

Osbert Lancaster and the Littlehampton Connection

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In *Who's Who*, where his activities and honours occupy a fat three or four column inches, Sir Osbert Lancaster gives his recreation as 'topography'. This could also sum up fairly well the character and style of his work for the stage, whether ballet or opera or drama is concerned, but it doesn't properly convey the extra factor of a gently mocking or knocking wit that pervades all his designs. For what we get, in addition to the authenticity he brings to the re-creation not just of a period but often of an exact year, delights less by its scholarship than by the pricking of pretension and the poke of parody. To deeply 'committed' directors, he thinks, this is probably disconcerting.

Curiously, as the retrospective exhibition of some of his work (now, alas, closed) at

the Redfern Gallery has reminded us, Osbert Lancaster seems to have arrived on the theatrical scene quite late in his life, and almost by accident — one of those happy accidents of having old friends that has meant so much to invention and taste in the theatre. His first designs were for John Cranko's energising romp for the Sadlers Wells Ballet *Pineapple Poll*, back in 1951. 'They'd asked John Piper, of course . . .', he remembers. 'He said "somehow I don't think it's quite my cup of tea. Why don't you have a go." So I did.' A year later came *Bonne Bouche*; again for Cranko, again a call for a stage crowded (Oh happy pre-depression days) with incident and colour. 'I don't think Ninette de Valois liked it much,' he says. 'Too frivolous, I suppose. Pity.'



The drawings for the *Bonne Bouche* costumes, and for the Old Vic's *She Stoops to Conquer*, ten years later, reflect perfectly, I think, his capacity to catch the mood of a period, suggesting not only how the dancers or actors should look, but also how they should move, and even how they should act. Even now, one feels, if you study the costume for Mrs Hardcastle in the Goldsmith play (reproduced here) it is possible to identify exactly how Peggy Mount played her. This would be true, too, of the many designs he has done for Opera at Glyndebourne, which will be on show there during *their* big exhibition later this year.

Above all, Osbert Lancaster, in a business too full of adumbrators, really draws. He takes great satisfaction in the drawn-to-scale and then painted backdrop to set a mood and for its ability to define and discipline a production. He views the fashion for bare stages and expressionist props, and the decline in importance of the proscenium with gentle distaste. He's not too keen on tee shirts and jeans either, one gathers. 'One trouble today, when you're designing costumes,' he says 'is that the younger generation seems to have forgotten how to wear clothes. But what can they do, poor dears, when they have to perform in theatres like prison yards, surrounded by scaffolding and search lights?'

As a designer, in keeping with the sort of scholarship that has brought him honorary degrees from no less than five universities, and made him, into the bargain, an honorary FRIBA, Osbert Lancaster is as meticulously attentive to the pictorial detail of productions as, in their diverse ways,