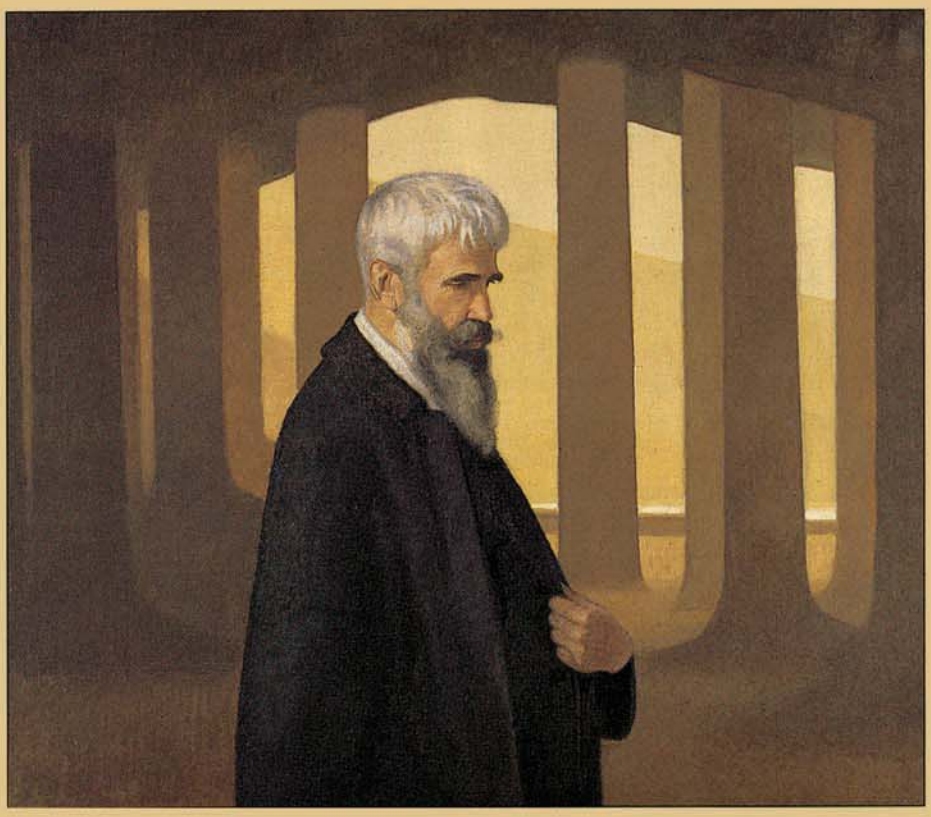
ADOLPHE APPIA

ARTIST AND VISIONARY OF THE MODERN THEATRE

Richard C. Beacham



ROUTLEDGE

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ADOLPHE APPIA

Artist and Visionary of the Modern Theatre

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For Jerry Frankel (1953–1987)

Qua Cursum Ventus

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Introduction to the Series

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

FRANC CHAMBERLAIN

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List of Illustrations

Preface

The work of Adolphe Appia is gradually attracting the attention and recognition it deserves. This is particularly welcome in the case of the English-speaking world, where despite recognition of Appia's extraordinary importance by some theatre critics and practitioners earlier in the century, the wider reception and appreciation of his contribution has been hindered by the absence of translations of Appia's primary texts. Many of his ideas were taken up and assimilated – indeed they provided the basis for a great many innovations, attitudes and practices that we now take for granted – but the man himself, including the actual works through which he first advanced those ideas, remained in the background.

With the publication in translation of Appia's two major books, *The Work of Living Art* (1960), and *Music and the Art of the Theatre* (1962) the situation improved, and did so further when Walther Volbach (who had been instrumental in securing publication of these works) brought out his own pioneering biography in 1968, *Adolphe Appia, Prophet of the Modern Theatre: A Profile.* Volbach intended to publish his translation of a large collection of Appia's essays at the same time, but this was most regrettably thwarted for many years, by factors quite beyond his control.

Since 1979, Marie L. Bablet-Hahn has been editing and publishing the monumental, fully annotated French language edition of *Adolphe Appia, Oeuvres Complètes*, four volumes of which have now appeared, covering Appia's written work up to 1928, the year of his death. Together with Denis Bablet she also prepared a travelling exhibition and catalogue on Appia and his work, *Adolphe Appia, Actor, Space, Light* which toured widely in Europe and America. Meanwhile, in 1983, Peter Loeffler published his excellent edition of Appia's short study, *Staging Wagnerian Drama.* In 1987 Cambridge Press published my critical account, *Adolphe Appia, Theatre Artist.* In 1989 Volbach and I at last succeeded in bringing out his long-delayed English edition of Appia's work. This book, *Adolphe Appia, Essays, Scenarios, and Designs*, includes much which had never before been published in any language. In 1992 a major exhibition of Appia's designs was presented at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, accompanied by a substantial catalogue. In 1993 I published *Adolphe Appia, Texts on Theatre*, the purpose of which was to make generally accessible to English readers a wide selection from all of Appia's major works gathered together into a single volume.

This book is a comprehensive revision and enlargement of my earlier Cambridge biography. It has been further expanded to include substantial selections from Appia's writings to complement the critical account of his work. It covers the entire span

of his creative life, and includes both abridgments of many of the most important essays, as well as extensive excerpts from his two full-length books. It thus provides (apart from the *Oeuvres Complètes*) the most complete study of Appia yet to appear.

Appia is notorious for the difficulties he presents translators. His style is highly idiosyncratic, and fluctuates between ecstatic passages of almost mystical evocation – and imprecision – and sections of virtually opaque abstraction. Compounding this is the fact that frequently he is attempting to chart out what is an aesthetic *terra incognita* where few have ventured before. We observe him in the very process of formulating the aesthetic basis for a total revolution in theatre practice; one which changed it forever and is still extraordinarily influential and relevant today. His analysis and in particular, the process by which he fashions and refines ordinary words or phrases into critical concepts or terminology is rarely clear or straightforward, and this is further troubled by what he described as a tendency to think in German syntactic structures, while writing in French.

