

### **It's Not About Us**

Sophie Lovell explains Dieter Rams' design philosophy as follows: “a well-designed product should be so good that it is barely noticeable” (341). Why? Because its purpose is not to draw attention to itself, but to facilitate a person's actions: in Rams' own words, “I believe that the product should play a secondary role in the relationship with the user, that it should not permanently vie for attention, that it should leave the user freedom and leeway for his own self-assertion as an individual” (Lovell 347). The essence of design is that it does not stand alone for its own purposes; its job is to facilitate action. This does not mean, however, that design is any less important. For Rams, design was a lifelong profession; he wrote, “Design, the shaping of things that we live with and the shaping of our environment, is of decisive importance.”

In theatre, as in manufacturing, it is likewise all too easy for design either to recede and become perfunctory, or to become self-indulgent and gratuitous. Rams leads us to an area in between these two extremes, where design is strong, productive, and entirely appropriate to the context—design that focuses not on itself but on facilitating the action onstage. The writing and designs of Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordon Craig, and Robert Edmond Jones remind us that the focus of design for the stage is on the actor.

Appia specifically rejects design that focuses on itself. His theatrical milieu was dominated by scenic painting, a medium which creates an illusion that is completely self-contained. Three-dimensional actors look impossibly out of place when they interact with flat surfaces that are painted to give the illusion of three-dimensional space, requiring lighting that illuminates just the flat surfaces. Instead, says Appia, the actors need a real three-dimensional space in which to move: “The two fundamental conditions for an artistic rendering of the human body on stage therefore would be light that enhances its three-dimensional quality, and a solidly constructed setting that enhances its postures and movements. We are far removed from painting!” (Beacham 60). This is a major step towards design that is able to be aesthetically strong while getting out of the way and

facilitating something other than itself.

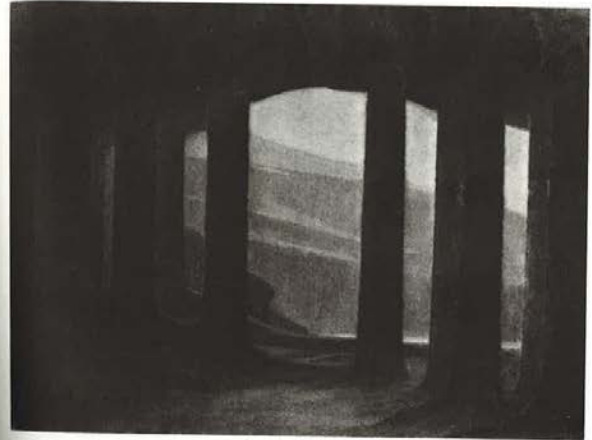


Fig. 1:  
Brückners and Appia, *Parsifal*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes*, Vol. 1, 274-275)

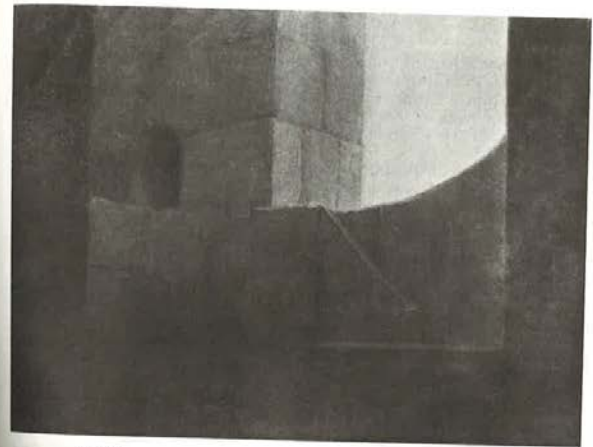
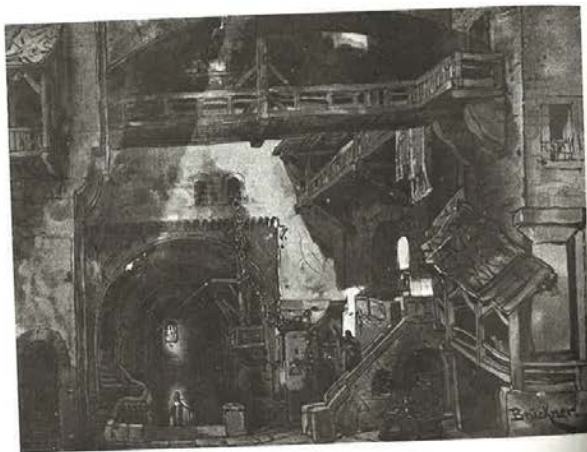


Fig. 2:  
Brückners and Appia, *Parsifal*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes*, Vol. 1 280-281)

How does Appia do it? We look first at two of his designs for Wagner's *Parsifal*, juxtaposed against those by Gotthold and Max Brückner. In the first pair (Fig. 1), we see a forest. The Brückner design gives us many details: trees that look largely realistic, forming a dense wall of scenery that leaves little room for interpretation. Light is apparently painted into the treetops. Appia, on the other hand, gives only the suggestion of trees. The trunks are massive, giving the forest as much visual power as the Brückners', but the viewer's imagination is engaged to fill in the details. The space is arranged three-dimensionally so the performers can move through. And perhaps most importantly, the design consists of plenty of space for light to move through.

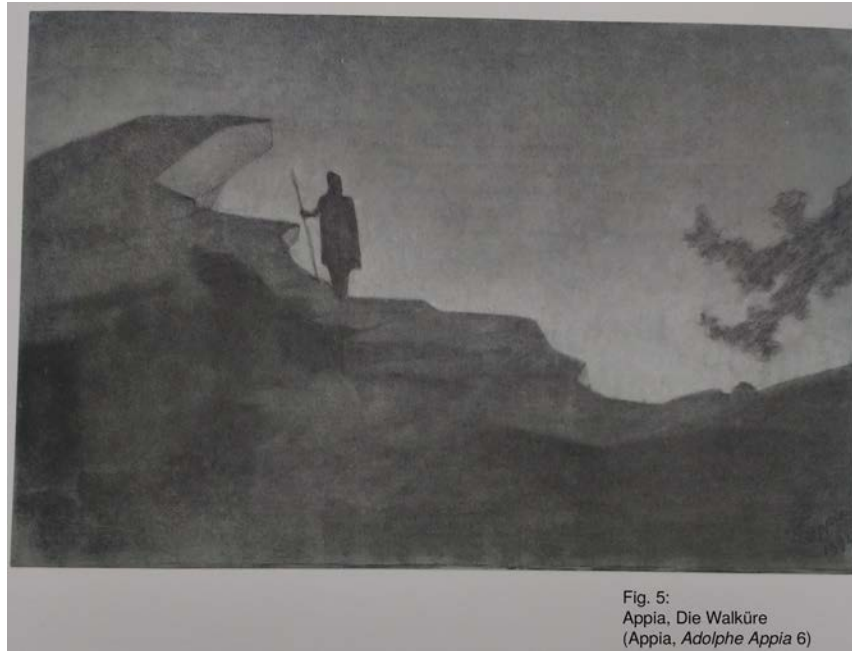
The backdrop appears to have a hillside painted on it, but it forms only the upstage-most element of the design and is framed on all sides by physical scenery. In the second pair of images (Fig. 2), this distinction is even clearer: The Brückner design consists of “a painted canvas placed parallel to the proscenium, at the front of the stage: a tangle of false galleries running over false walls” (Appia, *Oevres Completes* 280). The detail is overwhelming, but always behind the actors and removed from their three-dimensional world. Appia provides a single, massive architectural gesture, with a usable staircase and a balcony, defined by the lit area upstage and to the stage left. The space is physical and made for humans, and the flow of the architecture is motivated by the light that moves in it.



Fig. 3:  
Appia, *Die Walküre*  
(Appia, *Adolphe Appia* 4)



Fig. 4:  
Appia, *Die Walküre*  
(Appia, *Adolphe Appia* 5)



Next we look at Appia's design for Wagner's *Die Walküre*, consisting of a large rock outcropping, which he depicts inhabited by figures in different ways (Fig. 3-5). Again the space is defined by a large physical gesture combined with a lit area upstage. The figures are drawn mostly in silhouette, which is a limitation of strict adherence to this idea. But the figures still take prominence. The shape of the rock is uncluttered enough that the humans stand out from the background, making them a major part of the landscape, and able to drive the changes in configuration. We are not distracted by detail. The rock does rely on a kind of realism; both here and in the semi-architectural settings preceding, Appia does not free himself completely from representation. However it is clear that he is not bound by it; though the designs may refer to recognizable physical settings, their primary effect is their receptiveness to the performers, and their support of the emotional states the performers can convey.

The next several designs by Appia show how closely the scenery is tied in with the light. In *Les Cataractes de l'Aube* (Fig. 6), a large upstage mount is ringed by light. The light that pushes into the space seems to be driven by this same source, and reveals the contours of the rest of the architecture. The entire space is thereby unified by light, and the light is driven by the shape of the space. His designs for *Tristan and*

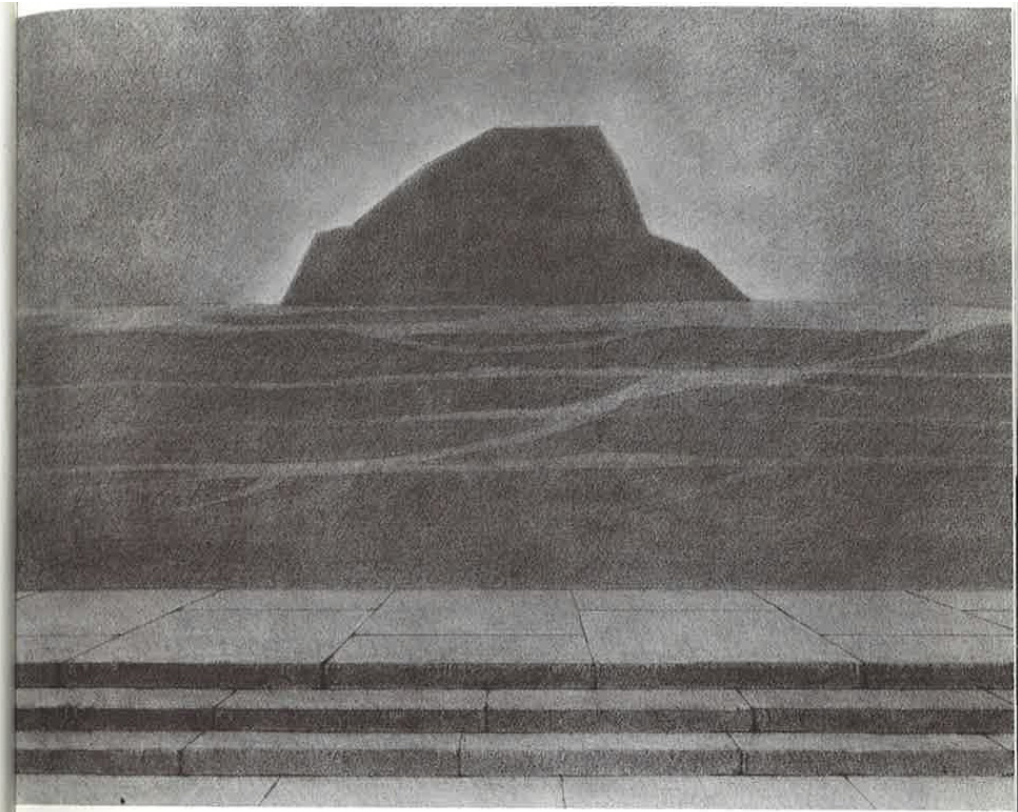


Fig. 6:  
Appia, *Les Cataractes de L'Aube*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes*, 13)



