



## **Concrete Creatures: A Contemporary Application of Appia's Living Art**

By Cade M. Sikora

In response to a long history of actors performing in front of representational, two-dimensional scenery in the theatre, Swiss theorist and designer Adolphe Appia called for a revolution in theatrical design. Over his decades-long career, he emphasized the importance of a rigid, dimensional, and non-literal space, intentionally lit and colored, for the dynamic performer to move within and against.<sup>1</sup> He believed that this, when properly aligned with the music and text of a production, would create a dramatic harmony which was the most complete and complex form of art.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I reflect on a contemporary application of Appia's theories of what he called "living art" to the design of Rebecca Lenkiewicz's *Her Naked Skin* for The Ohio State University and consider the effectiveness of Appia's principles in a contemporary setting. Appia's approach to the concepts of mobility, dimensionality, light, and how they interacted, were especially useful in creating the environment for this production.

Appia wrote numerous books and essays outlining his theories for a radical shift in the dramatic arts. His 1897 work *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, based on his experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Barnard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 9

<sup>2</sup> Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks, ed. Barnard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1962), 10-13

designing environments for Richard Wagner's operas, outlined his early beliefs on the subject of creating a unified *mise-en-scène* for the musical stage. He outlined a hierarchy of music, text, performer, and environment and stressed the importance of supporting the gravitas of the score with the visual design by more than literal representation:

[A] dramatic idea requiring musical expression in order to be revealed must spring from the hidden world of our inner life, since this life *cannot be expressed* except through music, and music can express only that life. By means of the spoken word, [the dramatist] endows it with a practical dramatic form and composes the poetic-musical text, the *score*; this text imposes an already living role upon the *actor*, a role he has now only to take on. The proportions of this role determine the form of the setting through *three-dimensionality* (the point of contact between the living actor and the inanimate setting); the nature and extent of the three-dimensionality determine the *spatial arrangement* of the setting which in turn controls the *lighting* and *painted scenery*.<sup>3</sup>

Appia insisted that the two-dimensional *trompe l'oeil* scenery so common in his day was incongruent to the human experience and the weight of the stories being told, primarily in the Wagnerian operas he was designing. In his 1921 *The Work of Living Art*, he succinctly wrote that “The human body makes painted forms and painted light irrelevant on the stage.”<sup>4</sup> Appia believed that the performer, a plastic and mobile body, was the most important physical feature of a designed performance. Thus, he sought to create dynamic and dimensional environments that would support the emotional journey of the characters the performers embodied as dictated by the musical score.<sup>5</sup> This, Appia held, was the “living art”: a total art form where the body, space, light, movement, and music or text came together as a unified and collaborative experience.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1962), 26

<sup>4</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 10

<sup>5</sup> For examples of Appia's designs, see the [Adolphe Appia](#) entry at Calvin University's Hekman Digital Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 9

## The Play, Producing Situation, and Early Process

*Her Naked Skin* premiered in London in 2008 as the first original play by a woman performed in the Olivier Auditorium at the National Theatre.<sup>7</sup> Set against the historically tumultuous backdrop of the women's suffrage movement, Lenkiewicz's text explores the contrasts of intricate personal relationships and large political movements as experienced by the fictional Lady Celia Cain through her involvement in the suffrage movement, her marriage to a Lord William Cain, and her affair with working-class suffragette Eve Douglas. The script features a cast of thirty named characters playing in roughly twenty locations ranging from the famous Holloway Prison to domestic interiors. Ultimately, it was the subject matter, combined with the practical challenges of changing the setting frequently, and the idiosyncrasies of our producing situation which led the design to resemble the work of Adolphe Appia and to embody living art.

