

# UP AND DOWN DIOTIMA'S STAIRCASE: SPACE AND METAPHYSICS IN SYMBOLIST AND EXPRESSIONIST THEATRE

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Heaven and earth together account for the verticality of an image.  
(Gaston Bachelard 1990, 121)

IN PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*, A DIALOGUE FOCUSED ON LOVE, the character 'Socrates' relates a story in which a woman named Diotima explains to him the different levels of value in the phenomenal world of appearance and the noumenal world of truth and reality. The lover who was developing his philosophical awareness would first love the body of another man, then beautiful bodies in general, then beautiful pursuits and practices, then beauty in learning. Finally he would love Beauty itself, the noumenal Form that neither begins nor perishes, nor changes in any way. To clarify her explanation, Diotima uses the metaphor of ascending a flight of stairs:

beginning from these beautiful things, to mount for that beauty's sake ever upwards, as if by a flight of steps, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits and practices, and from practices to beautiful learnings, so that from learnings he may come at last to that perfect learning which is the learning solely of that beauty itself, and may know at last that which is the perfection of beauty. 'There in life and there alone, my dear Socrates', said the inspired woman, 'is life worth living for man, while he contemplates Beauty itself (Rouse 1956, 105-6).

Diotima's staircase (or 'ladder') is a metaphor to explain Plato's theory of Forms, the basis of both his ontology and epistemology, and his principle legacy to Western philosophy.

In this paper I use the framework provided by Diotima's staircase to examine the relationship between theatre and metaphysics at the turn into the twentieth century, a time when shifting metaphysical positions both explicitly and implicitly drove Modernist—here specifically Symbolist and Expressionist—theatrical experimentation.<sup>1</sup> I argue that this shifting ground is especially manifest in the way Modernists dealt with that fundament of the theatrical medium, the arrangement of bodies and objects in space, and here I will focus specifically on the use of flights of stairs and multiple-level stage floors. I will also examine the kinds of bodies that were located on those stairs, as well as Symbolist and Expressionist lighting, because particular lighting effects were used during this period to complement

the use of stairs to create a sense of ascent and descent, of verticality, volume and suspension. I trace a trajectory that begins with two-dimensional Symbolist paintings of stairs, and the Symbolists' 'theatre of the mind' that sought, ultimately, to maintain a neo-Platonic and Cartesian separation of mind and body and hence eradicate the body from theatrical space. The pioneering work of Adolphe Appia and his 'rhythmic spaces', in which the body is regulated by music, then takes us through to Expressionism's embodied 'phenomenal' theatre and spaces in which the frequent use of actual stairs is tied to theories of ecstatic physical performance. This shift constitutes a move from proto-Modernist to a more fully Modernist theatre, and crystallises into a highly condensed form a much longer process that had been taking place ever since Aristotle challenged Plato's theory of Forms with his own empiricist theory of 'Indwelling Form', and continues today in the work of some cognitive scientists who relegate all metaphysics to the status of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call "embodied metaphors" (1999, 3-8).

Stairs are particularly resonant as a meeting place of metaphysics and theatre. In an article titled "Stairways of the Mind", architect Juhani Pallasmaa argues that

[L]ike painting and poetry, architecture is engaged in articulating and expressing the human existential experience. The art of architecture creates spatial and material metaphors of our fundamental existential encounters . . . An architectural metaphor is a highly abstracted and condensed ensemble that fuses the multitude of human experiences into a single image (2000, 7).

The stairway, with its symbolism of connection both to more rarefied realities above and darker and less appealing realities below, is deeply rooted in mythology, and is a particularly resonant example of such architectural metaphors. Stairs are embedded in the archaic space of our consciousness, an essence prototype or embodied concept, in Lakoff and Johnson's terms (1999, 20). Cooper reports that, in the mythology of many cultures, stairs connote the "passage from one plane to another or from one mode of being to another" and "the ascending power of man's consciousness passing through all degrees of existence". She further comments that stairs and ladders represent "communication between heaven and earth with a two-way traffic of the ascent of man and the descent of the divinity", and "access to reality, the Absolute, the Transcendent, going from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality" (1978, 94). Baldon and Melchior, in a book devoted to stairs and stairways as an architectural feature, suggest, "[i]t is not without reason that the stairway is called a flight, for by it, foot over foot, earthbound man may rise to the height of birds" (1989, 13).