Fig. 7: Appia, *Tristan and Isolde*  
(Appia, *Adolphe Appia*, 19)



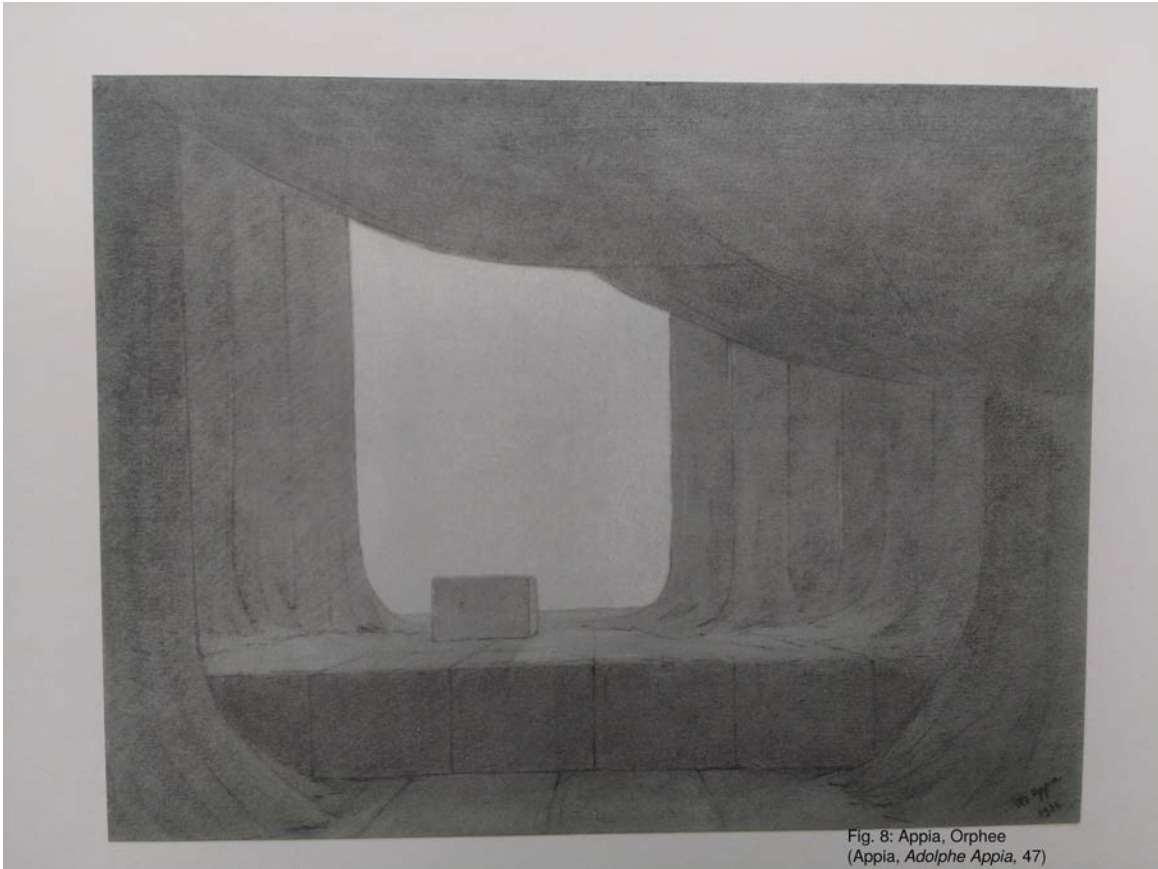


Fig. 8: Appia, Orpheus  
(Appia, Adolphe Appia, 47)

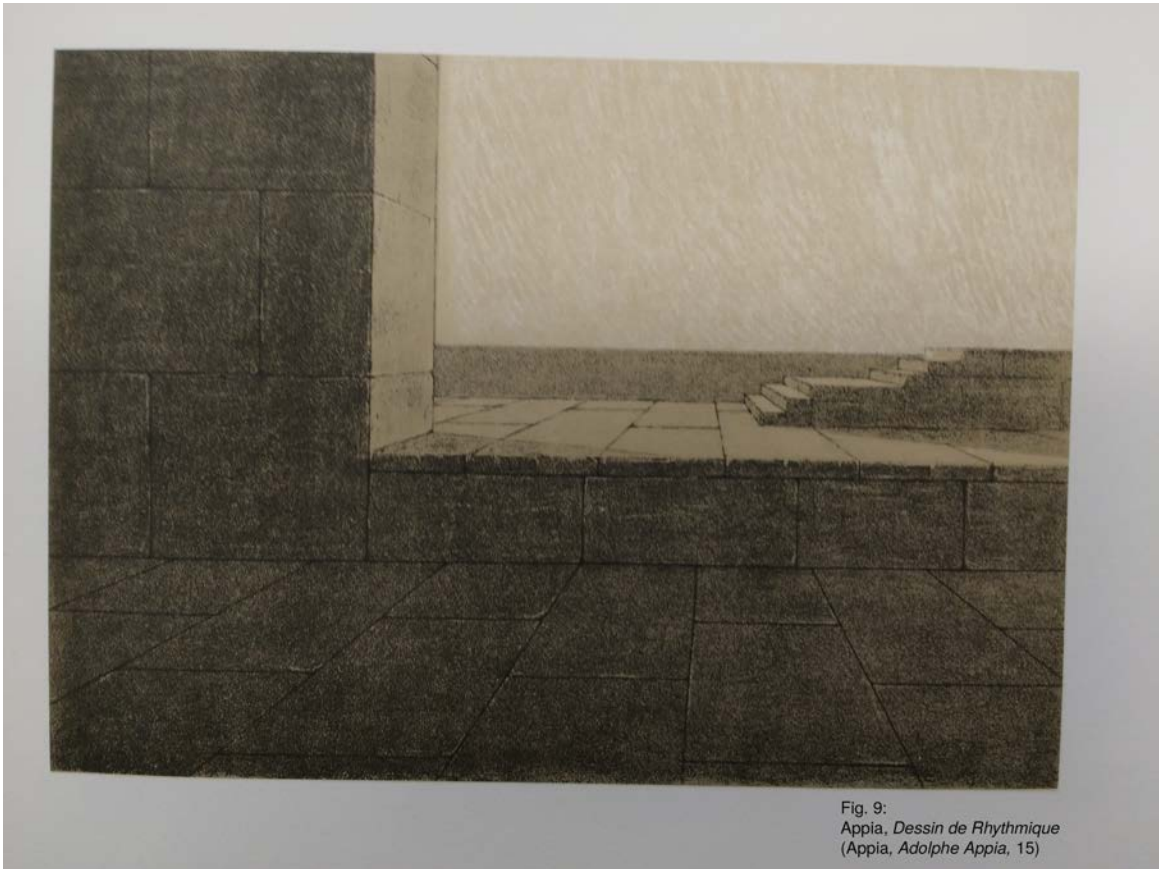


Fig. 9:  
Appia, Dessin de Rhythmique  
(Appia, Adolphe Appia, 15)

Isolde (Fig. 7), Orphee (Fig. 8), and his Rhythmic Spaces (Fig. 9) are similarly defined by light. Each is dominated by an opening through which a lit background is visible. While the materials and recognizable forms indicate a certain level of architectural realism, the designs do not seem to mimic any real place, and so instead of representation the effect is more of expressive groundedness. The designs provide three-dimensional space to be inhabited by human bodies, which can be unified by light. Contrast and the movement of light through space are clearly central in their conception.

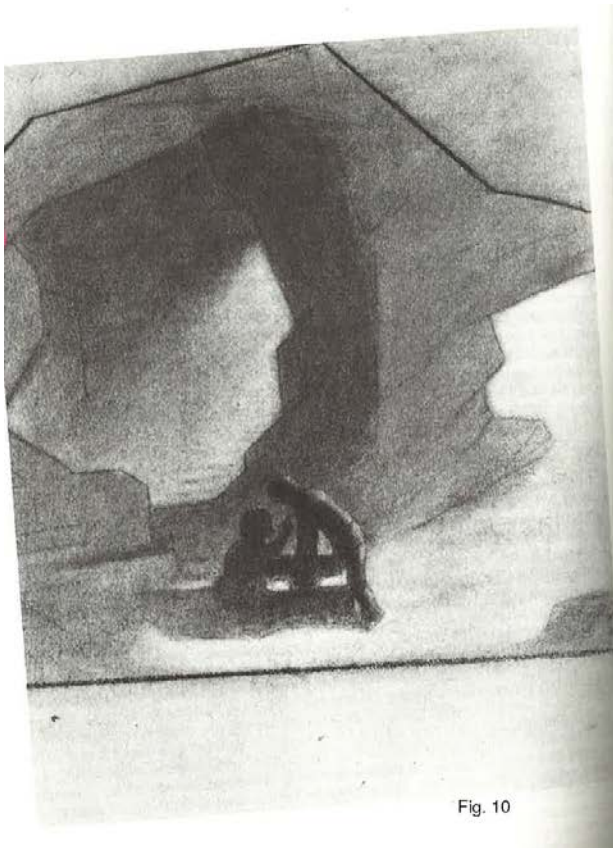


Fig. 10

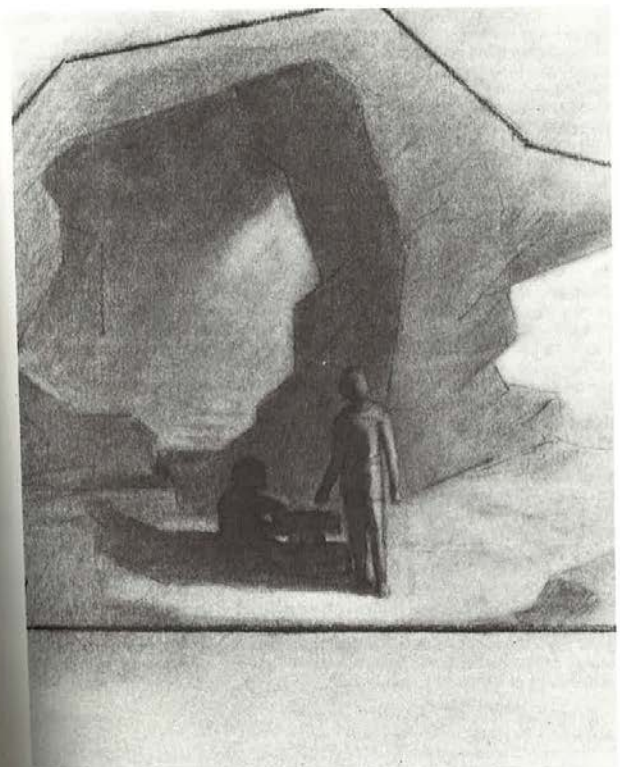


Fig. 11:  
Appia, *Siegfried*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes*, 180-181)

Appia's designs for *Siegfried* (Fig. 10-11) illustrate especially clearly Appia's desire for light to unify the space and the human figures. Again the scenery is simple enough so that the movement of human bodies can provide an active compositional change. The whole scene seems to be lit directionally from upstage left, making clear that the figures are in the same space as the scenery. In this case the scenery is less monumental, and its human scale also helps to unify the image rather than separating the figures from the background. Contrast this

with the painted scenery that Appia deprecated: if the stone arch were painted on a backdrop, it would need to be lit evenly from the downstage. Appia's up-left light source might be rendered in the painting, but try as one might, there would be no way of lighting the actors at least partially from the front. Not only would the actors not appear to be in the same space as the scenery, but the expressive quality of Appia's design, with the oblique light sculpting the whole scene, would be impossible.

