



CELEBRATING
40 YEARS 1980 - 2020



Sunday 18 April 2021, 2:00 pm
'Adolphe Appia and the emergence of
scenography' by Professor Thea Brejzek
Goethe Institut, Woollahra

Program:

12.30pm: DVD - Ludwig II Castles in Bavaria
2.00pm: Professor Thea Brejzek talks about
revolutionary Swiss stage designer Adolphe Appia
and the Emergence of Scenography
3.30pm: Afternoon tea

Goethe Institut, 90 Ocean Street, Woollahra

Members \$25 / non-members \$30 / full-time students \$10

Report

On Sunday 18 April an enthusiastic group of 40 members and friends gathered at the Goethe Institut for the first time in 18 months to watch a DVD and listen to a talk. We were warmly welcomed by the Director of the Institut, Sonja Griegoschewski, who congratulated the Society on reaching our 40th anniversary. We have been using the Institut as our base for 30 years and Sonja expressed the wish that we will continue for another 40.

The talk was followed by refreshments provided by members of the committee plus champagne very generously provided by Sonja.

ADOLPHE APPIA AND THE EMERGENCE OF SCENOGRAPHY

Professor Thea Brejzek, Professor in Interior Architecture at the University of Technology Sydney

Prof Brejzek started with the influence on the theoretical writings of Adolphe Appia (1862 – 1928) of Wagner's proposal in *Artwork of the Future* (1849) for a Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork). In turn Appia's ideas influenced Wieland Wagner's restaging of the operas in Bayreuth after the war. She talked about Appia's early reactions to Bayreuth's staging and his designs for *Tristan* and *Parsifal*. His revolutionary use of lighting and new technology to create atmosphere to support the actor changed the practice of

scenography forever. An interesting video clip illustrated Appia's Festival Theatre in Hellerau, Dresden, where he worked with architects, designers, musicians and choreographers turning his theoretical concepts into theatrical reality. Through the use of control of light intensity, colour and manipulation, Appia created a new perspective of scene design and stage lighting. Appia's work has been a great inspiration to the innovative director Robert Wilson, who has designed iconic productions around the world for the past 50 years. Thea ended with some exciting new developments in Virtual and Augmented Reality which are being used by directors to bring theatre to audiences in new ways.

Due to technical issues Thea was unable to show many slides but her vivid verbal description, based on her experiences in the theatre, brought her talk alive. Her talk and slides are available on the Society's website. Below is a selection of images and excerpts from various other writings that give a background to the talk.

Appia and Bayreuth

...On his first visit to Bayreuth in 1882, the Swiss producer, Adolphe Appia, declared: 'If every aspect of the auditorium expresses Wagner's genius, everything the other side of the footlights contradicts it'. This criticism was echoed by G.B. Shaw. Although Wagner was the greatest dramatist of the nineteenth century, his naturalistic stagings came to be regarded as backward-looking. Yet there were some who regarded the 1882 production of *Parsifal* as definitive; the increasingly dilapidated sets for that production were used until 1930.

When **Winifred Wagner** tried to introduce a new staging, Wagner's daughters **Eva** and **Daniela** circulated a petition, which declared that the original sets on which the eyes of the Master had reposed possessed a timeless validity and must be preserved. This petition received the signatures of, among others, Richard Strauss, Toscanini and Newman.

At the reopening of the Bayreuth Festival in 1951, Wieland Wagner shocked the Wagnerian world by adopting, in his new staging of *Parsifal*, the minimalist ideas set out by Appia in his Basle staging of *Die Walküre*. Appia had seen that a naturalistic pictorial representation, no matter how skilful, was unsuitable for Wagner's music. He preferred fully three-dimensional, semi-representational sets and exploited the developing technology of stage lighting, just as Richard Wagner surely would have done. Under Appia's influence, Wieland turned the operas inside out, preferring at first abstraction and later a pervasive psychological symbolism to bring out the (Jungian and Freudian) mythic dimensions of the works. **Ernest Newman** wrote in the Sunday Times: 'This was not only the best *Parsifal* I have ever seen and heard but one of the three or four most moving spiritual experiences of my life.'

Excerpt from *Montsalvat – The Parsifal Pages* by **Derrick Everett**

<https://www.monsalvat.no/parsifal-staging.htm>

Theory

...Before his (**Gordon Craig's**) influence was felt, however, Adolphe Appia, probably the most powerful theorist of the new movement, had written his remarkable book, *Die Musik und die Inszenierung*. In this, as an artist, he attempted to deduce from the content of the Wagner music dramas the proper stage settings for them..... Appia started with the principle that the setting should make the actor the all-important fact on the stage. He saw the realistic impossibility of the realistic setting, and destructively analysed the current modes of lighting and perspective effects. But, unlike the members of the more conventional modern school, he insisted that the stage is a three-dimensional space and must be handled so as to make its depth living. He felt a contradiction between the living

actor and the dead setting. He wished to bind them into one whole - the drama. How was this to be done? Appia's answer to this question is his chief claim to greatness- genius almost. His answer was-"By means of the lighting."

