



Messel, Oliver (1904-1978)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Oliver Messel was Britain's most celebrated theatrical designer, the creator of lavish costumes and sets for ballet and stage productions in the country's most prestigious venues. As such, he was the envied rival of Cecil Beaton--not only in professional endeavors but in private life as well.

Oliver Messel was born in London, on January 13, 1904, to an affluent middle-class family. His maternal grandfather, Linley Sambourne, was a leading cartoonist for the British periodical *Punch*, and his father an army colonel. He was educated at Eton--where his classmates included Evelyn Waugh, Harold Acton, and Brian Howard--and later at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London.

After completing his schooling, Messel began a career as a portrait painter. Commissions for theater work soon followed, beginning with his designing the masks for a London production of Serge Diaghilev's ballet *Zephyr et Flore* (1925). Subsequently, he created masks, costumes, and sets--many of which have been preserved by the Theatre Museum, London--for various works staged by C. B. Cochran's revues through the late 1920s and early 1930s.

During this period, Messel socialized among the most glamorous and extraordinary celebrities of his day. His friends included Noël Coward and Lord Berners. Berners based a character, one of the "girls" (who were all based on gay men), on Messel in his novella *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* (1937).

While most of the "girls," all members of the eccentric and generous Berners' circle, were amused by this boarding school farce, one was not: Cecil Beaton. Berners had jokingly represented the ferocious jealousy with which "Cecily" regards "Olive," the beloved of "Lizzie," which parodies Beaton's obsessive infatuation with painter Peter Watson, who was, at that time, Messel's lover.

Beaton had met Watson and Messel in 1932, whereupon Beaton pleaded with Messel to relinquish Watson to him, which, needless to say, Messel did not do. Subsequently, for a period of several years, the two men were the objects of Beaton's troublesome psychodramas, despite the fact that Watson found Beaton's conduct off-putting.

Not only did Messel triumph over Beaton in this romantic scenario, but he also triumphed in being the more acclaimed of the two in their respective stage design careers.

Even during World War II, Messel continued to design lavish and imaginative sets for ballet, opera, and theater. His career continued in both Britain and the United States after the war. He also designed sets for numerous Hollywood films, including *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959).

Messel's most enduring work is not, however, exactly a theatrical one. In 1953, he was commissioned to design the decor for a suite at London's posh Dorchester Hotel, one in which he would be happy to live himself. The lavishly ornate Oliver Messel Suite, which the hotel touts as Elizabeth Taylor's favorite place to

stay in London, combines baroque and rococo styles with modernist sensibility and a considerable dose of fantasy.

It was restored in the 1980s by many of the original craftsmen, overseen by Messel's nephew, Lord Snowden (Anthony Armstrong-Jones), the former husband of the late Princess Margaret. The suite, along with other suites that he designed in the Dorchester, are also preserved as part of Britain's national heritage.

In 1967, Messel retired and moved to his vacation home in St. James, Barbados. He died there on July 13, 1978.

Bibliography

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