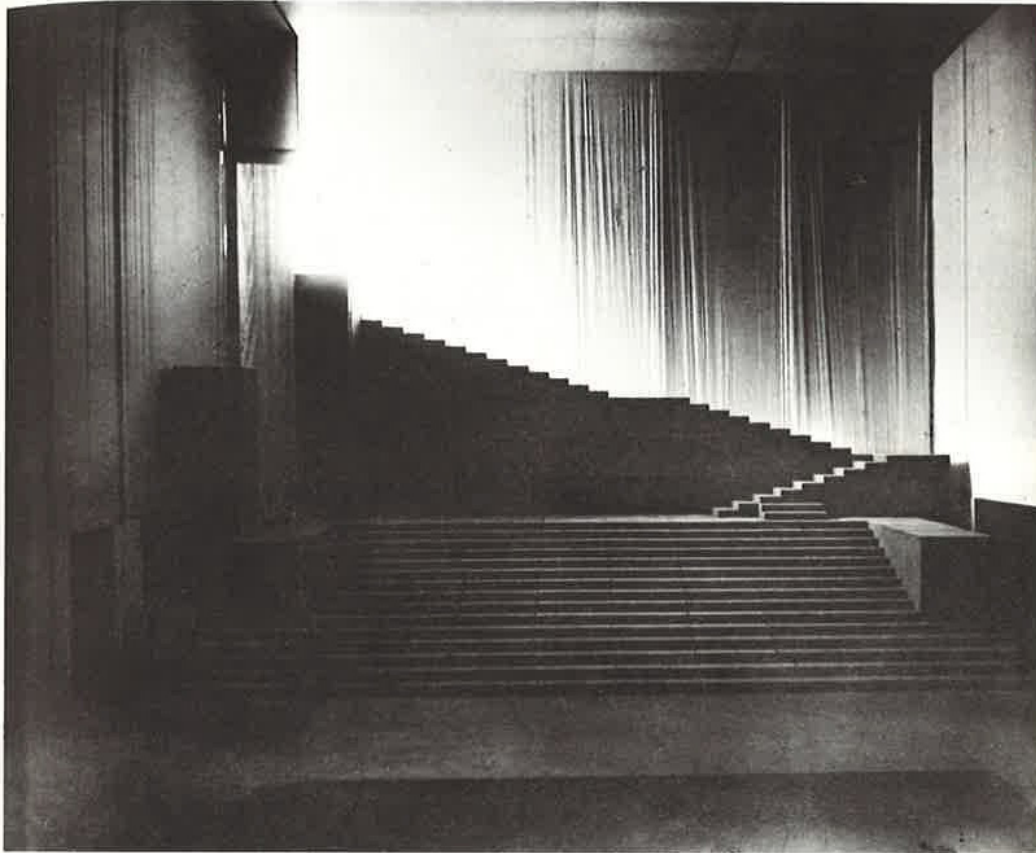


Fig. 12:  
Appia, *Orphee et Eurydice*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes* Vol. 3, 193)

Photos of Appia's *Orpheus and Eurydice* show a realization of aspects of this interplay among light, space, and bodies. In Fig. 12, lighting accentuates the form of the large staircase, imparting a strong composition to the whole space. As in several of the previous images, it seems clear that Appia conceived of the architecture and the lighting together. In Fig. 13, a mass of human bodies adds compositional elements to the architecture, showing how Appia conceived of the architecture as supportive of human movement. These photos appear to have been taken in rehearsal light, so unfortunately we do not see how the entire populated scene



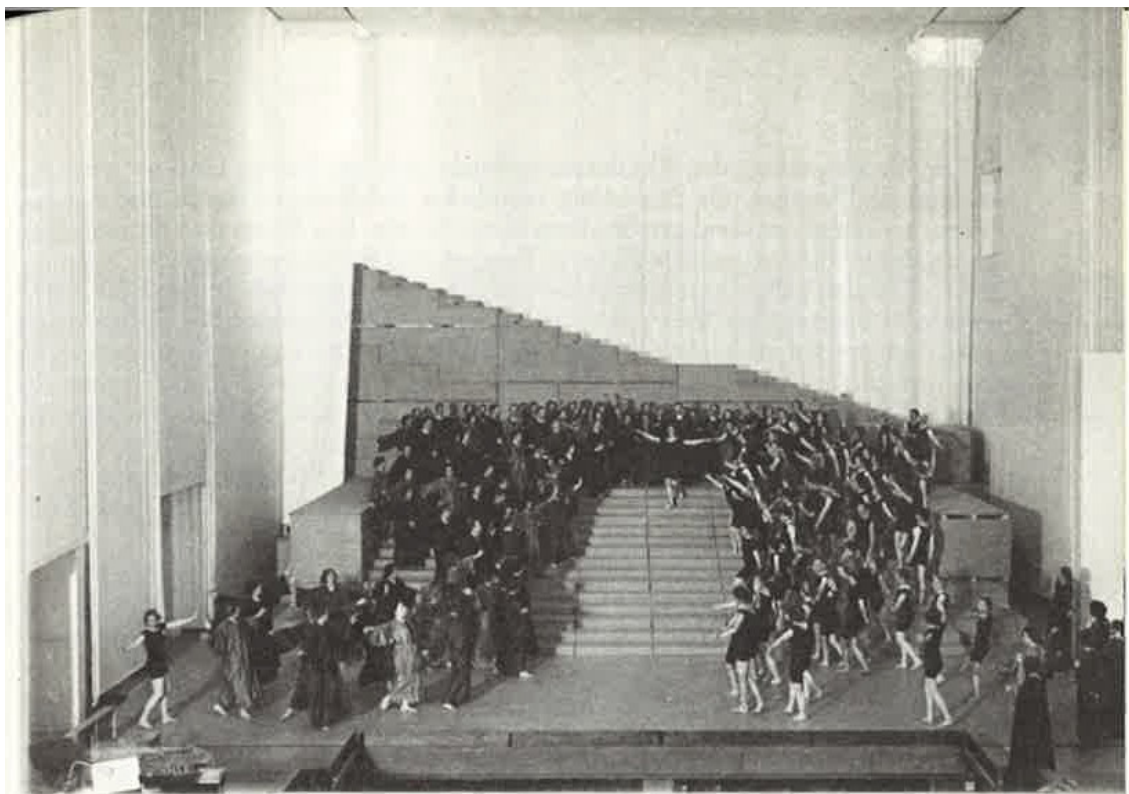


Fig. 13:  
Appia, *Orphee et Eurydice*  
(Appia, *Oeuvres Completes*, 195)

would have been lit. The lighting in Fig. 12, which so strongly reveals the composition of the space, seems impractical to light bodies throughout the space without being augmented and somewhat diluted. This might be a limitation of Appia's thinking; especially since so many of his lit images are brightest upstage, it may be unlikely that his powerful compositions will be perfectly realized onstage given the practical necessity of fully lighting the actors. To a lighting designer, however, these images suggest strongly how architecture can be the basis of a lighting design. If the ideas of light inherent in the scenery are planned first and kept in mind, all the necessary angles can be added so that they support these architectural ideas and never appear in conflict with them.

Of his design for *Siegfried*, Appia writes, "How are we to represent a forest onstage? First of all, let us clarify the issue: is it a *forest* with characters, or *characters* in a forest?...In order to create our settings, we need not visualize a forest, but we must represent in great detail the entire range of events that occur in this forest" (Beacham 62-63). As seen in the contrast between Appia's designs for *Parsifal* and the Brückners', and in Appia's design for *Die Walküre*, the detail of the scenery is not what matters. In fact, what matters most is the detail in the action, from which detail in the scenery often distracts. This is precisely the question Edward Gordon Craig confronts in his *Study for Movement* (Drain 240-241). Craig raises questions here rather than answering them, and he gives up without feeling the need to come to any conclusions. But the question he asks is that Appia asks of the forest: How much do we need to show? By proposing that a snowstorm might be depicted without any snow, he maintains Appia's focus on the human body. And by proposing that a human's movements might be able to depict the snowstorm better than the snow would, he keeps Appia's focus specifically on action and how it is supported by the physical environment. In *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*, he adds, "By means of suggestion in movement you may translate all the passions and the thoughts of vast numbers of people...Actuality, accuracy of detail, is useless upon the stage" (Drain 241). Suggestion, action by humans—these are expressive onstage, not detail.

As disdainful of the actor as Craig sounds in *The Actor and the Über-Marionette*, it is this same expressive suggestion in movement that is his aim. Art should not reproduce nature or the world, he argues; it

must be selective, making its point by leaving out some of the human details (Collins 257). In the same way that the snowstorm might be best expressed without the snow, a character might be best expressed without all the human details. "Do away with the actor," writes Craig, "and you do away with the means by which a debased stage realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure to confuse us into connecting actuality and art; no longer a living figure in which the weakness and tremors of the flesh were perceptible" (Collins 257). Craig does not really wish to replace the actor with an inanimate object; he wants to replace the pretense of representation with bodily expression.

