



Set and Costume Design

by Kieron Devlin

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Set and costume design and properties for stage and film are fields that have attracted many talented people, a large percentage of whom have been gay men. In fact, this field in the entertainment industry has often been identified specifically as "queer work."

While many heterosexuals have also been successful in the area of art direction, set design and decoration for stage and film have a distinctly gay cachet. Perhaps an even "gayer" field is that of costume design.

As William Mann has recently documented, even during the worst periods of repression, Hollywood offered opportunities of creative expression for gay men and lesbians, many of whom were open about their sexual orientation.

Opera and ballet also offered opportunities for gifted homosexuals. The trend here has been for painters to cross over from the fine arts to the applied arts, adding stage design to their range. For many notable stage designers working in this field, their sexual orientation was never an issue in their professional lives.

Among the most significant gay and lesbian artists who are distinguished for their work as set designers are Charles Ricketts, Duncan Grant, Erté (Romain de Tiroff), Pavel Tchelitchew, Oliver Messel, Cecil Beaton, Léonor Fini, George James Hopkins, Robert Colquhoun, Robert MacBryde, Franco Zeffirelli, David Hockney, Derek Jarman, and Keith Haring.

Many gay artists of Hollywood's golden age were extremely versatile, but openly gay men became especially associated with costume design. In some cases, Hollywood costume designers were considered on a par with world class couturiers and fashion designers and had a palpable influence on public taste. Among these designers, Howard Greer, Travis Banton, Adrian (Adrian Adolph Greenberg), Orry Kelly, and Walter Plunkett are best known.

Set Designers

In the first decades of the twentieth century two significant factors influenced the development of stage and set design, making it central rather than peripheral. The first was the massive impact of Sergei Diaghilev's lavish productions for the Ballets Russes. In particular, Leon Bakst's bold designs helped audiences appreciate the way color could be used to integrate an entire production.

The second factor that altered the development of stage and set design was the impact of Robert Wiene's German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), which set a precedent for using sets to express mood and theme.

The film employs fantastic, stylized sets to capture the subjective perceptions of the main character. This cinematic innovation raised the status of sets to an importance comparable to characterization and narrative. Hence, it gave set designers a new prestige as significant collaborators in film and stage

productions.

Charles Ricketts

Although more famous as creator-owner of the Vale Press and as a book illustrator, Charles Ricketts (1866-1931) also designed abstract, non-realistic sets for the London stage. He designed costumes for George Bernard Shaw's early comedies.

Ricketts first made a name as a set designer with Herbert Trench's production of *King Lear* (1909). He designed Shaw's *St Joan* (1924) and Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1926) and *The Gondoliers* (1929). As a specialist in Japanese art, he was the perfect choice to design *The Mikado*, while his knowledge of Venetian art allowed him to give a distinctly authentic flavor to *The Gondoliers*.

Duncan Grant

Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant (1885-1978) was probably the most famous British painter in the 1920s and 1930s. Although mainly preoccupied with painting and interior décor, Grant often designed for the theater.

He was invited to Paris to design an adaptation of *Twelfth Night, La Nuit des rois* (1913), by Theodore Lascaris. His abilities as a costume designer were also in evidence in *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1917) for Jacques Copeau, co-founder with André Gide of the journal *la Nouvelle Revue Française*.

During the 1920s he designed for C. B. Cochran Revues, including *The Pleasure Garden* (1924). He also designed a ballet, *The Enchanted Grove*, for Rupert Doone, with music by Ravel. He regretted that he never had the opportunity to design a ballet for his idol, Vaslav Nijinsky.

Erté

One of the most innovative and enduring designers of the twentieth century, Erté, or Romain de Tiroff (1892-1990), earned fame for his sinuous and sophisticated Art Deco fashion designs, frequently featured on the covers of *Harper's Bazaar*; but he also designed sets and costumes for opera, theater, and ballet productions.

Among these were the 1947 Paris production of Francis Poulenc's opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and the production of *La Traviata* for the Paris Opera celebration of the Verdi centenary in 1951. He also designed costumes for ballerina Anna Pavlova and American opera singer Mary Garden.

In 1925, Erté was transported from France by Louis B. Mayer to lend even more elegance and glamor to films at the MGM studios. Erté arrived in Hollywood with his lover Nicholas Ouroussoff under the lavish sponsorship of Mayer and in a blaze of publicity. He contributed work to *Ben Hur* (1925) and *La Bohème* (1926), but his stay in Hollywood ended after only a few months. He returned to Paris to design for the Music Hall.

Erté's drawings are intricate and highly detailed, creating an extravagant, exotic world of women dripping in pearls, covered in plumes, and wearing low cut back lines. Erté treated costume design as a fine art, and his numerous designs, though often whimsical, were also slyly erotic and technically perfect.