The creative process of The Ohio State University's production of *Her Naked Skin* began in the autumn of 2018. The director, Tom Dugdale released a concept statement, outlining the following:

The play is not primarily about imprisonment or the infamous Holloway Prison. Nor is the play mainly about the extraordinary gatherings of suffragists and suffragettes clad in white, marching courageously with their banners. I find these images unbelievably moving and convincing, but they are not the substance of the play. *Her Naked Skin* is not panoramic; it is intimate. The majority of its scenes contain just two characters. It's a clue that the play's focus is on relationships—that is, how the suffrage movement influenced the way people got on with each other.<sup>8</sup>

Dugdale emphasized that this production needed to focus on how the historic moment happening around the characters of the play *informed* the way people acted. He acknowledged that creating

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<sup>7</sup> This "first" is noted in reviews of the production. See, among others, Michael Billington, "*Her Naked Skin*," *The Guardian* (1 August 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Tom Dugdale, *Thoughts for Our Production*, 2018

many individual locations through scenery was neither practical nor helpful. Instead, he broke down the locations of the script into four categories and suggested creating simple settings to correspond to them. He defined those categories as: Prison Cell, Prison Room, Edwardian Interior, and Outside. Dugdale felt that providing basic treatments to each of these four environments would allow the text of the many intimate scenes to come forward without being distracted by the intricate details and differences of many dissimilar sets. This early desire to focus on relationships over the literal setting pointed us in the direction of Appia's ideas. Appia explicitly states his belief that representing the *themes* of a script are more important than representing the literal time and place. In *The Work of Living Art*, Appia writes:

For example, in a great national and patriotic festival, the historical (and to a degree the geographical and social) themes have a rather important role to play. They must be present in more than just name; they must unfold before us in time and space. If we present them only in their rational—that is to say, simply dramatic—form, we will render difficult the communication of the eternal values of the themes; at least, those values will not be represented, but will remain enclosed with the historic action.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, though, there were still many dramatic and practical factors to consider.

*Her Naked Skin* has the added challenge of changing locations frequently and rapidly; some scenes last scarcely a page while others are considerably longer. Beyond rapid scene changes, the script also included scenes very difficult to stage: a suffragette being hosed in prison, a graphic depiction of a forced feeding, and civil disobedience in the streets of London. As the scenic designer, I thought about how these actions could be facilitated onstage without the need to stop and clean up the stage, thereby interrupting the action and the story. As a team, we decided at an early point that a large turntable would be a very practical and flexible solution to the immediate challenge of complex scenes and frequent changes.

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<sup>9</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 64

Another important quality of Appia and his writings is his focus on mobility, primarily the physical mobility of the performer within the space. Appia writes, “The body behaves at the command of material necessity. But the feelings of the soul, too, are reflected in space—through gesture.”<sup>10</sup> Taking this a step further and acknowledging the practical benefits of a turntable, the production team formed a connection between the use of a turntable and the themes of the play. A major theme of Lenkiewicz’s text is the sense of being trapped in inescapable machinations of an unyielding society. These themes applied broadly to suffragettes seeking equality and specifically to Celia who is trapped in her loveless marriage. Dugdale defined a similar thought in his early concept, “...a panicked urge to cling to the old, patriarchal world order and a breathless yearning for something new.”<sup>11</sup> By using the gradual rotation of a massive turntable to achieve the necessary transitions between scenes, we felt we could evoke the slow and inexorable passage of time and society as the play moved toward its inevitable conclusion.

### **Collaboration and Creating a Language of Color and Geography**

“The better one can obey, the better one can command,” Appia writes. “Mutual subordination will always remain the only substantial guarantee of the success of a collaboration.”<sup>12</sup> While in that specific passage, Appia was referring to society as a whole, this very principle must also define any successful collaboration in the theatre. For this production of *Her Naked Skin*, an early collaboration between the scenic and costume designs came to define the visual language of the production. To capture the inhumanity of both the literal prison and society at large, I and assistant scenic designer Travis Daniel Williams were drawn to the idea of cold, grey stone. Costume designer Jensen Glick brought imagery which conveyed a range of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>11</sup> Tom Dugdale, *Thoughts for Our Production*, 2018

<sup>12</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 21

emotions and social status through color with elegant Edwardian women in bright yellows, oranges, and reds and men in black and grey suits. We brought these together to create a visual language of color. The physical environment, ever-present, would be cold, grey-blue, and uninviting at every turn. Accordingly, characters would be visually defined in similar terms through costume: law enforcement, matrons of the prison, and male politicians would be in period-appropriate attire in hues of black, greys, and blues. Suffragettes would be in warmer and brighter tones with Celia, the eye of the story's emotional hurricane, in creams and yellows.

