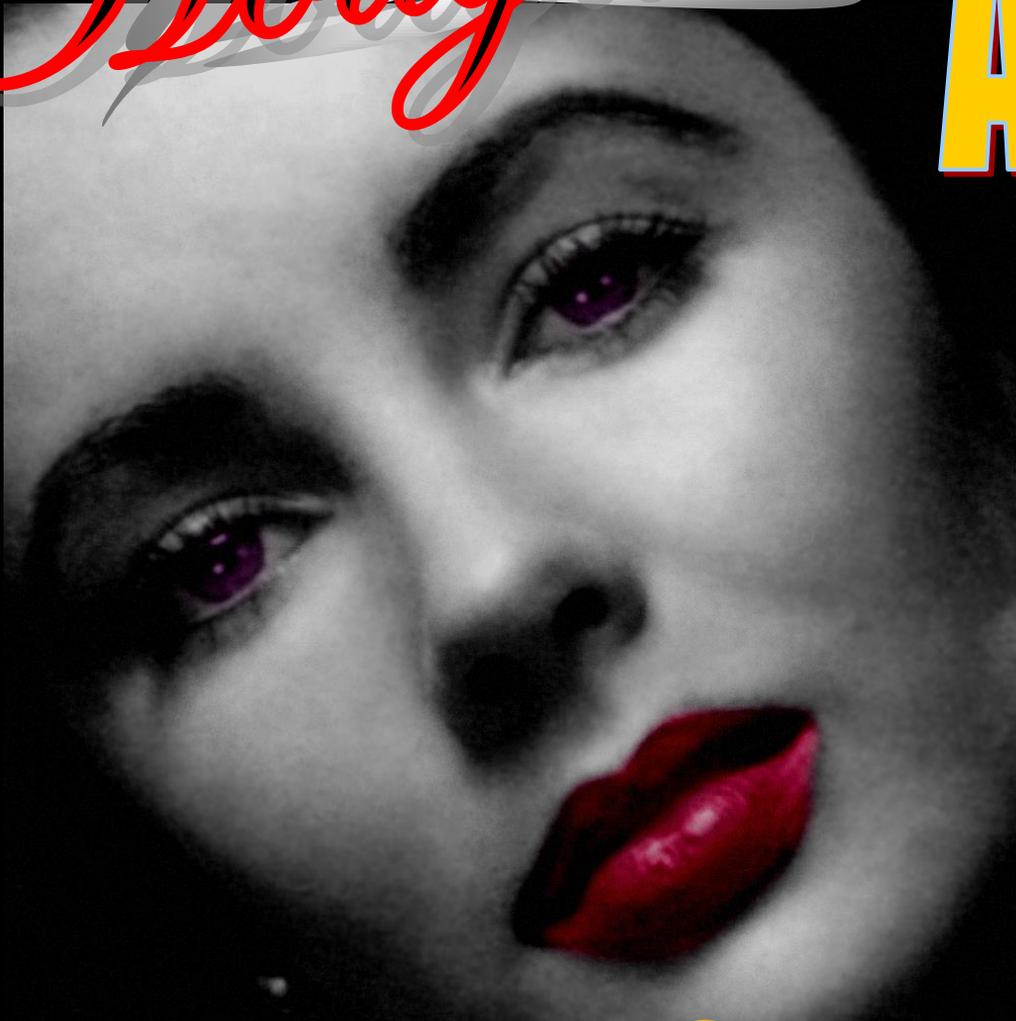


THE

*Nick Zegarac's*

*Hollywood*

ART



*Elizabeth Taylor*

the girl who had everything



*When sorrows come,  
they come not single spies...  
...but in battalions.*

*- William Shakespeare*

It's hard to feel sorry for Elizabeth Taylor; that seemingly indestructible phoenix who repeatedly denied her harshest critics with a sly glance, coy smile and shrug of those supple shoulders. No, Elizabeth Taylor in her prime was a very smart and enterprising gal who never looked back. She had few illusions about Hollywood – fewer still about her own career, and arguably, none at all about finding love the eighth time around.

*"I, along with the critics, have never taken myself seriously,"* Taylor once explained, *"I've always admitted that I'm ruled by my passions. And I've been a very committed wife – although I ought to 'be' committed for having been married so many times!"*

Perhaps more than any other star of her ilk or vintage, Elizabeth Taylor straddles the transition in Hollywood between 'golden age' elusive bird of paradise and burgeoning Babylon pop culture of celebrity that has today consumed every last vestige of this old-time, larger-than-life, studio-sanctioned glamor. Asked once by reigning gossip maven Louella Parsons if Elizabeth loved animals, she astutely replied, *"More than I do people."*

When second husband Michael Wilding attempted a smug putdown of Taylor's desire to be noticed for her 'wiggle' as she strode across the commissary to get her own salt, Taylor smugly spat back, *"That was for your benefit, darling...even in it didn't work at the time!"*

Even when it came to her fans, Taylor knew her own mind.

*"It would be wonderful to treat acting as a job,"* she suggested, *"But you can't and that's what I don't like about it. I've had people say I owe it to the public to stay in movies. I think that's nonsense. I owe them exactly what they see on the screen and nothing more!"*

Yet, it behooves the reader to reconsider Taylor's flippancies about her own acting in particular. In fact, many of Elizabeth's directors have had the highest regard for what she brought to the camera.

*"I'm always puzzling about Elizabeth's abilities,"* admitted Victor Saville, who directed Taylor in the minor, wartime/Red Scare programmer, *Conspirator* in 1949, *"Somewhere she has acquired complete repose in*





(Previous) A publicity still for **Rhapsody** (1954), with Elizabeth appropriately pedestaled and poised to exercise her more obvious physical assets. Films like **Rhapsody** and **The Girl Who Had Everything** (1953) did little to promote Taylor's other hidden talents – perhaps because MGM realized it could get away with parading their star around as a fashion-plate in tight-fitting and ultra-chic glamorous wardrobes designed by Helen Rose. (This page): 'How can we prompt thee...let us count the ways.' MGM's PR was second to none. Stars endured hours of still photography, quaffed and preened and posed to maximize their coverage in the media. At the height of their celebrity it was not uncommon for stars to appear in 20 to 50 fan magazines per month – all of them studio sanctioned and given bylines and tidbits approved and controlled by the front office. Nothing was left to chance. These pictures, taken in 1943 (left) and 1945 (right) illustrate the extent to which the studio attempt to promote Elizabeth Taylor as an ordinary child – albeit, one of the most supremely stunning children ever to grace a magazine. But in just two short years the studio would be forced into marketing their new find as a woman, despite the fact that she was a mere seventeen years old.

*her work, and she shows amazing clarity, boldness and timing. No matter what she says, she must brood about her parts and feels them emotionally. She often moves me when she plays a scene and I am sure it can't be accidental."*

Indeed, Taylor's ability to enthrall, captivate and hold our attention has always been her greatest asset. This quality is perhaps inextricably linked to her obvious physical beauty and even more so to Elizabeth's seeming nonchalance and disregard of it. "I know I'm pretty," she told a reporter from Look Magazine in 1951 who was obviously fawning over her every word, "So what? I'm over it. How about you?" Producer Samuel Marx recalls how, having been repeatedly coaxed by Taylor's father, Francis, to meet his young daughter, he nearly 'passed out' from seeing such a perfect female specimen. "She came into my office outfitted all in purple. Her coat was purple, her hat was purple. Even her eyes were purple. I nearly fell on the floor." Producer Arthur Freed had similar first impressions, later describing Elizabeth as 'a sport' – in reference to his hobby as a grower of orchids. In botany, a sport is a flower of rare and unique beauty that diverges from the stock where the other flowers have grown. And in hindsight, Elizabeth Taylor's flower was very much unlike that of her contemporaries.

Even director George Stevens, who wanted nothing of Elizabeth for the role of Leslie Benedict in **Giant** (1956) came to rally his support for her commitment on the project. "She's got guts," Stevens would later recall, "And damn fine instincts too. I thought, here's this MGM glamor queen and she's really sellin' it like it is – bare, without the forty pounds of lacquer they usually like a star to wear. Then and there she won me over completely and I tell you...she had an uphill battle at that." Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who directed Taylor twice; the first time in 1958's **Suddenly Last Summer** echoed these sentiments,





(Previous): Phillippe Halsman's stunning portrait of 17 year old Elizabeth taken for LIFE magazine in 1949, wearing the satiny green décolleté evening dress from the film **Conspirator**, released that same year. Elizabeth's violet eyes seem to beckon on, even as there remains a strange innocence captured within them too. Her first failed marriage to Conrad Nicholson 'Nicky' Hilton on May 6, 1951 would wipe that wisp of inexperience from her visage forever. (Above left): sharing a bit of barbeque with Roddy McDowell in 1947. In their heyday the studios went to great lengths to promote their stars in all sorts of absurd ways, fabricating romances and setting up situations that were little more than a well-publicized photo-op. "Roddy is friend to all," Elizabeth would say years later, "There's never been a better friend than Roddy McDowell." (Above right): enduring the drudgery of another costume test for **Life With Father** (1947); a turn of the century family comedy in which Elizabeth was loaned out to Warner Brothers to play Mary, the demure daughter of William Powell and Irene Dunne. "They needed to test everything," Elizabeth explained, "Especially for those damn Technicolor cameras because the colors you wore didn't always photograph unless properly lit."

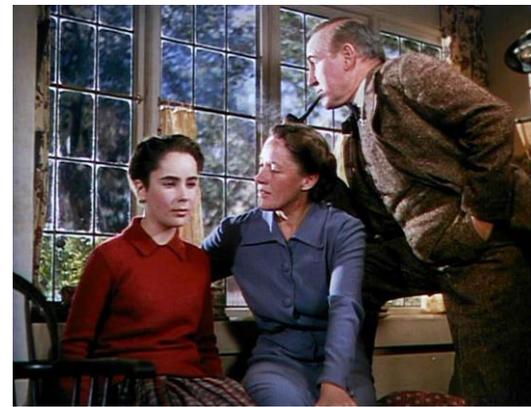
saying *"She is close to being the greatest actress in the world and so far she has done it mostly by instinct."* Anthony Asquith, who directed Taylor and Burton together in **The VIP's** (1963) was quick to extol Elizabeth's virtues as a consummate professional. *"There's nothing frivolous about her work. Whenever she walks onto the set she knows exactly the point of the scene, gets into the mood immediately and is astonishingly good at starting cold. And I have seldom known her to fluff a line."*

Not everyone was crazy about Elizabeth Taylor of course, either as an actress or even as a human being, starting with Pope Paul VI, who publicly condemned Taylor's affair with Richard Burton while in Rome on the set of **Cleopatra** (1963) and even suggested her passport should be taken away to bar her from reentering the country. Director Richard Brooks decidedly did not care for Taylor either. Then again, he didn't much appreciate any of the actors he worked with; glibly choosing to extol Taylor's accident prone nature on the set as daft 'clumsiness' instead of the obvious virtues she brought to her smoldering rendition of Tennessee Williams' sexually frustrated Maggie in **Cat on A Hot Tin Roof** (1958).