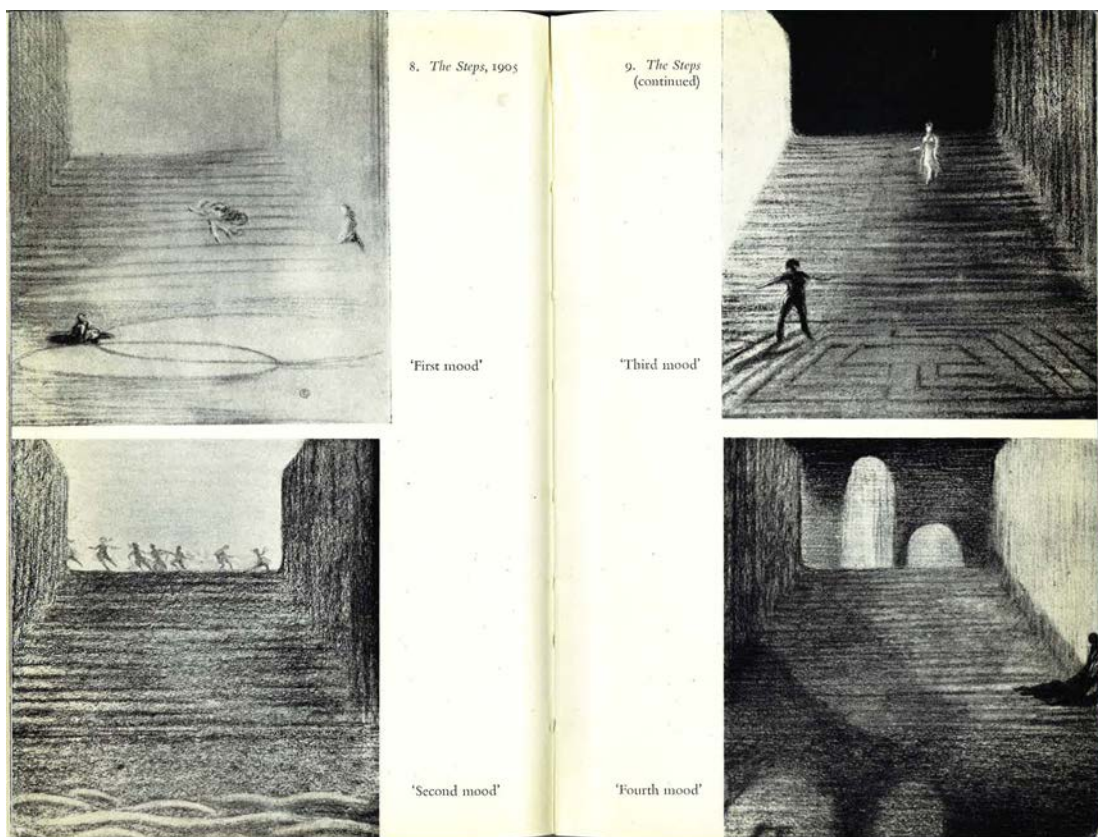


Fig. 14:  
Craig, *The Steps*  
(Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig*, 8-9)

Perhaps this is why Craig's sketches are full of faceless figures with highly expressive bodies. Craig's scenic design often echoes Appia's; see his sketches for *The Steps* (Fig. 14), with their monumental staircase



and expressive light. The depiction of light here is perhaps less nuanced than in Appia, and the architecture simpler despite its scale; what is added is the expressive language in the figures. Whereas Appia's figures are mostly upright and static, Craig's are always in motion. These rough sketches for *The Steps* show a wide range of attitudes, caught in mid-motion, and convey a corresponding range of emotional states. His engraving for

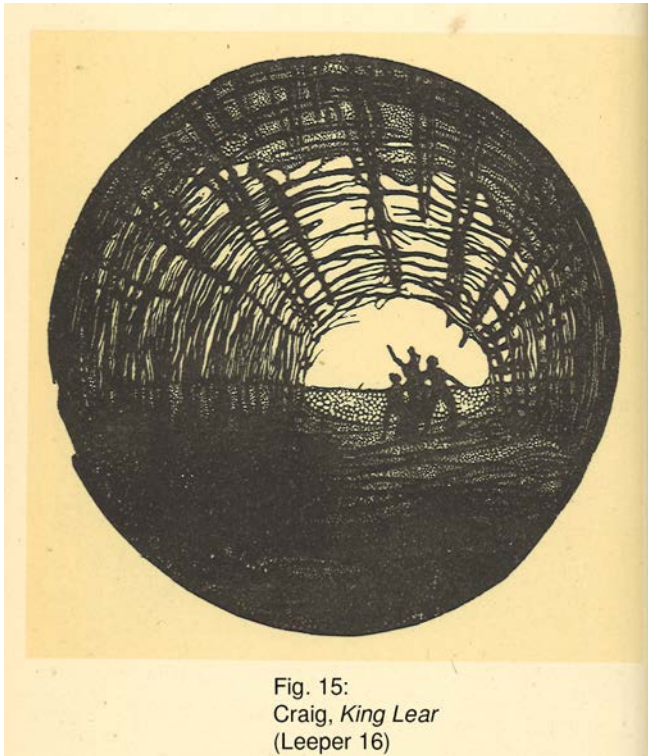


Fig. 15:  
Craig, *King Lear*  
(Leeper 16)

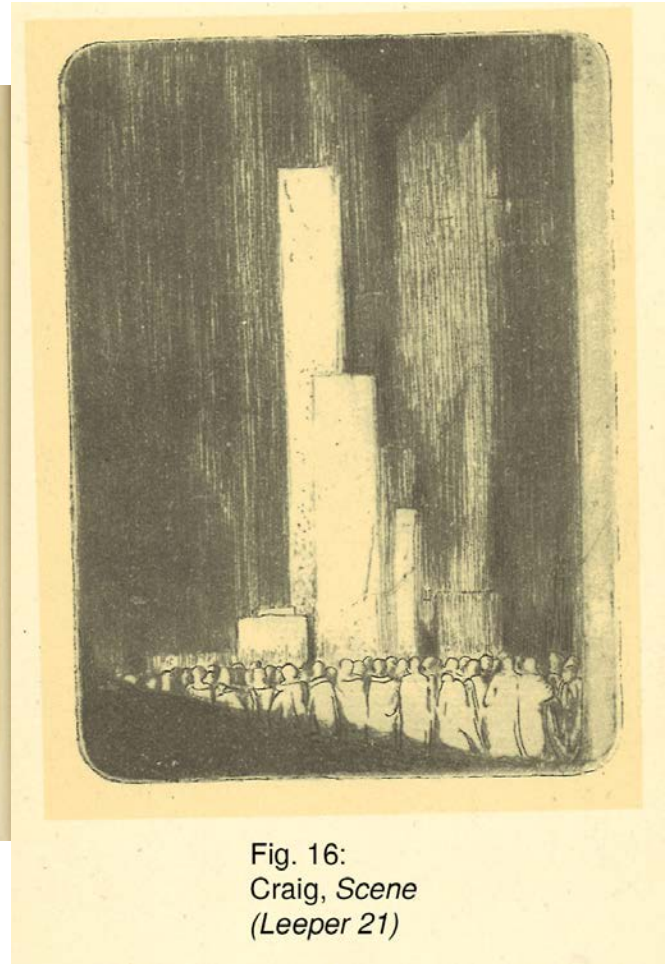


Fig. 16:  
Craig, *Scene*  
(Leeper 21)

*King Lear* (Fig. 15) focuses tightly down on a group of dynamic figures. *The Temple* (Fig. 16) includes a stream of faceless figures that seems to be filing out from among the architecture. As he says he would like to do in all the writings previously discussed, Craig is replacing the complex, flawed actor with an expressive body that says only what he intends it to say.

Even Craig's beautiful character designs are often masked or otherwise faceless. Fig. 17 shows masked characters whose overall silhouette will clearly be more important than their faces. Fig. 18-21 show





*On Baile's Strand (Yeats): The Blind Man. 1911*



**Fig. 17:**  
Craig, masked characters  
(Leeper 22-23)

*The Hour Glass (Yeats): Mask of the Fool. 1911*



*Merchant of Venice: Young Gobbo. 1909*



**Fig. 18:**  
Craig, *The Merchant of Venice*  
(Leeper 26-27)

*Merchant of Venice: Old Gobbo. 1909*



*Hamlet: Hamlet and Daemon.* 1909



*Hamlet: Second Grave-Digger.* 1913

Fig. 19:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Leeper 28-29)



*Hamlet: Ghost.* 1912



*Hamlet: An Actor* 1912

Fig. 20:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Leeper 30-31)



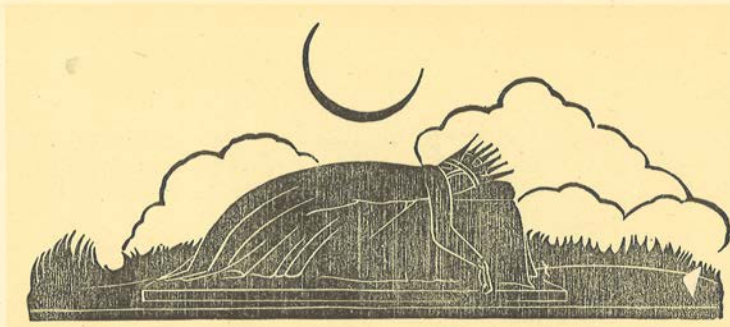


*Hamlet: The Actors*



Fig. 21:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Leeper 32-33)

*Hamlet: Hamlet greeting the Actors*



*Hamlet: Player-King asleep in the Orchard. 1927*



Fig. 22:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Leeper 34-35)

*Hamlet: "Lights, Lights, Lights." 1927*

Shakespearean characters whose faces are similarly hidden but whose clothing is highly expressive, despite the lack of detail of the medium. Fig. 22 shows these figures in their kinetic context. Its second image, in particular, consciously omits almost all the detail except for the bodily attitudes of all the figures in flight. The result is an instant in a kinetic stage picture. Far more than a scenic design, this image is choreography, which would take careful attention in rehearsal to reproduce. It tells the viewer exactly what is happening in the moment, who is in charge, and the extent to which that person's authority is devolving into chaos.