As a matter of course, we considered the number of times the script took us to certain locations as means of simply defining where the story took place. Because the script frequently visited a cell at Holloway Prison and Celia's Parlour, we needed to evoke those locations specifically. However, there were many more locations which only appeared once or twice: The House of Commons, a tea shop, Regent Street, etc. I grouped the settings named in the script into four groups based on the themes apparent in the text as well as the literal locations, amending Dugdale's initial list slightly:

1. Public Life / The Patriarchy
2. Holloway Prison Cell / Isolation
3. Holloway Prison Corridor / Subjugation
4. Celia's Parlour / Creature Comforts

This language of geography relied on consistently tracking the story to understand which scenes needed to happen in which locations to be true to the playwright's text and meaningful to the audience. By breaking down the story in this way, the production team could tell the audience something about each scene and the characters who would occupy it before the characters even spoke. While this collaboration on the surface appears to be the rudimentary duty of any member

of the production team, it is important to mention as it relates to Appia's theories. "Subordination implies analysis; what am I to receive, and what must I give in return?"<sup>13</sup>

## The Environment

While broad discussions of color, abstraction, and environment were happening, the process demanded that the scenic environment begin to actually take shape. To that end, Travis Daniel Williams, in his tireless visual research for this production, brought to our attention imagery of brutalist sculptures by David Umemoto. Umemoto's website describes his work as, "archaic and the ephemeral, despite the solidity and the modernity of the medium. Appearing before our eyes are ... steles deteriorated by rain, remnants of modern cities having survived a cataclysm, fragments of Babylonian cities, colonial settlements brought down to their foundations, cenotaphs abandoned in the jungle..."<sup>14</sup> These sculptures, nominally concrete forms, were rich with recognizable features: arches, stairs, and colonnades, in their small forms. They embodied this idea of creating versatile and non-specific environments.

Umemoto's sculptures bore many similarities to the scenic environments created by Appia. Author Richard C. Beacham summarizes some **tenets** of Appia's work which we found helpful:

Appia demanded utter simplicity in his settings, in marked contrast to the sumptuous spectacle that characterized contemporary operatic production. The stage should be set 'only so far as is necessary for the comprehension of the poetic text; a mere indication is enough to enlighten us to the nature of the visible environment'. He demanded the abolition of painted scenery, and criticized the ridiculous incongruity between the moving, three-dimensional actor and the static two-dimensional trompe-l'oeil flats.

The customarily flat surface of the stage floor should be changed to provide a variety of levels, steps and slopes: there must be variations in height and depth calculated to emphasize the solidity and mass of the actor and the space that

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<sup>13</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 21

<sup>14</sup> "INFO," David Umemoto, <https://davidumemoto.com/info> Accessed June 16, 2020

supported him. Instead of flats, solid 'practicables' should be used, whose reality was established by their displacement of space. But such solid settings should not be in the service of realistically depicting the external appearance of fictional locations; rather they should suggest, as simply as possible, the artistically appropriate locale generated from within the drama as conveyed by the actor.<sup>15</sup>

Williams and I devised a large structure, reminiscent of the forms created by Umemoto and Appia, which sat atop a turntable. The structure itself would be a brutalist assembly, evoking the institution that had been built to be formidable, but which was deteriorating. Each face of this scenic unit needed to serve multiple purposes and contain features which were recognizable enough to provide some character and be practicable to the performers. Cracks in the concrete and erosion from water and wind indicated that it was declining slowly but surely. We called it the Fortress, as if it were the established stronghold of a world built by those intended to subjugate others. The Fortress would essentially be the only piece of scenery onstage, surrounded by black masking, drawing the attention and focus of the audience down to the actors and avoiding unnecessary detail while still functioning to tell the story.

It is in deciding on this form that the production design of *Her Naked Skin* truly approaches Appia's living art. By creating an edifice of concrete, we not only visually mimic Appia's aesthetic, but relied on his first and strongest principle to tell our story. "[T]he first principle of *living art*—perhaps the one from which all others are consequently and automatically derived—must be: all inanimate forms must *oppose* rather than embrace all living forms."<sup>16</sup> Appia continues to clarify that flexibility within the environment may be desired, but that when overused, will reduce the performer to simply reenacting everyday life. We were telling a story

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<sup>15</sup> Richard C. Beacham, *Adolphe Appia: Texts on Theatre*, (London, Routledge, 1993), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 27



about the machinations of a society preventing marginalized people from gaining an agency over their own lives.