In general the critics were even more merciless in their vitriol – mixing opinions about her private life with her art and blurring the boundaries between them. *"Why are we still talking about Elizabeth Taylor?"* the late movie critic Gene Siskel begrudgingly inquired in 1991 just as the tabloids had begun to circle their gossip wagons over Elizabeth's rumored affair with construction worker and recovering alcoholic Larry Fortensky, *"She hasn't made a good movie in thirty years!"* A decade earlier, cribbing a line borrowed from Alfred Hitchcock, critic Pauline Kael threw in her own shovel of dirt, remarking, *"The chief requisite for any actor is to do nothing well...and Miss Taylor does that better than anyone I know."*

Of course, all this naysaying flies in the face of the considerable praise afforded Elizabeth in her youth; then earmarked by the critics as everything from *"a rare find"* to an *"outstanding moppet."* As she matured into her teen years these same critics became more jaded in their assessments, perhaps in part from an innate jealousy, but also because Taylor's alma





(Previous): Anatomy of a star maker: Clarence Brown's **National Velvet** (1944) was Elizabeth's first megahit. Despite Mickey Rooney's name being above the title, it is Taylor who has to carry the whole show. And carry it she does, with a startling forbearance and introspection, ably assisted by a roster of MGM's finest contract players. These include Donald Crisp as Herbert Brown, a stern but benevolent patriarch, Anne Revere as Velvet's compassionate mother, Jackie 'Butch' Jenkins, as Velvet's bug-collecting brother, Donald, and Juanita Quigley and Angela Lansbury as Velvet's kindly sisters (Malvolia and Edwina respectively). **National Velvet** is the sort of warm-hearted, glossy Technicolor entertainment MGM ably produced throughout the war years – imbued with a sense of pastoral grace and familial charm, harking back to a simpler time when propriety dictated the daily cadence of life. The film is very much a showcase for Elizabeth's talents, her stunningly beautiful, wide-eyed innocence magnificently captured in the film's many close-ups, expertly photographed Leonard Smith.

(Previous top): Only moments after meeting the drifter, Mi Taylor (Rooney) on the open road, Velvet Brown (Taylor) is also introduced to the gelding, the Pi. Both will play a pivotal role in Velvet's destiny. As luck would have it, Mi has come in search of Mrs. Brown after discovering her name in a journal written by his late father, Dan. We later learn that in Mrs. Brown's youth she was a champion swimmer who dared to cross the English Channel under Dan's expert tutelage. This discovery is made known to Velvet by Mrs. Brown but kept from Mi until the true metal of the lad can be determined. Mickey Rooney's performance as the schemer who failed in his vocation as a jockey, but who rediscovers his own moral compass through the Brown's faith in him is utterly superb. For his part, Mr. Brown does not trust Mi at first. Given an ample allowance from Mrs. Brown – basically taken from the gold coin prize money she won for swimming the Channel that has been kept in an attic trunk along with her trophy these many years – the money is to be used by Mi to go to London and enter the Pi in the Grand National. With a watchful eye and stern resolve Mr. Brown tells Mi, "*Mrs. Brown wishes you a safe journey. I will merely wish you a good time.*"

(Previous middle): Velvet finagles a stay for Mi with the Brown family. Mi has stolen money from the family's secret hiding place in a jar in the kitchen and is about to escape into the night when Velvet runs into the stables to tell him the good news. Guilt-ridden, Mi returns the money before anyone is the wiser. An ecstatic, Velvet rushes in to tell her mother and father that the Pi has survived a potentially virulent bout of colic. The Brown girls stop on their way home from school to purchase candy from Mr. Hallam (Arthur Shield's) shop. Even at 19, Angela Lansbury looks much too old for the part of the love-struck teenager. She would have far greater success (Oscar-nominated) as the saucy upstairs maid in George Cukor's **Gaslight**, made and released the same year. Jackie 'Butch' Jenkins was a more recognizable face than Elizabeth's at the time **National Velvet** came out; a freckle-faced, sad-eyed moppet often cast in 'all-boy' roles that required him to play simpler than he actually was. His career was short lived; debuting to considerable success in **The Human Comedy** (1943) and vanishing from the screen after 1948's **Big City**.

(Previous bottom): Mi and Velvet audition a rider for the Pi to race in the Grand National. But the jockey, I. Tasky (Eugene Loring) cares little for the pair and even less for his mount; only interested in the stipend provided as part of the deal. The moment of truth has arrived; Velvet will ride the Pi herself. At first Mi is vehemently opposed to the idea, and for all the right reasons. But Velvet's determination is unbowed. As Mi lops off her hair to disguise her as a prepubescent jockey and begins to explain the lay of the course, Velvet is momentarily overcome by fear. "*It's no use, Mi,*" Velvet explains, "*Everyone tomorrow will know more than me.*" "*Do you think a race like this is won on luck?!?*" Mi frustratingly inquires. In a moment of sheer acting brilliance, Taylor resurrects her heroine's resolve with an almost unearthly confidence, "*...by knowing I can win and telling the Pi so.*" This scene is arguably the highlight of the movie.

(This page): Britain's Grand National – actually staged in California – gets underway with an enthusiastic Mi cheering from the stands. Having won the race, Velvet loses her grip and tumbles from her mount, momentarily knocked unconscious. The attending doctor soon discovers she is a girl and disqualifies her. But a more personal victory has been won. The papers declare her 'our national Velvet'. The Brown family is inundated with offers to showcase Velvet and the Pi in a series of paid guest appearances across the country and even in America. Giving the matter some serious consideration Velvet, however, refuses to exploit the horse who has given her, her dream, merely for profit. After some minor frustration, Mr. Brown concurs, bolstered by Mrs. Brown's gentle and guiding influence and her enduring love for her family. Earlier Mrs. Brown had explained to Velvet "*Things come suitable to the time*", reasoning that whatever the outcome of her own endeavors, Velvet must dare to dream. Having lived the moment it will continue to live on in her memory for the rest of her life. His faith in himself restored, Mi quietly departs the Brown family home for an uncertain (though undeniably brighter) future. Mrs. Brown encourages Velvet to ride on ahead to the horizon (a matte painting). The truth about his father can at last be told to him. **National Velvet** is one of the finest motion pictures ever made, and not just at MGM. Unquestionably, it is a highpoint in Elizabeth's movie career.



(Above left): The privileges of childhood, or at least one orchestrated by MGM's PR department. Elizabeth is photographed with a prized collection of dolls in 1943. Photos like this one were meant to illustrate for fans that despite her far above average looks, young Elizabeth was a child just like other children. In fact, this photo was taken in the photographic department at MGM. The dolls are props, not Elizabeth's to keep. (Above right): caught in a far-away look by her mother (played by Mary Astor) in the film version of **Cynthia** (1947). Despite her father and uncle's edicts to stay home Cynthia Bishop has just returned a grand old time at the high school dance abetted by Louise, a woman who knows something of a woman's place and the daydreams it cost her. **Cynthia** is standard melodrama, perhaps even subpar for MGM, but Elizabeth's performance is sincere and heartfelt, yet tinged with a curious sadness that miraculously never becomes overwrought or maudlin. Good stuff.

mater, MGM, having observed the striking physical beauty that had blossomed in their midst, sought to exploit this over Taylor's acting prowess with a string of largely disposable and very syrupy melodramas that exuded sex appeal, like **Love Is Better Than Ever** (1952), **The Girl Who Had Everything** (1953) and **Rhapsody** (1954).

There's no denying that throughout the 1950s Elizabeth Taylor did her best work away from MGM; over at Paramount (**A Place in the Sun** 1951), Warner Brothers (**Giant** 1956) and Columbia (**Suddenly Last Summer** 1959). *"When MGM began to die the death rattle was truly horrendous,"* Taylor later recalled, *"Producers, writers, stars, all let go from their contracts. I mean, these were guys you could count on to pull a picture together all under one roof and then suddenly – callously – they were all gone."*

By the time Taylor won her one and only Best Actress Oscar for **Butterfield 8** (1960) she had already begun to be better known for the life she was living beyond the screen – a life some still argue masks her true bearings as an actress. This malignancy on her reputation has often been construed as scandalous pop tart fit for the critical beating of a piñata. There's no doubt that the precepts of Taylor's life and art overlap; in retrospect the plots of a goodly number of Taylor's later movies cruelly paralleling her turbulent marriages and other rumored infidelities. For the record then, Elizabeth Taylor was married eight times to seven very different men of varying qualities and backgrounds. And to be frank, Taylor is almost as famous (or infamous) for these alliances as for the roles she played in the movies. Few female stars have been so readily admired, possessed and idolized; fewer still pounced upon with relished vitriol and demonized for their ability to repeatedly throw caution – and perhaps occasionally tact – to the wind for love.

The wording in the press for the affair between Taylor and singer Eddie Fisher, as example, has always insisted Elizabeth *'stole'* Eddie from wife, Debbie Reynolds. But Fisher had a choice. So did Richard Burton, who began his tempestuous romp with Taylor on the set of **Cleopatra** (1963), then popped her in the eye with his fist when she threatened to tell his wife, Sybil. Now there's a gent! But the men in Taylor's stormy private life were neither innocent nor haplessly consumed by some ravenous *'home-wrecker'* who desired to *'steal'* anybody from anyone merely to satisfy her own immediate urges. No, these boys came and went willingly and of their own accord, perhaps lovingly frustrated or perplexingly exacerbated by their own inabilities to make the relationships click beyond a brief sexually charged détente. Arguably, Elizabeth Taylor in her prime was too much for any one man, although producer Michael Todd might have been the singular force of nature to bring Elizabeth to heel. Indeed, when Todd died tragically in a plane crash, Taylor was



(This page): Richard Thorpe's **A Date With Judy** (1948) is really a modest Jane Powell programmer fleshed out with some delightful supporting bits from Wallace Beery, Selena Royle, Carmen Miranda and Xavier Cugat. But although Powell is given the bulk of the score, Elizabeth is given more than her ample share of sultry close-ups by cinematographer Robert Surtees, immaculately outfitted by MGM's resident couturier, Helen Rose. While MGM made every attempt to maintain the illusion of Powell as just a child (and, in fact she was), it seems they simply could not wait to remake Elizabeth over into a voluptuous screen siren. Judging by these stills from the movie, and despite the premise that both Powell's Judy Foster and Taylor's Carol Pringle are getting ready for graduation, it is difficult, if not impossible to accept Taylor as just another 'high school student': a very unusual day indeed...but a charming movie musical besides. (Right): With Powell just prior to the penultimate moment of joy. (Middle right): erroneously accusing nightclub singer, Rosita (Carmen Miranda) of infidelity with Judy's father (played by Wallace Beery). Xavier Cugat is decidedly not impressed. (Bottom): Carol (Taylor) learns from her father (Leon Ames) that he intends to be more proactive in all of their home lives from now on.



inconsolable for days, and sought comfort in the arms of his best friend, Eddie Fisher – or is it vice versa? At least in hindsight, Fisher proved that his corruptible loyalties could be traded in for the most basic of all human needs.

*"I object to anybody's memory being so poor,"* Debbie Reynolds told interviewer Robert Osborne in 1999, in response to a rather unflattering 'tell-all' Fisher had written about their marriage and break-up. The rift between Reynolds and Fisher arguably never healed. And yet Debbie forgave Elizabeth her infidelities with her husband, even burying the hatchet long enough to costar with Taylor in **These Old Broads**, a 2001 made for TV movie co-written by Reynolds and Fisher's daughter, Carrie (Princess Leia) and Elaine Pope. It is also interesting to note that their forgiveness did not extend to Fisher himself, who remained estranged from both mother and daughter for the rest of his life at their request.



