Adolphe Appia

From “A New Art-Material” (c. 1902)

At present, theatrical technique is about one thing only: scenic illusion. With very rare exceptions, everything is sacrificed to the pursuit of this illusion. The important development of scene-painting on vertical canvases, the parallel aligning of those canvases, the construction of the stage with the single end in view of enabling them to be handled, and the almost total dedication of the lighting to the task of showing them off to best advantage—all this leaves no doubt that someone is wanting to make us believe in the reality of the scenic picture.

But…the Actor? Is it painted canvases that determine the drama? A play without an actor is a diorama. That plastic, living, moving form…how much care is taken over that? Where do we place it? Ah, that’s it!—the actor is a most inconvenient necessity of our scene painters: They do not exactly resent him, but they make him feel how out of place his presence is in front of their fine painting. Every bit of the painted scenery designed to accommodate the real solid form of the actor, is called ‘practicable’; these are the concessions that painting is willing to make to the free human body. Let us admit for the moment that reasonable concessions have been made. Here then is the actor in front of painting generously cut out on his behalf. To enhance himself, what is there left to him? A plastic form, whatever it may be, exists only bi virtue of the light. How is the actor lit? Alas, not at all; the painting has taken all the lighting for itself. Those long rows of electric lamps which run parallel to the slices of scenery, or which even run right round the stage, are designed to let us see the painting clearly. No doubt they also let us see the actor clearly, lit from all sides at once… But is that *Lighting*? Would a sculptor have thought of lighting in this way his bronze or marble dreams?...

However, if we leave aside painting for a moment and attempt really to light the actor… what happens? All the vast apparatus of the stage would suddenly lose its *raison d’etre*, and the actor would suddenly find himself in excruciating emptiness, in a veritable void. What is called twilight and night lighting on our stages witnesses to that with a crudity we know.

We must therefore conclude that our scene-painting is based on a principle of immobility in contradiction with the presence of the actor and the decorative factor which gives this away its: *the Lighting.*

It is useless to wish for movement without light, without real lighting that creates forms, and it is useless to seek to have light that creates forms if one remains under the tyranny of dead painting. This follows rigorously.

But in that case, some will say, how is the scenic illusion to be maintained?

Is this illusion then to be so cared about that anything and everything is sacrificed to is? In the presence of the actor, everyone knows that the most beautiful scenery is nothing more than an assembly of painted canvases; and if, perhaps accidentally, a particularly favorable arrangement for deceiving the spectator happens to be found, will not the following arrangement immediately destroy its effect? Now, an illusion which is to constant simply does not exist. Our eyes, tricked, do us a disservice here; and yet the first indispensable confliction we must acquire where representation is concerned is that illusion, not only does not exist on our stages, but that it is impossible *and…must* not be possible.

Yes, drama must not, any more than independent paintings or sculpture, seek to deceive the eye.

From “How to Reform Our Staging Practices” (c. 1904)

An attempt of this kind cannot fail to teach us the path to follow in order to transform our rigid and conventional staging practices into an *artistic* material, living, supple and fit to realize no matter what dramatic vision. It will even come to surprise us that we neglected for so long such an important branch of art, and abandoned it, as if unworthy of our direct attention, to people who are not artists. Our aesthetic feeling is thus positively anaesthetized where theatrical production is concerned; he who would not tolerate in his apartment an object of less than exquisite taste, finds it natural to book an expensive seat in a theatre, already ugly and built in defiance of good sense, to spend hours at a show beside which the garish prints sold at the fair are delicate works.

The procedures of staging, like other artistic procedures, are founded on forms, light and color; now these three elements are in our control and we can in consequence arrange them in the theatre as elsewhere in an artistic fashion. Until now it has been believed that staging must achieve the highest possible degree of illusion; and it is this principle (unaesthetic though it is) which has barred out progress. I strive to show in these pages that scenic art must be based on the one reality worthy of theatre: the human body.

Translated by Richard Drain and Micheline Mabille