Diotima's staircase is a very early example of the metaphysics of stairs, for they clearly express Plato's theory of Forms. Although the various Platonic dialogues present slightly different and sometimes even self-critical propositions, and elements in his philosophy changed during the course of his lifetime, the main line of his system remained firm. *Noumena*—transcendent realities—literally 'things that are perceived by *nous*' (or Mind), are differentiated from phenomena, 'things that appear', that display themselves to the senses, imperfect manifestations of *noumena* in the material world. *Noumena* are in a state of Being while phenomena are in a state of Becoming, and these are entirely different orders of reality. Plato presents this fundamental dualism in a number of key texts (for example *Phaedo*, 73-7, *Republic*, VI, especially 517b, 524c, and VII, the 'cave' allegory), in which he asserts that all material objects, sensations and even concepts of this world (such as justice), are partial, ephemeral and unreliable; they are mere appearance, and in a state of constant flux. The higher truths and realities, unchanging, perfect paradigmatic examples of such phenomena, exist independently of human perception in a transcendent realm, and can only be perceived through rational thought. These entities are the 'Ideas' or 'Forms'.<sup>2</sup> *Phenomena* are perceived merely by means of the senses, and cannot

therefore be truly 'known', a term that applies only to rational thought and to an object that is permanent and unchanging. Becoming is sensible, Being is knowable.

The famous 'cave' allegory clearly sets out the thrust and effect of this dichotomy in terms as gradually vertical as Diotima's staircase. Prisoners chained in a cave facing the wall are unable to turn around or even turn their heads. Behind them is a fire, and between the fire and their backs is a parapet, where puppeteers operate puppets. The light from the fire throws shadows of the puppets and other objects onto the wall in front of the prisoners, and since this is all that they can see, they assume they are seeing the 'real' things. What they actually see are mere shadows, appearances, or 'phenomena'. When one of the men in the cave turns around and sees the fire, he realises the error of his former vision. Once he has become accustomed to the new light, he then realises that up the incline to the outside world there is an even brighter and truer light, the sun, which is seen in this analogy to represent the ultimate truth, the highest good. In the cave allegory, it is not enough for the wise man to perceive the 'sun' of true reality outside the cave and attained wisdom; it is his duty towards humanity to descend into the cave again and try to teach the nature of reality to his fellow men. Like Socrates, he may be ridiculed and even put to death. This re-application of the theory of Forms to the everyday life of transient human beings in the phenomenal world, and more specifically to the organisation of the state, is a second philosophical legacy that Plato left to the Western world. As Guthrie puts it, "[n]o real reform of the fundamentals of political thought could take place without a corresponding reform of men's ideas about the whole nature of reality" (1989, 94).

The ascent and re-descent of Diotima's Staircase, an expression of a metaphysical system developed at the turn into the Fourth Century B.C., is, as I will show, a perfectly apt means to analyse the use of staircases—painted and then actual—at the turn into the Twentieth Century A.D., in Symbolist and Expressionist theatre.

### **The Symbolist Staircase: Bodies Ascending**

The following is a description of a haunting poster that appeared in the streets of Paris early in 1892:

[The poster] depicted three female figures, one of them nude and sunk into the mire of daily life, slime dripping from her finger tips. The remaining two ascend a celestial staircase. Of these, one is darkly dressed and occupies the middle ground. She offers a lily to a near-transparent figure higher on the stairs who has left life's pollution far behind. This latter figure represents pure Idealism . . . Masses of clouds and stars swarm about the mountain peaks at the top of the stairs (Pincus-Witten 1976, 102; and see his Figure 8).

The poster, by Carlos Schwabe, announced the first Salon of the Order of the Rosy-Cross and the Grail and the Temple, the first of a series of mystical, Idealist exhibitions and performances in Paris from 1892 till 1897, under the leadership of Josephin Peladan, known as *le Sâr* (an ancient Assyrian word for magus or King). The theme of the poster is 'Initiation': by ascending the stairs of this quasi-secret society and devoting oneself to the Idealist art that it practiced, the initiate would gain access to higher truths. The higher one went up the staircase, the poster suggests, the less corporeal would be our bodies. The stairs in Schwab's poster also evoke the ascent to the sunlight on Diotima's Staircase, and in Plato's 'Cave' allegory. Those unfortunate human beings confined inside the cave, watching the shadow play of daily life on the cave wall, are symbolised by the "nude . . . sunk into the mire of daily life", and the ethereal figure further up the stairs is on her way to a pure perception of Truth outside the cave. The aim of these exhibitions and performances was partly to represent Symbolist ideals, but perhaps more importantly to actually help bring about the (apparently immanent) transformation of

the mud of daily life into the transcendent sunshine of neo-Platonic truth mixed with occult Catholicism. Peladan, as it were, was to descend the staircase with news of the truth above.