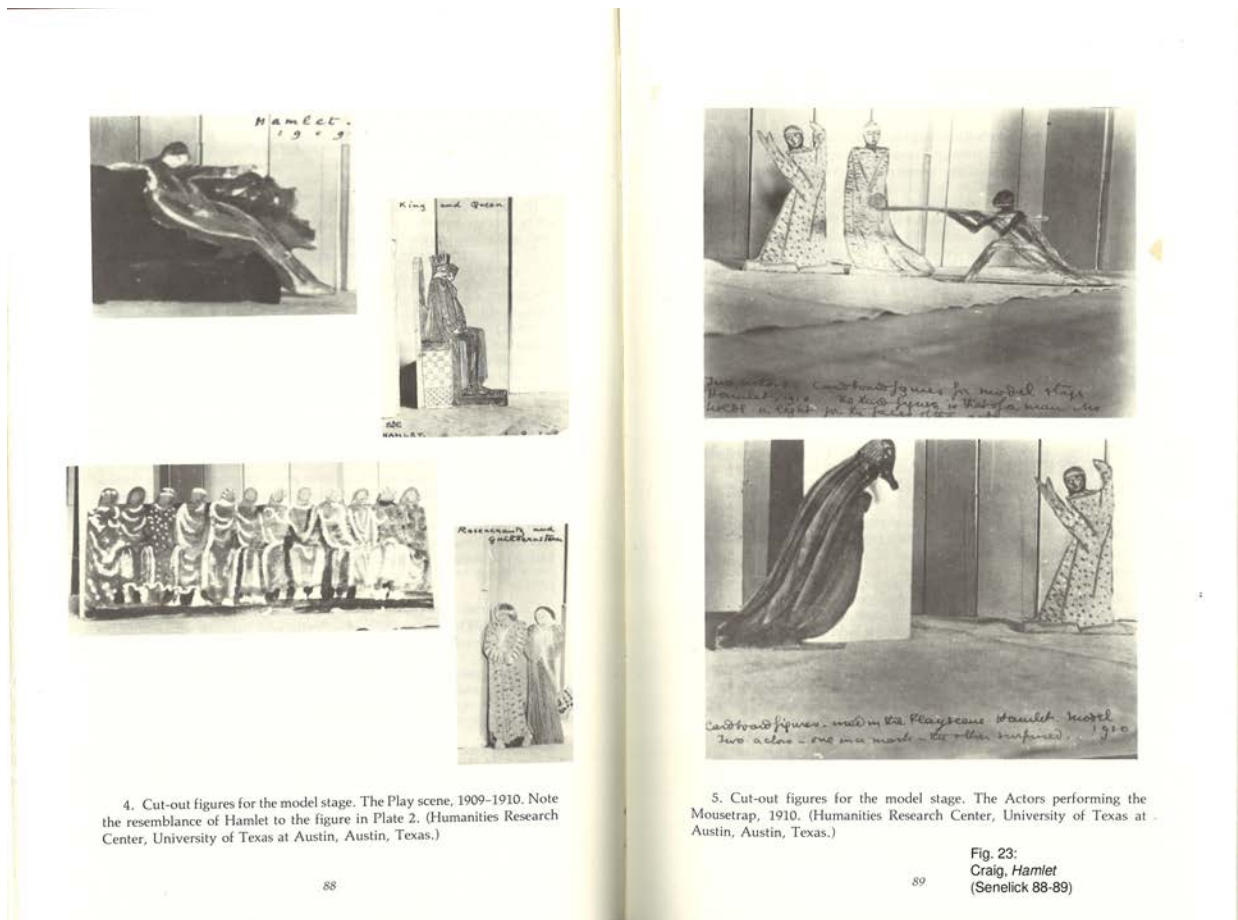
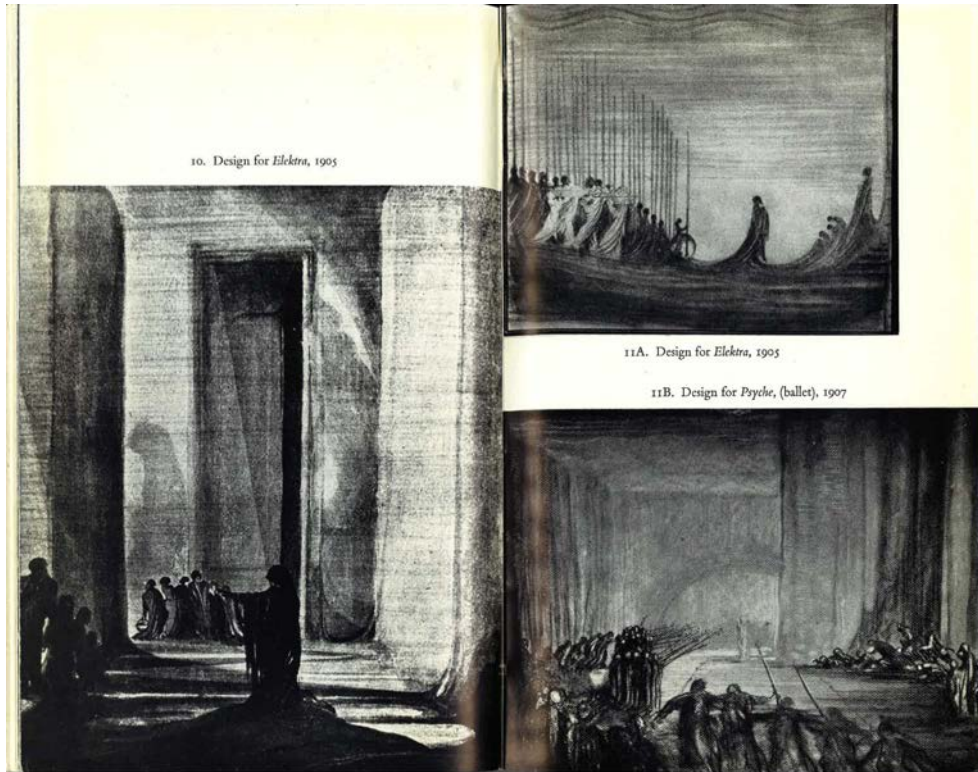


Fig. 23 shows how some of these drawings were to be used: to be cut out and placed in Craig's scenic models. Again, the physical attitude of each of them speaks volumes. When placed in a model, they would give a clear sense of the action of the play, what the set needs to support, and what it does not need to depict. If Craig were, for example, designing the environment of the snowstorm, and wanted to see whether the snow was actually necessary, figures with kinetic expressiveness such as these would be the only way to evaluate whether



the body could convey the necessary information.

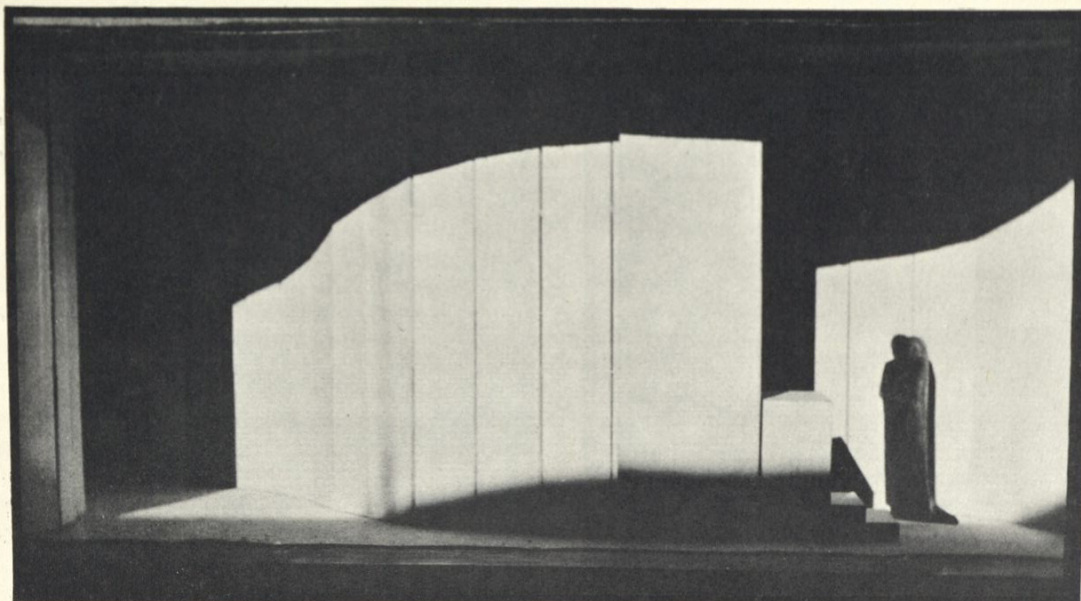


10. Design for *Elektra*, 1905

11A. Design for *Elektra*, 1905

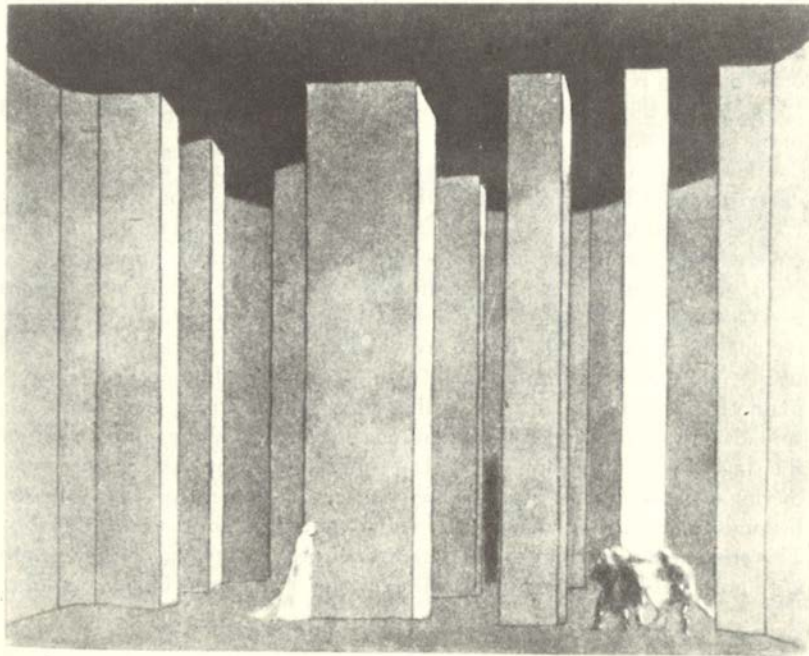
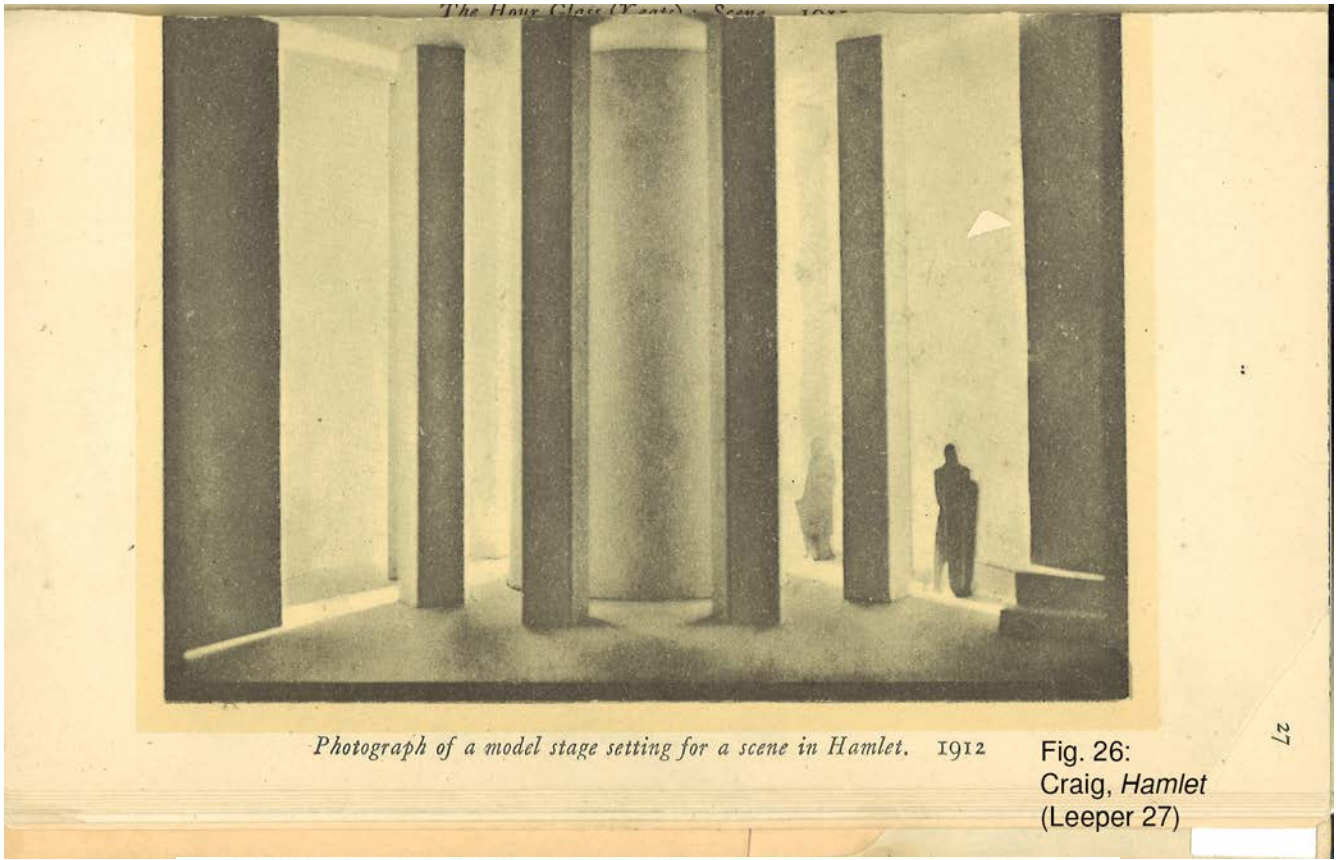
11B. Design for *Psyche*, (ballet), 1907

Fig.24:  
Craig, *Elektra* and *Psyche*  
(Babel, Edward Gordon Craig 10-11)



*Hamlet* Moscow 1910

Fig. 24:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Craig, *90th Birthday*, 23)



12. The first scene of *Hamlet*, sketch by A. Lyubimov. The ghost enters left, as Horatio and the guard cower at right. (*Theatre and Art*, 1912.)

