

dominate the post-war scene; he in turn was artistically descended from Ricketts, Sheringham, Lovat-Fraser, themselves inspired by the new designer-status of the Ballets Russes, palely imitating Bakstian fervour.

In the event Oliver Messel had little competition in living-out the visualisation of the post-war British theatre (shadowed but hardly rivalled by Beaton), heralded by his most innovative production, the 1946 version of *The Sleeping Beauty*. First seen in its entirety in the West in the Diaghilev/Bakst version in 1921, the great Russian classic was given a national interpretation by the Ballet Rambert in 1939, but had to await the birth of the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden for its essential splendour.

Oliver Messel was born in 1904 and at the age of 18 entered the Slade School of Art — before specialised theatrical courses. W. A. Probert the distinguished writer on the Ballet Russes, who ran the Claridge Gallery, exhibited Messel's Character Masks and introduced him to Diaghilev and C. B. Cochran. In 1925 the young Messel made his theatrical debut with masks for the Ballets Russes' *Zephyr et Flore* (designed by the great painter Braque), while his association with Cochran, from 1926, in a series of sophisticated revues, reached its apotheosis in 1932 when Messel designed two shows for the great Max Reinhardt — the revival of the mime-drama *The Miracle* at the Lyceum Theatre, and *Helen*, adapted from Offenbach, at the Adelphi.

It was the all-white decor for the latter that established the Messel style — with its derivation from contemporary, fashionable, interior decorators, such as Syrie Maugham. The style remained virtually unchanged, if not always at its best, for the rest of his career. How does one describe it, with its dangerous superficial frothiness and feathery grace, plus, at its best, the uncommitted elegance of English watercolour painting? The Baroque featheriness can be traced

to seventeenth-century French court designers — Gissey, Berain, etc. — with their carefully described detail (not imitated by Messel). With this basis, he aimed at a kind of throw-away, aristocratic insubstantiality, so that plants seem hardly able to stand up, and figures appear to be boneless. The languid grace of the costumes cannot be denied, but there is an inappropriate sameness in stance and gesture no matter what the period or subject. Carl Toms, Messel's assistant from 1952 to 1958, says that he was a serious student of historical periods and style. Of course, no matter how thoroughly researched or assimilated, history must become theatrically submerged in a personal statement, a convincing summary of shapes and detail; and inevitably such summaries must as much describe the past as the present. What stamps Messel is not his draughtsmanship or scholarship but

the uncanny accuracy with which he reflects his own time, distilling and summing up a particular evolution of British taste and theatre.

That period was notably escapist, even frivolous, and in terms of playwriting one of the least productive of the last 100 years. Indeed, in terms of sumptuous production and visual entertainment (thereby raising the designer to prominence) the post-war decade can be compared with the Victorian stage. That was a time of brilliant impersonations and elaborate stage effects, but of virtually no new English play of value.

The history of art can be described in terms of swings and see-saws — classical and romantic, neurotic and escapist, decorative and austere, etc. By the end of the nineteenth century the reaction resulted in the monumental puritanism of Appia and Craig, the distrust of actors' personalities,



Costume designs for Caesar in the film of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1945.



Costume design for *The Country Wife*, Old Vic 1936.



Scaled-up drawing, ink on tracing paper for garden scene Act IV *Le Nozze di Figaro* Glyndebourne 1955.