A translator is tempted either towards being too literal and thus leaving his reader mired in ambiguities, or conversely, over-translating; homogenising Appia's prose into an English version that both obscures his critical process, and risks destroying his individual tone and the resonance of his ideas. I have tended to lean (and sometimes perhaps to err) towards a more literal rendering of Appia's writing. I have resisted over-simplifying his prose, by putting it into blandly smooth English which sacrifices the personal voice – including often the note of struggle – so characteristic of the original. In the interests of including as wide a selection as possible of Appia's work, I have abridged, sometimes substantially, most of the essays. I can only urge English readers offended or perplexed by the result to have a look if possible, at the French edition of the texts to puzzle out Appia's meaning, while savouring the sense of his personality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend thanks for support and assistance in preparing this book to a number of individuals and institutions. I am grateful to the staff of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale for their cooperation. I am grateful also to the Yale School of Drama for making its collection available to me, and for permission to reproduce many of the illustrations appearing in this book. I also received invaluable assistance from the Swiss Theatre Collection, Bern, and wish to thank its director, Dr Martin Dreier, for his continuing support, and in particular, for his aid in securing a number of the photographs reproduced here.

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1 PROLOGUE: CHALLENGE AND STALEMATE IN SYMBOLISM

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a period of extraordinary artistic ferment throughout Europe. Although the underlying causes and expressions of this restless spirit of innovation and experiment are complex, extensive, and well worthy of study in themselves, essentially they all had their origins in a fundamental revolt against the dominant artistic style of the day: realism. Whether in the literary, plastic or graphic arts, the realist hegemony held sway; the curious and partial exception being theatrical practice, which was always notoriously behind the times aesthetically, and which, in any case, few observers of the period would have been comfortable in dignifying with the title 'art'.

For a century and more – since at least the time of Diderot – manifestoes calling for greater realism in the theatre had been issued, and at least in the hands of the more advanced playwrights, the drama itself had become increasingly concerned with realistic characters and situations. Stagecraft, however, and above all the practice of scene design, lagged far behind. It had remained for centuries the captive of the aesthetics of perspective *painting*, which, ironically, had first been introduced during the Renaissance to give greater scenic realism to theatrical presentation, but whose alien principles and their demands had never ceased to dominate it, severely curtailing the potential for truly naturalistic settings. Thus the scenic requisites of the nineteenth-century theatre were still essentially *artificial*: painted, *trompe l'oeil* effects executed on flat canvases pretending to be solid three-dimensional objects. These 'flats' in fact were nothing more than paintings, arranged around the stage behind the proscenium arch to give what in the flickering candlelight of earlier times may have passed for plausible settings but in the harsher glow of gaslight stood exposed as palpable 'fakes'.

Now, still in the thrall of painting, and only beginning to grope towards truly realistic settings, the theatre found itself in the second half of the nineteenth century 'high and dry', as the artistic tide swept at full flood in the very opposite direction and, increasingly, the other arts turned away into more abstract and symbolic modes of expression. The theatre, not for the first, and certainly not for the last, time in its haphazard history, was in crisis – at best behind the times, and at worst, artistically speaking, retrograde and irrelevant. Nevertheless, and this too had been true throughout its history, it yet contained within itself an extraordinary potential for reform, and even for regeneration. In the very desert of its isolation, a new voice was heard within it, which not only pointed

the way which in time would lead to its *own* renewal, but, remarkably, provided radical challenge and leadership to the *other* arts as well.

Richard Wagner seized the initiative and, as prophet, iconoclast, and creative artist, reformed music-drama; in doing so he exercised enormous influence upon a host of other non-theatrical artists and theorists as well, many of whom soon followed, devoted converts, in his luminous path. Wagner demanded that dramatic art return to its distant sources, there to be nourished again on myth, dream and archetype, attaining thereby once more the purity, perfection and beauty which had been its glory in antiquity. The drama, Wagner passionately believed, must cease to strive after realism; must use instead its uniquely expressive potential to explore the inner meaning, as well as the mysteries, of human life. 'To Wagner's way of thinking, a musically-arranged and musically-executed histrionic performance was "the one indivisible, supreme creation of the mind of man", "the most perfect art-work".'[1]

Others – poets, musicians, and painters already sceptical of orthodox art – found the force of his ideas and example irresistible. Throughout Europe a new movement in the arts, 'symbolism', arose (with Wagner adored as a veritable 'patron saint'), to push back ever farther the sovereignty of realism in all the arts. The French poets, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud called for and produced poems whose expression relied not on realistic description or imagery, but upon evocative signs and verbal symbols; words aimed at inspiring an emotional, even irrational, response in the reader by awakening inner resonances in the realm of fantasy, mysticism and the sub-concious. Poetry strove to imitate music, while music too, by nature the purest and most abstract of the arts, was intermingled with poetry to reinforce its appeal and effectiveness in inducing a dream-like state within which the imagination might freely express itself, liberated from the shackles of rational thought and control and the limits of perceived reality.

Painting, too, was swept up in turn into the anti-realist flux. The long-established conventions of naturalistic representation were loosened, and in some cases abandoned altogether. Perspective technique itself was foremost amongst these, as artists no longer attempted to give the accurate illusion of three dimensions to objects they depicted, but other conventions were affected as well. Colour, shape and line, as well as subject-matter, were all chosen, modified and coordinated to suggest emotional, psychological and spiritual states. Just as the symbolist writers and musicians sought to engage the imagination of those encountering their work, so now painters too created pictures intended to increase the beholders' share in interpreting the image by inviting them to 'fill it in', and in the process to introduce subjective elements of their own fantasy and imagination, while responding as well to those suggested but not explicitly depicted by the artist.

Although the symbolist movement in painting, together with its expression in literature, was centred in France, both found support and emulation throughout Europe, as the broad anti-realist reaction became an important factor in the artistic 'spirit' of the age. Those influenced by it outside France included, amongst many others, Oscar Wilde, Beardsley, Yeats and Whistler in the British Isles, and Ibsen, Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, Gustav Klimt, Arnold Böcklin and Edvard Munch on the Continent.

