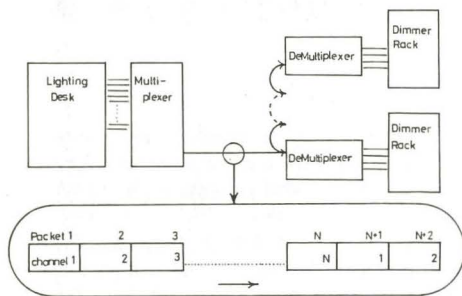


MULTIPLEXING IN THE THEATRE

IAN R. FUEGGLE

Multiplexed or Multiplexing is a term being used increasingly in technical descriptions of theatre control products and the like, not to mention micro-computers, personal computers, word-processors and even washing machines. So it is not exactly new, as some would have us believe, and for some years now American lighting boards have used Multiplexed or Digital Dimmer drives. Also CCT's successful MX colour wheels and more recently the large memory (multiplexed) Semaphore system, all use multiplexing techniques.

What is *multiplexing*? In simple terms it is the ability to feed lots and lots of information down a single wire at the same time, or very nearly the same time. What in fact happens is that the wire is *time shared*, the information being carried down the line in packets with each packet allotted its own segment of time in the wire. In practice the lighting control transmits instructions to the multiplexer which feeds the packets of coded information along the line to the De-Multiplexer. See Figure 1.



From there the signals are converted and passed to the correct channel at the dimmer.

What are the advantages of *multiplexing*. First there is the cost-saving of large runs of multicore cable, from control room to dimmer room, now replaced by one-, two- or three-core cable. Second, once established there is an increase of information available. For example the operator is warned if a fuse has blown or a lamp failed. Also it is not necessary to have all the dimmers in one place, with more than one De-Multiplexer the dimmer units can be placed wherever necessary, only linked by the Multiplexed line. Other advantages are of course increased speed and capacity.

However, the full benefits of multiplexing will only start to flow if a standardisation programme can be agreed between the manufacturers of theatre control systems. But now is the time to be doing the ground work by discussion through the ABTT and other learned societies. Let us by all means welcome lively and healthy competition, but at the same time let us also eliminate some of the confusion in customers' minds which comes from having too many different standards.

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OLIVER MESSEL (1904–1978) at the Victoria and Albert Museum

CHARLES SPENCER

The best way to approach the Oliver Messel Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, organised by the Theatre Museum, is as a slice of history. Messel can hardly be assessed as a great theatrical draughtsman, and there are serious limitations to his imaginative evocation of periods or themes. Yet he was one of the most sought-after and successful stage designers in British history, and enormously contributed to the pleasure of vast audiences.

Given the ephemerality of theatrical forms, with only a small percentage of work surviving for future consideration or revival, Messel emerges as the visual distillation of a particular period of British theatre, of a style and a taste now gone forever.

He was unashamedly a decorator. Roy Strong suggests that "his work was so hypnotic" because "after the starvation of the war years he swept his audiences away with his painterly stage visions." Therein lies a major clue. The post-war entertainment world, personified by Tennents in the theatre and Alexander Korda in films, decided that what the British public needed was colourful escapism after the tragic reality of war. They were clearly right, and successful. It was revival time, nostalgia, Oscar Wilde on stage and screen, the famous productions of John

Gielgud, the marzipan importation of Paulette Goddard as "the ideal wife", plus concoctions by Beaton, the poor man's Messel.

The sad historic irony is that the true begetter of the style, Rex Whistler, was killed in France in 1944, before he could deservedly



Self portrait by Oliver Messel at 17 Oil. 1922. Lent by Lord Snowdon.



Edith Evans as Lady Fidget and Ruth Gordon as Mrs Pinchwife, in the Country Wife, Old Vic Nov 1936. Photograph J. W. Debenham. Costumes and set by Oliver Messel. Theatre Museum Collection.