Fig. 27:  
Craig, *Hamlet*  
(Senelick 155)

Craig's designs for *Elektra* (Fig. 24) and *Hamlet* (Fig. 25-27) show relationships between these figures and their environments. They are still mostly faceless, often cloaked. Their physical attitudes in relationship to the inanimate surroundings tell the story. In Fig. 24, the figures are dwarfed by their own lances. In Fig. 25, both the architecture and the figure are equally mysterious. In Fig. 26 and especially 27, the architecture looms over the figures, suggesting overbearing authority, the figures are taking action around the base of the architecture—prefiguring the breakdown of order to come. In all of these cases, the scenery is suggestive of architecture, like Appia's, but not representative of a real place. This non-specificity supports the performers' expressiveness. The architecture remains blank enough to allow the people to maintain focus; by not conveying too much information by itself, it helps the eye to read the abstract information being conveyed by the performers' bodies.

Robert Edmond Jones, an admirer of both Appia and Craig (Jones and Oenslager 21), reframes their emphasis on human bodies in remarkably lucid and compelling language: “A stage setting is not a background; it is an environment. Players act in a setting, not against it” (Jones 20). This is Appia's point about three-dimensional actors in three-dimensional space, made more succinctly. And Jones also states that design should serve the performers, not itself: “The sole aim of the arts of scene-designing, costuming, lighting, is, as I have already said, to enhance the natural powers of the actor” (35-6). In fact, Jones takes this idea a step farther: “And just as the good designer retires in favor of the actor, so does the good actor withdraw his personal self in favor of the character he is playing” (29). The mantra “It's not about us” applies not just to design, but to every individual. None of us is as important as the production as a whole. And this is not just a philosophical statement; it is something we all must keep in mind through all of our work, for it is the only way for all the various disciplines to work together in a productive whole.

To this end, Jones, like Appia and Craig, eschews detail and never wants his work to draw attention to itself. He mentions with disdain such comments as “the settings were gorgeous!” because “[s]uch a statement, of course, can mean only one thing, that no one concerned with producing the drama has thought of it as an organic whole” (69). Is he saying that he never wishes scenic design to be gorgeous? Surely not. But if a



design is so present that “gorgeous sets” is an informed viewer’s strongest take-away, then the design is missing the point, which is to support the action. In fact, for Jones, the theatrical endeavor will know it has succeeded when “audiences will say to themselves, not, This is beautiful, This is charming, This is splendid, but—This is true. This is the way it is” (75). This truth Jones seeks is related to Roland Barthes’ *punctum*, or the beauty which Dave Hickey wishes to separate from the academy, or the true theatre Antonin Artaud is after. It is the opposite of a superficial beauty, which looks pleasing and does not challenge us. It connects with our humanity and gives the audience a reason to care about what is happening onstage.

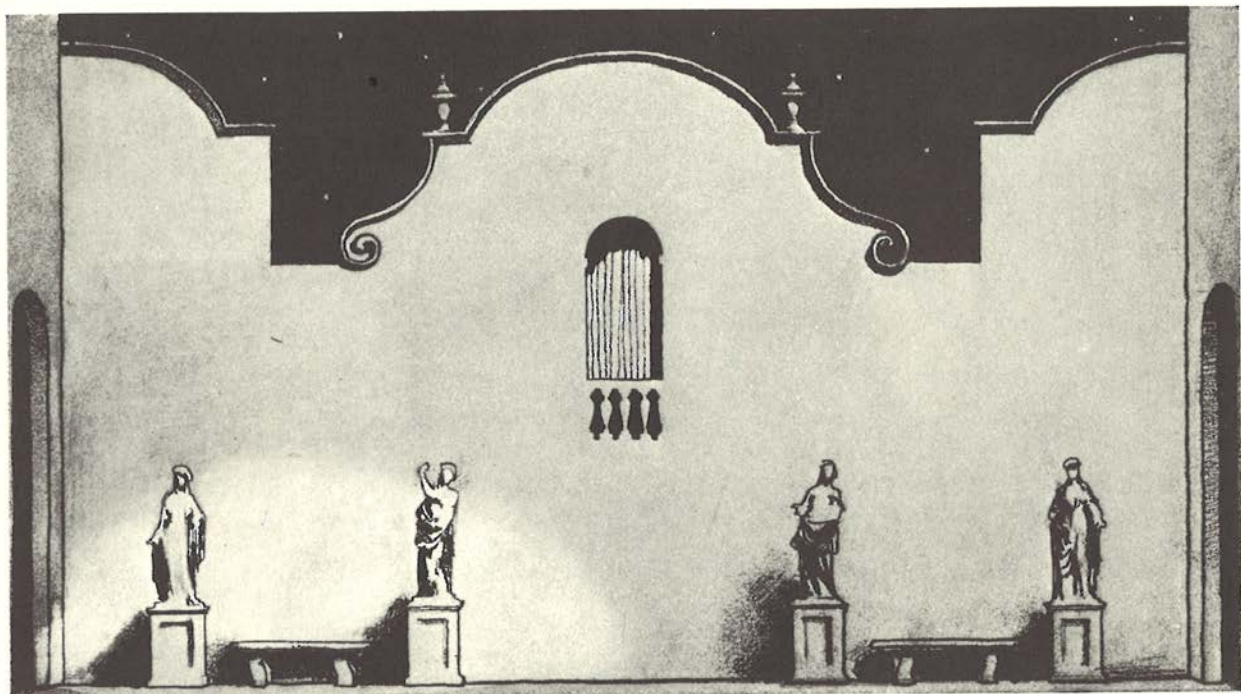


Fig. 28:  
Jones, *Caliban*  
(Jones and Oenslager 2)

Perhaps what is most immediately noticeable about Jones' designs in comparison to Appia and Craig is the range of their realism on one hand and expressiveness on the other. Some consist entirely of architectural elements, while some are completely expressionistic. It is clear that Jones has chosen this mode in which to design as is appropriate to each piece. In the first few images, we see architecture. *Caliban* (Fig. 28) looks like

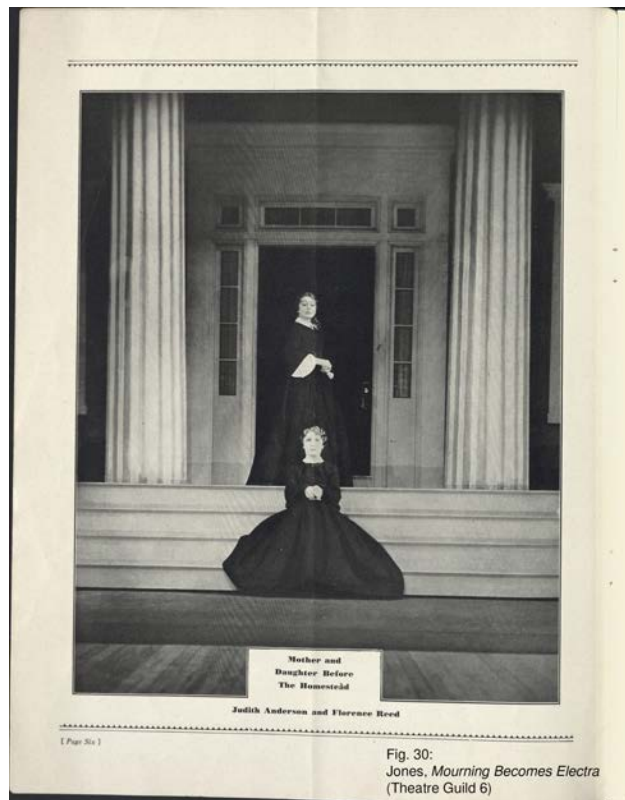


a real wall anyone might have seen in the world. Compared to the Brückners' designs discussed earlier, however, it does not belong to the same kind of realism. For one thing, it is clean and simple, with few details to interfere with the performers. In this way it has more in common with Appia's *Die Walküre*. Equally importantly, there is hardly any illusion. Perhaps it will be treated with materials to make it look like stone and stucco. However there is no false background, forced perspective, or unnecessary detail; aside from its minimalism indicating a designer's hand, this appears to be a real wall placed in the theatre with no further artifice.



Fig. 29:  
Jones, *Mourning Becomes Electra*  
(Pendleton 83)

Jones' *Mourning Becomes Electra* (Fig. 29-30) takes this style further toward realism. As in *Caliban*, a piece of architecture has been placed on the stage. In this case, however, the porch, doors, and windows can be construed as producing the illusion that this is a real house. Gone are the excessive amounts of painted detail as in the Brückners—everything here is three-dimensional and apparently real, and the level of detail is not



gratuitous—however it seems that realism has now come full circle. Appia's fully three-dimensional sets have eliminated the artifice of painted flats, but in the American Modernism of Eugene O'Neill, Appia's abstraction would feel out of place. Hence Jones chooses not a representation of realism, so much as a chunk of something real.

*Til Eulenspiegel* (Fig. 31) and *La Cena Delle Beffe* (Fig. 32) are designs that are based on architecture, but distorted through a hefty amount of nonrealism. The design for *Til Eulenspiegel* shows a cathedral rising into the darkness, with spires bristling in all directions and flying buttresses reaching up to impossible heights, is based more on an emotional state than on an architectural reality. The result achieves the setting required by the text, but even more strongly sets a foreboding and tangled tone for the action. Significantly, it appears from the drawing that the most active parts of the scenic composition—the spires—are well above the heads of the actors. Jones' design for *La Cena Delle Beffe* similarly takes architecture and shifts it into an emotional or metaphysical world. We are clearly in a room, with walls, doors, and rafters, but the glowing stars and shadows of tree trunks are decidedly more evocative than realistic.