The spiritual home of the movement, however, remained in France, where one of the terms used to designate the reaction as applied to painting was coined by Gauguin, who called his method 'synthetish-symbolic'. By this, Gauguin and

the group of painters directly influenced by him – the so called 'Nabi' school – 'meant simply the recording of form in symbolic line and colour as distinguished from the imitative procedures presented in realist and impressionist doctrines... certain characters in his pictures were intended to record mental images and ideas as distinguished from visual experience'.[2]

The Nabis (the word was taken from Hebrew, meaning 'prophet'), whose prominent members included Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard and, pre-eminently, Paul Sérusier, collaborated and exhibited together as a group from 1888 to about 1900. The impulse of their work originated with Gauguin, but their effective organiser and spokesman was Sérusier, whose dictum, 'art is a means of communication between souls', became one of their guiding principles, along with 'resemblance is the enemy'.

Sérusier was extremely interested in the theatre – had, indeed, considered becoming an actor – and, following his example, most of the Nabi painters soon became involved in creating actual theatrical décors, while frequently publishing their designs in the avant-garde theatrical journals of the day, including, most prominently, the *Revue Blanche*, which, together with the short-lived, but highly provocative *Revue Wagnérienne*, had a major impact on the symbolist movement and its dissemination.

The painters found that the symbolist writers had already discovered in the theatre both a challenging testing-ground for their theories, and potentially, a very effective venue for publicising them. Symbolist playwrights set out to create a new theatrical language together with a dramaturgy capable of providing a visible and practical exploration of their ideas. As Professor Katherine Worth notes, 'performers were testing Rimbaud's dream of a language "of the soul for the soul, containing everything; smells, sounds, colours"; Pater's dictum that all art aspires towards the condition of music; the Nietzschean concept of Dionysiac unity "wherein actor becomes transformed into dancer, dancer into musician, musician into lyric poet".'[3]

Since scene design had followed the fashions of painting for centuries, it was hardly surprising to find it attempting now to accommodate the latest symbolist development. However, this attempt at once stumbled against an intractable problem, one which starkly revealed the fundamental aesthetic incompatibility between stage settings and painting. Painting, so long as it depicted surface reality in a more or less naturalistic mode, had served the theatre's requirement for the realisation (or more accurately, for the illustration) of its fictive locales tolerably well. But once divorced from realism, such scenery became merely and manifestly *painting* again, and no longer could suggest – because it no longer sought to depict – three-dimensional settings.

One of the foremost symbolist dramatists, Maurice Maeterlinck, perceived the crux of the problem. Whilst calling for 'musical scenery', he nevertheless recognised that the *mise en scène* as currently practised was quite incapable of conveying the suggestive qualities, the inner essences, of sublime drama. 'The majority of the great poems of humanity are not stageable', he wrote. 'The staging of a Masterpiece with the help of human and unpredictable elements is a contradiction.'[4] The immediate evidence of this contradiction, in terms of scenery, was that there was as yet no 'visual language' to correspond to the language of drama and poetry, giving them expression in space. And whilst bravely proclaiming that 'speech creates scenery like everything else',[5] in practical terms symbolist playwrights seeking to present their plays in the theatre found

themselves in a virtual aesthetic cul-de-sac. The theatre could not accommodate them, could not *stage* them; and, more troubling still, in the light of the new symbolist insights and values, even its traditional handling of its own orthodox works now seemed decidedly tawdry and inadequate.

The symbolist theatrical experiments thus did more to highlight and demonstrate the problems which the contemporary theatre faced than to provide any comprehensive solution. The Théâtre d'Art, founded in 1890, staged seven symbolist productions before it closed to be succeeded in 1893 by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, which continued as the focus of avant-garde work until the turn of the century. The Nabis created scenery for productions at both theatres, according to their concept of stage setting as 'a pure ornamental fiction that creates the illusion by virtue of the analogies with the drama suggested by the lines and colours'.[6]

In practice, however, this meant that their work was confined to little more than providing 'discrete decorative backgrounds'.[7] Despite their sometimes expansive claims of significant innovation, in limiting their work to such backdrops and little else they adhered to a tradition dating back to the late fifteenth century, when such paintings were first employed in the court theatres of Renaissance Italy. The style and content of the painting may have changed; the basic principle – the concept of the nature and function of scenery – remained the same.

Nothing more graphically demonstrated at one and the same time both the symbolists' desire for radical reform and their inability to escape imaginatively from the tyranny of painting than an announcement at the beginning of 1891 that future performances at the Théâtre d'Art would 'end with a *mise en scène* of a painting unknown to the public or with a project of a painter of the new school. The curtain will remain up on the tableau for three minutes ... scenic music and combined scents suited to the subject of the represented picture will prepare for it and then will perfect the impression'.[8] The symbolists were staging paintings! The introduction of the new art *into* the theatre was complete, but it remained quite incapable of formulating a new art *of* the theatre.

What was required was a fundamentally new approach, one which would analyse the essential, formal elements of stage setting as boldly and succinctly as the Nabis had analysed painting. 'A picture – before being a horse, a nude or an anecdotal subject – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a certain order.'[9] Such an approach must recognise that painting could not form the basis of, was not even necessary to, stage setting, which on the contrary must be composed out of its own integral elements: space, solid objects, light and colour, all mutually coordinated and arranged in harmony with the other expressive elements to realise a dramatic work in the theatre.

The ultimate test of such a genuinely new approach would be to stage Wagnerian opera, for although Wagner's works had given profound inspiration and stimulus to dramatic art, and to poetry, music and painting as well, he had conspicuously failed to reform scenic practice – a fact sadly acknowledged by the more perceptive symbolists, who regretted that Wagner had climbed only 'halfway up the holy mountain.'[10]

Moving amongst the symbolist artists and Parisian followers of Wagner in the mid 1880s – but not attracting much notice from them – was a shy and rather diffident young Swiss artist, Adolphe Appia. A fervid Wagnerian himself, Appia had for some time been considering both the specific problems involved in staging Wagner's works and the implications which such problems – and

