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Hamlet's Last Act

Sam Jay Gold, Artist's Statement

When I first began development on *Hamlet's Last Act*, I did not know much about Edward Gordon Craig's personal connections to *wayang kulit*. I did not know, for example, that he had his own collection of Indonesian shadow puppets, or that he had edited *The Mask* under the pseudonym, "John Semar"—which I can only assume is a nod to Semar, the clown character in Javanese *wayang kulit*. I suppose such biographical factoids could have served as just the right kinds of justification for developing a *wayang kulit*-infused production of Hamlet based on Craig's own woodblock prints but, for me, the sparks of inspiration for *Hamlet's Last Act* were more personal and visceral.

I have long loved puppet theatre for how it allows you to dream big and build in miniature. Balinese *wayang kulit* in particular—as I was taught—embodies this credo. Want to stage a sword fight in a graveyard but lack the scenery, costumes, and budget? Scale it down. Perform it in the shadows. Construct your entire cast of characters from a single cow-hide. *Wayang kulit*, similar to what we know of early Shakespeare, employs an empty stage that can transform into whatever the dramatic action requires of it. A rectangular piece of white fabric becomes an entire world, activated through the dance of the *Kayonan* puppet at the beginning of each show. Following, tales of love, honor, betrayal, and revenge jump from location to location as easily as the show's shadows appear and disappear from the light. From abstraction springs possibility; anything can happen, provided the puppeteer can dream it (and then convince the audience to come along for the ride).

I had only recently returned from studying *wayang kulit* in Bali when Thomas Leabhart, James Taylor, and I met for lunch and spoke about devising a shadow puppet show for the Craig conference at Pomona College in March 2013. I was eager to find an opportunity to continue practicing *wayang kulit* and Craig's *Hamlet* figures immediately spoke to me. For all their stillness, they crackled with kinetic energy—from tableau sprung action, while their static, two-dimensional existence on the page only furthered their dramatic struggles. In Act V, for example, the abstracted silhouette of Hamlet (or is it Laertes?) lunges across a two-page spread at his foe and, while the two figures cannot come to blows, they still somehow threaten to burst from the page.

James Taylor, in his own talk for the Craig conference, suggested that Craig came closer in the Cranach Press *Hamlet* to realizing his ideas for the theatre than he ever did on an actual stage. I found this notion deeply moving and inspirational. To think that Craig's dreams for the theatre were too grand, too technically complex, too abstractly utopian to play nicely alongside our own human limitations and messiness *and yet* that they might still be possible on a smaller scale—it was enough to make me want to give it all a try. Craig's cast of characters, it seemed to me, was just waiting to be animated—and Craig, who could always be counted on to dream big, made for an exciting theatre artist to partner with the traditions of *wayang kulit* in an effort to do so.



Sam Gold, *Two Players and the Cranach Press Kayonan*, final tableau from the end of *Hamlet's Last Act*.
Two Player puppets accompany the show's Kayonan, designed with an open book motif to pay homage to the show's source material.
Performed at Scripps College, Claremont, CA, March 2013. Filming Credit: Richard Meyer, 2013

In *Hamlet's Last Act*, the world is activated by a *Kayonan* puppet designed to resemble an open book. The puppets, while constructed following Balinese traditions, are modeled as closely as possible on Craig's own designs. The story has been cut and condensed to fit the structure of a traditional *wayang kulit* performance and the *gender wayang* musical accompaniment plays as it would in Bali. The show began as an experiment, an attempt to find a dramatically pleasing and aesthetically rich meeting point for the distinctive theaters of Craig and *wayang kulit*. I leave it to the viewer to assess the results, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity to dream big, and I hope you enjoy.

Sam Jay Gold is a performer, director, and teaching artist based in New York City. As a 2011/2012 Thomas J. Watson Fellow, he trained in traditional forms of puppetry around the world in an effort to explore the relationship between puppets and people in a variety of performance cultures. His works for stage and screen have been featured at venues including the 2012 Bali Arts Festival, the 2013 Puppets on Film Festival at BAM, and *Action, Scene, and Voice: 21st Century Dialogues with Edward Gordon Craig*. He works and performs with Roman Paska and his company, Dead Puppet, most recently in *ECHO IN CAMERA*, which was featured at La MaMa, the Palais du Tokyo, and Robert Wilson's Watermill Center. Sam is a member of the Teaching Artist Ensemble at The New Victory Theatre and serves as a Producer/Creative at the Tony Award-winning company, Martian Entertainment. www.samgolddoesstuff.com