The third spoke in the great wheel of Elizabeth Taylor's life yet to be mentioned is, of course, her frequent health scares that often caused costly delays on the sets of her movies. While riding the gelding during practice for **National Velvet** (1944) Taylor was thrown and injured her back, incurring lifelong trauma that would infrequently lead to hospitalization. On the set of **Elephant Walk** (1954) Taylor suffered a shard of course metal imbedded in her right eye and had to endure two painful surgeries while wide awake. Either might have cost Taylor her





With so much duplicity between the studio's PR for 1950's *Father of the Bride*, and their even more ravenous promotion of Taylor's first marriage to Conrad Nicholson 'Nicky' Hilton as the wedding of the century, it is difficult to discern where reality ends and Hollywood-land fiction begins. Unlike the movie's joyous finale, Nicky and Elizabeth did not live happily ever after. (Top left): George Banks (Spencer Tracy) prepares to marry off his daughter, Kaye (Taylor) to Buckley Dunstan (Don Taylor). (Top right): relaxing with Tracy on the set. Both stars needed a major hit in their respective careers. They had it with this movie. (Right): Nicky, age 23 and Elizabeth, age 18, pose for photographers on the steps of the church, and (bottom) prepare to meet the press in a flurry of flashbulbs for questioning. Hilton's abusive nature, his obsessive gambling and drinking were all cited as 'cause' for divorce nine months later. By then Elizabeth had induced a miscarriage. After an affair with his stepmother, Zsa Zsa Gabor and another failed marriage to Patricia McClintock, Nicky Hilton died in 1969 of a heart attack at the age of 42; perhaps, the *real* picture of Dorian Gray.



sight as well as her career. Before *Cleopatra's* shoot relocated to Rome, Elizabeth slipped into a pneumonia-induced coma from which an emergency tracheotomy had to be performed in order to save her life. Throughout the late 1990s she increasingly became something of a favorite or 'regular' on the morbid '*celebrity death watch*' lists – her various bouts with cancer, crippling spinal ailments and other illnesses creating a ghoulish public fascination to actually see her die.

On March 23, 2011 Elizabeth Taylor obliged the macabre. She left us for real and for good. It is perhaps foolhardy to speculate what she would make of this departure from beyond the grave; perhaps grateful for the time and experiences allotted her while alive; perhaps contented to have left it all behind along with the contemptible beguilement to see her crumble before our very eyes. Yet Taylor has since proven a very resilient sport indeed. The flesh and blood of her gone; the legend and legacy endures. This, above all else, continues to captivate. Even as she witnessed popular opinion repeatedly toy with that legacy and manipulate its variables to make for 'good copy' and tabloid fodder: '*Liz*' – the abbreviation Elizabeth so obviously abhorred; and '*Liz and Eddie*', then '*Liz and Dick*', then '*Liz and Larry*', but always more and more '*Liz*'.



No, there comes a time when it is necessary to declare one legally dead. But that time for Elizabeth Taylor has yet to come. She remains as vital a part of our collective remembrance for Hollywood's vanquished hour of show magic as ever. While popular opinion is likely to remain divided about Taylor as a person, primarily for her private indiscretions, one fact about this iconic beauty will forever be irrefutable; Elizabeth Taylor truly *was* the girl who had everything.



***“Neither of us is inhibited...We speak freely to each other. Also we happen to love each other. We have more fun fighting than most people do making love.”***

**– Elizabeth Taylor on her marriage to Michael Todd.**



Elizabeth Taylor is a true movie goddess. And yet her legacy is only partially captured on film. As a child star she was the personification of youth and innocence, joy and happiness. In her teens she was often cast as the female viper, a bad girl easily converted to the side of righteousness by the love of a loyal companion. But in her waning years of stardom (though never waning popularity) Taylor’s onscreen persona often fed off popular opinions about her private life expounded in the press. Fueled by negative and scathing backlash over affairs with Eddie Fisher and Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor’s movies after 1963 began to eerily mirror her real-life circumstances.

In **The V.I.P.’s** (1963) as example, she plays an unfaithful spouse, torn between a controlling husband (played by Richard Burton) and a flawed dalliance with an intercontinental lover (Louis Jourdan). In 1965’s **The Sandpiper** Taylor seduces a compassionate man (...of the cloth no less, and once again played by Burton), this time, away from his dotting Sweet Polly Purebred of a wife (Eva Marie-Saint exhibiting shades of Burton’s real-life ex, Sybil). In 1967’s **The Comedians** Taylor skulks off with Burton, behind the back of yet another devoted spouse (played with ominous understanding by Peter Ustinov).

In between these rather obvious homages to infidelity came Mike Nichols’ **Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** (1966) and **The Taming of the Shrew** (1967). While some might label the former as almost an apology put forth by Burton and Taylor (a



(Previous): two sides to a goddess. Elizabeth strikes a pose of sweetness in 1944, and another suggesting a more worldly nature in 1954. Oh, what ten years can do! Taylor is one of the most photographed women in movie history, yet, of the literally hundreds of thousands of feet of exposed film it seems virtually impossible to find one bad shot; her face a miracle of bone structure and finely wrought features that absolutely adored the camera and vice versa. (Above): strolling the concourse with co-stars Eva Marie-Saint and Montgomery Clift on the set of **Raintree County** (1957); an epic misfire in Taylor's career and the costliest motion picture ever made on American soil at that time. To the right of Elizabeth are proud VP in Charge of Production Dore Schary – a successor to L.B. Mayer after 1951 - and the film's director Edward Dmytryk. Judging from the smiles this is an early publicity still before spiraling costs and horrendous reviews began to trickle in to herald the movie as a colossal turkey. Schary's head would roll over this epic implosion, starting the beginning of the end for MGM as both a Hollywood superpower and as a thriving film studio.

sort of *'hey, we're together but just as unhappy'*) and the latter, a project tailor-made for their unremorseful tomcatting, each getting their just deserts and each other in the final reel, there is little to deny the fairly transparent mirroring of the couple's life together beyond the screen as being retold for the cameras – shamelessly so, and perhaps with Taylor and Burton relishing it all themselves – a sort of thumbing their noses at all the critical backlash that, despite its venom, could not poison the public's perennial fascination to see more and more of the two together at the movies.

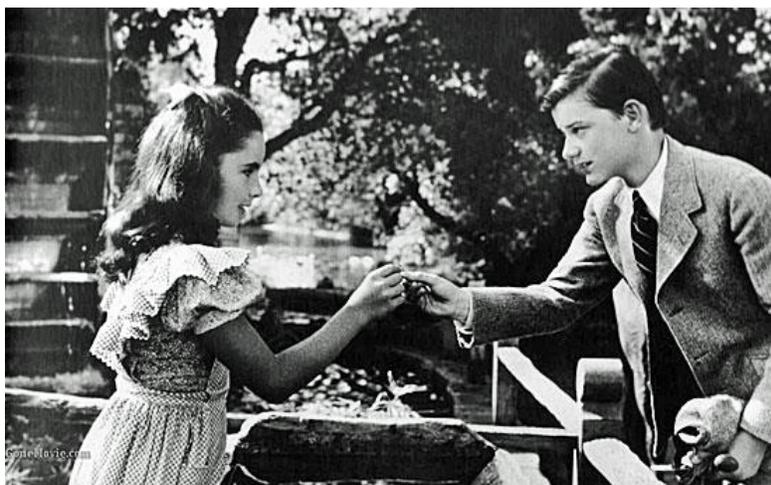
The record clearly indicates that Elizabeth Taylor never found lasting happiness in marriage. But was it her fault? Now, there is a more complex question to consider and one likely to remain unanswerable for all time since Taylor is unable to speak for herself. Without a doubt the optimism she infused into her various unions to Nicky Hilton, Michael Wilding, Eddie Fisher, Richard Burton, Sen. John Warner and Larry Fortensky all ended in disarray, her one arguably 'perfect' alliance with Michael Todd ending in personal tragedy. The name-calling didn't help. From *"luscious Liz"* to denouncements on the floor of the U.S. Congress, Elizabeth Taylor somehow managed to remain 'above it all.' Always considered a departure from mere mortals, both Taylor and her reputation have gone on ahead now - destined for the ages as either an independent-minded heroine or punching bag in popular folklore. Elizabeth Taylor is no longer a person, you see. She has become America's national myth.







(Previous): a touch of sadness, and perhaps heat exhaustion, caught in a publicity photo for George Steven's *Giant* (1956). It is unclear if this still was taken before or after the company learned that co-star James Dean had been killed in a horrific auto accident. Elizabeth had befriended Dean on the set, gingerly coaxing him from his awkwardness. (This page top left): As Helen Burns, offering a compassionate hand and some food to Peggy Ann Garner in Robert Stevenson's definitive production of *Jane Eyre* (1943); as the precocious Pricilla tending to a depressed collie in Fred M. Wilcox's *Lassie Come Home* (also in 1943) and right, (with Roddy McDowell) as first love, Betsey Kenney from *The White Cliffs of Dover* (1944). By far the most impressive of the three films, at least from the perspective of seeing Elizabeth at work, is *Jane Eyre*. She seems particularly engaged and so utterly genuine that Fox's chief Darryl F. Zanuck desperately tried to buy up Elizabeth's contract immediately following the shoot. L.B. Mayer would have none of it. Taylor was his star and would spend almost three decades making movies for Metro instead. Good, bad or indifferent – the studio's zeal for ultra-glamor and high gloss would dictate Elizabeth's public image for decades to follow.



## ‘SPORT’

She was born Elizabeth Rosemond Taylor; a British subject to American parents Francis and Sara Taylor living in London, England, on February 27, 1932. In her youth, Sara had been on the stage; a past life that brought about erroneous speculations she had forced Elizabeth into an acting career. *“Nothing could be further from the truth,”* Sara commented in a 1949 interview, *“I not only gave up the theater when I married Francis Taylor... I never looked back.”*

Elizabeth Taylor's childhood generally gets short shrift, but certain points about the girl's pre-Hollywood life bear mentioning. To begin with, Taylor's track record for illness began practically from birth with bouts of ear infections and influenza, and, a penchant for accidentally bruising, burning and otherwise injuring herself under the aegis of childhood curiosity. If it had not been for her faithful brother, Howard, she might have drowned – twice; once in a creek near her familial home, then again, in Malibu after a dangerous undertow dragged her beneath the surf.

England was home to the Taylors until Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939. By May, Sara and Francis had moved the family to Pasadena California. Neither parent had any interest in exploiting their daughter as a child star. However, at the tender age of seven, Elizabeth had already developed a mind of her own. When asked by her teacher what she wanted to be when she grew up, Elizabeth replied, *“I don't want to be a movie star. I want to be a serious actress like my mother was.”*



(Above): Whooping it up for the Yanks and the RAF as devil-may-care Helen Ellswirth in Richard Brook's overwrought melodrama, **The Last Time I Saw Paris** (1954). Taylor plays a self-destructing vamp who seduces a lonely soldier (Van Johnson), then proceeds to make both their lives utterly miserable. For some reason the movie made money, but its reputation was excoriated by the critics who found it "trite", "mundane" and "forgettable". (Right): mooning over a slightly over-the-hill Robert Taylor in MGM's glamorous and glossy remake of Sir Walter Scott's **Ivanhoe** (1952). Elizabeth is Jewish princess, Rebecca, providing our hero with jewels aplenty to help finance his revolution against the treacherous Prince John (Guy Rolfe). **Ivanhoe** is one of MGM's finest swashbucklers and was a real boost to Robert Taylor's sagging appeal.



Taylor had her chance to do just that, inauspiciously and quite by accident when her father met Andrea Berens; a woman who was then engaged to Cheever Cowdin – chairman to the Board of Directors of Universal Pictures. At the insistence of his fiancée, Cowdin met the Taylors and became enamored with Elizabeth. Cowdin also attempted to fashion a career for Taylor as a childhood chanteuse, something he had done for Universal's protégé, Deanna Durbin. Taylor even took lessons from Durbin's singing coach, Andre De Segurola. As luck would have it, at a recital Elizabeth wowed Carmen Considine, wife of producer John W. Jr. who finagled a meeting with MGM's lion, Louis B. Mayer. The audience between Elizabeth and Mayer was brief and tainted by Mayer's usual gruffness. "Well," Mayer told Considine, "What are you waiting for? Sign her up!"

Unfortunately for Elizabeth, Cheever Cowdin was prepared to double Mayer's initial offer to \$200 a week. Cowdin got Elizabeth – then didn't know what to do with his new acquisition. Universal dropped Taylor from her first Hollywood contract after only one year. Elizabeth spent nearly two more in limbo – living resplendently in Beverly Hills with her parents until a turn of events once again brought her to the attention of MGM. This time the catalyst was a minor B-movie produced by Samuel Marx – **Lassie Come Home** (1942). Initially, Margaret O'Brien had been slated to be cast opposite Roddy McDowell. But O'Brien's star had been on the ascendance and **Lassie Come Home** was a far cry from the other roles she was being offered. So, Elizabeth was given the part instead. No one, least of all Sam Marx expected the whirlwind of publicity that followed.