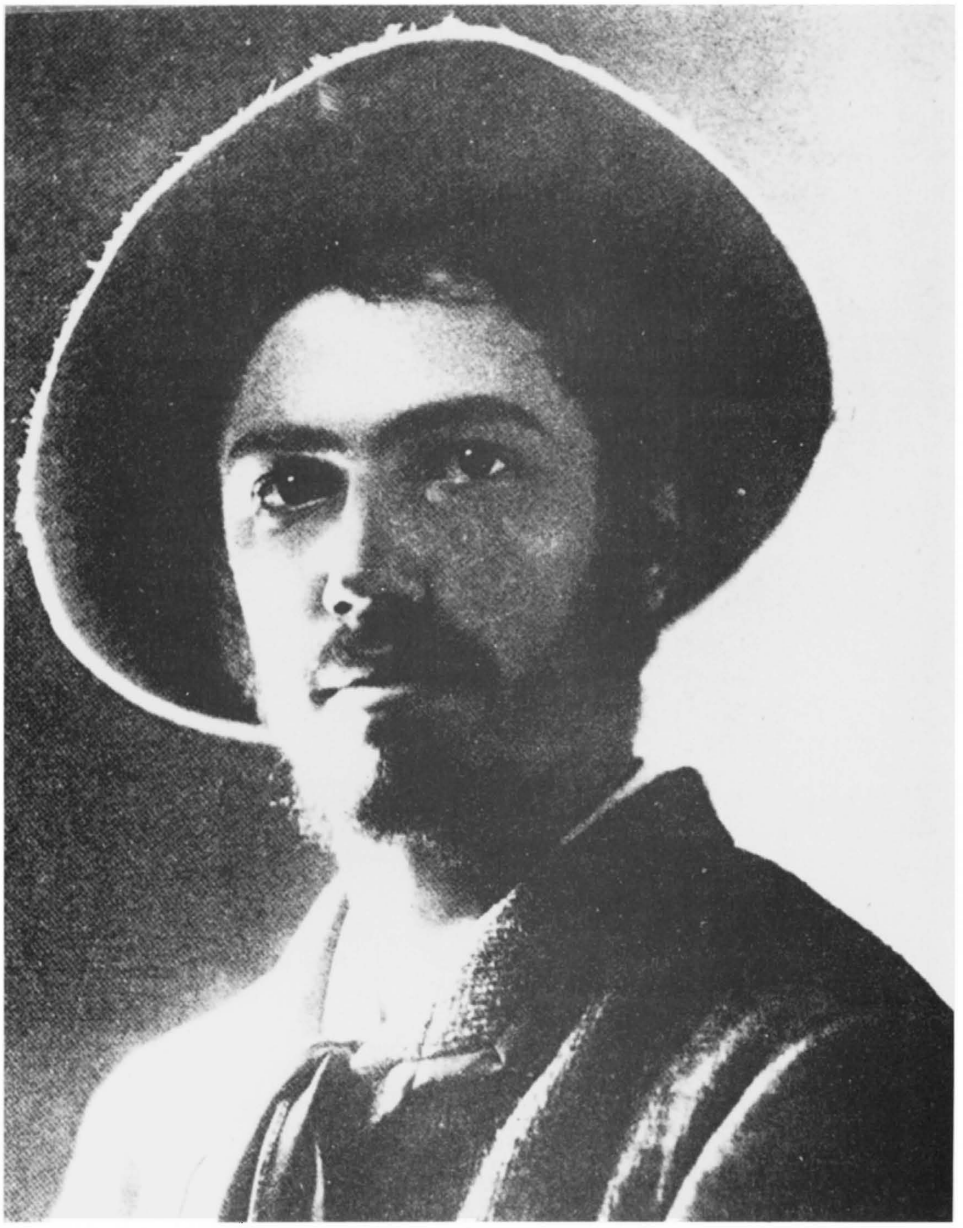

Plate 1. Appia at the age of twenty, when a student at the Leipzig Conservatory of Music.

their solution – had for theatrical reform in general. Encouraged by his friends within the Wagner circle in Paris, and experience gained during his studies in Germany and Austria, Appia returned to Switzerland and, in the summer of 1891, began to put his thoughts on paper. The work, which was published in Paris in 1895, addressed the problem head on. Appia entitled it *La Mise en scène du drame wagnérien (Staging Wagnerian Drama).*

Notes

1. J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1981), p.7.
2. R. H. Wilenski, *Modern French Painters*, quoted by Frantisek Deák, 'Symbolist Staging at the Théâtre d'Art', *The Drama Review*, Vol. 20, no. 3 (1976), p.118.
3. Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London, 1978), pp.11–12.
4. Quoted by Edward Braun, *The Director and the Stage* (London, 1982), p.40.
5. Deák, 'Symbolist Staging . . . ', p.118.
6. *Ibid.*, p.118.
7. Braun, *The Director and the Stage*, p.46.
8. Deák, 'Symbolist Staging . . . ', p.118.
9. Charles Chassé, *The Nabis* (London, 1969), p.7.
10. Quoted by Worth, *The Irish Drama*, p.21.

2 EARLY THEATRICAL INVESTIGATIONS AND THE CONFRONTATION WITH WAGNER

An account of Appia's contribution to the theatre must commence where Appia himself began, with the figure of Richard Wagner. Appia as a young man was enthralled by Wagner's works, and obsessed by the challenge they offered conventional stagecraft. Over a period of twenty years and more, he used them to formulate a completely new definition of scenic art, which in large part provided the theoretical and practical basis for the modern theatre.

Appia's early artistic training was almost entirely in music. As a child he was keenly interested in theatre as well, but in his strictly Calvinistic home in Geneva such interest was severely discouraged, with predictable results. 'The idea of theatre, even the word, was banned in our family circle, and its absence was doubtless a stimulant to my imagination ... since theatre ... had been excluded from my childhood, it inevitably drew my attention.'[1]

At the age of eleven, in the autumn of 1873, Appia left for boarding school at the Collège de Vevey, not far from Geneva, but a comfortable distance from home. He remained there until the spring of 1879, and, somewhat to the neglect of his formal studies, was able more actively to follow and develop his interest in music and theatre. Perhaps still bearing a remnant of his family's moral disapprobation, from the very first Appia approached theatre, attracted to it though he was, with a high degree of scepticism, and, significantly, his interest in it was centred on music. He was troubled by a kind of guilty pleasure after viewing theatrical productions, sensing vaguely 'a moral and artistic betrayal of my innermost being'.[2]

These doubts were fairly readily rationalised, but Appia's sense of the artistic inadequacy of theatrical production continued to disturb him: the first tentative intimations of the fundamental and far-reaching reforms so carefully worked out later. Even as a fourteen-year-old student, he was preoccupied with the concept of space in the theatre, and the placement on stage of three-dimensional objects.