For the Symbolists, stairs like the ones in Schwabe's poster symbolised the transitional status of human existence. In the context of 'Symbolism' as a movement of the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries, the term 'symbol' has metaphysical connotations. According to the Russian Symbolist poet and playwright, Vyacheslav Ivanov, the symbol has the power to take us from *realia* or 'the real' (in the ordinary sense) to *realiora*, 'the 'more real' (West 1970, 57). Fellow Russian Symbolist Andre Bely asserted that the symbol also had the potential to 'render the immaterial material', to manifest the 'more real' in daily life (Morrison 2002, 3; West 1970, 87). The symbol reveals or suggests, but does not directly name, the hidden essence and meaning behind material life. As Henri de Regnier, a follower of Mallarmé famously asserted in 1900, "a symbol is a kind of comparison between the abstract and the concrete in which one of the terms of the comparison is only suggested" (in Balakian 1982, 27). Symbolist metaphysics explicitly rejected the concrete and phenomenal in favour of the abstract and noumenal. Human existence, or at least material existence in the form it had taken by the end of the nineteenth century, was seen to be a painful alienation from the divine Idea, and the ultimate aim of Symbolist art was precisely to transform this material reality into a spiritual realm of (largely Christianised) Platonic Forms.<sup>3</sup>

A number of Symbolist paintings of the period explored the alienated space of human life by means of the staircase. In 1880 William Blake painted *Jacob's Ladder*, a depiction of the story in which Jacob dreams of a ladder that reaches up from earth to heaven. Similarly a new edition of the Holy Bible, published in 1886, featured Gustave Doré's *Jacob's Ladder*. In both paintings, a long, ethereal staircase dominates the painting, and Doré's painting bears a considerable likeness to Schwabe's poster some six years later. In Georges Rochegrosse's *Madness of Nebuchadnezzar* (1886) set in the ancient Babylonian past, stairs depict a downward 'Fall' (see Bohrer 2003, 260; fig. 67). At the top of the stairs, light shines on a group of onlookers who stare down a staircase at the king sprawled at the bottom in the semi-darkness. The cause of his madness, a semi-transparent spectre of an angel with sword drawn standing on the King's head, is also visible. In another painting by Rochegrosse, *Fall of Babylon* (1891), a huge set of stairs dominates the centre of the canvas. At the top of the stairs there is a throne; at the bottom and strewn around the floor area are naked and semi-naked women lying in their own disgrace. The room they are in is vaulted and monumental, a picture of a once proud but now all too human palace.<sup>4</sup> Other Symbolist painters, such as Gustave Moreau, had expressed interest in palaces and ancient Jewish and Egyptian mythology in which small sets of steps are centrally placed.<sup>5</sup> Some spaces in Symbolist painting that allowed and encouraged one to dream of transcending the material world were associated with water. In these kinds of spaces, says Jullian, one might see "those who wished so fervently to become spirits that they soon became nothing more than shadows" (Jullian 1973, 21).

An extreme simplicity and focus on painting (and poetry) precluded, as far as I am able to ascertain, the use of actual staircases and multi-level floors, but Symbolist stage design took from Symbolist painting its aesthetic, and from Symbolist metaphysics its aims.<sup>6</sup> The sense of vertical aspiration symbolised by the painted stairs was, in any case, present in Symbolist theatre despite the lack of actual staircases. Deak points out that much Symbolist theatre involved notions of initiation—a notion implying upward movement and that these plays fell into two categories: "inner development, in which individual stages of this development are part of the dramatic plot", and liminal or 'static drama' in which 'the hero is suspended between two states', the plays of Peladan generally falling into the first category, and those of Maeterlinck into the second (Deak 1993, 127-8). Moreover a major influence on the Symbolists as a whole was Richard Wagner's intensely spiritual music and staging. A photograph

of the 1882 production his *Parsifal* at the Festspielhaus Bayreuth Bildarkiv shows the religious monumentality of the stage area with a strong sense of volume and connection to the heavens (in both an upward and downward direction) (see Baugh 2005, 22; Figure 6). Light seems to shine on the semi-circular group of performers from the huge dome above them.