According to Appia, the strong emotional experience we desired to illicit from the audience would be demanded by an environment which appeared to oppose the performers' bodies at every turn. This opposition the environment needed was present across the scenic unit and lighting served this ideal as well. Appia, also a lighting designer in his own right, wrote that "Light is to production what music is to the score: the expressive element in opposition to literal signs."<sup>17</sup> The contribution of Jarod Wilson, lighting designer, must not be overlooked. Wilson understood the need to step away from literal and representational lighting for much of the production and rely on expressive swaths of light which often cut across the space obliquely, expressing the aggression and antagonism present in the script.

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<sup>17</sup> Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1962), 72



Public Life / The Patriarchy. William (Jacob Ooman Athyal) and members of Parliament meet in the club.  
Photo by Jodi Miller.

The first side of the Fortress, which portrayed public life, represented the Patriarchy's ever-watching eye on the outside world and the establishment built on disparaging and repressing women. To illustrate this, a huge, sweeping staircase dominated the scene. Fanning out at the bottom, the staircase resembled the imperial staircases of palaces and mansions in Europe. The top of the staircase met a landing and began a narrow wraparound leading to a high platform—a literal and metaphorical dead-end.



Holloway Prison Cell / Isolation. Eve (Erin Parsons) is force-fed in Holloway Prison.  
Photo by Jodi Miller.

The Holloway Prison Cell / Isolation side of the Fortress corresponded to the cells and smaller rooms in Holloway Prison. The tallest and flattest of these environments possessed only a door, a nook just large enough for the prisoner's fold-down bed, and a wall sconce. The aforementioned perch on the Public Life / The Patriarchy side was not immediately visible, but prison matrons could stand on it and look over the high railing to monitor prisoners. The strong sense of isolation was more prevalent on this side than any other. On different occasions, Eve, Celia, and another suffragette, Flo, occupied this cell. This side and the Holloway Prison Corridor / Subjugation side were dominated on top by a prominent serrated edge, adding to the sense of danger and unpleasantness of existing in the prison.



Holloway Prison Corridor / Subjugation. Eve (Erin Parsons) and Celia (Kylie Logan) in their cells.  
Photo by Jodi Miller.

The Corridor / Subjugation Side of the Fortress depicted a series of barred windows. This side most regularly appeared as open areas in Holloway Prison such as corridors and the prison kitchen. The repeated use of the curved windows, based on those found in the real Holloway Prison, evoked a sense of order and subjugation which existed in the women's ward of Holloway Prison.



Celia's Parlour / Creature Comforts. Celia (Kylie Logan) and William (Jacob Ooman Athyal) after a domestic dispute.  
Photo by Jodi Miller

While the aforementioned sides represented a largely untested societal dominance over women, the Parlour / Creature Comforts side stood in contrast to that. This location was depicted four times in *Her Naked Skin*. Celia's parlour needed to stand out as her attempt to make pleasant that which was egregious. The parlour also illustrated Celia's position and privilege.

In a departure from the strict interpretation of Appian ideals, the room was filled with the luxuries of a privileged life: a sofa, a gramophone, a Tiffany-style lamp, and a profusion of period artwork. Some of these were specifically called for in the script. Arguably, the dominant feature of this environment was a large decorative curtain that flew in, completing the scene. The curtain was devised as a means of illustrating the lengths that a woman in Celia's position could go to fashion a comfortable life for herself.

Drawing from research of Edwardian interiors, I integrated the large curtain with the staircase which, in this orientation, ran stage left to stage right. While transitioning into scenes of the parlour, the curtain flew in from above, draping gracefully on each tread as it landed and the turntable stopped moving. The lighting delicately emphasized the curves of the draping curtain, highlighting the opposition this concrete environment gave to the characters occupying and attempting to modify it. Executing this environment successfully was the most particular of the four. It relied on the careful coordination of scenery, costumes, lighting, and direction to create a look of opulence, softness, and order.

While at first it may seem inappropriate to add chandeliers, curtains, and chairs to an otherwise minimalist and Appian environment, it was actually quite suitable and, to a degree, points back to Appia's principles. In this play, Lenkiewicz's script specifically called for some pieces, making them essential. In discussing the dynamics of depicting a location through the written word *and* through design, Appia writes, "The setting is always geographic and historical, dependent on a climate and a culture which are indicated visually by a group of specific objects. Unless the audience can see the objects, the text of the play must convey a quantity of information that will completely paralyze the action. As a result, we are forced to represent them

in the stage decoration.”<sup>18</sup> We were employing Appia’s principles without entirely duplicating his style of production.