> One of my friends at the boarding school had seen *Tannhäuser* in Germany and gave me vague reports of it. I tried to pin him down and inquired whether the characters were really 'in a place' and what this 'place' was like. He didn't understand me. I remember having been rather insistent and having finally asked almost in despair, 'Where were their feet?'.[3]

In the same period Appia and a schoolmate designed a small cardboard stage but fell out over the friend's use of conventional painted cut-outs for the scenery. Appia found these meaningless and insisted on placing real objects on stage. The dispute was fundamental and irreconcilable: it ended with the solemn and deliberate destruction of the toy theatre, the whole incident a precursor in miniature of Appia's later relationship to the real theatre.

Appia's first direct experience of theatre occurred in 1878 when he was sixteen. His parents had sanctioned his decision to study music and, reluctantly, allowed him to visit the opera. He saw a production of Gounod's *Faust*, which reinforced his tentative sense of the inadequacy of painted flats and raised again troubling questions about the spatial arrangement of the stage. 'I was conscious of the flimsiness of the settings and the flatness of the stage floor.'[4] He felt, without yet being able to articulate his notions into any coherent theory, that the actors' movement and, consequently, the expressiveness of their performance, suffered from the absence of different playing levels and from the failure generally to use the performance area more imaginatively. The scenic arrangement seemed an inadequate environment for containing or complementing the ostensibly significant actions taking place there. Far from enhancing his own imaginative vision of the piece, the production seemed grossly inferior to it. Something was terribly wrong; 'afterwards I toured the theatre alone, murmuring to myself "is it for this that these thick walls were built, this massive construction?"'.[5]

The following years, 1882–90 were of crucial importance to the development and refinement of Appia's ideas; these were to culminate in the extraordinarily original theories drawn together and published in the 1890s. Although ostensibly studying music, first at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1882–83, and subsequently (following a sojourn of two years – 1884–86 – in Paris), in Dresden from 1886 to 1890, he was far more engaged in developing a comprehensive critique of contemporary stage practice. He 'felt a passionate curiosity for anything connected with the theatre, with the presentation of every kind of drama'.[6] But with few exceptions what he saw about him was profoundly disappointing and disheartening, his theatrical investigations 'more extensive than profound, more negative than inspiring'.[7] Even the rich variety of examples provided by the Parisian theatre – except for their technical proficiency and precision, impressed him only by further emphasising the gaping disparity between his own inner experience of a dramatic work and its rendering on stage. 'I saw many productions, and the memory I have preserved of them is of regrettable monotony'.[8] Yet, however negative his impressions of the productions he witnessed during this period, the thoughts which gradually he formulated in reaction to them began to coalesce into positive ideas for reform. His as yet uncertain, but deeply sensitive, mind responded to the affront of crass and inartistic staging by beginning to work out, slowly and hesitantly, first the practical and then the theoretical basis for a more beautiful and expressive *mise en scène*.

A very few productions which Appia saw in this period contained suggestive elements which helped to guide him. He observed for the first time at the theatre in Brunswick the use of platforms, which, he noted, not only improved the quality of the actors' performance, but allowed more interesting use of light as well. Appia was impressed too by the simplicity of the settings used in this modest theatre, perhaps more out of necessity than artistic principle, but, nevertheless, creating a more convincing and concrete reality than the usual insubstantial scenic illusions. Although only nineteen at the time, Appia was already critically

responsive to the relationship between light, space, and simple, three-dimensional settings: the elements out of which his astonishing scenic reforms would eventually arise. Much remained to be learned however; 'the impression was very great, but not yet based upon sufficient technical knowledge nor upon aesthetic conviction'.[9]

In Leipzig he was keenly impressed by Otto Devrient's 1883 production of Goethe's *Faust* which used a simple, pictorially unified set to present an uninterrupted series of scenes without the customary clutter and changes. It was a technique which, again, was to have enormous significance in Appia's later stagecraft. Astutely, however, he also noted that, in important ways, Goethe's own ideas as contained in the words and action of the play had been compromised by purely scenic considerations, and out of this observation he began to develop the hierarchic principle that all elements of production must be rigorously subordinated to the meaning of the work as expressed by the playwright-composer.

His attitude towards theatre up to this point had been an unstable mixture of contempt and fascination: contempt for virtually every aspect of contemporary production, fascination with a still nebulous vision of what his imagination told him theatre might become. Appia's aesthetic notions might possibly have never developed beyond this volatile, unformed, and unsatisfactory state, had they not now, in the mid-1880s, received a catalytic shock which charged and changed them forever. He encountered the works of Richard Wagner.

Wagner succeeded in his later operas in creating a new art form – a union of drama and music – which overturned the conventional concept of opera. Having joined within himself the roles of composer and dramatist, he achieved an extraordinary creative breakthrough, fashioning a new type of musical drama in which a work's inner values as expressed through the music were conjoined with its outward meaning as articulated through dialogue and plot. The new medum thus achieved could become, as Wagner both practised and prophesied, a uniquely expressive art form.

He recognised, moreover, that if the autonomous artist, the composer-dramatist, were to present his work successfully before an audience, it would be essential for him to master and ideally, control all the disparate elements of production. Since his operas were simultaneously music and drama, the latter not fixed for performance by a score, their integrity could be maintained only through rigorous attention to all the details of theatrical production.

Wagner went still further, insisting that, because the contemporary German theatre as constituted was incapable of achieving the required standard for staging his works, it was necessary not only that he personally supervise their presentation, but, indeed, that he design, found, and manage a theatre as well. With the benefit of considerable advice and patronage, he did so, opening his Festspielhaus at Bayreuth in 1876. Wagner recognised (and many later reformers have shared the perception) that theatre is an inherently conservative institution: a complex and antique mechanism not geared to sudden and unaccustomed change, which must either reject or grossly mangle his work unless he personally mastered, rebuilt, and ran the entire enterprise himself.

At Bayreuth he introduced drastic and far-reaching reforms. He began by refashioning the theatrical event itself, providing both a special venue – a small town in Bavaria – and, through the institution of recurrent festivals, a highly unusual sense of occasion as well. Wagner modified his audiences' perception of a production even before it began, and in time they came to view the presen-

tations at Bayreuth not simply as operatic performances, and still less as mere entertainment, but as deeply moving participation in an aesthetic pilgramage.