Nicholas Schenk, the head of Loewe's Incorporated New York offices – the parent company of MGM – told Marx his picture was so bad it was not even going to be released. L.B. Mayer, however, had a different opinion; perhaps one prompted more from his contempt for Schenk than the movie's actual merit. Exiting the screening room with tears running down his cheek, Mayer told Marx "This picture must play Radio City Music Hall!" **Lassie Come Home** is, in fact, a standard programmer – albeit one with solid sentimentality for which Mayer had a natural affinity. After the death of Irving Thalberg, MGM's VP in Charge of Production, Mayer had slowly begun to weed out the adult stars from his studio's roster, not entirely because they were washed up or even 'old' per say, but because children in general were proving



***"We're, all of us, children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks."***

- Tennessee Williams (Suddenly Last Summer)



(Previous): Anatomy of a nightmare. Elizabeth gave one of her most ambitious and riveting performances in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's **Suddenly Last Summer** (1959); a film the Los Angeles Herald Examiner astutely labeled as "a malignant masterpiece" and "a horror movie for adults". Variety commented, "...it is by far the most bizarre movie ever made by a major studio." Based on Tennessee Williams terrifying stagecraft, Elizabeth is Catherine Holly; a troubled young woman confined to an asylum by her wealthy aunt, Violet Venable (Katharine Hepburn), who employs neurosurgeon, Dr. Cukrowicz (Montgomery Clift) to perform a lobotomy on her niece, presumably out of some altruistic desire to alleviate the garish darkness that has come over Catherine's mind. In the film's climactic 'dream' sequence, Catherine is instead gingerly coaxed into regression therapy by Cukrowicz while Violet, Catherine's mother, Grace (Mercedes McCambridge), brother George (Gary Raymond) and Cukrowicz's superior, Dr. Lawrence J. Hockstader (Albert Dekker) look on in abject shock and amazement.

Catherine is taken to that moment when 'suddenly last summer' on a remote Greek isle she experienced the murder and cannibalism of her cousin, Sebastian – Violet's son. It seems that Sebastian, a meandering poet and closeted homosexual, exploited his own mother to procure him male companionship from the local urchins. When Violet's looks faded, Sebastian discarded her for Catherine; a reluctant participant whom he paraded along the beach head in a skimpy and semi-transparent white two piece bathing suit. However, having exploited the impoverished men for some time – again, presumably for sexual pleasure – these starving youth now turn on their wealthy patron, charging Sebastian up a cliff side where they dismember and consume him as Catherine looks on. The truth, that Violet sought to keep Sebastian's lifestyle a secret and his memory as the perfect son ensconced within her own family's history by silencing Catherine with a lobotomy, sends Violet over the edge. She mistakes Cukrowicz for Sebastian with the likelihood that in sparing Catherine her own sanity she has forever lost her own.

In 1959, the production code was still very much in effect and Mankiewicz's daring - his clever use of symbolism to convey the grotesqueness of his subject matter - remains not only powerful, but thoroughly satisfying. Elizabeth's performance ranks among her top three; only **National Velvet** and **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** marginally best it. Mankiewicz's framing throughout this penultimate 'nightmare' sequence keeps Catherine's head framed at far right, the hodge-podge of haunting remembrances shot through heavy gauze and clouded around the edges by Vaseline applied to the peripheries of the camera lens. Look carefully and you'll also see Eddie Fisher in the background as one of the urchins about to devour our doomed victim. **Suddenly Last Summer** remains a terrifying gem, oft overlooked in Elizabeth's canon or even as part of revivals of vintage horror, perhaps because its central psychoanalytic focus is so truly frightening one cannot help but echo the probability and sentiment that somehow it all just might be true.

(This page, top left): High-priced call girl Gloria Wandrous awakens alone in her lover's apartment to discover a letter inquiring 'Is this enough?' and \$250.00 left on the bureau. Her reaction is clearly scrawled in lipstick on the mirror. As compensation she takes a mink fur coat instead. John O'Hara's novel **Butterfield 8** had been a best seller six weeks on the New York Times list. The film treads lightly, careful not to incur the ire of screen censorship too much, while still implying there's a lot more going on behind closed doors. (Top right): Gloria amuses herself with a myriad of male admirers. Coy and aloof, sultry and sophisticated, she's a temptress with a soft spot, her genuine affections for waspish playboy, Weston Liggett (Lawrence Harvey) unrequited beyond their sexual liaisons. Herein, he is decidedly unimpressed by the amount of attention Gloria is getting.

(Bottom left): Having departed her lover's apartment in the dead of winter wrapped in nothing more than a fur coat, Gloria makes a pit stop at composer, Steve Carpenter's (Eddie Fisher) apartment. Gloria could be happy with Steve, or at least made comfortable if only he would take the initiative to be more than just friends. Steve, however, is for Norma (Susan Oliver) while Liggett isn't about to leave his wife, Emily (Dina Merrill) for anybody. By any stretch of the imagination, **Butterfield 8** is a standard melodrama; its laissez faire attitude toward sex and prostitution made fairly bland. Elizabeth always considered this her worst movie; a project foisted upon her by MGM's management who insisted her contract still owed the studio one picture. It could have been better. But it could also have been a lot worse, and in the final analysis, Taylor was well served by the property, earning her one and only Best Actress Academy Award. By the time Elizabeth accepted the honor she had already narrowly survived her near-death bout of pneumonia on the Pinewood set of **Cleopatra** (1960). Critics begrudgingly suggested that Academy voters gave Taylor the Oscar for personal, rather than professional, reasons – a claim the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) has always denied.



(Above): looking positively radiant as Madam Frances Andros in Anthony Asquith's **The VIP's** (1963); the first post-Cleopatra movie to capitalize on the salaciousness of the Burton/Taylor affair but with a twist. Terrance Rattigan's screenplay was hardly a departure from the formulaic all-star extravaganzas MGM was used to producing, dating all the way back to 1932's **Grand Hotel**. But it had 'Liz' and 'Dick' and an impressive roster of luminaries that included Orson Welles, Margaret Rutherford (walking off with the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance as a penniless dotty duchess; Rod Taylor as tractor building industrialist Les Mangrum, Maggie Smith as his devoted secretary, Miss Mead and, for Taylor's intercontinental lover, Louis Jourdan. It might have turned out all right if the dog of a plot didn't have the indecisive Frances waffling between her affairs with Jourdan's notorious gambler before returning to the side of her ever-devoted husband, played by Richard Burton, who seems as steady as the proverbial rock of Gibraltar until Frances announces that she's leaving him. Not exactly high art, but a passable way to spend two hours nevertheless.

popular with audiences and were far more malleable on the whole. Mayer could comfortably boss them around. He could also pay them far less.

Elizabeth's role in **Lassie Come Home** isn't big or showy, but it did afford Taylor the luxury to flash her violet wide-eyed innocence and cry on cue as well as utter some fairly articulate dialogue with great sincerity. Roddy McDowell was *the star* of **Lassie Come Home** – unless, of course, one counts Lassie herself – but when the movie wrapped Mayer knew he had a new star on his hands. And it's rather telling that in the subsequent sequel to the original film, 1946's **Courage of Lassie** only Taylor was called upon to reprise her role, playing basically the same character but with a different name. An instant hit with audiences of all ages, **Lassie Come Home** proved the springboard for Elizabeth Taylor's fledgling movie career.

MGM was quick to capitalize on Taylor's initial success. They loaned her to 20th Century-Fox for a pivotal role in **Jane Eyre** before recalling her back to the studio for **The White Cliffs of Dover** (both in 1944). With each assignment, Taylor's reputation as a pint-sized consummate professional with no hint of self-consciousness steadily grew. But by far Taylor's most ambitious film project to date was **National Velvet** (1944), based on Enid Bagnold's bestseller. MGM cast a horse of genuine pedigree, King Charles (grandson to the famous Man O' War) as the fictional Pi whom Taylor rides to victory in the film. The horse, "*a lunatic*" by Elizabeth's own reflections, proved a very spirited mount indeed. Once, it literally ate the front off Taylor's blouse.

All, however, was not idyllic beyond the fabled walls of the dream factory. Mayer's relentless pursuit in crafting Taylor's career often led to overwork and increasing demands. Sara Taylor tried to intervene. But she was no match for Mayer's imposing nature. Elizabeth's temperament was quite another story. At one such meeting where Mayer frightened Sara almost to tears, Elizabeth suddenly defied the mogul with, "*Don't you dare speak to my mother like that! You and your studio can both go to hell!*" She was all of fourteen. Refusing to apologize for her outburst, Taylor and Mayer never again



(Above): Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* was a real downer; the tale of an insecure mama's boy who moves away and uses the memory of his familial name to make a place for himself amongst polite society. He falls in love with a girl from his social ilk, but catches the eye of a sophisticated socialite in the meantime, only to discover that his first love is pregnant with their illegitimate child. Desperate to improve his own social standing, the boy kills his girl and their unborn child and attempts to resume his grand amour with love interest number two, only to be caught by the police and sentenced to death for his crime. Reconstituted by director George Stevens' *Place in the Sun* (1951) built on the grandiosity of the Dreiser's thematic elements but had the boy, George Eastman (Montgomery Clift) wrongfully accused after his girl, Alice Tripp (played to dowdy perfection by Shelley Winters) accidentally drowns. Nevertheless, George wanted her dead, and so in the film's penultimate moment Clift's introvert faces the same fate. Elizabeth was cast as the socialite, Angela Vickers – sumptuously attired in tulle by designer Edith Head and looking every bit the glamor girl of her youth. (Left): a publicity still meant to capture the essence of Angela and George's doomed romance. (Right): Enduring less than ideal temperatures at Lake Tahoe, Clift and Elizabeth share a coffee while bundled in heavy coats. Elizabeth adored Monty, "He was my brother and my dearest friend."

spoke to one another in person for the duration of her tenure at MGM – only through third party contacts.

Immediately following this outburst, Taylor was loaned to Warner Brothers – as punishment – for the film adaptation of *Life With Father* (1947); a delightful departure from Mayer's tyrannical reign. It kept Elizabeth busy and away from MGM for five months. The film's director, Michael Curtiz did his own predicting. "Elizabeth is the most promising dramatic ingénue in years." Jack Warner concurred. But every attempt to acquire Taylor's participation from Mayer for a part in *Green Mansions* was unsuccessful. Henceforth, and for some time thereafter, Taylor would be preoccupied on the Metro back lot, plugged into standard fare like *Cynthia* and *A Date With Judy* (both in 1947).