The absence of actual stairs on the Symbolist stage is tied to their theatrical aims, which in turn is driven by Symbolism's neo-Platonic metaphysics. In his examination of the metaphysics of stairs, Palasmaa suggests that, in addition to the door, "the stair is that element of architecture which is encountered most concretely and directly by the body" (2000, 9). And it was exactly the body that Symbolist theatre wished to eradicate from theatrical space. For Peladan and fellow Symbolists, poetry was the primary form of art—Baudelaire wrote that "poetry is the most real thing we have, what is only made completely real in another world" (in Grant 1970, 48)—and their attitude to the insistent corporeality of live theatre was notoriously ambiguous: Maeterlinck complained in 1890 of the "disgust which all artists feel as the curtain rises" and calls the theatre of his day 'the prison of dream—the gaol of art' (in McGuinness 2000, 91). The 'malaise' they felt in the theatre was caused not only by the fact they judged the theatre of the day to be base, but because for the Symbolists there was a fundamental antipathy between the 'sullyng corporeality' of theatre on the one hand, and the extra-physical aspirations of the symbol on the other. Maeterlinck claimed that "[a]ll masterpieces are symbols, and the symbol can never sustain the active presence of the human being" (in McGuinness 2000, 94). Theatrical performance, said Maeterlinck, "puts things back exactly where they were before the arrival of the poet" (McGuinness, 97).<sup>7</sup> Private reading, Mallarme's 'theatre of the mind' or conceptual theatre is therefore to be preferred.

Despite the difficulty they had with the body, there were over ninety new Symbolist productions in the last decade of the nineteenth century (McGuinness, 101). Their difficulty was to remove the body from the space, and their techniques therefore were strongly based in the suggestive potential of poetry, in the ear more than the eye. Strategies employed or suggested for this included a monotone, anti-expressive delivery, variously described by recourse to verbs such as 'psalmodise', 'intone', and so on; a focus in delivery on 'verbal orchestration' that emphasised the musical qualities of the text, especially vowel sounds, and the eradication of 'the theatrical voice' in favour of 'the poetic voice'. Since the actor's body remained necessary, strategies for its depersonalisation included the use of formal, hieratic gesture and slow movement with a 'ritualised' feel; the use of shadows rather than the fully corporeal human actor; the use of heavy make-up that removed the actor's identity and resembled a mask, and full-length costumes that hid the actor's physical particularities. And if the distraction of the actor's presence could not be overcome, then the complete eradication of all human presence from the stage was recommended. Deak suggests that the techniques developed by Symbolist actors may have been influenced by the late nineteenth century puppet company, Petit Théâtre de Marionnettes, and that, overall, Symbolist theatre "raised the issue of representation in such a way as to put the existence of the live actor into question" (Deak 1993, 171; 174-175).

### **Appia's Stairs: platforms for the body**

The translation of staircases from Symbolist painting to actual three dimensional stairs in theatrical space was principally the innovation of Adolphe Appia, whose reforms, with those of Edward Gordon Craig and others, helped transform the proto-Modernist theatre of the Symbolists into Expressionist and other 'Modernist' theatre forms.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Wagner (the staging of whose operas Appia was initially so intimately associated with) through music, and the Symbolists, through poetry, had sought to achieve a spiritual renewal by eradicating the body from two-dimensional, illusionistic space, Appia used music to bring the body back into the space in a dynamic and plastic relationship with spatial

depth and volume. This was Appia's principle gift to the twentieth century. A dynamic simplicity is evident in reproductions of Adolphe Appia's so-called 'rhythmic spaces', designs drawn from around 1909 while working with Jacques-Dalcroze at Hellerau (Bergman 1977, 328). In them you can see the prevalence of actual platforms and stairs, an enormous simplicity of conception, and the sense of monumentality and volume I mentioned earlier in connection with Wagner and the Symbolists. Dalcroze founded a method of learning and experiencing music through physical movement, and what was rhythmic about these spaces was that they were designed for this musically motivated movement, as well as to energise the physical space. By 1912 the studio at Hellerau had been adapted to the design of these drawings, with a single room divided into three sections of roughly equal length: steeply raked stairs and platforms, open floor, and audience seating.

Images of performances in this new studio reveal the dynamism of the actors' physical work on these stairs, and it is clear that in Appia's conception stairs and the bodies were intimately linked. In stark contrast to his early Symbolist influences, Appia considered the actor moving through space as the first cause of theatre, the primary element that all other elements of space and light must relate to in order for theatre to be 'living'. In *The Work of Living Art* he emphasises that the weight and rigidity of inanimate forms in space are as essential to a living theatre as the human body. How different this is to the floating softness of Symbolist painting and bodiless poetry! As Appia writes, "[t]o receive its portion of life from the living body, space must oppose this body . . . opposition to the body gives life to the inanimate forms of space" (Appia 1960, 27). We can see this living relationship most clearly in the bodies on stairs of his rhythmic spaces, because of "the obstacle they [the stairs] form to free walking, and the expression they give to the body" (Appia 1960, 25). The rigid step, he explains,

await[s] the foot only to resist it, to throw it back at each new step, and to prepare it for a new resistance; through its rigidity, such a surface involves the whole organism in the spontaneity of walking. By opposing itself to life, the ground, like the pillar, can receive life from the body (1960, 29).