Inside the Festspielhaus itself, the uniqueness of the event was further emphasised through the building's highly unusual design. The auditorium was a semi-circular amphitheatre, consciously modelled upon ancient example, which in theory allowed every spectator an equally good and unimpeded view of the performance. In place of the elaborately ordered seating arrangements customary in every other theatre of the day, which emphasised social hierarchy and privilege within the audience, Wagner encouraged those at Bayreuth to forget such distinctions, while surrendering themselves collectively and communally to the spiritual experience of the production. Banished too was every suggestion of elaborate décor or ornament – anything which could distract attention from the stage itself.

At Bayreuth the audience sat in an auditorium which, for the first time, was darkened during performance. Even the orchestra was hidden from view, this allowing the spectators to observe the world of the opera without being consciously reminded of the presence and activity of the musicians. As Wagner himself described it, the spectator

> once seated is actually in a *Theatron*, a room designed for nothing else but seeing. Between him and the visible picture nothing definite, tangible exists: instead the architectonic device of the double proscenium gives to the stage picture the remoteness of a dream, while from the mysterious chasm mystic music arises akin to the ascending vapours from the tripod of the priestess of Apollo at Delphi.[10]

The Festspielhaus was a radical innovation: its seating, sightlines and accoustical qualities marked the beginning of modern theatre design.[11]

On stage, however, the situation was different. Wagner spared no expense or effort in equipping his theatre with the most advanced technology of the period, but it was a technology essentially in the service of the traditional aesthetic of scenic illusion.

The disparity, indeed the incongruity, between these extraordinary works and the conventional form in which they were brought forth on stage was sensed even by some early critics, convinced Wagnerians among them, though none produced any systematic critique or suggested a radical solution to the problem. Bernard Shaw noted that the 'quaintly old-fashioned tradition of half rhetorical, half historical-pictorial attitude and gesture' characterised the acting, in which the most significant points in performance 'were conceived as *tableaux vivants*, with posed models, instead of as passages of action, motion, and life'.[12] Later he recognised that the scenic arrangement at the festivals was similarly out of date: 'one had to admit at Bayreuth that here was the utmost perfection of the pictorial stage and that its machinery could go no further ... in planning his Bayreuth theatre, Wagner was elaborating what he had better have scrapped altogether'.[13]

The extent to which Wagner himself was aware of or troubled by the incompatibility between his works and their realisation on stage is difficult to assess. Certainly he brought to the preparation of his operas an emphasis on acting which was new, and sometimes disconcerting to his singers. He exhorted

them to think of their performances not merely as renditions of the music, but, simultaneously, as active expressions of the work's dramatic qualities. Both in his theoretical writings and in practice at Bayreuth, he demanded a careful coordination between movement and gesture on stage and the fluctuations in the music itself. He hoped to create a more harmonious integration between acting and singing than had ever before been achieved in operatic performance, a synthesis which would emanate directly from that already forged between music and drama in the works themselves.

But, whether consciously or not, by placing his performers within a relentlessly illusionistic scenic environment where little or nothing was left to the imagination, he ensured that, visually, the settings could never express the inner spiritual world suggested by the music. Wagner's own attitude appears to have been rather ambiguous. Whilst he claimed that scenery should provide simply 'an unobtrusive practical background and framework'[14] his librettos abound, nevertheless, with precise stage directions and scenic descriptions.

In his theoretical treatise, *The Art Work of the Future*, he emphasised the vital role which he believed scenic illusion must play in providing the necessary naturalistic environment for the performer. 'As the final and most complete means of expression in visual art, landscape painting will become the life-giving soul of the whole construction. It will teach us to build for the drama the stage on which it will itself represent the warm natural background for the living actor.'[15] Yet, despite what would appear to have been a generally literal-minded conception of settings, his advice and instructions to his scene designers at Bayreuth were frequently vague and elusive, in marked contrast to the high precision of his work in other areas of production. This suggests that Wagner desired more than he could visualise – something at any rate other than the romantic naturalism which his craftsmen invariably produced. Generally less than satisfied with these results, he once remarked that, having invented the invisible orchestra, he ought to have invented the invisible stage; and, at the end of his life, he lamented that 'in this field of musical dramaturgy, alas, all is still so new and hidden in the dust of bad routine'.[16]

These last remarks were part of a critique which Wagner wrote of his final production, the première of *Parsifal* in 1882, shortly before his death. This production was in a literal sense, Wagner's 'last word' on staging his operas. He collaborated far more intensely with his designers than ever before, attempting to formulate the appropriate and coherent scenic style which, as he conceded, had not yet been achieved in the Bayreuth productions. Unlike the earlier works, including the *Ring*, *Parsifal* was written after the construction of the Festspielhaus and designed specifically for production there, and there alone. The results were indeed impressive: the meticulously executed scenery, portions of which continued in regular use until 1937, embodied and perfected a lavishly pictorial romanticism which could advance no further. Viewed in another light however, these sets and the work culminating in them were an aesthetic cul-de-sac: the 'magic garden' represented the final flowering of a stylistic tradition, and its completion.

The première of *Parsifal* was the first Wagnerian opera that Adolphe Appia attended. He was nineteen years old.

Although Appia had seen very little opera at the time, the staging of *Parsifal* profoundly disappointed him. 'The *mise en scène* in Bayreuth, conceived in the pictorial tradition of the day, impressed me only by its unusual luxury ... even the careful treatment of the characters left an emptiness because there was no

harmony between scenery and acting except in the Temple of the Holy Grail... the music held all my attention.'[17]

Having first seen the Master's own production of *Parsifal* in 1882, Appia later attended Cosima Wagner's faithful re-stagings of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1886 and of *Die Meistersinger* in 1888. While in Dresden he witnessed a production of the *Ring* in 1890. He was overwhelmed by the impact of these works as music, while goaded by the unshakable conviction that their potential as pieces for the theatre, and the basis for an entirely new form of theatrical art, had not only been left unexplored and unexploited, but also had been all but totally obscured under the gross burden of contemporary stage practice. Here, at last, in Wagner, Appia recognised an artist whose titanic genius might redeem theatre and raise it to the level of true art. Here were sublime works whose full power and beauty could only emerge, be revealed and realised, could only *exist* in the theatre itself – but only if a theatre could first be fashioned to contain them. Appia soon became obsessed with Wagner's works, touched by a kind of divine madness which for many years to come activated and directed all his creative resources and mental energy. As an incredulous relative, observing his altered state at the time, remarked, 'he is the maddest Wagnerian I know of ... Wagner has taken the place for him of religion, of love, of everything'.[18]