Pavel Tchelitchew

Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957) was a theater designer and painter of homoerotic images quite daring for their time. The son of a Russian family who fled their homeland after the 1918 Revolution, he first gained artistic recognition in Berlin, where he designed sets for Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Wedding Feast of the Boyar* (1922) and met Diaghilev.

He settled in Paris, where he became a member of the Gertrude Stein circle. In 1928, he designed a minimal but magical ballet, *Ode*, which had stark lighting and was well in advance of its time.

An accomplished portraitist, Tchelitchew often painted his lover Charles Henri Ford, an early gay novelist, filmmaker, and critic. After his emigration to the United States, he became part of the Paul Cadmus-Lincoln Kirstein circle in New York.

In 1936 Tchelitchew designed Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at the Metropolitan Opera house. The long remembered sets had gauzelike graves and ladders leading nowhere.

Tchelitchew's design for *Hide and Seek* (1942) for New York City Ballet, the theme of which was children at play, was rumored to have included a disguised rendition of dancer Nicholas Magallanes's penis. His painting *Hide and Seek* is one of the treasures of New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Léonor Fini

Argentinian Léonor Fini (1908-1996) was often associated with the Surrealist movement, yet developed her own distinctive style. Her work has a strange and visionary cast reminiscent of the Symbolists.

Among her other design work, Fini did costumes for her close friend Jean Genet's only ballet, *Adam Miroir*, which premiered in Paris in 1947. This ballet, danced to music by Darius Milhaud, highlighted the doubling themes from Genet's novel *Querelle*. Surrealist Paul Delvaux did the sets.

Christian Bérard

Genet himself was very much influenced by Jean Cocteau's circle, which included designer Christian Bérard (1902-1947), known simply as *Bébé*. Although Bérard was not immediately taken up by Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes, he made a name for himself in the French theater. He was particularly known for his subtle, nostalgic use of color in designs for such works as *Cotillion* (1930) for George Balanchine and Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1947).

Bérard and his lover Boris Kochno (1904-1990), who directed the Ballets Russes and was co-founder of the Ballet des Champs Élysées, were the most prominent openly gay couple in French theater during the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps Bérard's greatest achievement was his lustrous, magical designs for Jean Cocteau's film *Beauty and the Beast* (1946).

Oliver Messel

For almost three decades Oliver Messel (1904-1978) was Britain's most celebrated theatrical designer. He created lavish costumes and sets for ballet and stage productions in the country's most prestigious venues.

Messel first started out under the tutelage of homosexual English painter and portraitist Glyn Philpot. He was then taken under the wing of French designer Christian Bérard, with whom he shared a similar sense of color and unerring use of fabrics.

Messel's first commission was to design the masks for a London production of Diaghilev's ballet *Zephyr et Flore* (1925). He then achieved great acclaim with his white on white set for Offenbach's comic opera *Helen* (1932). He won a Tony award for *House of Flowers* (1935) on Broadway and received acclaim for the elaborate royal box decorations for the premiere of Benjamin Britten's opera *Gloriana* (1953), presented in the presence of the new queen, Elizabeth II.

Messel also designed the Royal Ballet's 1959 production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. In this work, which

borrowed subtle nuances from the paintings of Antoine Watteau, the designer's innate sense of pomp and grandeur is evident. His work in opera at Glyndebourne and the Met was also notable.

In 1935 gay director George Cukor invited Messel to design the sets for *Romeo and Juliet*. Although Messel did not regard these designs as entirely successful, he subsequently designed numerous other Hollywood films, including *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959).

Cecil Beaton

Cecil Beaton (1904-1980) was Messel's principal rival as leading British designer. Although he is best known as a society photographer, after World War II Beaton designed extravagant stage sets and costumes for Broadway and London theater as well as opera and film.

Beaton loved the simplicity of ballet, and his design for *Apparitions* (1947) for the Royal Ballet bore the hallmarks of Tchelitchew's influence, containing as it did symbolic lamps, harps, and chandeliers.

Beaton's design for Lawrence Olivier's production *The School for Scandal* (1947) was also notable. He won a Tony Award (1957) for his costumes for the Broadway production of *My Fair Lady*, and an Academy Award (1958) for sets and costumes for the film *Gigi*.

George James Hopkins

In 1916, the young George James Hopkins (1896-1988) was hired to do costumes for Theda Bara and set designs for her films. His set designs helped elevate the status of the profession in Hollywood, raising design beyond what was previously regarded as "glorified carpentry."

Hopkins executed a striking peacock throne for Bara's infamous film *Salome* (1919). *The Soul of Youth* (1920) included scenes set in a male whorehouse. *The Furnace* (1920) included an elaborate nude scene in hell.

