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Dr. Al-Shamma

Theatre History I

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Adolphe Appia: Unifying Acting through Sets and Lighting

Adolphe Appia is considered one of the most important turn-of-the-century innovators of theatrical lighting, but he also advocated for fundamental changes in the use of stage setting and the definition of theatrical art. Appia is considered an idealist or a theorist, but he was also a “practitioner whose scenographic understanding was rooted in the craft of theatre production” (Palmer). For his time, his theories were advanced and helped bring a new sense of creativity to the 20th century stage. His ideas and theories combated realism in theatre, so many actors found themselves wondering how his new methods for lighting and scenography would affect them. The focus of most of his writings is light but, in my research, I have found that Appia’s theories completely changed methods for acting at the time. For Appia, space was a dynamic area that attracted both actor and spectator and encouraged their interaction. Appia’s designs showed him wanting to focus on unifying a production and creating a complete atmosphere, with the actor at the center.

Appia viewed space as a dynamic and integral part of a performance that was used by both the actor and the audience. He envisioned the stage as a “vista into the unknown, into a boundless space” (Lewis). He theorized that the scenery should be replaced with steps, ramps, platforms, and drapes that blended with the actor's movements and the horizontal floor (Appia, *Music and the Art*). He advocated for the removal of the proscenium arch and all naturalistic details (Lewis). He saw the stage as a place that could be artistically organized. This was

partially due to Appia's view of the body as not only mobile, but plastic. The plasticity of the human body "naturally gives it an immediate kinship with architecture and brings it close to sculptural form—without, however, fully identifying itself with sculpture, which is immobile." Movement was an important aspect of art to Appia. It can "organize these art forms hierarchically, can mutually and proportionately subordinate them, and can finally achieve a harmony in themselves they would have sought in vain" (Appia, *Living Art*). He wanted to create movement and mobility within the space onstage to allow for the actors to be free. It was for this same reason that he didn't use painted sets. His stage designs aimed at evoking an atmosphere rather than representing a place. Appia established a hierarchy with his sets: a three-dimensional setting rather than a flat backdrop as a proper background to display the movement of the living actors; lighting that unifies actors and setting, evoking an emotional response from the audience; the interpretive value of mobile and colorful lighting; and lighting that highlights the actors. As he moved away from painted sets he wanted to use the color of paint somewhere else on stage so he turned to light. He states:

Sculpture is plastic; living in space, it therefore participates in living light. Like painting, it can suggest the context of chosen movements it is immobilizing, though it exists and acts as a material reality rather than a fictitious symbol. (Appia, *Living Art*)

Appia recognized that the possibility of light was realized through the control of its volume, the intensity and color of the light, and the direction of the light. This complemented his theories about space and his belief that lighting is used to bring together the visual elements of a piece. To gain this effect, Appia would study every scene of a work and would make note of the relationship of actor, scene, dialogue, music, and lighting. This was to create a unified harmony throughout the work. He discovered that to enhance the setting and create a three-dimensional look, he first had to identify two types of light and then use them. The first type is diffused light,

which provides a layer of light to enhance the more suggestive lighting effects. The second type of light was active, which highlighted what it lit, providing the means for enhancing both the external and inner settings as well. Active light allows the night to be expressed, and diffused and active lighting are used simultaneously. Appia discovered that to avoid extreme shadows, which weakens the effect of active light; diffused lighting can illuminate the setting and the actor (Palmer). Appia could recognize the potential of light as a unifying and expressive force that could be modulated and controlled like music. In establishing the principles of stage lighting, he drew attention to the materiality of light, its effect upon stage space, and the actor's body within it.

Appia originally studied music, which influenced many of his ideas about design and lighting. The qualities of music became Appia's dominant metaphors in his analysis of light. He would create a lighting plot that would begin with the first chords of an overture and would continuously change and blend throughout the entire time of the production (Baugh). Like music, light would come to express profound human expressions. He published "The Staging of the Wagnerian Drama." This was a collection of stage and lighting plans for 18 of Wagner's operas that clarified the function of stage lighting. In this, he proposed to banish painted backdrops and replace them with three-dimensional settings. His sets made use of risers and steps to emphasize the physical space of the stage, and the actor's presence within it. Appia's vision, for the first time, placed light and shadow and its movement over time as central to the dramatic experience. To Appia, music, light, and the actor had to work together. Appia once wrote,

I discovered the living germ of the dramatic art, in which music is no longer separated from the human body in a splendour which is after all illusory, at least during performance, nor subjugated to it, a dramatic art which will direct the body towards an externalization in space, and this makes it the primary and supreme means of scenic expression. (Rogers)

These ideas that light, scenography, and the actors must work in tandem supported the idea that actors should be relieved of their traditional jobs of filling out and making real the dramatic character from their own personal experiences. To Appia, the individual actor's reality was the reality of stage presence and not that of a fictional character (Baugh). In order to create a unified piece, the actor must be an expressive medium that, in conjunction with the music and lighting, emanates directly from the work of the poet-dramatist. He spoke on this further in his text titled, "Actor, Space, Light, Painting." In this he states, "Light, just like the actor, must become active; and in order to grant to it the status of a medium of dramatic expression it must be placed in the service of the actor" (Appia, *Texts on Theatre*).

