

# Roberta Gandolfi

## Edy Craig and Suffrage Theatre

*I have no quarrel with you;  
but I stand  
for the clear right  
to hold my life my own;  
the clear, clear right!  
To mould it as I will,  
not as you will,  
with or apart from you ...*

### A Pageant of Great Women

On Saturday the 13th of November 1909 the front page of the *Daily Mirror* was entirely dedicated to photographs of London's leading actresses performing in a new suffrage play. Under the heading "Well-known actresses appear as famous women in a pageant advocating Votes for Women", the readers could admire, among others, performance pictures of Ellen Terry as Nance Oldfield, Angela Hubbard as Queen Victoria, Eva Balfour as Sappho. The extensive coverage, which breached the normally virulent anti-suffragist Edwardian press, testifies to the impact of *A Pageant of Great Women*, which, in short, was to become the most celebrated play of the Suffrage movement.

The premiere took place at the fashionable Scala Theatre, as part of a public matinée organised by the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) and the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL), two sister societies founded in 1908 to support the cause of the Women's Movement; by joining forces, they were creating through drama a new meaning for propaganda. The main event, within a rich programme of events, was *A Pageant of Great Women*, which had been specifically devised for this meeting; the AFL wanted to stage a celebratory piece able to cast the largest number of actresses possible. The task was given to Edy Craig, a very active member, who, as well as mounting theatre productions on behalf of the Suffrage Movement, was responsible for designing decor and programmes of entertainment for suffrage fairs and festivals.

But what do we know about Edy Craig?

In 1909, the year of the *Pageant's* debut, Craig was forty years old. She had had a remarkable career as both actress and costume-designer and had taken part in pioneering ventures such as the Independent Theatre Movement, that launched Ibsen in England; the Purcell Operatic Society, whose famous symbolist amateur productions were directed by Edy's brother, Gordon Craig; and the socialist Stage Society, where Edy was also a member of

the Executive Committee. Later between 1904 and 1907, she was stage-manager for her mother, Ellen Terry, on tour in the United States and throughout the English provinces. By then the Women's Suffrage Movement had reached its peak, and it was through becoming one of the promoters of the "propaganda" plays that Edy discovered her true vocation as a producer. She fixed her artistic visions on a feminist horizon, and developed a capacity for creating an ideological theatre; she adapted her theatrical skills to a new set of artistic and cultural contexts.

Following this period she was to become the director of the Pioneer Players, a predominantly female play-producing society which, according to Bernard Shaw, "by singleness of artistic direction and unflagging activity did more for the theatrical vanguard than any of the other coterie theatres"<sup>1</sup>.

Edy was the only one of her outstanding theatrical family to become involved with political theatre; her story reminds us that the art of directing, at least in its feminine version, arose from a fruitful interweave of cultural, political and social turning points central to a most significant revolution, the emergence of feminism.

According to Cicely Hamilton, the playwright who devised *A Pageant of Great Women* together with Edy Craig, the Women's Suffrage Campaign was "the first political agitation to organise the arts in its aid." Hamilton's statement, though not historically correct, stresses the contribution of women artists to the Edwardian Suffrage movement; the involvement spanned the visual arts, writing, and theatre. Feminist performers and playwrights not only "invented" a new kind of theatre (nearly one hundred "propaganda" plays were written in England between 1906 and 1914), but also fresh touring strategies. "Propaganda"

theatre had to follow a different process to that of the commercial theatre; it required low-cost, easily adaptable productions able to be performed on improvised stages; it required creativity and flexibility to allow prompt and swift support of the political agenda with current subject matter.

