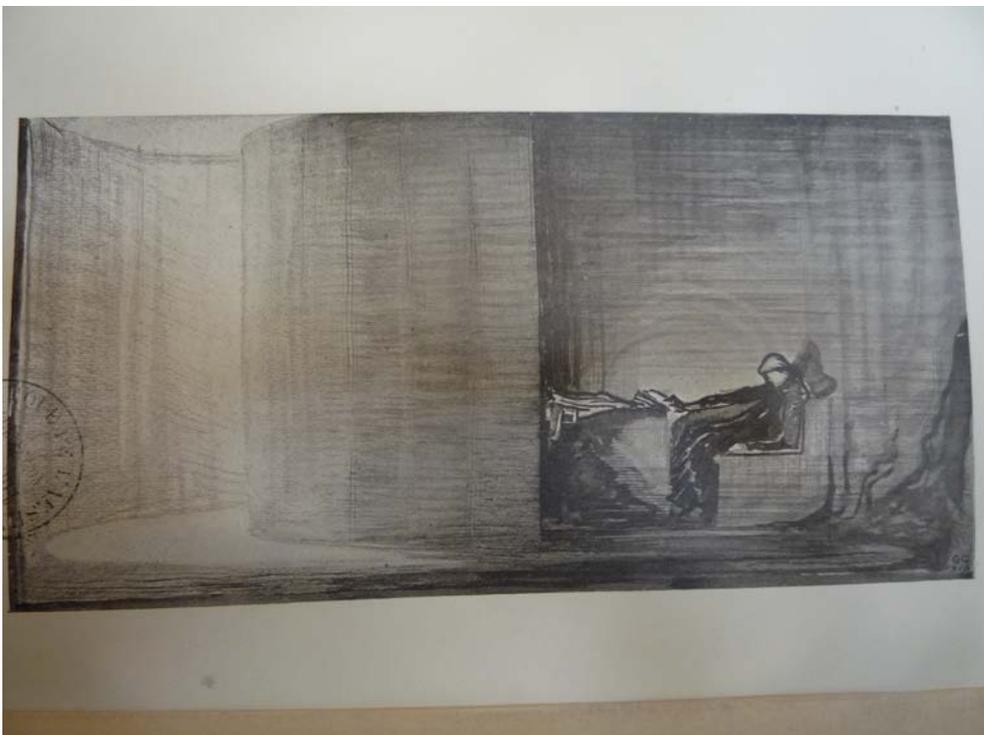
Cardboard screen for use in model (BNF's EGC Collection, object 126)



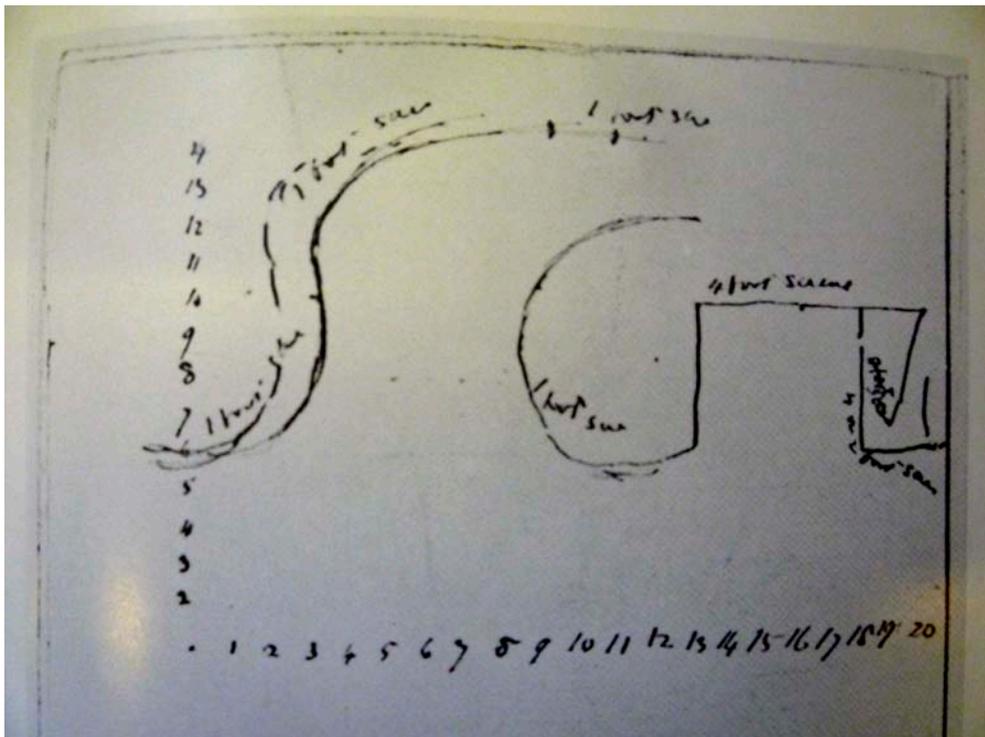
Cardboard screen for use in model (BNF's EGC Collection, object 128)



Cardboard screen for use in model (BNF's EGC Collection, object 147)



