

ROBERT EDMOND JONES REVIEW

(Introduction)

Many would say that Production Style in the theatre came of age around the turn of the twentieth century, at least in the U.S, although strongly impacted by European influences. A significant development in the development of a consciousness of theatrical production style was the movement known as the “New Stagecraft.”

The ability to think in terms similar to those espoused by the New Stagecraft received a significant impetus from the work of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia. **Appia** (1862-1928) came to theatre by way of music. He began by asserting that artistic unity should be the fundamental objective of theatrical production. He noted that 19th Century production traditions exhibited 3 major conflicting elements: the moving 3-dimensional actor, the stationary 2-dimensional vertical scenery, and the flat, horizontal floor. He sought to use light to unify these elements by placing the moving, 3-dimensional actor at the center of attention by allowing the actor to move freely through 3-dimensional scenic units (various levels, steps, ramps, platforms, etc.) that broke up the 2-dimensional nature of painted scenic drops and flat floor design. He also noted that because light can be easily changed (moved, color changes, intensity changes), it was able to effectively center concentration on a moving actor within a 3-dimensional setting. **Edward Gordon Craig** (1872-1966) was a very provocative designer/director/theorist. He publicized many of the production theories that he shared with Appia (especially in *THE MASK* published from 1908-1929). Viewed in his time as a highly dangerous artistic oddball, He viewed theatre as an independent art form that blends language, movement, visual line and color, and rhythm in a manner similar to other artists (music, painting, etc.). He accepted the notion that one must begin with the playwright’s text and he sought to find ways for the director to marshal the creative forces of cooperating theatre artists in a way that would present a finished work of art that would illuminate the master-artist’s vision of the substance of the script. He was primarily a visual artist and so his influence was largely in the area of scenic design. His designs exhibited the stylistic characteristics of vast height and moveable scenery.

Although they shared many similar ideas, Appia and Craig also differed sharply in many areas. First of all, Appia believed in the supremacy of the playwright’s text; Craig saw himself as the supreme artist who could change any and all elements to suit his personal vision. Secondly, Appia preferred multiple settings whereas Craig favored a single unit set with movable parts.

The New Stagecraft

The work of Appia and Craig forced their contemporaries to reconsider how theatre was done. They asked theatre to take a new view of the nature of theatre as an art form that has a special function in society. They asked theatre to reconsider how all of its elements could be used to further the art form and clarify its role in society. They influenced the visual developments of simplification of setting, 3-dimensional scenery, and sophisticated lighting. In this way, they fostered the development of the movement referred to as the New Stagecraft. This movement aimed at the harmonious synthesis of setting, lighting, acting, etc. and it embraced a very wide range of stylistic techniques, including theatricalism and expressionism. This New Stagecraft, therefore, was primarily a visual movement and the total effect of most production produced in this vein could be described as simplified realism.

Robert Edmond Jones

Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954) is widely recognized as one of the leading men of the American theatre during the first half of the 20th Century. Although his strength was in the area of scenic design, he was also known for his skills as a writer, lecturer, director and, above all, thoughtful and dedicated theatre artist. Because of his first professional scenic designs (for the New York production of *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife* directed by Harley Granville-Barker in 1916), he is widely credited for sounding “the note that began the American revolution in stage scenery.” It was a resounding repudiation of the romantic realism of David Belasco and other producers of the late 19th Century that were dominating the theatre scene at the time. He went on to become widely associated with the plays of Eugene O’Neill.

Following his 1916 debut, along with other Americans (e.g, Lee Simonson), Jones began to pick up the trends of this New Stagecraft the Europeans were practicing. And they applied these concepts directly to the commercial theatre. In this new philosophy, theatrical settings were conceived primarily as a way to project the play’s essential mood (read substance, if you will) to the audience.

One of the assumptions of this New Stagecraft is that there is not such thing as a play without a setting, no matter how simple or sparse it may be. Even if you have a bare stage (cf. *Our Town*), that bare stage serves as the setting. Whatever the audience views is the setting. Scenery no longer is considered as “decoration” but rather it must perform a specific function. It needs to serve the play in an organic way. It now becomes the director’s task to formulate the play’s substance and suggest what the play’s scenic or visual problem might be. The designer then works to solve this problem.

CHAPTER I:

Robert Edmond Jones seems to suggest that the play’s setting ought to have a certain luster regardless of the realistic squalor it may be asked to represent. He seems to say that the designer’s task is to express the play’s substance and therefore whatever the realistic situation may be (a bar, a slum setting, an ornate palace, a sewer), a proper expression of the substance of the play should make the setting “lustrous.” An important question then presents itself:

QUESTION: How do we respond to Jones’ dictum and theatre should seek to make life appear “lustrous”?