The lighting, for Appia, is the spiritual core, the soul of the drama. The whole action should be contained in it, somewhat as we feel the physical body of a friend to be contained in his personality. Appia's second great principle is closely connected with this. While the setting is obviously inanimate, the actor must in every way be emphasised and made living. And this can be accomplished, he says, only by a wise use of lighting, since it is the lights and shadows on a human body which reveal to our eyes the fact that the body is "plastic"-that is, a flexible body of three dimensions. Appia would make the setting suggest only the atmosphere, not the reality of the thing it stands for, and would soften and beautify it with the lights. The actor he would throw constantly into prominence while keeping him always a part of the scene. All the elements and all the action of the drama he would bind together by the lights and shadows. With the most minute care each detail of lighting, each position of each character, in Appia's productions is studied out so that the dramatic meaning shall always be evident.

Extract from an analysis of Appia by **Hiram Kelly Moderwell** in his book, *The Theatre of To-day* Published by John Lane in 1914

Hellerau

The Hellerau Festival Theatre was built in 1911 to a design by the architect **Heinrich Tessenow**. Tessenow's plan was to bring to life the visions of the stage designer Adolphe Appia and the music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze in a layout that was to point the way for modernism with its clear lines and functional structure. This building was a visionary alternative to all traditional theatres: featuring a retractable orchestra pit, freely combinable stage elements and rows of audience seating, Appia's hall did not have any permanent fittings – neither a stage nor a curtain – making it a "cathedral of the future" (Appia) in which the audience and performers were supposed to merge into spiritual and sensory unity. The real curiosity, however, was the lighting concept developed by the Georgian painter and stage designer Alexander von Salzmann. The ceiling and walls were lined with white waxed sheets of cloth, behind which thousands of bulbs produced a diffuse indefinite light that rid the room of every last grain of naturalism, bathing it in transparency and transcendence.

The teachings of **Émile Jaques-Dalcroze** also offered an alternative to previous dance and theatre traditions: they revolved around the "man in motion" who, by deliberately exercising his rhythmic abilities, was brought up to be a holistic individual who incorporated art, work and life all at once, who not only "knew" but also "felt". **Wolf Dohrn**, a close friend of **Karl Schmidt**, met Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and brought him to Hellerau. The newly founded educational institution quickly became a success, with Dalcroze starting lessons as early on as October 1910. At the first public school fête in the summer of 1912, known as the "Festival", the students performed scenes from Gluck's "*Orpheus and Eurydice*" before 500 journalists and an audience of more than 4,000, as well as improvisation and group exercises. At the second festival a year later, an audience of 5,000 in the Festival Theatre then watched a full performance of "Orpheus and Eurydice". The viewers included **G.B. Shaw, Oskar Kokoschka, Stefan Zweig, Max Reinhardt, Franz Werfel, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Claudel, Gerhart Hauptmann** and many other European intellectuals. The radically new staging approach at the Festival Theatre was diametrically opposed to the traditions on the stage of the Semper Opera House, in the centre of Dresden. Alongside disapproval, it also met with great enthusiasm and sparked interest throughout Europe. Hellerau, then a suburb of Dresden, became, and remains, a centre for European modernism. <https://www.hellerau.org/en/history/>