Elsewhere he writes about the platforms that they were: "a style suitable for establishing the value of the human body under the control of music" (Bergman 1977, 325).

The plasticity and dynamism of light, which for Appia is intimately linked to stairs, bodies, and music, is another of his most lasting legacies. Appia employed light as "visual music" (Bergman 1977, 325), sculpting the plastic stage with it, unifying objects and colours, and emphasizing the dramatic values of the body. Appia differentiated 'diffused light', used simply to allow vision from 'living light': that which sculpted the living actor with its sharp and tight rays (Bergman 1977, 324-5). In a 1911 article, he wrote of

light without which there is no plasticity; light which fills the room with brightness and moving shadow . . . And the bodies, basking in its animating atmosphere, will find themselves in it and greet the Music of Space (in Bergman 1977, 324-5).

The shift that begins in Appia's work, in other words, is that the body is no longer ascending Diotima's staircase into Symbolist exile, but placed centrally once more in a stage space dominated by stairs.

### **Expressionist Stairs: the body descending**

Appia's work, along with that of Edward Gordon Craig, laid the foundations for the physical dynamism of German Expressionist theatre of the second and third decades of the twentieth centuries, in which stairs were used so often they became almost a *sine qua non* and, for some, a cliché. And it was in Expressionist theatre that the exploitation of the actor's dynamic physicality reached its peak in

Modernist theatre, and directional lighting was most dramatically employed. Craig's resistance to the corporeality of the actor is initially marked, and like Maeterlinck and other Symbolists, he advocated the use of puppets to replace actors, because the actor did not possess the physical precision required by art. But Craig's principle legacy to Modernist theatrical space is his concept of moving screens that could provide dynamism to the stage like Appia's light and—after he fell in love with the dancer Isadora Duncan, perhaps—the moving body. Moving platforms were impractical, but screens could be moved to increase the architectonic liveness of the stage space. Some of Craig's drawings also reveal a preoccupation with stairs (see, for example, his 1905 'Steps' series, some of his 1907 'Scenes', and his 1909 designs for *Macbeth*). Indeed in a catalogue to an exhibition of some of these designs in England in 1912, Craig used the action of climbing steps to distinguish drama from literature, where the action was only described.<sup>9</sup> There was something about real steps that spoke to Craig of three-dimensional theatre. Stairs and platforms also made their mark in the Russian avant-garde stage. Alexander Tairov, at the Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, for example, expressed similar sentiments to Appia about the value of stairs and platforms.<sup>10</sup> In Expressionist theatre the staircase appeared from the very beginning. In Reinhard Sorge's *Der Bettler*, recognised as the first truly Expressionist play, the 'poet' descends the staircase at the end of the play to a deserted lower level; a "a powerful image", Patterson writes, "of the artist turning from the exploitation of his art to descend wearily into the wilderness" (1981, 55). There were many other uses of stairs in Expressionist theatre, for example in Alfred Roller's *Faust Part 2*, at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1911, for Act III of Georg Kaiser's *Die Bürger von Calais*, written in 1913 and staged in 1917, and for Ernst Toller's *Masse Mensch*, directed by Jürgen Fehling at the Berlin Volksbühne in 1921 (Kuhns 1997, 211).

Stairs and steps in Expressionist theatre, however, are most strongly associated with Leopold Jessner, who used them so often that they became known as the *Jessnertreppen*, or 'Jessner's Steps'. The stairs first appear in his work in 1920 in the Fourth Act of *Richard III*. Patterson's description is worth quoting:

[a]s the curtain rose at the end of the interval after the third act, a monumental flight of blood-red steps was revealed, its base filling almost the whole breadth of the stage, rising in three narrowing sets to just below the height of the wall . . . Richard, in a long crimson robe, slowly mounted the red steps [for his coronation] through two lines of bowing henchmen. As he reached the top to ascend his throne, the red of the steps was linked to the red of the sky by the crimson of Richard's gown, as though an electric charge of evil had leapt the gap between heaven and earth . . . Later the same steps were used as the battlefield on which Richard assembled his warriors, on which Richard passed the nightmare-filled hours before battle, and on which the battle itself took place (Patterson 1981, 93).