Fig. 31:  
Jones, *Til Eulenspiegel*  
(Jones and Oenslager 3)

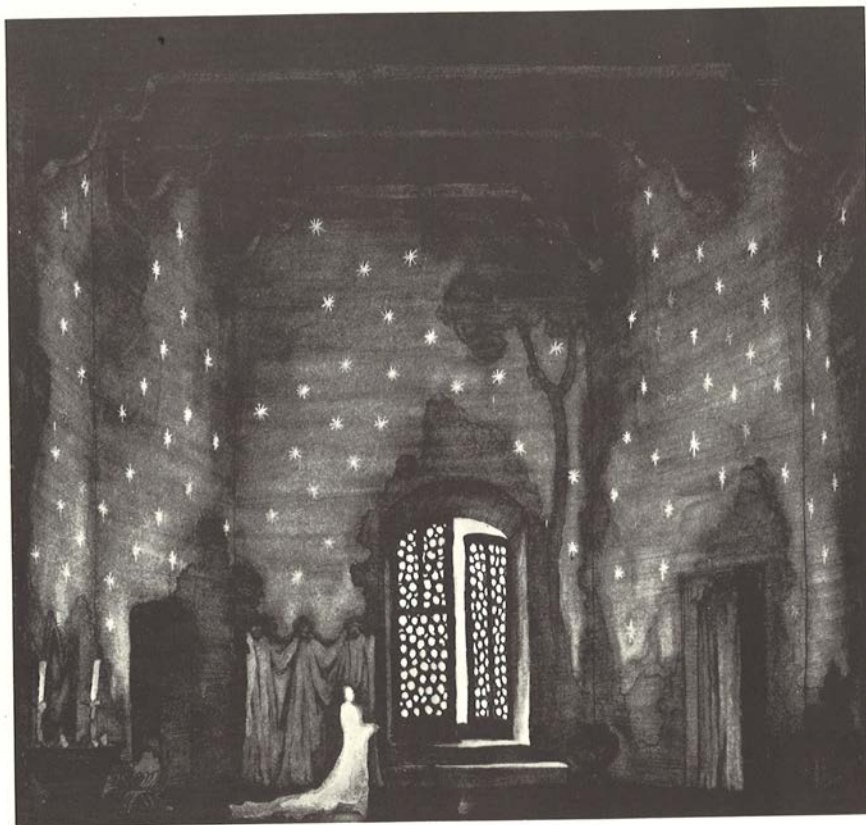


Fig. 32:  
Jones, *La Cena Delle Befte*  
(Jones and Oenslager 5)



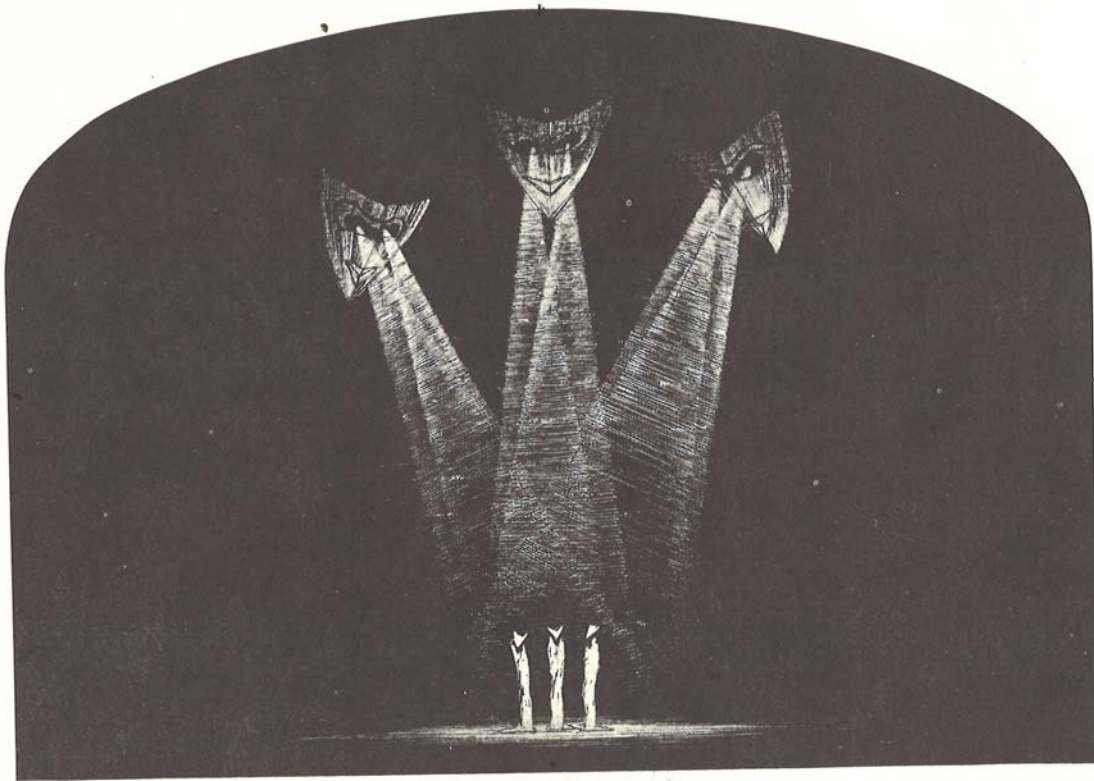


Fig. 33:  
Jones, *Macbeth*  
(Jones and Oenslager 12)

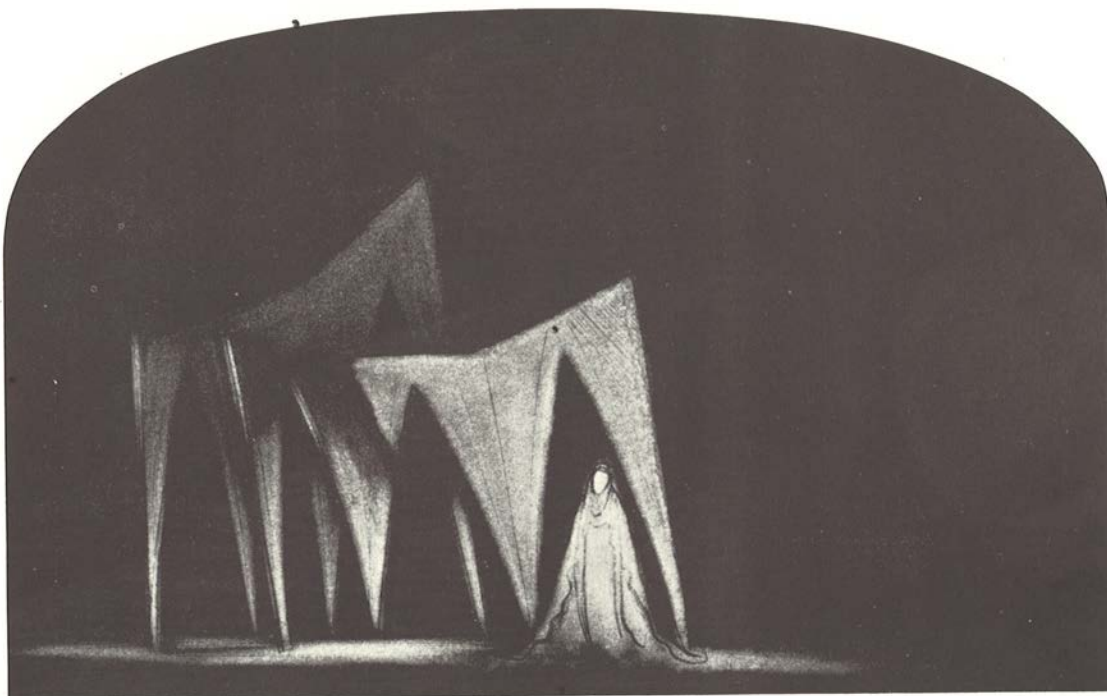


Fig. 34:  
Jones, *Macbeth*  
(Jones and Oenslager 13)



Fig. 35:  
Jones, *Macbeth*  
(Jones and Oenslager 14)

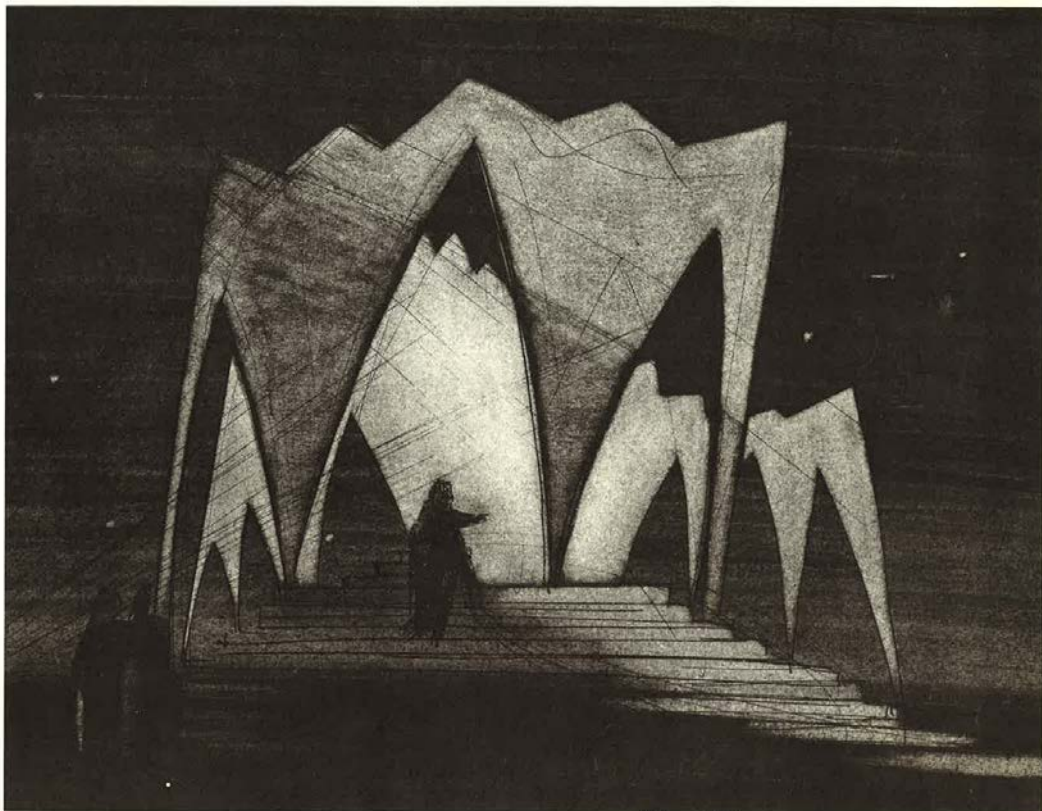


Fig. 36:  
Jones, *Macbeth*  
(Pendleton 41)