Specific talents were sought, among which, a capacity for acting quickly under pressure. This was something that Edy Craig possessed; during an interview for *The Vote*, the newspaper of the Women's Freedom League, she described herself as an "emergency worker":

*Women suffer many disadvantages in their training, but, curiously enough, for that very reason they make better "emergency workers" than men. I am thinking now of my experiences when designing and preparing the wardrobe for some of Henry Irving's productions. They get there somehow, whereas a man, who has had better chances of training, will refuse to undertake anything that has to be done quickly.*<sup>2</sup>

Craig's readiness to respond to the organisational and ideological needs of the campaign helped to make the performances highly effective, both from a theatrical and ideological perspective. There is no doubt that efficacy was a key priority in guiding her work:

*I do think, she declared during the same interview, that plays have done such a lot for the Suffrage. They get hold of nice, frivolous people who would die sooner than go in cold blood to meetings. But they watch the plays, and get interested, and then we can rope them in for meetings.*

*A Pageant of Great Women*, specifically, was often praised by the suffrage press for its success in "converting unbelievers".

Generally speaking, it is true that suffrage theatre was more likely to attract women to the cause than outdoor political rallies; theatre matinées were a popular and approved entertainment for middle and upper-class women; they did not break the conventions of acceptable female behaviour. However, this can only partially explain the success of the *Pageant*, staged in several British towns between 1910 and 1913, and becoming internationally renowned within the women's movement. There were ideological and artistic reasons for the popularity of *A Pageant of Great Women* as well as reasons rooted in the method of producing and rehearsing it. Let us closely examine these different aspects.

Unlike most suffrage drama, which dealt realistically with specific topics such as marriage, women's work, prostitution, etc. *A Pageant of Great Women* was an allegorical piece that aimed at wider horizons; it revisited women's history, endeavouring to promote a new, feminist ideology. It dealt with female emancipation rather than directly with enfranchisement, and as such its scope went beyond the propaganda-for-the-Vote.

The term chosen for its title, a *pageant*, referred to a parade of famous women, sixty-five in all, who entered the stage divided into six groups: learned women, artists, saints, heroines, rulers and warriors. An allegorical figure, Woman, introduced each character with a few verses, whose archaic, Elizabethan-like metre brought a solemnity to the performance. The famous women ranged from the Greek philosopher Ipatia, the first character to enter the stage, to Florence Nightingale, founder of the Red Cross, who was still alive when the *Pageant* was staged. The historical characters, however, were given no lines, the text being solely allocated to Woman and two other allegorical figures, Justice and Prejudice.

The idea for the *Pageant* was inspired by a famous suffrage cartoon by W.H. Margetson. It depicted Woman appealing at the foot of Justice, while Prejudice tried to drag her away. Craig and Hamilton used this image for creating both a thematic frame that gave a dramatic intensity and significance to the parade of famous women, and for a visual recreation in the style of tableau vivant. At the beginning, the play transposed the cartoon onto stage, bringing its figures to life. Woman knelt at the throne of Justice and appealed to her with the following words: "I cling to Justice and I cry for freedom!"

The issue as to whether Woman is worthy of freedom was the leitmotif of the play; the plot was simple but powerful and intrinsically dramatic; it followed the structure of a trial. Prejudice, acting as prosecutor and resorting to all the "separate spheres" clichés, which anti-suffrages used against the suffrage campaign, questioned Woman's right to emancipation. Woman denied the charges one by one, calling the groups of famous women to the stage, to demonstrate how her sisters had always been in the forefront of cultural, social and political life.

One after another, the groups of actresses moved across the stage and took their places around the throne of Justice. The effect was imposing, due to the richly elaborate costumes designed by Edy Craig, who had brought an art-nouveau look to her "archeologically exact" costuming. The entrance of each group of historical characters was accompanied by a live orchestra. Queen Elizabeth stopped downstage and crowned the young Queen Victoria, symbolically sealing a representation of a female genealogy across the centuries; Joan of Arc led the parade of the warrior women, cross-dressed, accompanied by a march-like rhythm of drums and cornets; the saints were surrounded by white-clad children, in

a Pre-Raphaelite-like composition. Edy Craig wanted the performers to assume a noble and proud bearing, which challenged the conventional representation of the "womanly woman"; in her descriptive cast list she asks a "stately walk" from Mrs. Siddon, a "dashing" attitude from Catherine of Russia, a "commanding" aspect from Mme Roland, a "warlike" carriage from rulers such as Zenobia and Philippa. When building the characters and devising the costumes of these famous women, Craig demonstrated that she had learnt from her mother's (Ellen Terry's) powerful performances of Shakespearean roles at the Lyceum Theatre; Edy applied the lesson to meet the demand for dignity and prestige advanced by her feminist sisters.

