

Adolphe Appia

1862-1928

Adolphe Appia (born September 1, 1862 in Geneva; died February 29, 1928 in Nyon), son of Red Cross co-founder Louis Appia, was a Swiss architect and theorist of stage lighting and décor.

Adolphe Appia, a Swiss theorist and pioneer of modern stage design is most well known for his many scenic designs for Wagner's operas. Appia rejected painted two dimensional sets for three-dimensional 'living' sets because he believed that shade was as necessary as light to form a connection between the actor and the setting of the performance in time and space. Using control of light intensity, color, and manipulation, Appia created a new perspective of scene design and stage lighting.

Directors and designers have both taken great inspiration from the work of Adolphe Appia, whose design theories and conceptualizations of Wagner's opera's have helped to shape modern perceptions of the relationship between the performance space and lighting. One of the reasons for the influence of Appia's work and theories is that he was working at time when electrical lighting was just evolving. Another is that he was a man of great vision who was able to conceptualize and philosophize about many of his practices and theories.

The central principle underpinning much of Appia's work is that artistic unity is the primary function of the director and the designer. Appia saw light, space, and the human body as malleable commodities, when integrated create a unified production. He advocated synchronicity of sound, light, and movement in his productions of Wagner's operas and he tried to integrate corps of actors with the rhythms and moods of the music. Ultimately however, Appia considered light as the primary element, which fused together all aspects of a production and he consistently attempted to unify musical and movement elements of the text and score to the more mystical and symbolic aspects of light.

Appia was one of the first designers to understand the potential of stage lighting to do more than merely illuminate actors and painted scenery. His ideas about the staging of "word-tone drama," together with his own staging of *Tristan und Isolde* (Milan 1923) and parts of the *Ring* (Basle 1924-25) have influenced later staging, especially those of the second half of the twentieth century.

For Appia and for his productions, the set design and the totality or unity of the performance experience was primary and he believed that these elements drove movement and initiated action more than any thing else (Johnston 1972). Appia's designs and theories went on to inspire many other theatre creators such as Edward Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau and Wieland Wag.