Theatre costume

Date: 1946 (made)

Artist/Maker: Messel, Oliver Hilary Sambourne, born 1904 - died 1978
(costume designers)

Museum number: S.847-1981

Gallery location: In Storage

Descriptive line

Headdress for a Court Lady worn in the Prologue of The Sleeping Beauty, Sadler's Wells Ballet, Covent Garden, 1946

Physical description

Headdress for a Court Lady worn in the Prologue of The Sleeping Beauty, Sadler's Wells Ballet, Covent Garden, 1946. Wire framed oval to fit on pointed wig covered with grey cotton net, the back decorated with a metal fan and two rosettes of crin threaded with fine gold strip; low on the centre back is a flat grey silk ribbon bow with long tails. The upper edge and sides are decorated with a central flower of off white crin edged with mauve and off white chenille with a central pearlised stud circled with gold fringe; above this is a triple leaf of white fancy plastic braid threaded with gold. To the sides are 'flowers' of white painted acetate, with a pointed centre formed of two pearls, papier-mâché flower buds, long thin leaves of grey crin edged with iridescent cellophane, and a triple leaf of a fancy iridescent cellophane braid with, at the base, two small flowers of white woven plastic braid threaded with gold strip, with centres of iridescent and pearlised beads.

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Object history note

Headdress for a Court Lady worn in the Prologue of Marius Petipa's ballet 'The Sleeping Beauty' performed by the Sadler's Wells (now Royal) Ballet at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, 20th February 1946. The music for the ballet was composed by Tchaikovsky, and the scenery and costumes were designed by Oliver Messel. The ballet had originally been performed by the Imperial Russian Ballet at the Maryinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg in 1890, where it quickly became acknowledged as an important work in the repertoire due to the high quality of Petipa's choreography and Tchaikovsky's music. The 1946 production, mounted by Ninette de Valois, was based on the 1939 Sadler's Wells Ballet production staged for the company by Nicolai Sergueeff, the former regisseur of the Russian Imperial Ballet. The production also included additional new choreography by Frederick Ashton, and the first cast included Margot Fonteyn, Robert Helpmann, & Beryl Grey.

Oliver Messel designed 'The Sleeping Beauty' for the Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1946. This was the first production when the Royal Opera House reopened after the Second World War and marked the establishment of the ballet company in the theatre. The production underwent various modifications over the twenty years that the production remained in the repertory. A smaller version of the ballet was produced for the Royal Ballet Touring Company at the Grand Theatre, Leeds, 14th September 1959. A later refurbishment of the production was first performed by The Royal Ballet at Covent Garden on 10th June 1960.

Historical significance: The Sleeping Beauty is a key production in the history of the Royal Ballet. The mounting of the greatest of the Russian classics in 1939 by an English company not ten years old was presumption in the extreme, but it was possible because Ninette de Valois recognized a potential Aurora in Margot Fonteyn. She went on to dance the role over fifty times during the War. In 1946, The Sleeping Beauty was the production which re-opened the Royal Opera House and Oliver Messel's vision of the ballet has overshadowed almost all subsequent attempts to stage it.

In 1949, the Sadler's Wells Ballet opened their first American season at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York with The Sleeping Beauty and Fonteyn's performance in Act I was both her artistic coming of age and that of the Sadler's Wells Ballet - overnight both were catapulted to international superstardom. In 1961 the Royal Ballet took The Sleeping Beauty, back to the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, where it had been created in 1890. Once again, Fonteyn in the pink Messel costume in Act I, was fundamental to the company's success.

Sarah Woodcock.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O110410/theatre-costume-messel-oliver-hilary/