In between the parade by the different groups, Prejudice brought new charges, but finally, short on argument, he slunk away in silence. Justice, surrounded by a semicircle of the sixty-five famous women, pronounced her final verdict in favour of female emancipation. Finally, Woman made an intense and moving speech to the absent Man, foretelling the terms of relationship between the sexes:

*I have no quarrel with you; but I stand  
For the clear right to hold my life my own;  
The clear, clear right! To mould it as I will,  
Not as you will, with or apart from you.*

...

*This you must know:  
The world is mine, as yours,  
The pulsing strength and passion and  
heart of it;  
The work I set my hand to, woman's work,  
Because I set my hands to it. Henceforth  
For my own deeds myself am answerable  
To my own soul.  
For this in days to come  
You, too, shall thank me.  
Now you laugh, but I*

*Laugh too, a laughter without bitterness;  
Feeling the riot and rush of crowding hopes,  
Dreams, longings and vehement powers;  
and knowing this -  
"Tis good to be alive when morning dawns!"* <sup>3</sup>

The sixty-five characters then walked down stage and through the stalls, enclosing the public in a symbolic embrace that sealed their common female kinship.

The ideological appeal alone, however, is not enough to understand the *Pageant's* widespread success; further reasons must be examined.

Unquestionably, Hamilton's skilful script was a crucial factor. Her trial-like plot was able to generate a sense of expectation towards Justice's final verdict. Hamilton, a close friend of Edy and a member of both the actresses' and writers' leagues, was not only a performer and a successful writer of light comedy, but also a feminist theorist. When devising the *Pageant* (which, in her own words, she wrote "to illustrate Craig's ideas") she rightly sensed the need for both theatrical and feminist ingredients to create an effective, openly propagandist script that would grip an audience.

Craig's first rate mise-en-scene was a conclusive factor promising an interesting artistic result akin to the discoveries of theatrical modernism in Russia and Germany. Staging without scenery, the use of the stage's width rather than its depth, the static poses of the characters, the use of allegorical figures, the predilection for a text in rhyme: such premises were also informing the research of directors such as Meyerhold and Fuchs. Furthermore, the performance's anti-illusionistic finale, which broke the divide between stage and stalls, stepped towards a path crucial to twentieth century experimentation.

In other words, not only did the director make a point of not opposing art

and propaganda but committed herself to combining an ideologically committed theatre with artistic quality.

Finally the director is to be credited with devising a precise process for rehearsing and producing each performance which allowed the (potentially financially prohibitive) propaganda play to tour, while, at the same time, enhancing relationships between amateurs and professionals.

Although widespread, amateur involvement in the suffrage theatre represented both a richness and a potential danger; such involvement constituted competition to professional actresses, and risked lowering the artistic quality of the performances. Edy Craig solved the dilemma by asking those local suffrage societies, that wished to stage the play, to sign the following agreement:

*A Pageant of Great Women is performed under the following conditions:*

- 1. That I myself stage manage and produce the performance.*
- 2. That it is dressed according to my directions.*
- 3. That the three speaking parts are played by professionals. The other characters (numbering from 53 to 72 as required) can be played by amateurs.*
- 4. That a large enough hall or theatre is engaged.*
- 5. That an orchestra is engaged (for which I will supply the music).*
- 6. That you guarantee to pay the fees and travelling expenses of the professionals concerned.*
- 7. That your society is responsible for getting together the cast, with the exception of the professionals - and for all expenses incurred by the performance.<sup>4</sup>*

Amateur involvement rendered it possible to drastically reduce the production expenses: the only fees to be paid were to

Craig herself, to the three professionals playing the roles of Justice, Prejudice and Woman and to a wardrobe mistress "engaged to take charge of, pack and alter clothes" (the clothes being those designed by Craig, and hired to local actresses).

