

CELEBRATING INNOVATORS OF THE TOTAL THEATRE SCENE DESIGN, STAGE ARCHITECTURE AND SPACE

Ebenezer Henry Brew-Riverson (Jr.)

Abstract



The need for the creative forces of the playwright, the directors, actors, designers and architects as well as the dexterity of the general crew to forge and constitute a cohesive, force effort in the development of a successful theatre production cannot be over-emphasized. If as artists, we are to fully appreciate the impact of what the likes of Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig and the doyenne Eflia Sutherland spent a large part of their lifetime to achieve in order that theatre might be what it is today, and ought to be in the already-here tomorrow and the inseparable interplay of the academic thinker's invaluable inferences and the practically creative academic's tangible exhibitions and demonstrations.

In his book *The Theatre Experience*, Edwin Wilson (2004) states that theatre does not happen in a "visual vacuum". He further underscores the indispensable part that the visual images of scenery, costumes and lighting play in a total theatre experience. Those whose responsibility it is to create these visuals that constitute an integral aspect of the activity of performers on stage, that audiences so much appreciate, are the designers.

There is the scene or set designer who creates and supervises the installation of the set. The costume designer chooses, creates and organizes the clothing and other accessories that actors or performers wear on stage. The lighting designer sorts out the colours of lighting gels or gels, decides how to blend or mix these for added effect, determines the number of lights required and their various and varying intensities and brightness. Also, in rigging the lights, he places their angles in relation to the stage positioning of actors and must perfectly time when the lights come up, fade out

or blacken out during a production. The sound designer is responsible for all sound effects as well as for recorded or orchestrated music. Where microphones are required, he places and synchronizes them. Like the lighting designer, he must be thoroughly alert, especially when the production opens. For all these categories of designers, great dexterity, talent, innovation and creativity are a prerequisite.

Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), a French-speaking Swiss artist and Gordon Craig (1872-1966), a British designer, were two innovative scenic and lighting designers who tremendously influenced 20th century methods of play or theatre production. Whereas Craig became known more for his proliferation of ideas than for his achievements, Appia is described as the pioneer of mobile lighting which refers to the plastic, malleable nature of light. Appia's discovery that lighting could be varied in terms of its direction, intensity and colour became an archetype upon which designers today still build.

Historically, theatre began as a largely outdoor experience staged mostly during daytime to take advantage of natural illumination. Primitive torches and candles indicated night; sometimes night was suggested in dialogue. The early 17th century witnessed theatre beginning to move indoors. Illumination was by candles and oil lamps. Later, gas lights were introduced which brought improvements in lighting but the constant threats of fire and actual fires, sometimes with tragic, fatal consequences, made it imperative to find better, safer, alternative sources. In 1879, a researcher-inventor, Thomas Edison invented and ushered in the electric light bulb. There has been no turning back since. Today, of all the elements employed in theatre productions, lighting is probably the most advanced or progressive.

Adolphe Appia immediately recognized the potential of the electric and used light as the 'visual counterpart' of music to enhance the mood of the play and to functionally link the actor to the setting. He developed theories on stage design particularly, stage lighting. He had occasion to realise some of his innovative ideas through simple but effective designs for plays by Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. Appia's book **Die Musik Und Die Inscernierung** (Music and Stage Setting) became a sort of blueprint for other directors in their productions.

From numerous experiments he conducted, Appia arrived at the conclusion that flat painted scenery was drab, uninteresting and inappropriate for a three-dimensional actor. He acknowledged that artistic unity in theatre is fundamental though not easy to achieve. This challenge he attributed to the conflicting elements of the living actor, the horizontal floor and the vertical scenery. His answer to these obstacles was to replace flat painted scenery and all decorative detail with more functional three dimensional structures which would complement the three dimensional actor. So in place of a

flat stage floor, he adopted steps, levels and ramps. The idea was to effect transitions from horizontal to vertical planes and to introduce variety in composition and stage movement.

Mordecai Gorelik (1899-1990), also a designer, re-echoed the mind of Appia when he emphasized the need to distinguish the largely expressive from the symbolic in a work of art. He suggested that symbolizing details that indicate the particular locale or setting should be kept to a minimum, basically to orient the audience, similar to the function of a signboard. This way, he argued, the more expressive functions of a production would be allowed more play. In essence, Gorelik, like Appia, was advocating for a play production that would deal with the immediate and more imaginative treatment of line and form which brought to the drama a more impactful appeal, as against the reminiscent far-removed impression of an outer world of history and geography. Indeed, Appia sought to do away with any elaboration that distracted attention from the actor. Symbolizing details therefore had to be **suggestive** rather than **indicative** yet strong enough to evoke an anticipated effect or ambience.