Robert Wilson

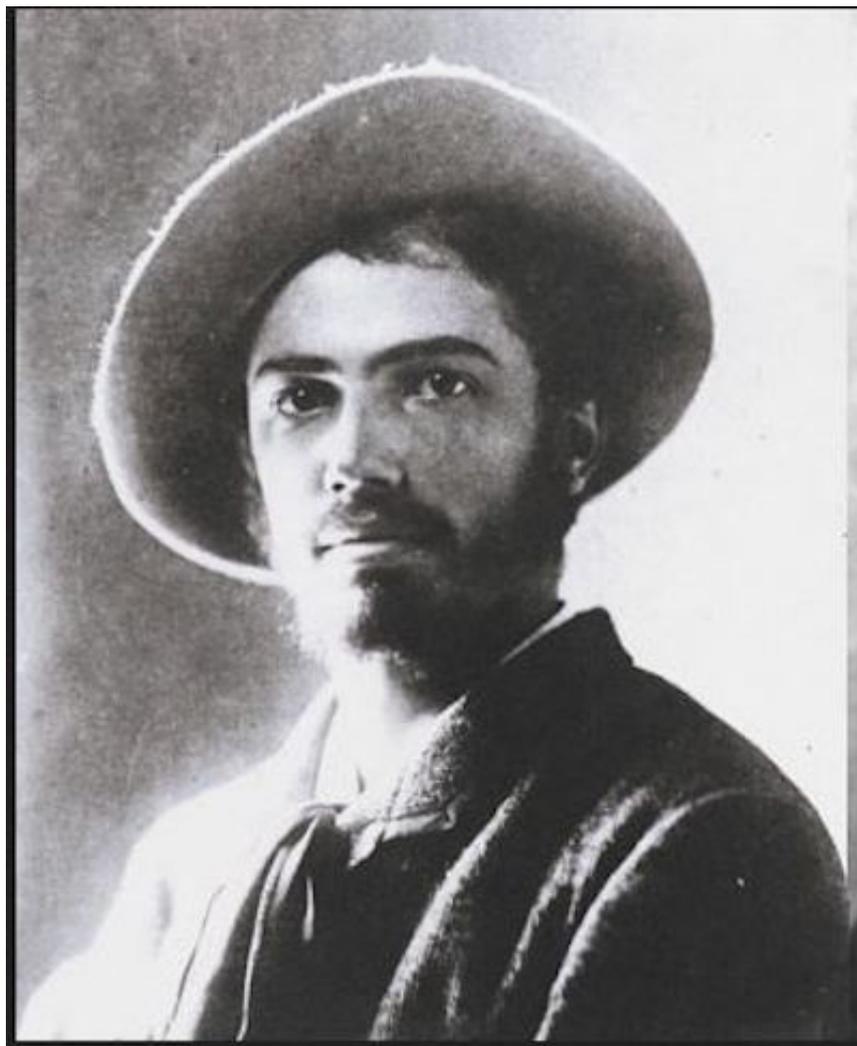
Robert Wilson (born 1941) is the supreme example of director as scenic writer. He draws on a wide variety of artistic sources, from symbolism to the visionary architecture of the late twentieth century, from surrealist dream imagery to post-modern choreography and the perceptual modes of so-called 'maladjusted' children. He is unique in his uncompromising fidelity to the realisation of his own visions in performance, fuelled by a quasi-mystical belief in the therapeutic power of art as a stimulus to the individual imagination. He takes his place in the tradition of visionary mystics and romantic innovators of the last 150 years which has its origins in the 'music drama' of Richard Wagner and subsequently in the theories of **Edward Gordon Craig**. Wagner's principle theoretical legacy is the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: a synthesis of disparate art forms — dance and movement, light, design, music — into a total work of art. Bradby D., Williams D. (1988) Robert Wilson. In: *Directors' Theatre. Modern Dramatists*. Palgrave, London.

Review of Robert Wilson's *Parsifal*

Beginning with a hallucinatory sunrise, slow as real time, the lighting never once loses its spellbinding magic over five hours. In an atmosphere of such visual perfection, Wilson enacts "*Parsifal*" mainly in a drama of color and luminosity, which serves both to bring the music psychedelically close and simultaneously distance the drama vastly.

Excerpt from review in Los Angeles Times by **Mark Swed** March 1991

From the Wagner Quarterly 161, June 2021



Adolphe Appia

About Adolphe Appia

Adolphe Appia (1862 - 1928) was a Swiss architect whose theories of staging, use of space, and lighting have had a lasting influence on modern stagecraft, helping to bring a new realism and creativity to theatrical production, and to evoke an atmosphere rather than representing a concrete place. His ideas have influenced later stagings, including those of Wieland Wagner.

Appia is best known for his many scenic designs for Wagner's operas. He 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. Through the use of control of light intensity, colour and manipulation, Appia created a new perspective of scene design and stage lighting.

About Professor Thea Brejzek

Dr Thea Brejzek is Professor of Spatial Theory at the University of Technology Sydney. Thea straddles the world of practice and theory and publishes and lectures widely on the history and theory of scenography and performative environments with a particular interest in transdisciplinary practices. Prior to 2013, Thea was a Professor of Scenography at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland, and in 2011 was the Founding Curator for Theory at the Prague Quadrennial for Performance Design and Space (PQ). Thea is a member of the scientific advisory board of the Bauhaus Dessau and Co-Editor of the Routledge Journal, Theatre and Performance Design. Recent publications include *The Model as Performance. Staging Space in Theatre and Architecture*, Bloomsbury (co-authored with Wallen in 2018).



Professor Thea Brejzek