Simply said, we applied Appia’s notions of creating an unforgiving environment and emphasized those principles by adding a veneer of distinctly comfortable, but visually out-of-place elements. On the surface, this seems to smack against Appia’s assertion that doing so would lead to performers reenacting real-life, but in fact served to show the audience that all characters, rich or poor, man or woman, was fully aware that their environment was uncomfortable and that they could control it no more than to sit on a padded chair. This situation and our response to it showed us the limitations of the conventional interpretation of the principles Appia developed for the operas he designed. However, our solution to add certain set decoration served to highlight his broader principle of opposition between environment and performer to great effect.

Appia divided his approach to staging in two parts: the mobile human actor and the inanimate set, which could have both mobile and immobile parts.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on our early idea of using the turntable to illustrate gradual movement of time and society, we firmly integrated the motion of the turntable into the storytelling by carefully timing it to our necessary scenic transitions. Just as a body expresses itself through movement, the movement of the Fortress also expressed meaning and helped tell the story of its characters.

In its simplest form, the Fortress rotating to different sides expressed the grueling passage of time, a sensation Dugdale referred to in his initial concept. Creating an understanding of the

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<sup>18</sup> Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. H.D. Albright, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1960), 42

<sup>19</sup> Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre; a Theory of the Theatre & Man Is the Measure of All Things*, trans. Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks, ed. Bernard Hewitt (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1962), 26

locations we were leaving or approaching was enhanced through judicious blocking. For example, as the prison came into view, a prison matron would walk by in the dark, jingling her keys or as Celia's parlour was set, the parlour maid would walk down the stairs, dusting as the curtain landed just behind her. Through this use of movement through the space, we were able to further inform the audience about the lives these two dozen characters led, reinforced their positions in the society of the play, and echoed Appia's strong desire for performers to be integrated with and resisting the space they occupied.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Through a careful integration of Appian ideals and careful planning, this scenic design for *Her Naked Skin* presented an environment which both highlighted the characters of Lenkiewicz's text and continually informed the audience about the characters they were watching and the society in which they existed. While the scenic environment was very effective at both highlighting the character's stories and evoking environments, this design was not without its drawbacks. One criticism of the production was of the sense of inactivity that permeated the show. Michael Grossberg of *The Columbus Dispatch* wrote in his review of *Her Naked Skin*, "Often remarkably slow-moving, the production pauses too often for tableaux of silent pondering or sad solitude. Yet, some pondering is rewarded, with nearly every scene striking to look at, with superb design by a topnotch team."<sup>20</sup>

Even though these pauses were largely intentional and often choreographed as part of establishing transitions, the production team engaged in them too frequently to be as effective as we imagined. In an effort to focus on the intimacies of the production and allow the audience to contemplate the gravity of what they were watching, we focused

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Grossberg, "'Her Naked Skin': Historical Drama Evokes Women's Struggle for Vote," *The Columbus Dispatch*, Gannett Publications, Published February 28, 2019



too much on making each moment count. In doing this, we inevitably lost some efficiency in our storytelling and unintentionally distanced the audience from the tale.

The design of The Ohio State University's production of *Her Naked Skin*, through exacting collaboration between designers and inspired by Appia's ideals of minimalism and theories of living art, was by and large, a success. On a practical level, this design took the audience from the depths of Holloway Prison to the heights of English parliament and the opulence of an Edwardian home. More importantly, it took the audience on a journey of oppression, repression, subjection, and the efforts the marginalized persons made to cope with that.

Although not every aspect of Appia's ideals of living art were utilized in this production, our interpretations and reinterpretations of his principles only made the storytelling stronger. By applying some of the basic tenets of Appia's century-old approach to Lenkiewicz's modern words for this production, the characters were allowed to radiate from the environment by having to both symbolically push against it and literally move with it. This successful adaptation of Appia's approach to mobility, dimensionality, and light illustrates the broad applicability of Appia's theories and proves that they can still be applied to theatre today in the journey to make total art.

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