After this production, Jessner was so taken by the steps that he just kept on using them, to the eventual chagrin of even his principle actor, Fritz Kortner (Kuhns 1997, 210).

Stairs were the tool by which Jessner wanted his actors to embody the idea of the production, not just represent or suggest it (as a Symbolist might do). The physical expressiveness of the actor's body is, apart from the stairs, the most characteristic aspect of the Expressionist acting event. Kuhns argues that "the co-operative efforts of the productions' artists", including scenic and lighting designers, "converged definitively on the body and voice of the actor . . . whose performance in turn infused the stage environment with great energy" (Kuhns 1997, 2-3). Drawings and photographs of productions such as Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (1916), Sorge's *Der Bettler* (1917), Toller's *Masse Mensch* (1921) and others, reveal the dramatic use of directional lighting, the contrast between static and dynamic

postures, contorted bodies, and emphasise how far the use of the actor's body here has shifted from the hieratic and ceremonial Symbolist theatre. And although ecstatic states were not characteristic of all kinds of Expressionist performance, they were strongly associated with the movement, and formed a central focus of Expressionists' own theory.<sup>11</sup> *Ecstasis* involved "stepping outside of oneself . . . to become the embodiment of poetic form". By removing unnecessary elements from the stage and the body, the actor sought to reveal and transform his soul, considered to be "the only reality" (Gordon 1975, 35). The Jessnertreppen were designed to assist in this great aim. Together with strongly directional lighting and dark shadows which sculpted the actor's ecstatic body, the stage space, so different to the ethereal and transparent Symbolist stage, was rhythmic and thick with resistance, something that was felt, as the dancer Mary Wigham put it, as if one were in water (in Kuhns 1997, 92). Expressionist stage space did not reflect the external world but set about "reconstituting it poetically from within" (Kuhns 1997, 92), and Gordon notes that the Jessnertreppen's contribution to this aim was to signify

the relationships between characters and their individual psychic states; it increased the actor's plastic possibilities, allowing him to be more easily perceived in depth; it rhythmically heightened the impact of slow, fast or disjointed movements; and it created a novel aesthetic unity that was thought to be lacking in other Expressionist productions (Gordon 1975, 50).

The point I want to stress here is that, just as they were for Plato's Diotima and the Symbolists, Expressionist stairs represented and expressed a metaphysical position, but one that, despite some statements that sound superficially Platonic, was now radically different from the one expressed by Diotima. Kuhns reports on an interview in which Jessner "cautioned critics against regarding the staircase as merely a stylistic signature. Rather, it was simply the most effective setting for playing the 'mythic events' which comprise the 'idea' of a play" (Kuhns 1997, 210). As Jessner himself is reported to have said,

the erection of the steps—as an autonomous architectural element—meant altering the base of the stage in accordance with its new function, which was now no longer to reproduce different rooms and landscapes but to be the abstract setting of mythical events (in Patterson 1981, 94).

This was Jessner's *Motivtheater* (theatre of motifs), one in which the aim was to embody the central production concept on stage. According to Kortner, the stairs represented Jessner's *Weltanschauung*, and it is instructive that for Kortner, who believed the steps were originally his idea, not Jessner's, the stairs, and the action of climbing them, were an image of "a career" in which one rose "right up into the dizzying heights" (Kuhns 1997, 197). Patterson sees the steps as giving concrete form to "the transcendent quality of Expressionism . . . a correlative of the soaring lyricism and philosophical search for a higher reality" (Patterson 1981, 94). According to a contemporary German theatre critic, Alfred Polgar, the steps were infused with a Platonic metaphysic:

They narrow towards the top and are free-standing in space. A sign that we are not to regard them as steps but as a vertical playing surface which we imagine stretching into infinity . . . This is surely the Platonic idea behind Jessner's steps . . . The performance gains a new dimension; the characterless movement to right or left is replaced by extremely meaningful moves up or down (Patterson 1981, 94).

While I agree with the general tenor of these statements, the difference between the Symbolist and Expressionist use of steps is precisely one between a neo-Platonic and a post-Nietzschean metaphysic.



