



# Oliver Messel Schools' Resources

## Theatre Glossary

Suitable for  
Key Stages  
3, 4 and 5

# Theatre Glossary

This glossary has been designed for use by teachers and students alongside the Oliver Messel Schools' Resources. It includes theatrical terms used in theatre (and film) design.

## Accent lighting

Lighting technique used to bathe an area of the stage in colour to evoke mood or tone, or a stronger beam used to illuminate a specific character or action.

## Act

The name used for dividing up the different parts of a theatrical performance, such as a play, ballet or opera. Traditionally narratives are split into one, three or five parts.

## Apron

The section of a stage floor that sticks out into the auditorium.

## Auditorium

The space where the audience sits, which is usually in front of the stage or 'in the round' with the audience seated on all sides of the stage.

## Backdrop

The large curtain which hides the backstage space, traditionally painted as a landscape or skyscape.

## Backstage

The area behind the scenes, including the wings and backdrop. It is also used to refer to different creative and technical departments such as lighting or wardrobe, whereas, 'offstage' refers to any space outside the performance area.

## Batten

A long timber attached to the top and bottom of a cloth so that it hangs flat.

## Carpenter

Maker of scenery.

## Cast

A list of characters and the performers playing each role.

## Choreography

A planned series of movements performed either through dance or by physical actions.

## Cloth

Scenery painted on fabric. A 'cut cloth' refers to a piece with no centre and a 'floor-cloth' to a painted canvas floor.

## Costume

The outfit worn by a character on stage. There are many different styles of costume such as:

- Realistic – Incorporate elements that resemble real life.
- Symbolist – Representative of a theme or to communicate an idea.
- Minimal – Using accessories or individual items to express time and place.
- Fantasy – Detached from real life and based on a theme of the designer's choosing.
- Period – Designed to accurately reflect a specific period and often geographical location.

## Curtain

A hanging cloth that hides the stage from view in between acts and falls to mark the end of the performance.

## Cut-out

A freestanding piece of scenery, for example a tree.

## Designer

The person responsible for how the production looks, this includes both costume designers and set designers and can extend to props, hair and make-up.

## Era

The time when the story has been set, for example, Renaissance Italy. Like the location this is indicated through elements of the set, scenery and costumes.

## Flat

An oblong timber frame covered in hardboard or canvas which is painted to form part of the set. A 'backing flat' refers to a flat that stands behind a window or door in the set.



## Fly

A verb used to describe scenery that is flown in from above using a system of pulleys and ropes. A fly tower is an extension of the stage walls allowing scenery to be flown up until it is out of sight.

## Gauze

A light cloth upon which a scene is painted and lit to create different effects e.g. lit from the front it is opaque but from behind it becomes transparent.

## Ground plan

The ground plan is a flat drawing which shows where each object will sit on stage.

## Lantern

The name for a light in the theatre.

## Location

The place where the story takes place which is indicated by the set and scenery.

## Milliner

Interprets a costume designer's drawings to make a variety of headwear. Separate to a wigmaker who is responsible for making or altering wigs and hairpieces and maintaining them during the production.

## Model Box

A scaled model of a theatre in which a stage design model is housed.

## Prompt Script/Copy

A copy of the script that also contains all the cues, moves, lighting and scenery changes.

## Prop

An object used on stage or screen by a character, including anything portable such as a bowler hat, a rake or a teapot.

## Proscenium

The traditional type of 'picture frame' stage, usually with a curtain hung across the front. The proscenium arch refers to the opening itself.

## Revolve

A stage that can revolve 360 degrees.

## Seamstress/Tailor

Works within the wardrobe department to interpret costume designs using a range of assembly methods. They will be overseen by the Wardrobe or Costume Supervisor.

## Scenery

The painted background which represents the place where the story has been set.

## Scenic Artists

The artists who paint scenery, transforming a designer's ideas into reality.

Above: Black and white photograph of a set model from *Twang!!* with one of the female characters in front of the castle chapel, photographer unknown, c.1965-66, OHM/1/1/19/3

# Theatre Glossary

## Set

Created by the theatre designer, the set is the space in which the action will take place, such as a landscape, a kitchen, or a palace. A set can be as lavish or as minimal as the performance requires. A 'box set' has three walls with the fourth opening at the front, also known as a 'room set'.

## Set Dressing

Items used to 'dress' the set, which unlike props are not physically used by anyone on stage e.g. flowers or a lamp.

## Set Model

A scale model of the set made by the set designer with which to help test and communicate their designs. It allows the designer to see how characters will physically move within the space they have created.

## Sightlines

The physical angles at which a performer or area of the set is visible to the audience.

## Sound Effects

These can include live and recorded elements such as rain, lightning or a gun shot.

## Stage

The space upon which the performance takes place, typically a raised platform. The term 'thrust stage' refers to a multi-sided stage with at least one back wall.



## Wardrobe

The department in which costumes are constructed or altered based on designs created by the costume designer.

## Wings

The hidden spaces on either side of a stage through which performers traditionally enter and exit the stage.

## Working Drawings

Additional drawings intended to further explain a specific element of a design.

The Oliver Messel: Wake Up and Dream Schools' Resources have been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Above: Watercolour, charcoal, brown ink, coloured inks and pencil on pale blue paper, mounted on card, design for Carabosse the evil fairy in a snake-covered chariot with vultures overhead from the prologue of *The Sleeping Beauty*, by Oliver Messel, date unknown © Theatre Collection, OHM/1/2/4/2/35

Front cover: Watercolour, gouache, charcoal and pencil sketch on blue paper, mounted on card, costume design for one of the fairy tale characters (possibly the Wolf or the Beast) from the last act of *The Sleeping Beauty*, by Oliver Messel, date unknown © Theatre Collection, OHM/1/2/4/2/48



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