Another area in which the director must work involves collaborating with the other artists, and in this case, with the scenic designer. How is proper unity achieved? And how does a search for this unity of expression affect the setting, the lighting, the acting, and the text? Other questions present themselves:

QUESTION: How does one explain/respond to Jones’ imaginative set design for *MACBETH* (abstract, symbolic scenery) in a production that featured realistic, flesh-and-blood characterizations by Lionel Barrymore and Julia Arthur?

QUESTION: If Robert Edmond Jones epitomizes the New Stagecraft of the early 20th Century, how would you describe this New Stagecraft or “new kind of drama” and what implications does/could it have for directors working at the beginning of the 21st Century?

QUESTION: Jones mentions the impact of the talking picture on theatrical productions in 1941 America. Do you agree with his observations? Have his predictions come to pass? Are there similar implications from technology for today’s theatre?

CHAPTER II:

What does Robert Edmond Jones mean when he says “it is the scenery that sets the key to the play. A stage setting is not a background, it is an environment. Players act in a setting, not against it.”?

How do you respond to Jones’ observation that “a good scene should be, not a picture, but an image”?

Jones indicates that a theatre artist should present plays that appeal “to the eye of the mind.” What does he mean by this? How do we satisfy his request as stage directors?

Jones also seems to be saying that a production of a play ought to “reveal” rather than merely represent. What does he mean? How do we accomplish this?

Jones repeats the challenge of the Irish poet: “Keep in your souls some images of magnificence.” What does he mean by this? How can we, as stage directors, accomplish this task?

Do you agree with Jones’ observation that the best actors today are found on the operatic stage? What did he mean by this?

What does Jones mean when he instructs the actor to **PLAY** the character rather than **NARRATE** the character? What implications does such an instruction have for the stage director?

Jones admonishes stage directors to avoid “imposing his ideas on the actors.” What does he mean by this? What does he expect the director to do?

CHAPTER III:

What does Jones mean when he says that we need to look at the theatre of the past in order to see our own theatre clearly?

Describe the sense of magic Jones ascribes to the theatre of the past. Is this important? Does that sense of magic exist in today’s theatre? If so, how can it be nurtured? If not, how can it be re-kindled? Or should it simply be forgotten?

Jones describes theatrical experiences from several eras (primitive times, classical Greek, Elizabethan, Restoration/18th Century, 19th Century realism). What common threads exist in all these styles? How do they differ? What lessons can we draw from these examples?

CHAPTER IV (Scenic Design):

What does Jones mean when he insists that every performance of a play is an occasion that has its own characteristic quality or atmosphere? How does the director approach the task of trying to create this special occasion with its unique quality or atmosphere?

Jones says that “plays are wrought, not written.” What does he mean by this and how does this notion affect the work of the stage director?

How does Jones suggest that the concept of “theatrical truth” differs from “photographic realism”?

Robert Edmond Jones states that “all art in the theatre should be, not descriptive, but evocative.” What does he mean by this? How does this notion inform the director’s work?

Again, Robert Edmond Jones instructs: “The artist should omit the details, the prose of nature and give us only the spirit and splendor.” What does he mean by this? How does the director do this?

CHAPTER V (Costuming):

In speaking of costumes, Jones says that the dramatic imagination transforms styles and clothing from the mundane to the dynamic. What does this mean to the stage director?

According to Jones, how do the concepts of theatricality and appropriateness affect not only the work of the costumer, but also of the director?

In describing a woman’s costume, Jones mixes several images (a costume of the Reformation, a Miltonic costume, a gleaming costume; a Biblical Costume, a costume for Delilah, a costume reminiscent of a stately ship). What is his point here? What does this have to say about the role of the director in forging a production style for a specific play?

CHAPTER VI (Stage Lighting):

What does Jones mean by the phrase “the livingness of light” in terms of theatre? How does this relate to the stage director?

Jones says that lighting designers “are to carry images of poetry and vision and high passion in our minds while we are shouting out orders to electricians on ladders in light-rehearsals.” How could this apply to the stage director?

VII (Towards a New Stage):

What reasons does Jones cite for the demise of theatre? (Photographic realism is better handled by the cinema.)

Why does Jones suggest that returning to a bare stage, sans scenery, would help create the most exciting theatre? Do you agree? What does this say about productions like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Miserables*, and *The Lion King*? Or Las Vegas shows?

What are the characteristics of Jones’ envisioned New Stage?

- 1) Stages should be proudly presented for what they are – stages.
- 2) Simplicity should rule – non-elaborate scenery.

VIII (Behind the Scenes):

According to Robert Edmond Jones, the most creative attitude is the theatrical attitude. What does he mean by a “theatrical attitude”? And how does the stage director achieve it?