Appia's preoccupation with Wagner and his works was reinforced, and to some degree shaped, by the friendship he formed in 1883 with Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman seven years his senior, and already a stalwart disciple of Wagner. Chamberlain was a man of strong personality, decided opinions, considerable education and refinement and impressive social credentials. Appia, shy, tentative in many of his ideas, rather indifferently educated, and with little interest in society, must have found him in many ways a daunting figure, but their mutual regard for Wagner encouraged them to form strong ties of friendship. Over many years, but particulary during this period when Appia first began to work through the implications of Wagner's operas for stage reform, the two men were in close and frequent contact, and when apart, conducted a massive correspondence. In the summer of 1886, Appia sojourned at Bayreuth with the Chamberlain family, and later stayed with them at their home in Dresden when he enrolled at the Conservatory there.

Chamberlain admired Wagner virtually without quibble or stricture. In 1896 he published an important but largely laudatory study, *Richard Wagner*, and later he married Wagner's daughter, Eva. His spirited defence of Wagner as a producer, must certainly have provided an impressive and articulate antithesis to Appia's own still-emerging critique. In addition to serving both as an intelligent and responsive friend, and a mentor who could engage Appia in productive dialectic, Chamberlain used his contacts and resources to help Appia gain access 'backstage' to several important theatres, including the Hoftheater at Dresden, and later, in 1890, at the opera-house in Vienna.

At Dresden, 1889–90, Appia had the quite invaluable opportunity to work extensively as an apprentice with 'the father of light' Hugo Bähr, whose experiments with lighting were already widely influential in the German theatre, and whose innovations had been employed with considerable success at Bayreuth as early as 1876. Bähr developed and used a variety of carbon-arc devices, projections and other lighting effects and it was under his guidance that Appia learnt many of the techniques he later employed in his own work.[19]

While in Dresden, (and earlier at Leipzig) Appia also had the chance to view productions presented by the touring company of the Meiningen Court Theatre, famous throughout Europe for its meticulous attention to details of staging, particularly the creation of elaborate pictorial scenery. Through such observation he acquired a direct and concrete understanding which challenged him at the time to develop his own theory further, and later ensured that the theory when it emerged was firmly grounded in sound technical expertise and practical knowledge. The value and efficacy of his principles, and the astonishing degree to which he did indeed map out the shape of things to come, owe a great deal to this knowledge.

Although he never worked there, Appia was also able to spend considerable time at Bayreuth, observing and analysing both the productions themselves, and also the technical intricacies of the Festspielhaus. Gordon Craig provided an acute evaluation of the process Appia underwent:

> The most important fact about Appia's development – the growth of that idea of his – is the fact that he was at Bayreuth and in the theatre there ... Appia sitting watching the rehearsals, puzzling things out, watching performances, surprised at the failure to achieve a visible beauty anything equal to, or in any relation to the music being played, that is the interesting point.
>
> In an artist such an experience engenders surprise – and puzzlement turns to anger as he observes how wantonly every chance is lost. He then goes away and begins to work – to discover whether it might not be possible to create some wonder for the eye which shall tally with the wonder in the sounds which he has heard.
>
> He begins – he then realised that as the stage itself controls the success or failure of his designs, he had best work to scale, and to the other limitations of the stage. This Appia did ... and soon produced for some of Wagner's operas scenes which were perfect of their kind. The kind was simple, and this he achieved by eliminating all the lines, colours, and 'bits' in the old designs which he saw as useless.[20]

By the end of 1890, Appia was ready – indeed, he felt himself impelled – to fashion into writing and designs the scenic ideas which over the years had come to possess his mind, virtually to the exclusion of everything else. 'I began to sense my own inner resources and the responsibilities they imposed upon me. Shortly thereafter I retired to the countryside and set to work on what I regarded as my imperative task'.[21] The statement is revealing: Appia saw his undertaking as, simultaneously, a personal and an artistic mission. Personally, he recognised that after many years of real and figurative wandering, a period during which he had functioned as analyst, critic and iconoclast, it was now personally imperative as he approached thirty to enter into what he knew must be his true role: that of a genuinely creative artist. A variety of personal and psychological factors must have further urged this course upon him. Artistically, he saw clearly that the challenge which Wagnerian opera presented to conventional stagecraft had to be taken up and its implications followed relentlessly into completely uncharted areas. This concept of a mission, one which fulfilled both existential and aesthetic imperatives, coloured and characterised Appia's

personality and work throughout his life. No one who knew or worked with him for any length of time ever failed to be profoundly affected by it. Perhaps because the quality and direction of his own life were so deeply influenced by the subjects of his aesthetic investigations, he always insisted on the uniqueness and centrality of art to man's existence generally.

Appia returned to Switzerland and stayed first at Gennersbrun, and then in 1893 settled at Bière, in the country a few miles north of Lake Geneva, where he was to make his home until 1900, and he at once set to work preparing a scenic analysis of the *Ring*. His own unpublished accounts of his method are extremely revealing, for they demonstrate how his work was based directly and solely on the works themselves – on their own integrity and expressiveness – and not on any pre-existent notions whatsoever about how they ought to be presented in the theatre. This was in itself a revolutionary approach, for uniquely, Appia undertook not to provide the external historical or fictive locales – mere illustrations and background for the stories – but, rather, to determine the setting dictated by the music through the drama, generated from within the work itself. Only later, after comparing and analysing the results achieved through the process of directly visualising the work, did he step back and attempt to formulate a coherent theory and set of principles.