In retrospect Taylor was perhaps ill-served by these pictures, as neither made an attempt to rival the career-setting standards of *National Velvet* nor particularly showed off Elizabeth to her best advantage. As example, she was contractually obligated to sing 'Voices of Spring' in *Cynthia* – a wafer thin story about a sickly girl who finally becomes a young lady despite the overbearing concerns of her embittered but doting father (played by George Murphy). Originally a Broadway flop (dubbed *Junior Mess* in pun and comparison to the play *Junior Miss* - a resounding success) the filmic version of *Cynthia* nevertheless proved popular with audiences and a considerable triumph for Taylor who acquitted herself rather nicely of the song despite her thin voice. The film also served to showcase Taylor having her first onscreen



(Above): Two of the most gorgeous people who ever lived. Elizabeth was well served by her two adaptations of Tennessee Williams' plays, **Suddenly Last Summer** (1959) and **Cat on A Hot Tin Roof**, costarring Paul Newman and made one year earlier. Director Richard Brooks didn't much care for Taylor on the whole, but she certainly won the admiration of her costars and even the playwright, who was known to be harsh in his criticisms about Hollywood actors in general. Newman's piteous drunkard, Brick Pollitt has married Maggie – the cat (Taylor) but cannot shake himself of his homo-erotic desires for a former classmate and football star – Skipper – now dead. In the movie this scenario was altered so that Brick – now heterosexual – suspects his wife of an affair with his best friend; hence, his own sexual frigidity toward her. It didn't really make much sense, particularly with Elizabeth exuding so much sex appeal so as to cancel out the presumed affair as utterly moot. Worse, in the final moments we learn that Maggie didn't sleep with Skipper. Brick merely presumed as much. How daft can a guy get? *"I can't live on this way,"* Maggie roars, *"Skipper is dead and I am alive. Maggie, the cat is alive!"* She most certainly was!

kiss. *"Some wit had me give an interview to promote the thing where I said 'It's only going to be a peck...and not a Gregory,"* Taylor later mused, *"If that didn't turn their stomachs there was always the plot!"*

Yet, **Cynthia** proved very popular with audiences, perhaps because Harold Buchman's screenplay heavily rewrote Vina Delmar's catastrophic dialogue from the original play, removing much of its saccharine and treacle. And then, of course, there was Elizabeth's performance to consider – revealing a vulnerable femininity, unassuming and brimming with doe-eyed smiles. Commenting on her natural ease in front of the camera The New Herald-Tribune declared, *"Elizabeth Taylor does a brilliant job with the title role."* *"Bless its little bloomers,"* cooed the famed critic, Bosley Crowthers, *"Cynthia is a nutty and fruity little tale; a synthetic morsel right out of Metro's candy box!"*



(Top left): Elizabeth and co-star Rock Hudson prepare to cut the inaugural cake to mark the start of shooting George Steven’s *Giant* in Marfa Texas. Despite the film’s many attributes, the finished product tends to suffer from too many storylines all going on at once; none of them realized beyond the initial cardboard cutout phase. (Middle): Elizabeth poses for a wardrobe test in the nightgown she wears aboard her husband, Jordan ‘Bick’ Benedict’s (Rock Hudson) train. (Right): quietly observing co-star James Dean indulging in some origami. In death, Dean acquired the image of a rough and tumble rebel. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In life Dean was more insecure than self-destructive.

*“I think he was just struggling to find himself,”* Elizabeth later hypothesized, *“But he was gentle and sweet and once you convinced him that you understood where he was coming from he came to let you into his world. He didn’t do that with too many people though and most people today think it’s because he thought he was too tough. He wasn’t too tough. He was too shy. I feel sorry for shy people.”*

(Right): looking radiant as the rancher’s wife, Leslie Benedict. *“It was too damn hot in Marfa,”* Elizabeth has said, *“So hot that I sometimes thought it couldn’t get any hotter...and then it did.”*

(Bottom): Dean practices his hog-tying on Elizabeth as she chats up Rock Hudson on the set. Dean understood he was a better actor than Hudson, but was slightly competitive and more than slightly enamored with Hudson who never seemed to have a problem talking to the ladies. *“He would have liked to have been Rock,”* Elizabeth reasoned, *“He wasn’t jealous or even envious of him. Just strangely in awe without being able to recognize what an extraordinary person he was all by himself. I wish I could have told him how extraordinary he was. It might have made a difference.”*



Even so, Taylor was given far less to do in *A Date With Judy* – a typical Joseph Pasternak embellishment of small town charm and effervescence, its *“light and beguiling”* musical mish-mash starring Metro’s resident winsome soprano, Jane Powell. The film, a delightful (if somewhat plot-less) bit of fluff and nonsense did little to enhance Elizabeth’s rising stardom. On the flipside, however, it created no negative imprint either. But by now Taylor was beginning to grow slightly bored with her assignments. Throughout her early MGM years Elizabeth had often quietly resented the studio’s insistence that her life should be imitating her art. She found most of her contemporaries (save Roddy McDowell) rather shallow and pretentious and also resented the fact that her adolescent fancies and early adulthood crushes were being orchestrated for maximum effect by studio P.R. Even her first ‘legitimate date’ with actor Marshall Thompson was a planned affair. More distressing to Elizabeth were the fan magazines with their preoccupation over her practically non-



existent teenage love life. It was all banana oil - fabricated by MGM's publicity department.

In **A Date With Judy** Taylor plays Carol Pringle, a loyal and very rich girlfriend to Jane Powell's girlish wallflower, Judy Foster. Well...as loyal as Taylor was likely to get at this juncture in her career. The studio had already begun to craft the persona of a teen Mata Hari for Elizabeth. But at least in the film, her flirtations with stud Stephen Andrews (Robert Stack) were white-washed by Judy's willing relinquishment of him so that Judy could remain pinned with Carol's brother, Ogden (Scotty Beckett) – decidedly more her speed and temperament. Despite its conventional 'change partners' theme, **A Date With Judy** was a joyous Metro musical with the focus on Powell's singing, as well as other diverting pleasures to be had from the very cheeky Carmen Miranda. But Taylor had come out the other end, having outgrown her childhood freshness. She was a woman, or at least, looked like one – even if numerically she still was a child.

*"Name me one actress who survived all that crap at MGM," Ava Gardner recalled years later, "Maybe Lana Turner. Certainly Liz Taylor. But they all hate acting as much as I do. All except for Elizabeth. She used to come up to me on the set and say "If only I could learn to be good," and, by God, she made it!"*

What saved Elizabeth's sanity during this awkward transition were weekend escapes to her family's Malibu beach house with her ever-expanding troop of swains and close friends. On one such retreat in 1948, Taylor was introduced to Glenn Davis – a champion football star. He was tall, handsome and desperately attracted to her and it was hoped...or at least rumored...that a lasting attachment would ensue. But fame can do strange things to a person's private life. Lest we remember that these were the years when 'stars' actually earned their money – the most lucrative among them pumping out two to four pictures a year and at breakneck speed: not much time for socializing there.

Elizabeth next assignment at Metro was **Julia Misbehaves** (1948) a misfire for all concerned that cast her opposite Greer Garson and another rising star, Peter Lawford. Elizabeth had a hopeless crush on the handsome Lawford whose penchant for fast beauties might have fitted Taylor to a tee, if only the romance had come a scant few years later. But at the time Elizabeth was not as worldly as, say, Lana Turner, whom Lawford, in fact, preferred and briefly pursued behind the scenes. Reportedly, during their one and only love scene together Elizabeth's character was supposed to wrap her arms around Lawford, passionately kiss him and then utter the line, *"Oh Ritchie...what are we going to do?"* Instead, caught





(Previous two pages): Elizabeth Taylor met Peter Lawford in 1946, or perhaps worshipped him from afar is a better description of her general feelings toward the handsome Brit. Lawford was nine years Elizabeth's senior and had absolutely no interest in dating her. She was, after all, still a child despite her rapidly maturing physique. Undaunted by the discrepancies in their age, Taylor quietly kept tabs on Lawford's comings and goings around the studio, sneaking off to watch him work whenever she wasn't working or going to MGM's little red schoolhouse to continue her education. Lawford's first role of merit came in **A Yank at Eton** (1942), and earned acclaim as the ill-fated soldier in **The White Cliffs of Dover** two years later.

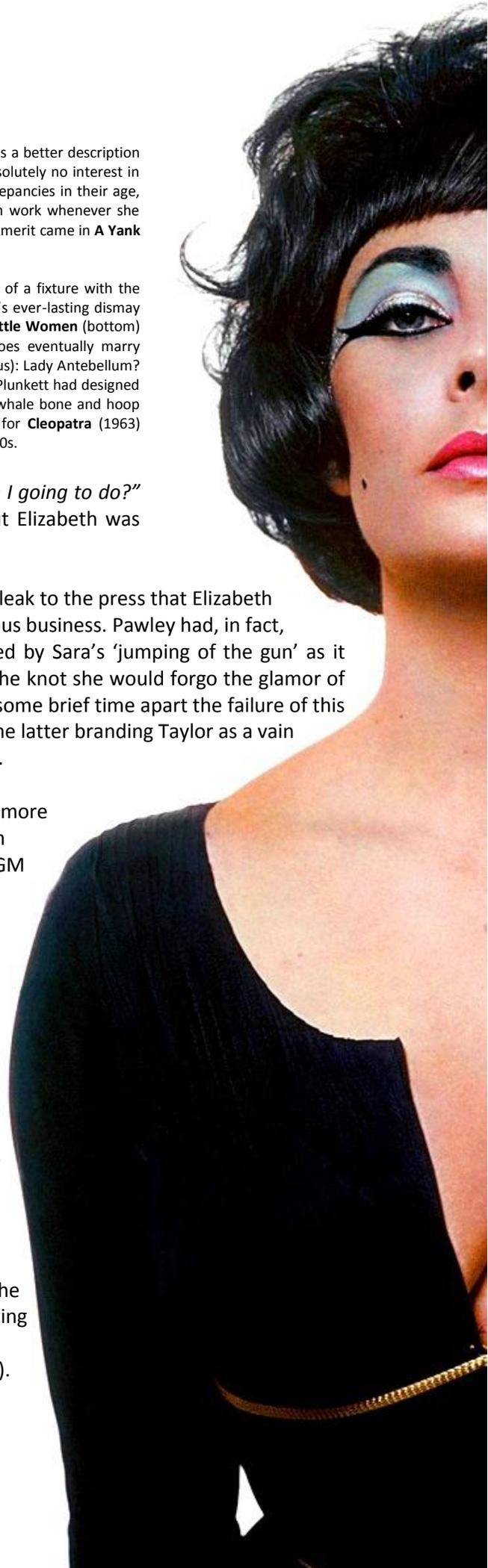
By the time he came to co-star with Elizabeth in **Julia Misbehaves** (1948) (right top) he was something of a fixture with the popular leading ladies; his handsomeness earning him many admirers both on and off screen. To Taylor's ever-lasting dismay their brief on screen kiss was met with a Freudian slip up; her costarring with Lawford again for 1949's **Little Women** (bottom) the second and last time the two appeared together. In that film, Elizabeth's snooty Amy Marsh does eventually marry Lawford's Theodore 'Laurie' Laurence. She never even made it to second base with the real man. (Previous): Lady Antebellum? Elizabeth's wardrobe for **Raintree County** (1957) was among the movie's most sumptuous assets. Walter Plunkett had designed the costumes for Selznick's **Gone With The Wind** (1939) so he came to the southern accoutrements of whale bone and hoop skirts with real lace and hand-made embroidery by second nature. (This page): Elizabeth's wardrobe for **Cleopatra** (1963) featured an endless display of cleavage and dramatic eye make-ups that briefly were all the rage in the 1960s.

in the throes of her own daydream, Elizabeth whispered, *"Oh Peter...what am I going to do?"* The crew found Elizabeth's Freudian slip quite amusing, as did Lawford. But Elizabeth was mortified.

She would have even greater cause to grow flush when her mother Sara let it leak to the press that Elizabeth had been dating William D. Pawley Jr. – heir apparent to his father's thriving bus business. Pawley had, in fact, proposed and Elizabeth had accepted – so there was no need to be alarmed by Sara's 'jumping of the gun' as it were. What troubled Elizabeth was Pawley's understanding that upon tying the knot she would forgo the glamor of Hollywood and become his 'little woman'. It wasn't going to work, and after some brief time apart the failure of this second romance was made clear to both families and eventually the press – the latter branding Taylor as a vain little minx who callously broke hearts to suit her own fickle fashion and tastes.

Worse, Elizabeth's breakneck schedule had yielded only one competent hit in more than a year; a glossy Technicolor remake of **Little Women** (1949). But that film belonged more to co-star June Allyson than it did Taylor. In the meantime, MGM had badly conceived two clunkers in a row for; **The Big Hangover** (1950 with Van Johnson) and **Conspirator** (1949; a woeful mishmash about communism opposite Robert Taylor, considered so atrocious it was shelved for over a year after production wrapped). Robert Taylor's own MGM career had spun wildly out of control since his halcyon days as the studio's veteran male beauty starring opposite such stellar leading ladies as Jean Harlow and the elusive Garbo.