In 1919 a certain MacGovan affirmed these ideals by categorizing the aims of Appia's innovations. First, was the need for **Simplification** that discarded excessive Victorian ornamentation on stage that did not do justice to the actor's stature. The next was **Suggestion**: that achieved a certain ambience using simple means, and, **Synthesis**: the effective combination of the actor and his stage business, setting, lights, music etc. to express the drama's inner sense while allowing for the necessary creative transitions that propel the play's action and the entire production forward.

Gordon Edward Henry Craig was born in 1872, ten years after Appia's birth. He lived much longer. He started out as an actor but later focused his attention on the theory and practice of scene design and directing. In 1903 he created sets for a number of productions including his mother's presentations of Shakespeare's **Much Ado About Nothing** and Ibsen's **The Vikings**. 1905 through 1906 found him spreading out his 'tentacles' when he prepared designs for productions in Berlin, Germany. In 1908 he settled in Florence in Italy where he ran both an acting school in the Arena Goldoni and founded and edited a theatre arts journal called *The Mask*. Craig was also a costume designer. In 1911 he designed the costumes for W. B. Yeats' **The Hour Glass** at the Abbey Theatre. It was during this production that he outdoored one of the inventions for which he is famed: that of screens as background or backdrop against which lights could be manipulated. It is an innovation which has been perfected over the years. He appears to have gingered controversy, however. Unlike Appia, Craig downplayed the prominence of the actor. In consequence, some of his contemporaries and critics cast aspersions at him, accusing him of reducing the actor to mere puppetry status to be manipulated by

an all-mighty director! This was due to his call for the stage director to stand out as **the only cook to stir the broth*, as it were, in the theatre! He especially insisted that the director had to be ambidextrous regarding the separate crafts of the theatre. The responsibility to come up with the blueprint for the entire production and to ensure that this became evident through the movement, line, colour and rhythm of the performance, according to Craig, had to be solely the director's.

In consequence, though, both Craig and Appia worked to realize similar, if not the same, ideals; essentially to make certain that all the elements: the set, costume, lighting, movement, music/sound etc. would combine to create an artistic harmony and unity. Merely presenting a play was no longer enough but the creation of a new work of art by the director and his team. Glamour for its own sake, they argued, was to be discarded. Costumes and scenery had to be an intrinsic part of the production rather than as a **decorative afterthought*. These perspectives and principles continue to guide theatre production today. (*italics mine)

In Ghana today many might remember Efua Theodora Sutherland (1924-1996), for her epoch-establishing plays like *The Marriage of Anansewa*, *Edufa* and *Foriwa* among many others, published and un-published. The Efua Sutherland Children's Park in the heart of Accra, Ghana's capital and the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio at The University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana's premier university, both named after her, stand in timeless attestation to the un-quantifiable contribution this famed daughter of the land made to theatre in particular and many other fields of endeavour. More than the playwright for which many will remember her, Sutherland, after her demise was paid the following tribute by Professor Kofi Anyidoho, of University of Ghana's English Department.

On 21 January 1996, the African world lost one of its most remarkable daughters of the twentieth century: Dr. Efua Theodora Sutherland. 'Auntie Efua' is best known for her pioneering work as a cultural visionary and activist, her impact on society at once comprehensive and enduring. Teacher, research scholar, poet, dramatist, and social worker, she devoted her life to the building of models of excellence in culture and education, and to the training of young people who would carry her vision into the far future. (Adams & Sutherland-Addy, Ed. 2007, p.235)

To borrow Anyidoho's line, Sutherland literally built 'models of excellence' when she saw the realization of her dream in the tangible erection of the original, first ever Drama Studio sited in the heart of the capital and also the Kodzidan (Story House) at Ekumfi Atwia in the Central Region of Ghana. Not long before her death, she had been reviewing 'the objectives and conception' of Park Library Complex (PLC) projects with Professor H. N. A. Wellington, her collaborator on a number of theatre-related infrastructural

concerns. She had overseen the design of these many yet to be completed projects during her tenure as Chair of the Ghana National Commission on Children. She was eager to see many Ghanaian children, to be the prime beneficiaries, to actually begin to experience and enjoy their availability and usage. According to Professor Wellington, focus discussions to seek the royal patronage and care of Nana Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, the then Asantehene, for the Park Library Complex and the Asanteman Children's Park in Kumasi, one of a few prototype projects to be replicated across the nation, had been initiated when Sutherland took a bow for good. She must have died dreaming that 'daily activities which took place at the various PLCs, such as reading at the literature resource centre, storytelling and drama performance at the amphitheatre, creative work at the pavilions, and active playing with the cognitive-development equipment,' would continue; especially at this time when talk of re-vitalizing quality teaching/learning, in public schools particularly, is predominant. Hopefully the few PLCs she helped to set up would continue to receive due attention from leadership and entire citizenry. We could not have paid Sutherland and indeed ourselves a better compliment!