After the local suffrage societies had been busy for several weeks, Craig would conduct rehearsals for the last few days prior to performance. The members would have met previously, discussed the project, involved friends and acquaintances in taking the role of one of the famous women. In fact, each *Pageant's* mise-en-scene, was based on true theatre workshop principles; furthermore it encouraged women to gather together socially; it placed women at the forefront of a creative project and demanded of them both a theatrical and political engagement. Moreover, as a result a large audience was guaranteed (imagine all the friends and relatives of more than sixty women!) and the interest of the local press was aroused. As one newspaper makes clear:

*The Pageant for which all the Swansea members have been working for so long was produced last Thursday at the Albert Hall, and was packed with the most enthusiastic audience. For days beforehand the newspapers had been publishing long interviews and photographs of the various groups, which, by the night of the Pageant had been reproduced as postcards and had sold very well. The Swansea Branch have reason to congratulate themselves on the Albert Hall Pageant as another on their list of successes. The whole performance created an enormous impression on the audience.<sup>5</sup>*

I see a complex set of reasons accounting for the success and popularity of *A Pageant of Great Women*. A combination of rehearsal process, ideological appeal,

dramaturgy and direction, made it a memorable occasion both for performers and audiences, as well as a highly celebrated one among the militants of the suffrage movement.

The *Pageant* stimulates further consideration with regard to constructing connections between theatre, politics and gender. While the yoking together of theatre and propaganda is frequently regarded with suspicion, the *Pageant* is but one example in which ideological issues can be highly stimulating for a theatrical phenomenology, and may inspire creative problem-solving. Feminist theorists have recently remarked on the centrality of the issues of representation for the women's movement in its double sense: to present in images; and to represent politically. In between the conflation of these two meanings there appears to be, in my opinion, a privileged space for a feminist theatre. At the core of the battle for political representation, the *Pageant* proposed an interesting solution. On the one hand, the representing of well-known historical characters offered a variety of oppositional images of womanhood which challenged hegemonic assumptions. On the other, this plurality did not mean fragmentation, as the links, established between the historical characters and the allegorical figure of Woman (whose voice represented them all) remained unmistakable. Craig and Hamilton represented on stage the dialectic of plurality and unity, an issue central to the women's movement of the twentieth century.

And finally, by looking at *A Pageant of Great Women*, and at suffrage theatre in general, another question arises, concerning female directing. Edy Craig is to be seen as the first significant woman director, in a context that was, and still is male dominated. Is it the case that she turned to directing on the wave of an ideologically committed phenomenon such as suffrage theatre?

Or that the extra impetus for women to take up directing, often sprang from a strong ideological engagement, or, simply, in a political (if not necessarily feminist) awareness? When looking at history, the examples of Edy Craig and Joan Littlewood, who started directing in England in the late Twenties in the agit-prop theatre, seem to support such an hypothesis.

(The present article further develops an unpublished paper delivered by the author at the XIIth World Congress of the International Federation of Theatre Research Moscow, 6-13 June 1994 and has been revised in translation by Jill Greenhalgh.)

1. Bernard Shaw, "Introduction", in Christopher St. John (ed.), *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*, London: Reinhardt and Evans, 1949, p.85.
2. "Edy Craig", *The Vote*, 12.3.1910, p. 232. Also *Votes for Women*, the newspaper of the largest suffrage society, reported that Craig's chief joy was "organising anything anybody would allow her to organise": cfr. "Helpers at the Scottish Exhibition. Edith Craig", *Votes for Women*, 15.4.1910
3. I am quoting from the 1948 re-print of Hamilton's *A Pageant of Great Women* re-published by the Suffragette Fellowship, London. pp. 21-22. The *Pageant* however has been more recently re-printed together with other suffrage plays, in Viv Gardner (ed.), *Sketches from the Actresses' Franchise League*, Nottingham: Nottingham drama texts, 1985.
4. "Expenses and arrangements for a production of *A Pageant of Great Women*", Edith Craig Documents, Ellen Terry Memorial Museum, Smallhythe.
5. "*A Pageant of Famous Women at Swansea*", *The Vote*, 14.5.1910, p.26.

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