It was at this juncture in Elizabeth's own career that two moves - one professional, the other personal - conspired to forever morph her 'child star' image into MGM's reigning siren. The first bit of great 'good luck' was Taylor's loan out to Paramount for **A Place in the Sun** (1951). The second was Elizabeth's serious attachment to heir apparent to a hotel fortune, Conrad Nicholson 'Nicky' Hilton Jr. The romance between Elizabeth and 'Nicky' had begun inauspiciously with Hilton – already branded something of a playboy – spying Taylor as one of the bridesmaid's in Jane Powell's wedding party at the Mocambo. Before long, Elizabeth and 'Nicky' were seen everywhere; their dating becoming a frenzied montage of spirited PR orchestrated by MGM's publicity department to perfectly dovetail into the release of **Father of the Bride** (1951).





(This page): Three ways the studio tried to market a teenage Elizabeth to the general public. Stars in general, and MGM stars in particular, were expected to be 'all things to all people'; their appeal as universal as Coca-Cola and as American as ma's apple pie. MGM had Elizabeth don some varsity sweats to show her athletic side. But it was also important that she be industrious and a lady, whether knitting a scarf on the front steps in a floor length full skirt or just taking the dog for a stroll – in high heels no less. "The studio really didn't know anything about me or how to realistically sell the image of a teenager," Elizabeth once recalled, "To them you either had to be holding a lollipop or wearing a wedding band. Anything in between was beyond them." (Right): Looking doleful and soulful for **There's One Born Every Minute** (1942) and coddling puppies who'd probably rather be someplace else for yet another photo op in 1944.

The premiere would coincide with Taylor's real life nuptials to Hilton on May 6, 1951: a perfect Hollywood ending for MGM's unofficially crowned princess.

Unfortunately, the marriage had begun to deteriorate practically from the moment the couple said 'I do' and departed for their honeymoon. Just prior Elizabeth had been forced to sign consent to satisfy the Catholic Church. Although retaining her own Protestantism, Elizabeth agreed that whatever offspring came of the union would be raised Catholic. There are many rumors as to why the marriage did not outlast the five month 'honeymoon' but neither 'Nicky' nor Elizabeth ever talked about it afterward, except in veiled hints that belied any real truth of the matter. Taylor would reflect, "When I married Nick I fell off my pink cloud with a thud. We were both much too young and immature. (My marriage) scarred me and left me with horrible memories." Eight months later Elizabeth's first divorce was finalized in Santa Monica.

MGM was shaken by this sudden turn of events. They were in the process of an idyllic follow up to **Father of the Bride (Father's Little Dividend 1951)** that presented Elizabeth as the happy mother with only hearth and home on her mind. Instead, Taylor was already polishing off the dust from her awkward first marriage by indulging in an affair with director Stanley Donen, who was at the time married to wife, Jeanne. On April 5, 1951 **Father's Little Dividend** premiered, and although successful, it failed to meet MGM's expectations. By the time Taylor began shooting **Ivanhoe** (1952) she had also moved on from the Donen tryst, courting the man who would become her second husband, actor Michael Wilding.





# I RE-TAKE THIS WOMAN

*"I remember a time when I went down on my knees to an executive at MGM who shall remain nameless. I was married to Michael Wilding and was pregnant and they put me on suspension. We had bought a house and we desperately needed \$10,000 or else we would lose it. I begged him to loan me \$10,000. It seemed the end of the world. He said, 'you didn't plan things very well did you?'...He pulled out a wallet choked with hundreds of thousands...to humiliate me. I got the money only on the condition that I would make an exhausting tour – pregnant mind you – to promote a picture. I vowed then and there that I would never have to ask anybody for anything again!"*

– Elizabeth Taylor

On January 6, 1953 Michael Howard Wilding was born to Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Wilding Sr. in Santa Monica. MGM offered Elizabeth a substandard script to get their most popular asset back to work. Taylor balked. Instead, she was loaned out to Paramount for **Elephant Walk** (1953) an abysmal tale of an ineffectual marriage to a drunkard colonialist, played by Peter Finch and set against the exotic backdrop of Ceylon. Suffering an eye injury on the set, and requiring drastic surgery to save Elizabeth from blindness MGM relentlessly recalled Taylor a scant six weeks post-op to star in **Rhapsody** (1953), a cliché-ridden romance that also costarred her second husband, before slipping into the even more loquacious remake of 1931's **A Free Soul**, rechristened **The Girl Who Had Everything** (1953). Upon its release, The L.A. Citizen-New quipped, *"It has everything but good sense and a decent script,"* while The Hollywood Reporter appropriately tagged the film as an *"over-talky drama of little interest"* that made 69 minutes seem an eternity.

Elizabeth's next pair of efforts; the convoluted literary clunker, **Beau Brummel** and pretentious, **The Last Time I Saw Paris** (both in 1954) were equally ill-received, particularly the former, that critics in Britain found *"ridiculous," "stupid"* and *"boring."* Although Elizabeth garnered praise for her work in the latter – Variety went a bit too far when it gushed, calling Taylor's performance *"a milestone"* and *"her best work to date."* In the good old days MGM could afford its share of flops. There were too many solid hits in their pipeline. But the end of WWII, at least in hindsight, seems to have marked the first visible signs that the studio's imperious reign had unofficially come to an end. Profits were down and so was MGM's prestige. With costs skyrocketing and television at the cusp of its rivalry with the movies, MGM could no longer afford to shrug off Elizabeth's waning box office. Thanks to their mismanagement of her career she was not a guaranteed winner anymore and, in the horse race that *is* Hollywood, Elizabeth's failure to take the lead or, in some cases even qualify amongst the forerunners, had suddenly become unacceptable to the powers that be.

(From left to right): the men in Elizabeth's boudoir. Happy in Paris with Nicky Hilton (1950-51); pushing a baby carriage with husband #2, Michael Wilding (1952-57) and their first child; posing for pictures with sons Michael Wilding Jr. and Christopher Wilding and #3, producer Mike Todd (1957-58) who looks thoroughly unimpressed, and finally, attending a New York premiere with hubby #4, nightclub singer and recording artist, Eddie Fisher (1959-64). Taylor's marital track record is one for the ages and rife with possibilities for parody. Taylor took it all in stride. Things might have worked out with Mike Todd – a man just as pugnacious, determined and headstrong as Taylor, and the one man whom Elizabeth would eventually call *"the only real love of my life."* Todd's premature death in a plane crash put a period to their happiness that might have been.

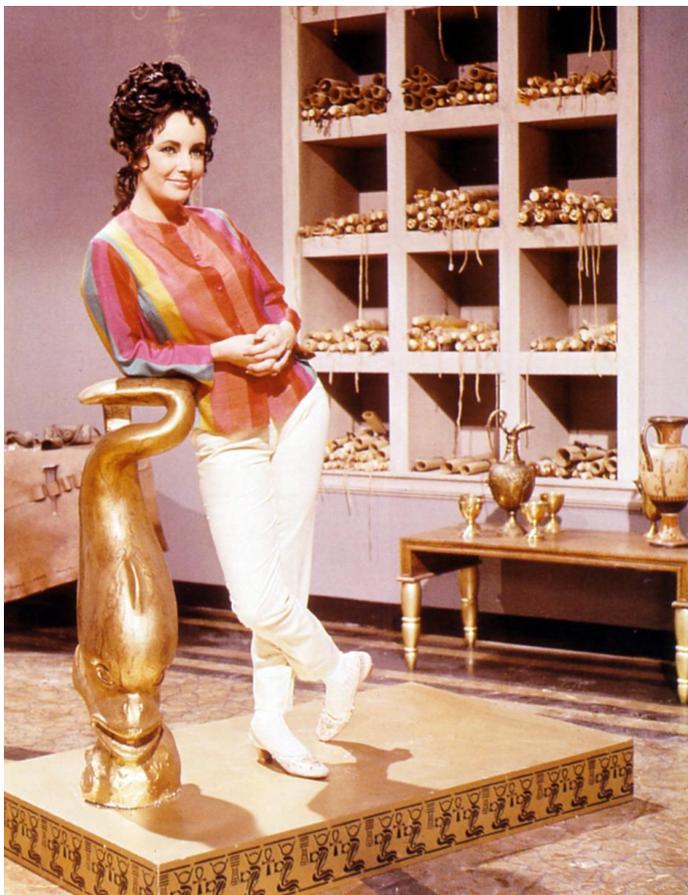


(Above): Hurricane Burton. They met on the set of **Cleopatra** (1963) and sparks flew. It didn't take long before co-star Martin Landau and director Joseph Mankiewicz knew they had a real crisis on their hands. The paparazzi in Rome caught the pair in a clinch and splashed their photos across every rag in the country. The scandal devastated Eddie Fisher. He suffered a breakdown. Becoming the brunt of late night talk show jokes wasn't exactly what he had in mind. His TV show was canceled and his recording contracts dried up. After attempting suicide, Fisher committed himself to a 'retreat' for a little R&R. He went on to live a long life. But things were never the same for him afterward. The public empathy had shifted – just not enough for Fisher to recoup his former glory. But the affair that derailed two marriages (it also ended Burton's to Sybil) became lucrative film fodder. Let's face it: Hollywood knows a profit center when they see it and Elizabeth and Richard were the biggest game in town throughout the 1960s. The movies they made were hardly art, but they repeatedly made money and that's really all that mattered.

(Top left): whispering sweet nothings amidst the turmoil and danger of Papa Doc's Haiti in **The Comedians** (1967); (top middle): unable to keep their hands to themselves in **The Sandpiper** (1965) – the film's one redeeming quality, Johnny Mandel's composition, *'The Shadow of Your Smile'*; (top right): looking radiant and happy at New York's Madison Square Gardens in 1965, (bottom right): nursing a terrible hangover in 1969, (bottom middle); mugging for LIFE magazine in 1970, and finally (bottom left) looking utterly deflated in between takes on the set of **The Taming of the Shrew** (1967). Taylor married Burton for the first time in 1964 just as soon as the ink from her divorce decree to Eddie Fisher had dried. The marriage lasted ten years. After a year of divorce Burton and Taylor decided to try things again, remarrying in 1975. But that second chance at wedded bliss barely withstood the year. Their time together had passed. Time to move on – again!

Even worse, Taylor's revolving line of credit in the marriage department was fast approaching divorce number two. It had taken less than a year to spiral into a spiteful battle of wills. A bitter feud between she and Wilding led to a barb spun a bit too close to home. When MGM orchestrated one of their typical 'a day in the life of a happy couple' interviews with Look Magazine, Wilding exploited the opportunity to lash out at his wife. *"Elizabeth has very little of the housewife in her,"* Wilding told reporters, with pithy remarks flung at Taylor's inability to keep a tidy home. These presented a portrait of a careless and lazy woman. He might have first reconsidered who he had married. Taylor was a movie star; not a





(Previous page): Will the real Liz and Dick please stand up? 1966's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is sometimes erroneously misused to illustrate the disastrous lows of the Burton/Taylor marriage; Taylor's Martha a shrewish and frumpy harridan who emasculates her morally ambiguous and very alcoholic hubby until all he can do is attempt to choke the life from her. Truth: Burton and Taylor both loved their drink. True: he gave her a black eye on the set of *Cleopatra* even before they were married when she threatened to tell Sybil about their affair. True: Taylor once confessed in a *60 Minutes* interview that "a real knock down/drag out fight" is the best marital foreplay any couple can have. But are the film's George and Martha really indicative of what life was like behind closed doors for Liz and Dick? Contrast this still of George and Martha's penultimate rampage in the film with (bottom) this candid still taken in 1966; Burton looking strangely serene and quite sober while Elizabeth seems to be contemplating the stars or an errant housefly crawling on the wall opposite them. Whatever her thoughts, neither is talking anymore. But, as they used to say, "a picture is still worth a thousand words."