Regarding Sutherland's keen, active interest and participation in architecture and matters architectural, Professor Wellington, a seasoned academic and practitioner of architecture as well as associate and friend to Sutherland, complements her thus

As a profoundly creative person and at the same time, a strong social-cultural activist, she saw in architecture (a discipline she never formally studied), the potential to impact society, similar to what she found in her own chosen field of specialization viz. drama and writing. (Adams & Sutherland-Addy, ed. 2007, p.181)

Wellington observes, and rightly, that key elements like the 'spatial, acoustic and visual' considered in the field of architecture are also factored in (as they must be) when a selected drama presentation is processed and produced. He further intimates that via personal experience and extensive observation Sutherland

.... might have probably discovered the fact that, indeed, architecture was fundamental to all human affairs and that it transcended the mundane provision of accommodation for human activities. The insight might have come to her that architecture, as a creative human activity, was naturally imbued, as it were, with an in-built capacity for sensitivity in enhancing the spirit of humankind. With this insight she passionately sought, as a lay-person, to challenge architects to release this tremendous potential of architecture to flow into their architectural designs. Her conviction in this regard was seen to have been informed, consciously or unconsciously, by the fact of the notional affinity between architecture and space. (Adams & Sutherland-Addy, ed. 2007, p.182)

Professor Wellington reveals that though some of the architects who came into contact with her must have initially been dismissive of her as a non-architect whose 'architectural' ideas were barely, practically workable, in time were persuaded that they were collaborating with "a very responsive and a well-informed lay-critic of professional architects". They could appreciate her keen understanding of and insistence on the application of key factors which they as architects also worked with and could relate to including location of space, materials for realisation of space and intended purpose for that space among other key considerations. Significantly, each space put up had to accommodate and reflect the peculiar socio-cultural and psycho-spiritual values, in symbolism and ways-of-life of that particular society; a symbiosis of sorts.

Sutherland, as any true creative artist with a keenly quizzical disposition to life, was interested to see that function and aesthetics forged a vibrant, dynamic and palpable partnership evidenced by the physical structures that survive her today. For those who care to find them, they are marked all over by her 'fingerprints'. These 'prints' include our spatial identity with regards to our epic narrative/by-the-fireside or under-the-moonlit-sky storytelling tradition (captured in the Drama Studio and Ekumfi Atwia designs and the PLC "library-cum-storytelling/drama amphitheatre" models). Besides the incorporation of appropriate Adinkra symbols, the concept and character of Ananse which she so deftly treats in writing, she also cleverly encapsulated in the design of the Asanteman PLC project for example.

Conclusion

Appia, Craig and Sutherland are undeniably innovative pacesetters whose research, experimentations and findings will continue to influence attitude and practice in the art of performance and the availability and appropriate-ness of the performance space especially regarding acoustics and visuals. They are significant points of reference to find leverage to set trends that shape and re-shape theatre practice as well as infrastructure and maintenance thereof. If as a non-architect, Sutherland's "ideas and ideals of space" used in the construction of the Drama Studio and Park Library Complexes continue to be keen subjects of study for students of architecture at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, the theatre/performing arts/literary traditions from which she originally hails must not lightly disregard her achievements in the field of architecture. It is important to note that her achievements in that discipline were influenced by principles observed in theatre productions; in the analysis and interpretation of texts, in the probing stance of theory and criticism, in the efficacious use of space, line and form, colour, sound, lighting, costume etc., culminating in well thought out productions that leave thought-provoking impressions on audiences.

References

Adams A. V. & Sutherland-Addy E. eds. (2007). *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism*. UK, Ayebia Clarke Publishing.

Brockett, O. (1988). *The Essential Theatre*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc.

"Edward Gordon Craig." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. (2004). Retrieved April 17, 2013 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404701559.html>

Forde, N. (1986). *Theatercraft: creativity and the art of the drama*. Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers.

Hartnoll, P. (1983). *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* 4th ed. Oxford:Oxford University Press.

Kernodle, G. (1967). *Invitation to the Theatre*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World Inc.

Simonson, L. (1963). *The Stage is Set*. New York: Theatre Arts Books.

Wilson, E. (2004). *The Theater Experience*. New York: McGraw Hill