> Unable to accept the ridiculous contemporary mode of staging, I conjured up one that seemed to me truly suitable for Wagner's music dramas. A creative period thus proceeded that of theoretical deliberation; for this reason the artistic integrity of my scenic visions seems to me guaranteed. First I 'saw' undoubtedly within myself yet with perfect distinction; and then only – and this is the essential point – did I reflect theoretically on the value and suitability of what I had seen.[22]

Like the Romantic poets' simile of the Aeolian harp, played upon by the wind, Appia used his own imagination as the sensitive object responding directly to the stimulus of Wagner's work – a role for which his years in the wilderness of critical alienation and aesthetic meditation had prepared him:

> I approached the *mise en scène* of the *Ring* with the sole desire of being true to my vision. My honesty did not fail me; on the contrary, it prevented me from violating a work of art whose character and complexity could have presented a great difficulty. Such was my disposition at the beginning of my work. After long years of experiences, or rather, after years of recording them in a necessarily unmethodical way, I began to produce a completely unknown art, for which neither my environment nor my memory could offer me any ideas, and for which all the elements had yet to be discovered and organised. Still I was convinced that, following my own vision, I would find the truth.[23]

Thus Appia began to create what became 'the new art of the theatre' – *our theatre.*

In the period between 1891 and 1900 Appia devoted himself with an extraordinary singleness of purpose to expressing and consolidating through his writing,

scenarios and designs the wealth of ideas inspired by his observation of Wagnerian production. His first extended essay, written 1891–2, but never published in his lifetime, was entitled 'Notes de mise en scène pour *l'Anneau de Nibelungen*' ('Comments on the staging of *The Ring of the Nibelung*'). In a concise and straightforward format, Appia discussed, essentially through concrete description, the problems which Wagner's work presented and his own solutions to them, solutions which required fundamental reform of contemporary stagecraft, although not as yet of its technical resources. His second essay, published as a small book in 1895, was *La Mise en scène du drame wagnérien* (*Staging Wagnerian Drama*). This was a further developed and considerably more theoretical rendering of the earlier work, presented now in the context of a totally new analysis of the principles governing the relationship between music, stage actions and setting. Finally, in 1895, Appia began to write his major work, which both summarised and revised his two earlier essays while moving beyond Wagner altogether to describe the implications of his theories generally for a radical and fundamental reformation (amounting virtually to a re-birth) or theatrical art. *La Musique et la mise en scène* was written in French, published in 1899 in German as *Die Musik und die Inscenierung*, and ultimately appeared in English in 1962 as *Music and the Art of the Theatre*. It was by far his most important and influential published work.

Throughout this period, and in close coordination with his writing, Appia worked upon a series of extensive scenarios for the *Ring*, elaborately illustrated by his own quite unprecedented designs, and executed according to the theories presented in the essays. He produced designs and scenarios for *Parsifal*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* as well.

The achievement was prodigious and, in time, its effect upon contemporary staging – indeed upon the very concept of theatre – was revolutionary. Within the space of less than ten years, Appia articulated theories and bodied them forth in designs which swept away the foundations that had supported European theatre since the Renaissance. In their place he laid down what became the conceptual and practical basis for theatrical art for many years to come. As Lee Simonson wrote, Appia's theories

> elucidated the basic aesthetic principles of modern stage design, analysed its fundamental technical problems, outlined their solution, and formed a charter of freedom under which scene-designers still practise ... the light in Appia's first drawings, if one compares them to the designs that had preceded his, seem the night and morning of a First Day.[24]

Appia began his work by first trying to understand and explain Wagner's fundamental failure himself to develop an appropriate means of staging his own works, a failure which had resulted in a style of production which, with all its inadequacies, became enshrined as orthodox after his death. 'As his scenic concepts were in conflict with his dramatic purpose, Wagner's own various stagings cannot be regarded as adequate to his work.'[25] The expressiveness of Wagner's operas resides in the music and the dramatic actions generated by the music and libretto on stage. To attempt at the same time to give that music a completely realistic materialisation was not only impossible, but, inevitably, it buried and obscured from the audience the essential qualities of the work.

Wagner failed to understand this, believing that direct scenic instructions from the author were necessary. But according to Appia,

> the musical score is the sole interpreter for the director; whatever Wagner has added to it is irrelevant ... his manuscript contains by definition the theatrical form, i.e. its projection in space; therefore any additional remarks on his part are superfluous, even contradictory to the aesthetic truth of an artistic work. Wagner's scenic descriptions in his libretto have no organic relationship with his poetic-musical text.[26]

What was necessary was that one devise a setting which emerged from within the score itself, and which was essential to its enactment on stage. That, and nothing more. Appia thus undertook his investigation of Wagner's operas by first putting aside both Wagner's own directions and what he knew or had observed of actual productions at Bayreuth, in order to formulate a type of staging based directly and exclusively on the libretto and score. He started out with no general theory or set of abstract principles, other than the most basic one that the elements of production must be coordinated to achieve a technical unity in staging which would correlate with that present in the work itself. Only afterwards did he discover that the results of this approach suggested a comprehensive and radically new theory of stagecraft, including the reform of its technical basis.

He began, then, by attempting to visualise, purely and simply, the settings which the music and necessary stage actions suggested to him. In the process he kept firmly in mind the central role of the performer as the intermediary between the composition and its realisation on stage. He determined what the text and score required of the performer in terms of his location and physical movement within the scenic environment. The relative theatrical significance given to each scene and its setting should thus be a direct and proportionate expression of the requirements made by each upon the performers. Anything else would be superfluous, mere window dressing, extraneous to the work and therefore not expressive of it. Wagner's composition as a work of art was conditioned by an overall unity of conception, and in performance this conception – the meaning of the work – was bodied forth on stage. Any genuinely artistic staging must therefore also exhibit a unity of expression which would be the sum of its parts; each scene, each event on stage, each setting, must be carefully balanced and coordinated with the others to contribute its appropriate measure to the overall quality of the production.

'By making the character of each scene derive from the conception of the whole, that is to say, by giving this conception the fabric of enough secondary characteristics, I have striven to create a unity organic in all its parts, parallel to that of the musical expression.'[27]

While assessing the significance of each scene, and its contribution to the production – an assessment based on the demands which each scene makes of the performer, and the degree to which its actions advance the plot – Appia was careful to bear another factor in mind. A Wagnerian opera has, in addition to its story, an emotional and intellective plot: another level of meaning. This interior drama, which in Wagner contributes so massively to the impact of his work, must also somehow be expressed through the staging. Otherwise the production, whilst representing the external circumstances of the action and its