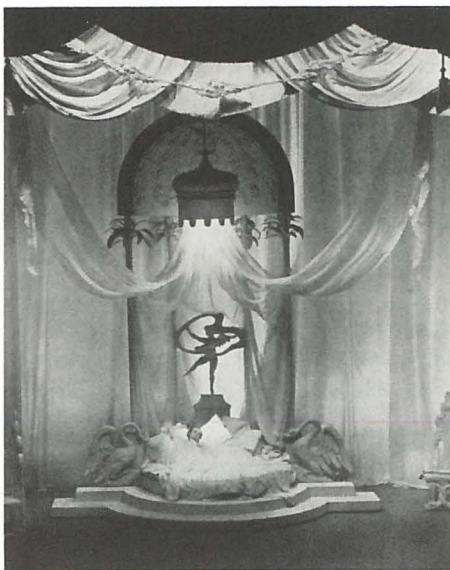
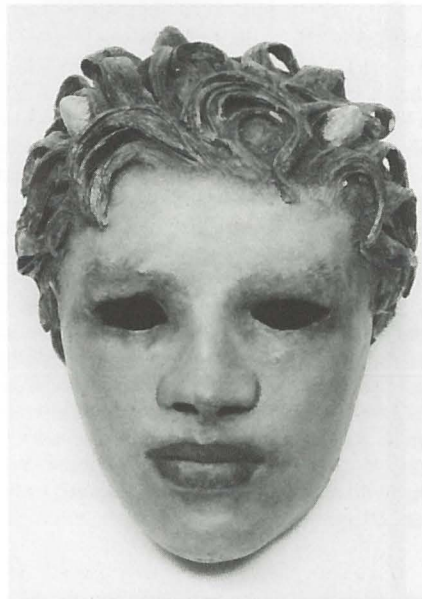




Costume design for a sprite in *Zemir et Azor*, Theatre Royal, Bath, May 1955. Ink water colour and gouache. Oliver Messel Collection.



The bedroom scene in *Helen Adelphi* 1932. Photograph Sasha Enthoven Collection.



Head of a Faun Mask. Papier mache, painted and glazed. About 1924. Oliver Messel Collection.



Corner of dining room in penthouse suite, Dorchester Hotel 1953.

the anxiety for intimacy, the distaste with extravagance. There especially arose the need for non-participant authority, i.e. the impressario and director; and all this coincided with, produced, or was itself produced by one of the greatest periods of literary theatre — Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw etc.

There then occurred another swing on the roundabout, the exuberant visuality of the Ballets Russes, where as at the Renaissance, content was dominated by ephemeral brilliance.

As the catalogue at the Victoria and Albert Museum makes clear, the mid-nineteen-fifties, when Messel was the leading English designer, was involved in visual formulas which "have become largely outdated . . . the painted flat, the border and backcloth . . .

lavishly, tastefully designed sets with costumes, often richly coloured, of expensive materials". This was the formula of the court entertainments, and significantly continues to apply to ballet and opera, the forms they inspired.

This remained Messel's most appropriate arena, at the Royal Opera House or Glynedebourne; applying the same formula to Shakespeare or Restoration comedy. Otherwise he remained virtually untouched by serious intellectual or emotional drama; after the Cochran revues his name is associated with Offenbach, the French boulevardiers Anouilh and Roussin, Christopher Fry, Dodie Smith, Truman Capote.

Since I am old enough to have seen a number of Messel productions, there is no denying the simple pleasure of his decorative charm; but on no more stimulating level than his interiors for the Dorchester Hotel, or the dolling-up of the Opera House for festive occasions. He was more like an illustrator —

the pretty clothes, the detailed sets emerge as coloured pictures in a pretty book, never intended to enquire or question.

It was all part of the contemporary scene. In his book *Film and Stage Decor* (1940) R. Myerscough-Walker refers to London productions of serious plays designed by the American artists Lee Simonson and Mordecai Gorelik; ". . . such productions are never a commercial success in England. They are for a limited run, capable of producing tremendous enthusiasm." Messel he describes as "eclectic" qualifying the term by stating that he was the most brilliant eclectic working on the London stage.

Myerscough-Walker differentiates between designers whose work merges with and contributes to the essential character of the production, and those, whose work "will dazzle the average person into applause". One thinks of the world of revue and popular entertainment, and to repeat, their historical origin in the Renaissance courts.

Quite apart from any assessment of Messel's artistic gifts and his long career in theatre and films, the exhibition must be admired for its thoroughness and fascination. The Theatre Museum, notably Roger Pinkum, have done a fine job in assembling original designs and models, and a superb collection of photographs. The last, indeed, is among the most rewarding aspects of the show, an historic panorama of a particular period of post-war British theatre.

A major regret, however, is the neglect of Messel's work for films. His cinematic career spans 1934 to 1949, from Korda's *Private Lives of Don Juan*, with the aging Douglas Fairbanks, and including Leslie Howard's *Scarlet Pimpernel*, Howard and Norma Shearer in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Caesar and Cleopatra* with Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains, and best of all the marvellous Thorold Dickinson version of *The Queen of Spades*, with Edith Evans and Anton Walbrook. Perhaps the organisers wished not to blur the theatrical image; but possibly there remains a snobbish underrating of cinema design.

The Oliver Messel exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum continues until 30 October 1983.

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