(This page left): Looking exceptionally pleased with herself on the set of *Cleopatra* and why not? Taylor's lucrative deal of the decade resulted in a final payout that rivaled the salary she had once earned from her first ten years of employment at MGM. At an overdraft rate of \$50,000 per week and a shooting schedule that seemed to exponentially by the hour, Taylor could afford practically anything her heart desired. She could certainly muster a smile. (Right): reapplying eyeliner on the set in preparation for Cleopatra's triumphant entrance into Rome. Originally cast and crew had been assembled to shoot the lavish procession some six months earlier until crabby cameraman Leon Shamroy discovered that the natural light pouring into the set was all wrong; a delay so costly that the overhead could have literally financed a modest programmer at Fox. The Cleopatra 'look' was snatched up by Max Factor cosmetics and marketed as "the most stunning evolution in 3000 years".

hausfrau. It could have turned ugly for Elizabeth, except the reporters were quick to come to her defense, citing her "lack of vanity" and complete unselfishness deemed as "an astonishing lack of ego."

Amidst this personal and professional turmoil Taylor hightailed it over to Warner Bros. for George Steven's *Giant* (1956), a generational saga melded from Edna Ferber's meandering novel about Texas-sized ego, greed, deceit and comeuppance. For Elizabeth, it was the acting opportunity of a lifetime; a chance to prove to herself and the world that she was more than just another over-preening movie queen about to be dethroned. Director George Stevens was not particularly pleased to learn the studio had chosen Taylor opposite Rock Hudson. But Elizabeth met and surpassed Stevens' expectations, working harder than ever to craft a performance of refined quality that impressed virtually everyone working on the film. Taylor also took it upon herself to befriend co-star James Dean, who otherwise kept himself fairly aloof from his fellow players – all except Jane Withers. While the record clearly illustrates Elizabeth's flawed marital relationships with men, it equally showcases her unerring knack for being able to heal 'wounded things'; her empathy genuine and big of heart. And Dean, who would die in a horrific car accident while cast and crew were still



(Above left): *“Every minute this broad spends out of bed is a waste of time!”* Mr. and Mrs. Mike Todd in their living room in 1958, just two weeks before Todd’s plane went down in New Mexico. Mike Todd didn’t mince words and when he wanted something badly enough he usually had it. Born Avrom Hirsch Goldbogen in 1909, Todd knew a thing or two about reinventing himself. He was a showman, a shameless self-promoter and the guy everyone suddenly found themselves turning to, to get things done in Hollywood. It seems no one except Mike Todd could assemble a cast for **Around the World in Eighty Days** (1956) and make it all run like a well-oiled machine. Todd’s movie, shot in his own patented Todd A-O wide gauge film format (co-created with ‘American Optical’) was a revolutionary widescreen process – the precursor to today’s Panavision. Todd, who had neither the money nor a studio to back his project initially, basically cajoled, pleaded, begged and bossed some very high-priced talent to perform for next to nothing, coining the term ‘cameo’ to explain why any big name talent should want to appear in what amounts to little more than thirty to sixty second snippets in his all-star spectacle. Today, **Around the World in Eighty Days** plays like a quaint travelogue. In its day it was nothing short of a grand old-time spectacle – gargantuan beyond anything Hollywood had ever seen and glistening from end to end with the biggest names in international show business. In pursuing Elizabeth for his third wife, Todd was acquiring something of a Rolls-Royce – a savvy Hollywood player who could dish the dirt and had raised more than a little hell with the best of them. He was 47. She was 24.

(Above right): Todd and Eddie Fisher flank a luminous Elizabeth at the Governor’s Ball as Hedda Hopper intrudes for a scoop to add to her weekly gossip column. After Elizabeth began tooling around with Eddie after Todd’s death, Hopper’s attacks on Elizabeth became vicious and spiteful. Clearly, Hopper sided with the camp who thought actress Debbie Reynolds had been wronged. Indeed, she had. But if Debbie could eventually forgive Elizabeth why couldn’t Hedda? After Todd’s demise Elizabeth and Mike Todd Jr. came in conflict over his father’s burial wishes. Todd Jr. wanted his father’s remains cremated. But Elizabeth elected to have her husband buried at Waldheim. A macabre postscript: in 1977, robbers desecrated Todd’s grave in search of the \$100,000 diamond ring Elizabeth reportedly had buried with his remains. A bag containing whatever was left of Mike Todd was eventually recovered – without the ring – and resealed and buried in an undisclosed location to prevent any more ghoulish attempts from occurring. So, was the ring stolen from Todd’s unearthed coffin, or was it never buried with Todd to begin with? Hmmm.

wrapping up production on **Giant** in Marfa, Texas, was very much someone who might have benefited from having Elizabeth as a lifelong friend.

Elizabeth garnered favorable reviews for her performance in **Giant**; leading MGM into their most disastrous misfire of the 1950s: **Raintree County** (1957), a thinly veiled attempt to recapture the magic and grandeur of **Gone With The Wind** (1939). Both are stories set in and around the antebellum. But this is where any similarities between **Raintree County** and Selznick’s masterpiece come to an abrupt end. Based on a rather convoluted novel by Ross Lockridge Jr., Elizabeth was miscast as Susanna Drake, the spoiled daughter of a wealthy southern plantation owner who steals the heart of a northern abolitionist (Montgomery Clift), then becomes pregnant with his child and shortly thereafter begins her downward spiral into hereditary madness. At \$5,300,000.00, **Raintree County** held the dubious distinction as being the most expensive MGM movie ever made in America; an accolade wildly touted in the trades by the studio’s publicity department. Not unlike today, budget is often erroneously equated to a film’s presumed success; a bizarre correlation



(Above left): Fisher and Taylor and a magnum of the best champagne; the occasion a celebration of their first wedding anniversary. Fisher was enamored by the lifestyle Mike Todd had. Now he had Todd's widow and she had Todd's millions. It was a match made in heaven...or some such place...and the partying continued on a grand scale for some time. (Above right): Elizabeth and Eddie clicked for almost six years, mainly because Fisher worshipped Elizabeth and did practically her every bidding – at least in the early part of their marriage. But the veneer was already wearing thin. Elizabeth couldn't love a man who hopelessly loved her. It wasn't a challenge to be with Eddie. He just doted on her and followed her around, eager to have his photo-ops and be trumpeted as the most glamorous couple in Hollywood. By 1962, it wasn't as much fun as it had once been and Taylor was rife for another hostile takeover in the marriage department. Then along came...

that in **Raintree County's** case only served to amplify the discrepancy between MGM's hefty expenditures and its disastrously anemic box office returns.

**Raintree County** is also footnoted out of a morbid curiosity regarding actor Montgomery Clift. Elizabeth had befriended 'Monty' on the set of **A Place in the Sun** and had immediately felt a kindred spirit; sympathizing with his insecurities over having to conceal his homosexuality from the general public. Clift, who lived a guarded existence felt 'open' and 'free' with Elizabeth and the two remained very good friends in the intervening years. Midway through shooting **Raintree County** Clift was returning from a house party at Elizabeth's when, inebriated, he suddenly lost control of his car, wrapping it around a telephone pole. What happened next would forever alter Clift's life and career.

*"My only thought was to get into that car and see if Monty was alive," Elizabeth explained, "Monty's head had been mashed into the steering wheel. He was bleeding so much it looked like his face had been halved. All my revulsion about blood left me. I held his head and he started to come to. But you could barely see his face. It was like pulp. A tooth was hanging from his lip by a few shreds of flesh. We waited forty-five minutes for the ambulance. I rode in the ambulance and by the time we made it to the hospital his head was so swollen it was almost as wide as his shoulders. His eyes had disappeared. His cheeks were level with his nose. His jaw was broken in four places. The whole thing looked like a giant red soccer ball."*

Miraculously, Clift survived these injuries. Doctors worked feverishly to restore his face and skull and to stitch back together the flesh that had been sheered away by fragments of his car windshield. Extensive plastic surgery resurrected much of Montgomery Clift's pre-accident looks. Clift's lengthy recuperation delayed **Raintree County's** shoot by nearly six weeks, creating a grotesque fascination amongst movie goers to try and figure out which scenes had been shot before and after the reconstructive surgery. This was really the only curiosity the movie garnered. When it was released Time Magazine accurately assessed **Raintree County** as *"beginning in tedium and ending 168 leaden minutes later."* The film's



(Above left): When Elizabeth posed for this backstage photo-op with husband, Mike Todd (receiving the Best Picture/Producer Oscar for **Around the World In Eighty Days** 1956) she could not have known that the little gold bald guy would one day also belong to her for **Butterfield 8** (1960). Yul Brynner is the other recipient in this snapshot, winning the Oscar for his seismic performance in *The King and I*. It was the crowning glory of a banner year for Brynner who had also costarred as the Russian general in Anatole Litvak's *Anastasia* and played Ramses, Pharaoh of Egypt in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. (Above right): Elizabeth and Eddie depart the Oscars in 1961 with Elizabeth still clutching her Best Actress Academy Award. We're not entirely certain whose award Eddie has in his hands. He never won an Oscar in his career.

colossal implosion at the box office effectively ousted Dore Schary as MGM's studio head. L.B. Mayer had suffered a similar fate at the start of the decade. But again, the movie's failure threatened to push Elizabeth Taylor's reputation as an actress into the celluloid dust bin. Meanwhile, Elizabeth had developed affections for producer Michael Todd. These might have begun with her spying him across the MGM commissary in 1955 or perhaps only after the Wildings had become Todd's frequent house guests. The details remain sketchy at best. Regardless, the attachment had steadily grown in the interim, was mutual and equally as palpable to those who knew both Taylor and Todd socially, so much that Todd – in his usual bombastic aplomb told Taylor, *"Now understand one thing and hear me good, kid. Don't start looking around for somebody to latch on to. You are going to marry only one guy, see, and his name is me!"*

Michael Todd and Elizabeth Taylor were married on February 2, 1957. To the press it seemed old hat at best, particularly given Taylor's track record of 'o' for two. But Mike Todd, a showman in all things, managed to spice up their romance and pending nuptials in the press in his own inimitable and larger-than-life way. *"Anyone who marries an actress marries a problem,"* Todd explained, *"Mostly, it's worth it. Actresses, let us not forget, are darned attractive people. I can do no better than to quote my friend Nick Schenck on the subject. He said 'So, she's spoiled. What man would want to indulge a girl like that?'"*

Regrettably, their whirlwind of bliss was short-lived. Only three days into their honeymoon Taylor slipped and fell down a flight of stairs aboard Todd's yacht, rupturing five discs in her lower back. Three were eventually removed, leaving her temporarily paralyzed and with the very real prospect that she might never walk again. Months of rehabilitation with Todd lovingly supportive at her side eventually resulted in a complete – though painful - recovery. Then, on March 22, 1958 Todd died in a fiery plane crash, leaving Elizabeth a very wealthy but utterly distraught widow. In the wake of her loss Taylor's emotional state went into a devastating tailspin. She rebounded by throwing herself into one of the best film properties MGM had offered her in years – Maggie Pollitt in **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** (1958). Director Richard Brooks exuded tyrannical control that cast a pall on the set. But it also brought out the best in Taylor's performance. **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** received rave reviews from the critics and a Best Actress Oscar nomination for Elizabeth. The subsequent year the statuette went to Elizabeth finally, for **Butterfield 8** (1960) a prior commitment forced upon her by MGM and one that she positively despised. At the end of her private screening of the rough cut Elizabeth reportedly took off her off her shoes and threw them at the screen.