The photographic reproductions of Jessner's steps make this amply clear. While Symbolist depictions of stairs lead ever upwards into an increasingly ethereal mist, the steps used in Jessner's *Richard III* lead to the top of a wall which doubles as a rampart, and behind this narrow level is another wall that quite clearly cannot be climbed. There is no virtual, mystical space beyond the top of those stairs. Central to Expressionist theory was the value of Man, and the search for personal spiritual renewal and oneness with "the true, inner ecstatic reality of life" (Gordon 1975, 35). What drove the Expressionist actor was not a desire to ascend Diotima's staircase out of this world, as in Symbolist theatre, but a "longing to be fully and irresponsibly alive" (Kuhns 1997, 92). A regenerated soul meant that the actor (and hopefully individuals in the audience) would experience a renewed sense of oneness with their fellow men as he attempted, in Georg Kaiser's phrase, to become "dissolved in humanity" (in Kuhns 1997, 30-31). The regeneration of society that Expressionists as much as Symbolists sought was now to be achieved via the body in actual, material space. Plato's metaphysic had been inverted.

The strong trace here of Schopenhauer's 'Will' and Nietzsche's 'Dionysian life force' is unmistakable. As Kuhns argues, from Schopenhauer Expressionist acting derived the notion of Will, that non-rational force "which disguises itself in phenomenal experience and impels the universe onward with the force of its own ruthless self-assertion" (Kuhns 1997, 28-29). Schopenhauer had insisted that the whole body is nothing but objectified will, that the movement of the body and Will were one and the same thing (Kuhns 1997, 30). Nietzsche gave to Expressionist theatre his Dionysian life force, a more positive spin on the pain of being alive, and a metaphysical—or rather an anti-metaphysical, anti-Platonic—model for ecstatic performance that connected to a naturally regenerating essence, the *élan vital* of specifically communal life. Writing in Germany during the latter period of Expressionist theatre (his masterpiece, *Being and Time* was published in 1927), Martin Heidegger claimed that art was an 'intuition of Being', a means of knowing 'what it is to be', and for the Expressionists, as for Heidegger, 'being' for humanity was *being there*, spatially and temporally 'in the world', not *out* of it in a transcendent realm.

### **Concluding Comments**

I have argued that the changing metaphysical position that is evident in Symbolist and Expressionist theatre is intimately connected to the way that painted stairways in Symbolist art became actual stairways and multi-level stage floors in the work of Adolphe Appia and German Expressionist theatre—in fact, this is also true of the Russian avant-garde theatre—and that this development involved the emergence (or re-emergence) on these stairs of the energised actor's body. Symbolism was the inheritor of a fundamentally anti-theatrical, anti-body and neo-Platonic vector in Western philosophy; transcendent Symbolism took the epiphanic aspects of Plato's rationalism towards mysticism, gnosis and the noumenal, and sought regeneration through adherence to classical simplicity of line and a belief in what Nietzsche called Apollinian form. The Symbolists remained in a theatre of the mind, separated at an objective distance from the stage, and stuck in a nineteenth century concept of two-dimensional, illusionistic stage design which "does not submit to any embodied immersion in space" (Wiles 2003, 7). A more phenomenal vector, nurtured by Nietzsche and later Heidegger, fed into (and out of) Expressionism and other 'modernist', anti-metaphysical expressions. Expressionist theatre, after Adolphe Appia's innovations with stage plasticity and depth, and a strong focus on the dynamic actor, brought the body back into theatrical space with a vengeance in an attempt to reconnect with their fellow human beings through an experience of Nietzsche's Dionysian delirium. The use of a monolithic metaphorical image such as the staircase is typical, in fact, of the stage design of the period I have been examining. Aronson points out that "[m]odern stage design has been characterised by the presence of a strong metaphorical or presentational image or related series of images".

There was a sense of singular, ‘organic’ and ‘monolithic’ unity about these images, aptly described by Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of modernism as “a meta-discourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (1984, xxiii). Modern design, says Aronson, functioned by creating a “meta-narrative that attempts to encompass the world within a unified image” (Aronson, 2005, 13-4). The staircase was such an image, and tracking its use in Modernist theatre provides valuable insight into the crucial developments during this time in the connection between theatrical practice and metaphysical convictions.

### Postscript

Mel Gordon recounts an amusing story about the perils of the *Jessnertreppen* in performance: “at the premiere of *Macbeth* [in 1922], Kortner, in a ‘possessed’ state of mind, lost his footing on the stairs and went sliding down the length of the platform” (1975, 50). But the postscript to this reading of the relationship between Modernist theatre and metaphysics has a rather more sombre side, for Schopenhauer’s pessimism lurked at the bottom of those stairs. Lee Simonson’s 1922 description of the wonderful effect of the *Jessnertreppen* in *Richard III* (1920) is prophetic:

[h]ow immensely the movement of the second part was enhanced by the staircase when Richard appeared at the summit, when his men in red and Richmond’s in white moved up and down it with all the symbolism of opposing forces, groups mounting towards its apex in imminent struggle. And what a contrast to all heightened movement as Richard descends slowly at the end in utter lassitude, to dream his last dream at its base (in Gordon 1975, 50).