But Hopkins' career was stalled for a while by an unresolved scandal involving his lover William Desmond Taylor, who died in 1922. In 1935 Hopkins joined Warner Brothers studios and went on to do the set designs for *Casablanca* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945), among others. He won awards for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *My Fair Lady* (1964), and *Hello, Dolly* (1969).

Robert Colquhoun and Robert McBryde

Scottish artists Robert Colquhoun (1914-1962) and Robert MacBryde (1913-1966), a gay couple known as "the two Roberts," lived and worked together after meeting at the Glasgow School of Art in 1932.

Colquhoun's work was the stronger of the two, being influenced by Wyndham Lewis and having an identifiable existentialist tone. They were close contemporaries of Francis Bacon, but were associated with the Neo-Romantic movement in England. They designed frequently for the stage and the lyric theater. Ken Russell made a short film for British television, "Two Painters" (1959), about their work.

Franco Zeffirelli

Italian Franco Zeffirelli (b. 1923) studied architecture and acting as a young man. Under the tutelage of director Luchino Visconti, for whom he did set and costume designs, he gradually made the transition from protégé to hugely successful film and opera director.

His *La Traviata* (1958) in Dallas is remembered largely because it featured a definitive Violetta in Maria Callas--the production's sole *raison d'être*. He also directed Joan Sutherland in a memorable *Lucia di*

Lammermoor (1959).

Zeffirelli was nominated for a Tony award for his scenic designs for the *Lady of the Camellias* (1963). His film *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) is remembered for its casting of unknown young actors to give authenticity and a fresh view to the production, as well as for its lush sets. His film and opera work, usually characterized by lavish and beautiful designs, still gains international attention.

Derek Jarman

Derek Jarman (1942-1994) was such a versatile artist that his work straddles many media, including gardening and political activism. However, he started out as a set designer at the Slade School of Art. His first break came when he was invited by Sir Frederick Ashton to design for the ballet *Jazz Calendar* (1968).

In the same year Sir John Gielgud asked him to design *Don Giovanni* for the English National Opera. Jarman then met director Ken Russell and designed the monstrous set for *The Devils* (1970). He also worked on Russell's *Savage Messiah* (1971).

Jarman's fruitful association with Russell included a joint project, *The Rake's Progress*, at the Pergola Theatre during the Florence festival in 1982. Even during his career as a provocative film director in the 1970s and 1980s, Jarman continued to design for ballets, the English National Opera, and plays, including a memorable 1988 production of *Waiting for Godot*.

David Hockney

David Hockney (b. 1937) was lured into opera only in the 1970s when he was asked by John Cox of Glyndebourne Opera to do set designs for a new production of *The Rake's Progress* (1974). Hockney was particularly interested in the subject, for he identified the Rake's progress with the homosexual's plight in society, and he had given the Rake a gay slant in a series of paintings completed in 1961.

He also welcomed the assignment because he had reached an impasse in his painting and hoped that designing for the theater would free his imagination.

Hockney based his designs on the 1735 engravings by William Hogarth and playfully emphasized the graphic effects of cross hatching in red, blue, and green.

Hockney was later invited to design *The Magic Flute* (1977). These designs were immensely popular, and distinguished by their vivid sense of color and realistic detail that were drawn from sketches that the artist made on trips to Egypt.

Keith Haring

Keith Haring (1958-1990) had a characteristic day-glo linear style influenced by subway graffiti, but he was very much the public artist who worked in multiple media. He did installations, children's books, and large scale murals. He even body-painted gay icon Grace Jones for her 1984 appearance at Paradise Garage.

Less known is his work for the theater and ballet, especially at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He designed such productions as *Secret Pastures* (1984), *Sweet Saturday Night* (1984), *Rodhessa Jones* (1986), and *Interrupted River* (1986). He also designed for Munich's Body and Soul Ballet in 1988.

Other Theater and Ballet Designers

Other theater and ballet designers who were known in homosexual circles but who were either bisexual or never disclosed their sexuality include British artists Sir Francis Rose (1909-1976), Christopher Wood

(1901-1930), and Rex Whistler (1905-1944).

Marie Laurencin (1885-1956) was also noted as a stage designer for her lyrical depictions of young girls in *Les Biches* (1924), commissioned by Diaghilev with music by Poulenc.

Artists not noted for being designers primarily but who nevertheless did sets and costumes include film directors James Whale (1896-1957) and Vincente Minnelli (1910-1986).

One of the most productive art directors in Hollywood, Cedric Gibbons (1893-1960), was rumored to be homosexual. He won an academy award for *An American in Paris* (1951).

Even Pop artist Andy Warhol (1930-1987) designed dangling silver pillows filled with helium for Merce Cunningham's *Rainforest* (1968).

Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925) is another artist who designed for ballet and modern dance productions. He collaborated on several works choreographed by Paul Taylor.