Craig's design for W.B. Yeats' 1911 production of "The Hourglass" in the Abbey theatre. Published in: YEATS, W.B, **Plays for an Irish Theatre**. London & Stratford-Upon-Avon, A.H. Bullen, 1911.



Design from Yeats for planning the scene for the staging of “The Hourglass” in DORN, Karen. “Dialogue into Movement: W. B Yeats’s Theatre Collaboration with Gordon Craig”. In: **Players and Painted Stage**, the theatre of W. B. Yeats. Sussex: The Harvest Press; New Jersey: Barnes and Nobles, 1984.

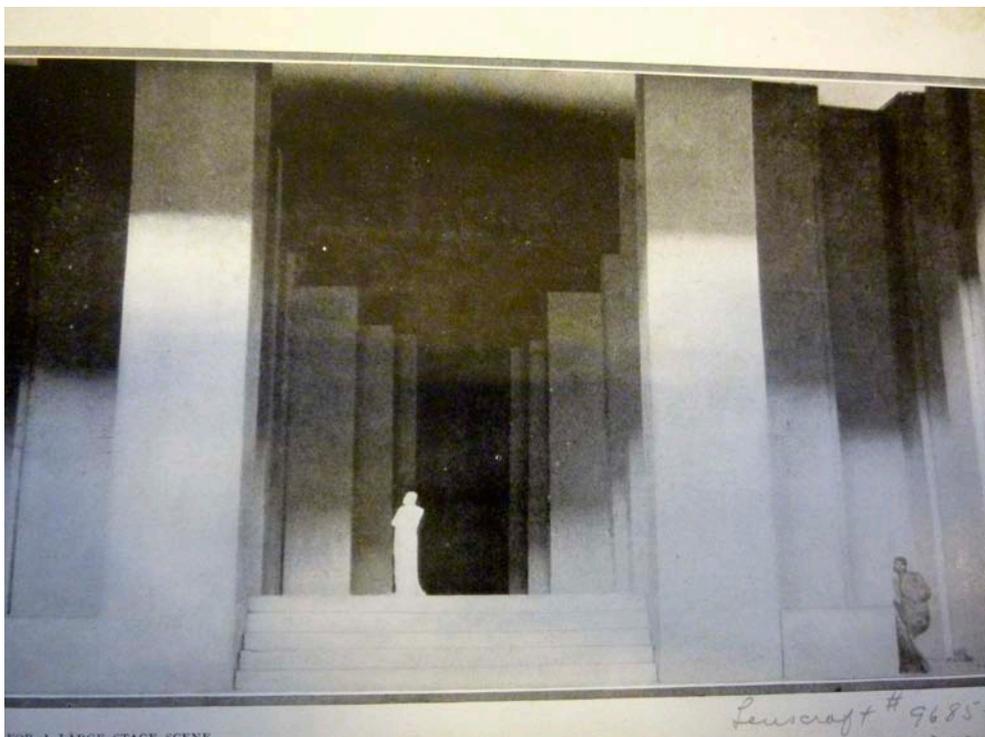
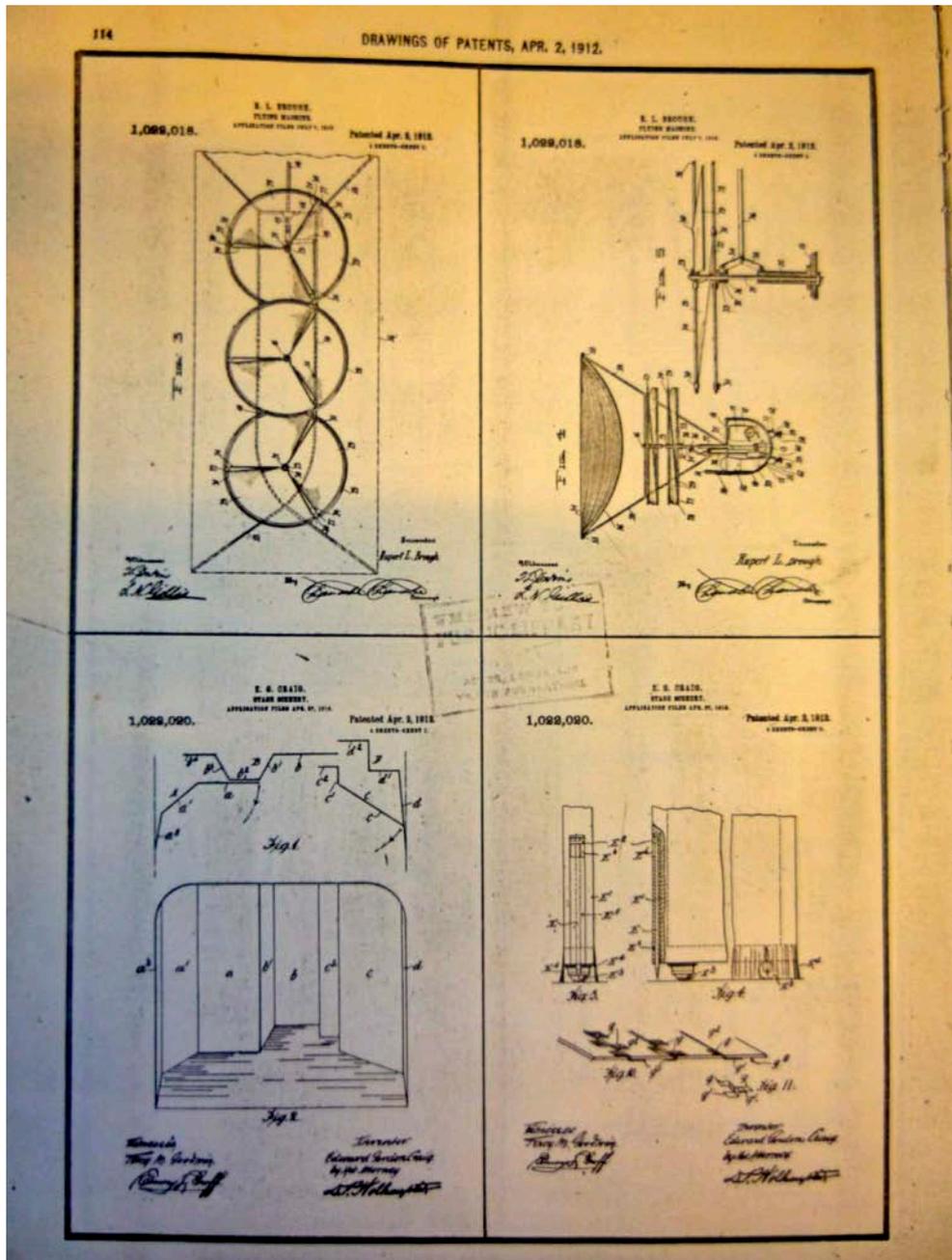
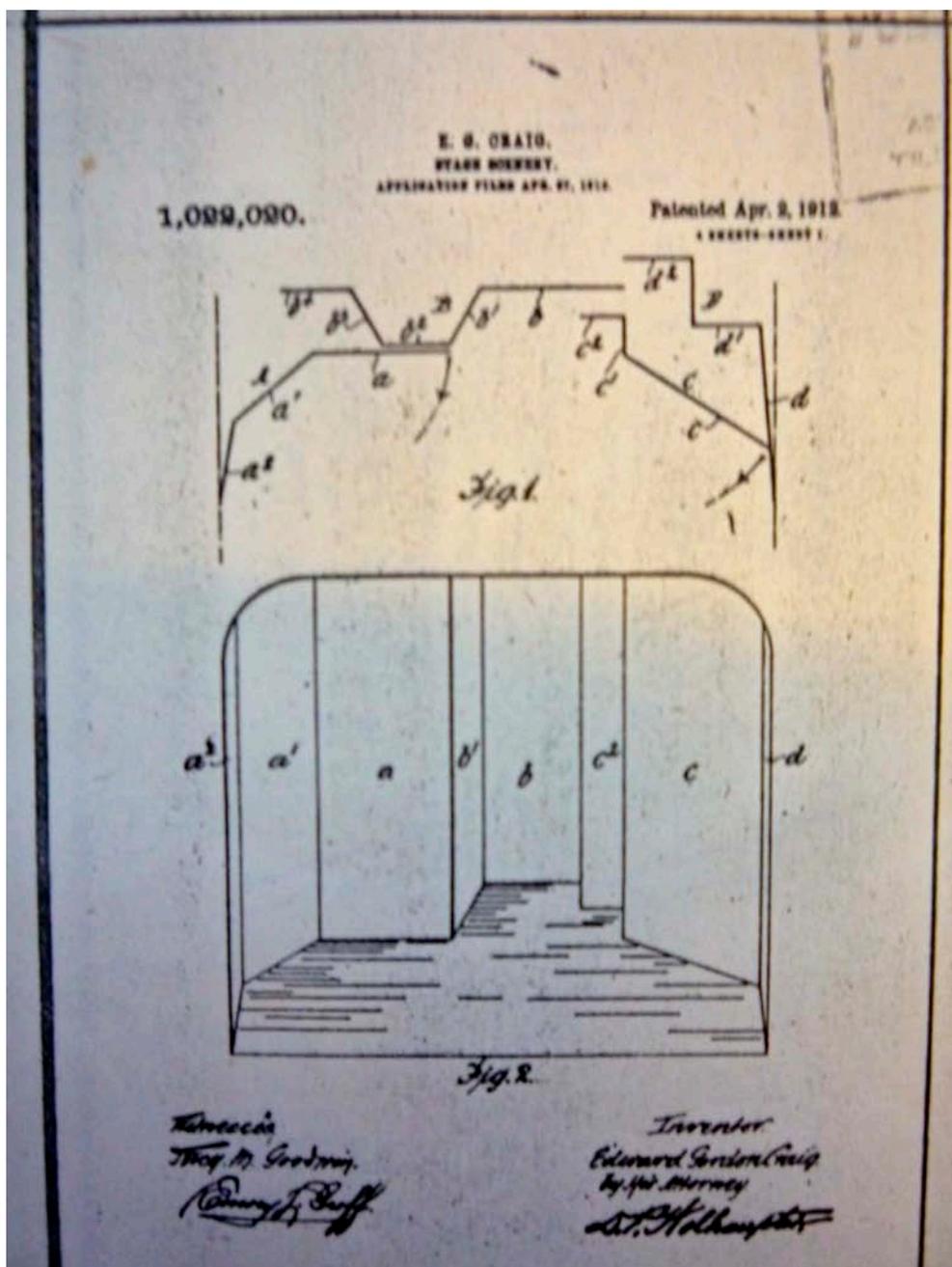


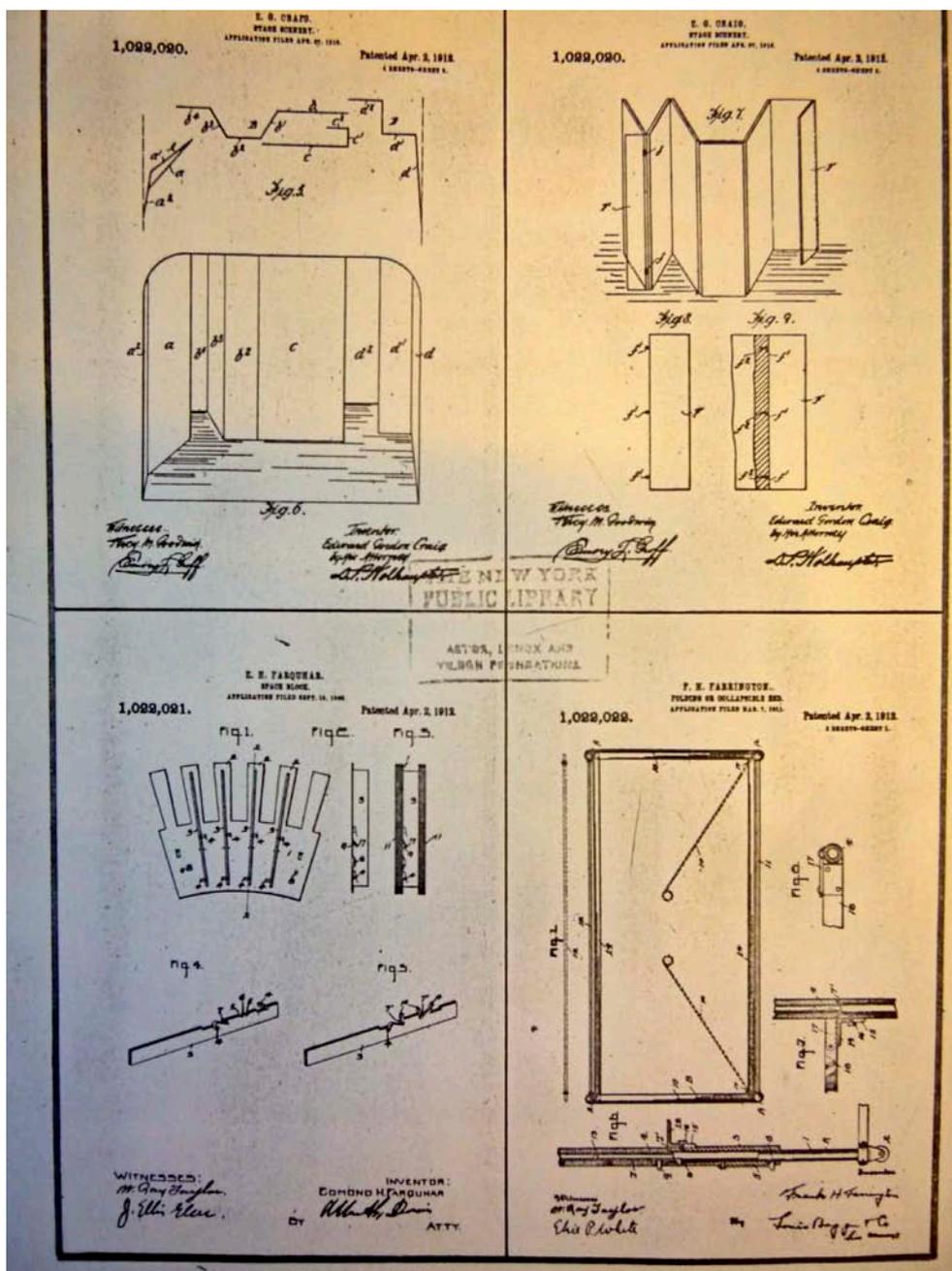
Photo of the model of the Moscow Art Theatre production of Hamlet, which used partially the screens system.



Technical designs for the Scene Project patented texts.
CRAIG, E.G. **Scene (notebook)** Microfilm Craig's Collection, BNF, Arts and Spectacles, Paris, Richelieu, 1910. Cote EGC MS 14, R 1048.



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