



## Desmond Heeley

Desmond Heeley, who recently earned rave reviews for the scenery and costumes of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Broadway's Roundabout Theatre Company, has, for more than 60 years, turned out distinguished designs for theatre, opera, and ballet companies around the world, as well as Broadway and the West End. In a chat with *Lighting&Sound America*, he recalled of the details of a life spent working with some of the greatest theatre artists of the 20th century.

**Lighting&Sound America:** Your designs for this *Earnest* have been so acclaimed. Did you draw on any particular sources for inspiration?

**Desmond Heeley:** I have always loved the 18th and 19th centuries, what I call the Never-Never-Land of Theatre. I've also been influenced by Rex Whistler, an artist who flourished in the '20s and '30s. He was responsible for the new fashion for the Regency style. It wasn't camp or silly; it was an incredibly witty look at an era gone by. Doing *Earnest* is very difficult; you're trying find the essence of the golden Edwardian years, when the sun never set on the British Empire.

**LSA:** In many ways, the set is lovely throwback to the work of such great midcentury designers as Cecil Beaton and Oliver Messel.

**DH:** There, you've said the names. Mr. Messel was my hero, and I worked for Beaton on a West End production of *Aren't We All?*

**LSA:** I understand the chandelier on the *Earnest* set is something of an illusion.

**DH:** The chandelier was done in a day and a half. We went to the joke shop and got some plastic glasses and assembled them to aluminum pipe held with parcel tape. Then we added crystal drops. If you see it too closely, it's pretty alarming. But, from a distance, it's very different. That's true of many set pieces. I did a *South Pacific* at New York City Opera some years ago, and Bali Ha'i was made of plastic tree bark and Scotch tape. Duane Schuler, who is the best, lit it. After he was done, I was backstage, and I heard a crew member say, "Have you seen that bunch of shit out front? It's great!"

**LSA:** You're very hands-on, aren't you? For example, you love to paint sets?

**DH:** I did *Earnest's* show curtain by myself, in a week. I'm very quick.

**LSA:** How did you become a designer?

**DH:** I was a very obedient child. I won a tiny scholarship, and my headmaster suggested that I go to work as a gofer at Stratford-upon-Avon. My formative years were at Royal Shakespeare Company.

**LSA:** What did you do there at such a young age?

**DH:** I was a handyman in the theatre, because I could make things—the odd sculpture, the odd prop. I don't think I was very good, but I was quick. I was lucky to fall into the company of Tanya Moiseiwitsch and Tony Guthrie, and an incredible bunch of people in wardrobe and props.

**LSA:** The Stratford Festival has been a mainstay of your career. Were you there from the beginning?

**DH:** Not the very beginning, I missed the tent theatre by a whisker. I arrived to do a *Hamlet* with Christopher Plummer, and, at that point, the roof of the theatre was only three parts on. I went there because of Tanya. I loved working on the Festival Stage with [the director] Michael Langham. I'd spend summers in Ontario, then head back to London. There, for kids like myself, there was the Royal Court way, with the angry young men, or the H.M. Tennant way, which was the West End, all tassels and trumpery. I became a kind of Man Friday to Tennants.

**LSA:** And on and on to the Old Vic, Broadway, and so many opera and ballet companies. Do you have another project coming up?

**DH:** This may be the last one. I'm pushing 80, and the dance may be over. And times have changed. I turned down a *Sleeping Beauty* a few years ago because there would have been four choreographers. The marvelous thing about Bobby [Helpmann, the choreographer], Sir Laurence [Olivier], and Michael Langham was, there was one boss. The wonderful thing is, I've had three worlds. Classical theatre taught me about ballet, because you could treat *Giselle* like a play, making it plausible. The dance world taught me a great deal about working with actors, and I learned from opera, as well. ☺