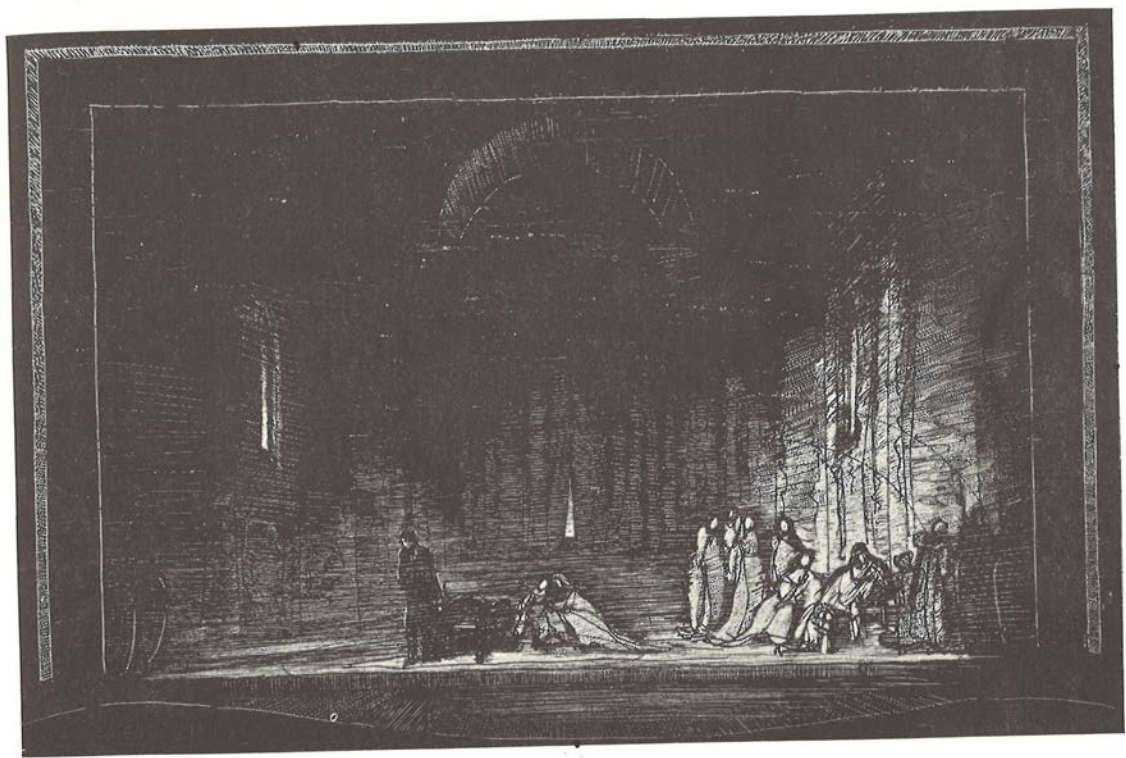


Fig. 37:  
Jones, *Hamlet*  
(Jones and Oenslager 19)



Fig. 38:  
Jones, *Hamlet*  
(Jones and Oenslager 20)



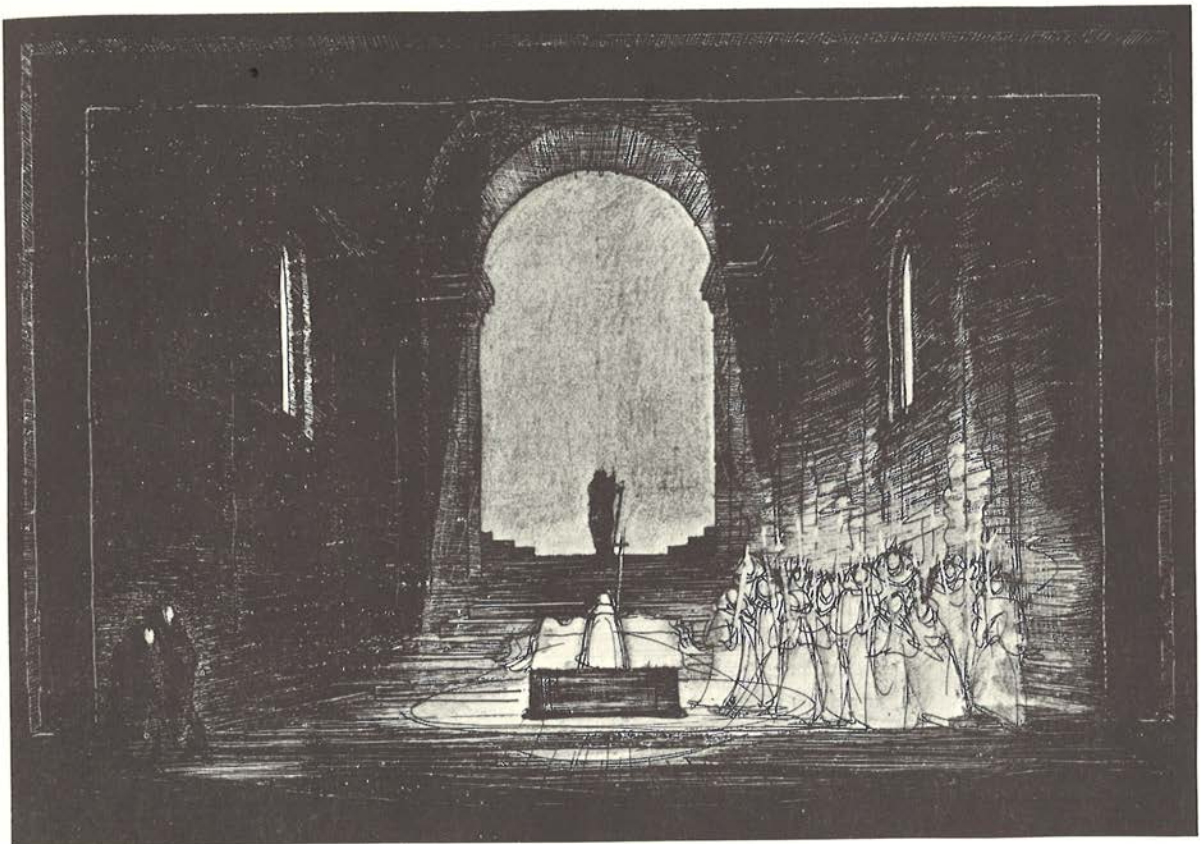


Fig. 39:  
Jones, *Hamlet*  
(Jones and Oenslager 23)

In Jones' design for *Macbeth* (Fig. 33-36), we see a space in which architecture is almost completely replaced by a psychological space. The witches, represented by giant masks far overhead; the tentlike suggestions of rooms; the shafts of light penetrating the space from far above—the space suggests the pervasiveness of the supernatural, the destabilization of the crown, and the oppressiveness of the characters' psychological realities. Detail is mostly absent, replaced by sweeping gestures. Jones' *Hamlet* (Fig. 37-39), on the other hand, veers much farther towards replete architecture. The structure of the castle is intact, and bestowed with a certain level of detail. There are still no painted flats, and the staircases and other obstacles for moving bodies would please Appia. However the specificity of the architecture is in keeping with the authoritarian structure of the play. As seen before in Craig's design, the architecture of *Hamlet* is monumental and structured. Jones' principles of design observed previously—environments that surround the characters, expressing their inner and outer realities—still apply.



Fig. 40:  
Jones, *Pelleas et Melisande*  
(Pendleton 45)



Fig. 41:  
Jones, *Skyscrapers*  
(Pendleton 60)





Fig. 42:  
Jones, *The Green Pastures*  
(Pendleton 75)

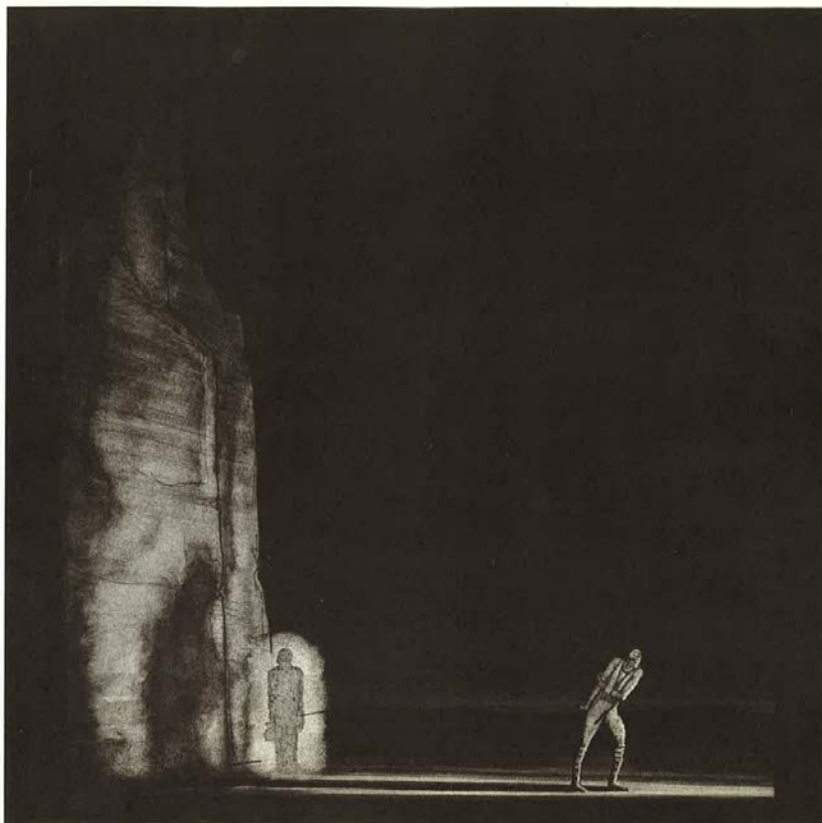


Fig. 43:  
Jones, *The Green Pastures*  
(Pendleton 77)



Finally we look at a few disparate designs of Jones' to see more of his wide range. His *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Fig. 40) and *Skyscrapers* (Fig. 41) are both highly expressive spaces in which Jones uses pure composition to create a rhythm and a tone. In *The Green Pastures* (Fig. 42-43), Jones relies on the play of light on planes and negative space. The first design is the essence of minimalism, with just a lit cyc that is bounded on either side, and seems to prefigure Robert Wilson's similar bottom-lit compositions.

The preceding designs show a wide range of styles and aesthetic priorities. The stories they tell and the art forms they support are all different, but they all conform to some vital overarching design principles. First, they all represent a singular coherent design idea. None is trying to do too many things at once—for the most part, each design creates only one type of image. Second, they all avoid drawing attention to themselves. Detail is kept to a minimum and none of it interferes with the people onstage. All the designs create a three-dimensional environment surrounding the performers, including plenty of empty space for the performers to inhabit. Because of these characteristics, none of the designs creates a complete image without people in it. Even when the designer has not drawn human figures, the design must be viewed as an environment that would surround human beings. In fact, this is why it is so important to show human figures in design sketches: the image is specifically made to have people in it. The design is not just context for the humans; it is the world that the people inhabit and that makes them who they are.

These properties put together a picture of how design can make strong, active statements while never pulling focus. As we can see in Jones' work in particular, a singular design gesture can be almost anything, architectural or abstract, realistic or expressionistic, subtle or bold, and as long as it makes space for people first and foremost, it will not interfere or distract. This is not just a matter of the physical content of the design; it is a mindset on the part of the designer from the beginning and throughout the design process. It is the genesis of the ideas, and the means of evaluating their efficacy.

Finally, Appia's integration of scenery and light provides great inspiration for the lighting design process. His scenic designs may not show the same aesthetic range as Jones or Craig, and he may be seen as an

innovator who broke away from the established practices of his time but whose work today looks somewhat pedestrian and dated. However, the way his sets include and motivate light may be held up as a strong example for the collaboration between scenic and lighting design. This lighting designer in particular will continue to use his work as a benchmark in the practice of set exploration and generating ideas.

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