Richard’s lassitude and his lost dream was also that of the Expressionists, once the initial fervour of the movement had, by the mid 1920s, lost its optimistic side. The hoped for regeneration of German society lead only to Hitler, who in the early 1930s squashed them under his heel. Kuhns suggests that Expressionist performance “located its historical efficacy in the inspirational power over audiences that allegedly emanated from an ecstatically ‘possessed’ stage” (Kuhns 1997, 90). But he further suggests that the highly energised Expressionist acting event, metaphorised and embodied by the *Jessnertreppen*, was not powerful enough to move social behaviour in the way that Hitler’s oratory influenced the nation. The terrible irony of the *Jessnertreppen* was the fact that placed centrally in the Nazi performance of power were huge rallies “where phalanxes of enrapt automatons gazed up at their Führer, who stood at the apex of a monumental flight of stairs” (Kuhns 1997, 223).

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### Notes

1. Whether or not Symbolism is seen as ‘Modernist’ depends, I think, on whether you are looking at it forwards from 1870 or backwards from 1930, but either way Symbolism was a crucial turning away from Romanticism and towards Modernism.
2. Neither of these usual English translations captures the force of the Greek *idèa*, which does not imply a material substance or shape (as does ‘Form’), nor does it imply (as does ‘Idea’) that the entity exists in our minds. The idea are immaterial, mind-independent essences.
3. The tendency to regard the phenomena of human life as alienated phenomenal objectifications of the divine, or *noumenal*, realm, with, however, both the desire and the possibility of reunion with divinity, had been strong in both Plato (see, for example, *Phaedo* 67c-d, where the body is specifically referred to as the ‘chains’ or ‘binding’ around the soul, a ‘prison’ one might be glad to be released from) and German Idealist philosophy

throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See, for example, the views of Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780-1819), *Philosophy of Art*, cited in Szondi, 2002, 24).

4. The next painting, *The Fall of Babylon*, is reproduced as fig. 69, in Bohrer 2003 on page 263. It is possible that the setting of paintings such as these was influenced by the vaulted domes of the Assyro-Chaldean Gallery in the Louvre at this time, and by the heightened pace of archaeological discoveries in the late nineteenth century in Europe.

5. For example, *Salomé Dancing* (1874-76), reproduced in Jullian 1973 (fig. 89) and ‘Salomé’ (1876) as fig. 102.

6. So important was painting for the Symbolist theatre that Paul Fort, at the Théâtre d’Art, announced in January 1891 that they would be closing each evening with static *mise en scène* of a Symbolist painting as a *tableau vivant* (Beacham 1987, 5).

7. For Maeterlinck poetry is “a detour, and never speaks face to face . . . It is the provisional mask behind which the faceless unknown fascinates us” (McGuinness 2000, 96).

8. Appia was no doubt drawing on the work of others. Several sources report that Appia was influenced by the use of platforms and multi-level floors at Anton Hiltl’s Brunswick Court theatre (Beacham 1987, 10). I have not been able to locate any further information on this.

9. The quote is from the catalogue of an exhibition of drawings and models for ‘*Hamlet, Macbeth, The Vikings and Other Plays*’ by Edward Gordon Craig, City of Manchester Art Gallery, November 1912, no.162, cited in White 2006, 97 and 103, note 10).

10. See Tairov’s comments on stairs and platforms at his Kamerny Theatre in van Baer 1992, 182.

11. Many commentators differentiate between three kinds of Expressionist theatre: the Geist performance, the *Schrei*, ‘scream’ or ‘ecstatic’ performance, and the *Ich*, or ‘I’ performance, but Kuhns argues that ecstatic performance was present ‘to some degree in every Expressionist approach to acting’ (1997, 90). Mel Gordon differentiates between the aims of Expressionist playwrighting and performance (1975, 34), and Patterson (1981, 48-59) focuses his discussion of Expressionist theatre on two main tendencies, Abstractionism and Primitivism; in the latter, the tendency towards an immediate, intense and ecstatic performance style, a primal scream in a more chaotic and distorted space, was more marked.

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