To Appia, to "achieve a harmonious whole in a theatrical production, there had to be strict controls placed on the actor" (Rogers). Appia ideally wanted the actors to become an instrument, replacing the actor with a pliable marionette. This received much criticism; therefore, Appia conceded that spoken drama was permanent, but he continued to insist that "the art of staging can be an art only if it derives from music" (Appia, *The Future*). Appia went on to say, "the living and mobile body of the actor represents movement in space; it therefore plays a critical role. Without a text, dramatic art cannot exist; and the actor is the bearer of this text. Without movement, the other arts cannot take part in this dramatic action" (Appia, *Living Art*). Appia knew that the actor was the base of this art form, but he wanted the acting to match the emotion from the work and the space around them. Because of his music training, his main goal was to "restate the fundamental aesthetics of the theatre in such a way that the actor, playwright, director, and scene designer would be aided by the unifying power of music" (Rogers). Appia came to see that music expressed man's inner being and that it could be used as a major regulating device. He believed that music was a means of expression for an actor. Music became

freeing and helped an actor become a medium of true art. He believed, “What the actor loses in freedom will be gained by the stage designer; and the setting, in giving up all pretense at scenic illusion, becomes an atmosphere in which the actor can be totally expressive” (Appia, *Living Art*). He believed that the designer and the actor could be united through the power of music to create a fully unified work, and whatever one area was incapable of achieving, the other could fulfill. According to Appia, drama controlled by music could be a supreme illusion, a “transformation which deprived an actor of his personal, arbitrary expression” (Rogers).

In an effort to get the actor to understand the rhythm and timing needed, he supported an actor’s study of gymnastics. Along with gymnastics, the actor should be trained in “voice and diction because such work would provide great ‘rhythmic suppleness’ and would allow the actor to obey ‘complex rhythmic pattern in following the directions of the poetic-musical text’” (Rogers). The largest influence however, came from eurhythmics, a system of education in the arts based on rhythm, musical theory, and gymnastics. Appia found that his theories on control of the body through music found explicit realization in the experimentation of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze. Dalcroze insisted that eurhythmic work was not an art form, but rather a path to art (Baugh). Working with Dalcroze, Appia evolved his own theory that the rhythm found in a text is the key to every gesture and movement of an actor. Appia said they shared the common goal to “give back to the body its good harmony, to make music vibrate in it- as to make music an integral part of the organism” and therefore they agreed that light was the sister to music, and therefore sound and light could provide actors with undreamt facilities of expression (Rogers).

The main characteristic of Appia’s theory of acting was the importance of technique. He once said, “Technique cannot err, its laws and their connections exceed our understanding; if we despise those laws, it is we who err” (Appia, *The Future*). To Appia, actors followed a principle

of order whose dictates were greater than their own personal institutions. The human body would accept the modifications that were demanded by the music, and without rhythmic training, the actor's body wouldn't transfuse with the elements of music (Rogers). In 1923, Appia explained the final evolution of his theory. This was towards art which took the "living and moving human body as its object as well as its instrument. He hoped to create an architectural style which used the living body of the actor as its sole point of departure" (Rogers). He was attempting to use eurhythmics to create a form of "living art."

While most of Appia's work was in the fundamental principles of scenography and lighting, it paved a way for a new style of acting. One that, similar to all of Appia's work, focused on music and the emotions and timing expressed through it. As Appia said,

The living body is thus the real creator of the supreme art, holding as it does the secret of the hierarchical relations between the conflicting elements, because it stands at their head. When we seek, therefore, place of the other arts in dramatic art, we must maintain the living and plastic body as our point of departure. (Appia, *Living Art*)

Because of his view of theatre as the synthesis of all art-form in free associations, his study and theories were not just limited to design. His efforts to create uniform, organized works helped express deeper human emotions and create a dynamic image on stage. His changes to lighting helped to frame those on stage. Light raises key issues about not only what is seen on stage, but how things look. Light affects how the audience feels and directs their attention. It determines what is perceived by an audience by emphasizing shape and volume, yet it is also able to create "ambiguities of depth and scale." Appia's theories have allowed lighting and the actors to exist on the same plane, letting lighting reveal things that the actor can't, and allowing actors to become a more cohesive part of a production. This in turn creates a more complete atmosphere on stage and allows for a more dynamic performance. Because of this, Appia defined a new style of performance that connects to all aspects of a work.

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