

Theories of Adolphe Appia: Conquering the Components of Dramatic Art

Everyone involved in the making of theatre – or in the arts at large – has their own unique and individual view of the nuances of their craft and the philosophies that motivate them both to keep creating and to improve. As we have learned, theatre artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took their own personal views very seriously, which contributed to the fragmentation of the arts into never-before-seen subgenres such as Surrealism, Symbolism, Dada, and more. A number of these artists went so far as to publish manifestos outlining the specific goals, tools, and regulations of their particular approach. One of the first to spearhead this shift in the world of theatre arts was Adolphe Appia, a Swiss designer and theorist. In his book *The Work of Living Art*, he explains in detail his philosophies of how new approaches to scenic and lighting design can lead to an altered vision of the essence of theatre itself. While reading this book, four concepts seemed most important to understanding Appia's theories: categorization of arts as belonging to the realms of either space or time, how those realms can become living space and living time, the importance of weight and plasticity, and Appia's definition of organic unity.

Appia states that the purpose for his book is to “analyze those factors in dramatic art over which we tend to slip too discreetly; and to clarify and sharpen our ideas on those factors...” (Appia 5). He begins to do this by first dissecting the components of what we know to be theatre. He claims that many view theatre as a combination of all other art forms including music, painting, and recitation, but sternly advises against observing it in this way (Appia 6). He believes that if one is to view theatre, or dramatic art, as no more than the sum of its parts, then they have missed the point of theatre entirely. He states that for a design to be “organically unified – and therefore mutually subordinated” it must make certain sacrifices, but it can also provide rewards in its “new mode of existence” (Appia 18). Appia suggests that the problem to

be addressed in order for theatre to unfold in a harmonious manner is finding a way to successfully unite the arts of time and space so that they may work together to create a “living art.” Appia classifies visual arts including architecture, sculpture, and painting as they apply to the theatre as being arts of space. This is due to their innate qualities of being fixed moments that, particularly in the case of painting, can evoke fictional space and weight - the communicable idea of these concepts but not the actual presence of them (Appia 12). Music, however, is considered an art of time, for it has no physical form and exists only in the duration given to it by the musician. Appia goes so far as to claim that “music *represents time*... [it] is the direct expression of our inner being” (Appia 18).

Appia defines living time as “the art of expressing an essential idea simultaneously in time and in space,” and living space as “the victory of bodily forms over inanimate forms... the resonator for the music” (Appia 30). He elaborates upon the idea of living time by explaining music’s existence as a language that can be interpreted by the body and therefore incorporated into living space; thoughts and feelings as inspired by music can be communicated in space through gesture. (Appia 22). Appia warns, however, that music’s function in dramatic art is to preserve the conditions under which it can exist. Due to this, music becomes the linchpin in the conglomeration of performance. He states in fact that he believes music to be in an extraordinary position within living art: in the center of all aspects of performance and capable of tying them together (Appia 56). This philosophy sheds much light on why Appia’s ideas fell in line with those of his contemporary, composer and director Richard Wagner. In many ways, Appia’s theories of uniting dramatic art echo Wagner’s theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the total work of art. Living space, however, is concerned with the movement of the body as restricted to two specific planes, one in which movement is intended and another in which movement is restricted.

The actions of the obstacles or lack thereof dictate the expression of the space and therefore render it living (Appia 25).

With the idea of plasticity, Appia attempts to “apply the principle of movement to the fine arts, which are inherently immobile” (Appia 8). He defines a plastic object as being one which demands its own unfalsified light, shadow, and atmosphere and therefore does not harmonize with two-dimensional components like painting because they only provide the *potential* for these expressions (Appia 10). Appia also advises that weight is a crucial element to consider while designing. He classifies weight as a principle rather than a poundage, stressing that objects do not actually need to be heavy to imply weight. He gives an example of the juxtaposition of a column with sharp, intense angles with the organic, curved body of an actor standing beside it, claiming that the contrast between the “quiet immobility of the column” and the “sinuous and rounded lines of the body” not only accentuate the weight of each other, but allow the presence of the body when it leans against the column to make the column itself resist the force and therefore act as a living object (Appia 28). The plasticity that is present in both the body and the architectural form allow them to form a kind of kinship with one another and react to each other in ways that the body and painting, such as the painted drops prevalent in earlier eras of the theatre, could never achieve. Appia argues that to exist on the same plane, a painting on a two-dimensional object would be forced to “renounce its character in favor of the living body” and the body would in turn have to “renounce its plastic and mobile life,” both of which would cause the collective work of art to suffer immensely (Appia 10). Therefore, Appia is claiming that painting and the body cannot exist together in dramatic art.

Finally, Appia brings these ideas together to form the direction in which he believes theatre should unfold: a sophisticated art form which displays the qualities of organic unity.

Appia believes that the dramatist has been stripped of their ability to create original and unique art because theatre has for so long been believed to be nothing more than the collection of all the other artistic elements it contains. He argues that disagreement and disharmony between such elements as the scenic design and the text can drain the beauty from the drama itself (Appia 39-40). If the dramatic artist can conquer the arts of space and time, they can therefore shape the resulting creation to their own will – essentially achieving the desire to contribute their own art to the form that is theatre.

Appia's ideas of dramatic art and theories of the theatre were extremely advanced for his time, so much so that many of his theories concerning staging were impractical and his theories concerning lighting were impossible with the technology of his day. Despite this, the theories laid out in *The Work of Living Art* were put into practice by many future thespians. An exemplification of this can be found in the New Stagecraft movement. Tenets of this movement are almost entirely drawn from Appia's ideas, including the belief that drama itself is a living organism with tension and feeling and that the rhythm of the play is important above all else. Clearly, Appia's revolutionary innovations influence the theatre to this day.

Works Cited

Appia, Adolphe. *The Work of Living Art and Man is the Measure of All Things*. University of Miami Press, Florida, 1969. Print.