Costume Designers

Costume design for stage and film has generally attracted a different kind of artist, designers often without a specific fine arts background. Nevertheless, their work has frequently reached pinnacles of stylishness and had a huge impact on the public taste and imagination.

Howard Greer

Howard Greer (1886-1964) started as a costume designer on Broadway and was one of the first to be appointed head of wardrobe at a major Hollywood studio. He worked on *Greenwich Village Follies* (1922) and *Jack and Jill* (1923) before moving to Hollywood to do set designs for Paramount Pictures. There he was responsible for such movies as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).

Travis Banton

The most sought-after Hollywood costume designer of the 1930s and 1940s was Travis Banton (1894-1948). He is best remembered for creating the style of such actresses as Carole Lombard, Lilyan Tashman, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West. His trademarks were understated elegance and luxurious fabrics.

Banton served as head designer at Paramount Studios for many years, but also designed for Fox and Universal studios as well. Perhaps his most successful creations were the angled hat and veiled look that helped establish the on-screen charisma and mystery of Dietrich in such films as *Dishonored* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935).

Orry Kelly

Australian-born Orry Kelly (1897-1964) emigrated to the United States as a young man. He found success as a costume and scene designer on Broadway before going to Hollywood during the Great Depression. His friend Cary Grant introduced him to the head of Warner Brothers' wardrobe department, where he stayed for eleven years.

Primarily associated with Warner Brothers, he designed costumes for a broad range of films in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, including Busby Berkeley extravaganzas as well as gangster films and costume dramas. Near the end of his career he was especially associated with Hollywood musicals.

He designed for stars as various as Ingrid Bergman and Marilyn Monroe, but was especially close to Bette

Davis. He won Academy Awards for his designs for *An American in Paris* (shared with Walter Plunkett and Irene Sharaff, 1951), *Les Girls* (1957), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), and *Gypsy* (1962).

Walter Plunkett

Walter Plunkett (1902-1982) is best known for his costume designs for *Gone With the Wind* (1939), but his long and distinguished career included many other triumphs. He came to Hollywood to become an actor, but became interested in costume design when he was invited to design costumes for dancer Ruth St. Denis.

Plunkett worked for RKO from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, earning a reputation for the authenticity of his period costumes. He later worked primarily for MGM and designed for stars such as Irene Dunne, Judy Garland, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, and Katharine Hepburn.

Although he did not receive an Academy Award for his designs for *Gone With the Wind*, he received numerous nominations and shared an Oscar with Orry Kelly and Irene Sharaff for their work on *An American in Paris* (1953).

Adrian

Adrian Adolph Greenburg (1903-1959) was one of the most flamboyant and successful costume designers of Hollywood's golden age. His first films were with Rudolph Valentino; then he moved to MGM, where he had the opportunity to design for some of Hollywood's biggest female stars, including Greta Garbo, Jean Harlow, Joan Crawford, and Norma Shearer.

Among the films for which he designed costumes are *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Women* (1939), and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). His work had an enormous impact not only on other designers, but also on the fashion world in general, as fans attempted to duplicate the glamorous style he created for Hollywood divas.

Arthur Freed and Roger Edens

Primarily a lyricist, choreographer, and producer, Arthur Freed (1894-1973) nevertheless exerted a massive influence on the design of some of Hollywood's most glamorous musicals. He, along with his assistant Roger Edens (1905-1970), reshaped this genre, taking it to new heights by unifying the designs of all the artists involved.

Freed himself was not gay, but his unit at MGM was known as "Freed's Fairies" because he had gathered so many talented gay designers, costumers, and other artists, including Roger Edens, whom he trusted implicitly. Among their most notable work are such classic films as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Easter Parade* (1948), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and *Kismet* (1955).

Irene Sharaff

One of the few costume designers to have worked both on Broadway productions and on their film adaptations, Irene Sharaff (1910-1993) first developed a reputation in New York and then joined "Freed's Fairies" at MGM in 1942, an association that did not prevent her from continuing to design for Broadway.

Among the shows that she designed both for Broadway and for film are *The King and I* (1951/1956), *West Side Story* (1957/1961), *Flower Drum Song* (1958/1961), and *Funny Girl* (1964/1968).

She was nominated for Academy Awards nine times and won Oscars for the following five films: *An American in Paris* (1951), *The King and I* (1956), *West Side Story* (1961), *Cleopatra* (1962), and *Who's Afraid*

of Virginia Woolf? (1966).

Equally adept at period or contemporary costume, Sharaff earned distinction for her attention to detail and for the elegance of her creations.

Although several other women achieved distinction in the fields of set and costume design--Edith Head, for example, who apprenticed with Howard Greer--openly lesbian women seem not to have found the kind of success that gay men did.

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