## VIPER?

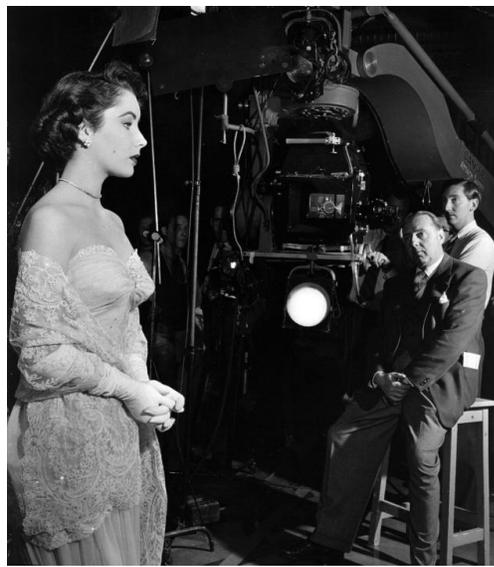
*"We're not Hollywood happy...this is the real thing."* – Michael Todd

No one stands on ceremony when a celebrity dies, least of all fans and the press. Mike Todd's funeral at Waldheim Cemetery in Zurich, Illinois was greeted with all the clamor and excitement of a three ring circus come to town; a grotesque display of people at their worst. Teenagers gawked and even asked Eddie Fisher for autographs while the crowd steadily encroached upon the 150 ft. perimeter set up to keep them at bay from the tent where Todd's casket lay. They climbed over mausoleum rooftops and stood on tombstones in their ravenous attempts to get a better look at Elizabeth, who arrived prostrated with grief in a limousine with her brother Howard. Afterward, the grounds were littered with empty Coca-Cola bottles, candy bar and potato chip wrappers blowing about in the icy March wind.

Elizabeth was heavily sedated, crying mostly to herself throughout the service, but could be heard twice quietly whimpering *"Oh God, no!"* and once gingerly placing her gloved hand atop Mike's casket; a scene hideously regurgitated to sell copy in every paper in the country as *"Liz Hurls Self Over Casket, Screaming No!"* The scene immediately following the service was even more unseemly. In a page torn straight out of the last act of George Cukor's 1954 **A Star Is Born**, the mob rushed Taylor, trampling down the barrier and snatching at her mourning veil, tearing it to pieces for souvenirs. They blocked the limo after she was safely inside and tailed it with flashbulbs blazing all the way to the airport where police were powerless to stop an all-out brawl from breaking out between fans and reporters. Years later Taylor contemplated *"People just don't behave like that...but they do. And did."*

Upon learning the news that Todd had died Elizabeth understandably had gone into a state of shock. In Hollywood the machinery went to work eulogizing the great man and his accomplishments. *"Hollywood had three things that saved the film business in times of crisis,"* Sam Goldwyn memorialized, *"Sound, the big screen and Mike Todd!"* Hearing the news on the radio, Debbie Reynolds immediately rushed to Elizabeth's home, already besieged by a small armada of reporters clamoring for a glimpse of the devastated widow. Debbie took Taylor's children home with her, encouraging Eddie Fisher to remain behind as a comfort and to perform whatever damage control was necessary with the press. *"I asked Eddie to stay with Elizabeth,"* Reynold would later quip, *"...and he did!"*

(Above): the grand guignol that was Mike Todd's funeral had a devastating impact on Elizabeth. Heavily sedated and escorted by her brother Howard and old-time press agent and friend, Bill Lyon to and from the makeshift pavilion where Todd's body lay in wait for burial, Elizabeth had to endure jeers, cheers and cat-calling from the crowds gathered to witness the spectacle. Departing the plane at Chicago Airport, Eddie Fishers' absolute look of disgust over having his picture taken is readily apparent. He was burying his best friend, not some icon of the movie business. And those who had gathered outside the perimeter built to keep the crowds at bay had not come out of respect or even pity, but a morbid curiosity to watch Elizabeth from afar in the hopes that some even more bizarre behavior or incident might unfold before their eyes. In absence of this satisfaction the crowds took it upon themselves to turn the moment into a wild and garish nightmare, tearing at Taylor and trashing the cemetery while police did their best to keep Elizabeth and her entourage apart from the general populace. This was the ugly side to celebrity and Elizabeth was given a front row seat to the moment when fan-based adulation can instantly turn against its subject, threatening one's sanity and even one's safety.



Todd and Fisher had been best friends for some time and Elizabeth, although not altogether friendly toward Reynolds at first, had quietly warmed to her squeaky clean image as the all-American girl next door. But it was an odd foursome tooling around Hollywood, attending premieres and turning up at the most fashionable nightclubs to have a good time. *"They were too much for us,"* Reynolds would later admit, *"Well, too much for me."* In life Fisher had idolized the gruff but good-natured Todd. *"Eddie loved him,"* Reynolds would later recollect. Worshipped is more like it, like a graven idol. But when Elizabeth flew to New York a short while later Eddie followed, returning to his own wife two weeks later to inform her that their marriage was over. At first stunned, Reynolds wisely deduced, *"You won't be enough for her."* It didn't matter. Eddie wasn't thinking with the right head and made it known to the press that he intended to marry Elizabeth.

For years the press seemed only too happy to brand Elizabeth the villain of the piece. But actually, Fisher's marriage to Reynolds had been on the rocks as early as 1958. The couple had even contemplated divorce; a split reconciled when Reynolds discovered she was pregnant with their second child. Marriage counseling staved off the inevitable, but arguably Fisher had been looking for a way out for some time and Elizabeth proved just the catalyst to make his move. The frankness of Fisher's infidelity and Elizabeth's unapologetic comments made to gossip maven Hedda Hopper effectively twisted to sound even more callous than they were, once more caricaturized Taylor was the wicked harlot; the *'home wrecker,'* the *'deviant'* and the *'unfit mother.'*

There were even some who suggested *'mental illness'* as a probable cause for her inability to remain faithful to any one man for very long. This latter suggestion infuriated Elizabeth immensely. *"I'm not crazy,"* she pointed out, *"I'm in love. We're in love."* In retrospect, it would be fascinating to have Elizabeth's recollections on exactly who initiated the affair between her and Eddie Fisher. But alas, Taylor was incredibly circumspect about this period in her life. She gave no interviews per say – her printed comments pieced together from often heated exchanges telescopically focused on her future plans that included marrying Eddie Fisher. In the many decades yet to follow, she told no tales to satisfy the public's perennially warped eagerness to know more. The story, however, simply would not die and neither did the mythology surrounding the affair. Debbie Reynolds kept mostly to herself, and this seems to have given the press cause to superimpose all sorts of sad-eyed mourning over Fisher's exit.

Amidst all of the hullabaloo Elizabeth and Eddie left the United States to begin work on her most notorious project to date; **Cleopatra** (1963). When producer Walter Wanger initially approached Taylor to star in the film she had remarked that nothing short of a million dollars would make her even consider the role. Wanger's equally blunt acceptance of this astronomical figure left Elizabeth completely unsettled. She had suddenly become the highest paid actress in movie history. *"If someone's dumb enough to offer me a million dollars to make a picture, I'm certainly not dumb enough to turn it down,"* Elizabeth explained. In actuality, Fox balked at this salary expectation, knocking Elizabeth down to a paltry \$700,000. In the end, however, Elizabeth would reap far more from the film's lengthy production shoot, as her contract stipulated that any overtime incurred would cost the studio an additional \$50,000 per week. Hence, Elizabeth's final salary – although never entirely disclosed by Fox's accounting department – is rumored to have tipped the scales at a little over \$5,000,000.00; by far the highest ever paid to any actress for a single picture.





(Previous pages): What is often overlooked in retrospectives of Elizabeth Taylor's life and career is the fact that Taylor was one of the hardest working, most resilient stars of her vintage. Whether posing for publicity stills like this stunning B&W for **The Girl Who Had Everything** (1953), working on the set (seen here being photographed for a scene from **Conspirator** 1949) or having to endure hours of prep under the hot stage lights (seen here with director Joseph L. Mankiewicz suffering a very stubborn headress on the set of **Cleopatra** 1963), Elizabeth pulled her weight and held her own, often under the most challenging of professional and private conditions. We're not entirely sure who at MGM thought up Taylor in a tutu and high heel shoes no less, the 'sport' and her faux deco tree of orchids, but it doesn't look as though the decision has won any points with Elizabeth either. Pro that she was, she did it anyway.

(This page left): most any star can be made to look gorgeous in her prime of youth as is Taylor in this 1953 photograph. But how many can still look absolutely ravishing at fifty-five; the age Elizabeth was when the center photo was taken to help launch her **White Diamonds** perfume in 1987? Two years earlier Taylor had appeared as the madam of a bordello (top right), a small but pivotal role in ABC's sprawling mini-series **North and South** (1985) costarring Patrick Swayze and James Reed. Almost until the very end, Elizabeth remained extraordinarily beautiful, relying on nothing more than proper diet, exercise, and a bit of slightly diffused photography to keep her looking young and vibrant. "Plastic surgery's not for me," she once told a reporter, "I'm deathly afraid of the knife and have a genuine fear of blood."

In hindsight, **Cleopatra** is perhaps the most grossly mismanaged production in Hollywood history. Begun in England, the entire shoot was scrapped after Elizabeth suffered a near fatal bout of pneumonia while laid up at the Dorchester Hotel; having an emergency tracheotomy performed to save her life. In England, Taylor's costar had been Peter Finch. But when the production migrated to a warmer climate in Rome both he and the film's original director, Roubin Mamoulian, were scrapped in favor of Rex Harrison, Richard Burton and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz. The move was but a Band-Aid solution to a troubled shoot that continued to spiral out of control. Actors and extras spent months on the payroll doing nothing while director/writer/producer Joseph L. Mankiewicz feverishly worked to polish **Cleopatra's** badly mangled script. The movie, while lavishly appointed and readily imbued with Mankiewicz's superior craftsmanship, is far better known today for the melodrama occurring after the cameras stopped rolling.

The Taylor/Burton affair *is* legendary. It wrecked Eddie Fisher's health, demolished two marriages (Elizabeth's and Richard's to Sybil Burton) and built into yet another groundswell of sympathy for Debbie Reynolds who remained above the fray while the press had their field day abroad. The media eventually forgave Fisher his part in the scandal – well...partly – after he attempted suicide and entered a 'retreat' to recuperate and convalesce. At one point the paparazzi were so ravenous in their pursuit of the couple that Burton tried to end the affair. When Elizabeth became hysterical, shouting she would tell Sybil what had been going on, Burton turned around and socked her in the face, citing his Welsh temper as his only defense and forcing make-up artist, Alberto di Rossi to invent new camouflage for a black eye so shooting could continue. It's no secret that Burton had been a rover many times over before meeting Elizabeth. It is rumored he had seduced every female costar he had ever worked with, but had always somehow managed to come back to Sybil relatively untarnished. This time around, however, there would be no going back.

When the dust settled 20th Century Fox had a colossal dud on their hands. Although **Cleopatra** received advanced ticket sales that made it the 8th highest grossing film, this record was overshadowed by the film's gargantuan \$40 million budget. In the end, **Cleopatra** did not even recoup half its initial layout. For her part, Elizabeth publicly decried the movie as cheap trash. "The final insult..." she told a reporter, "...was being forced to go to the premiere and see it."

# CHASING RAINBOWS

*“Just being together, very quiet and alone, absolutely alone – that’s our idea of complete bliss. An ideal day is Sunday. We sleep until around nine-thirty or ten, get up, read the newspapers and discuss whatever’s going on.”*

– Elizabeth Taylor on marriage to Richard Burton

Elizabeth married Richard Burton for the first time on March 15th 1964. They divorced ten years later, only to remarry for a second time in 1975. That brief reconciliation lasted one year. Elizabeth’s subsequent films following **Cleopatra** were disappointing from an artistic vantage; **The VIP’s** (1963), **The Sandpiper** (1965), **The Taming of The Shrew** and **The Comedians** (both in 1967) all sought to capitalize on the couple’s rumored stormy relationship. But more often than not these movies were little more than glorified soap operas in which Taylor seduced Burton or vice versa and then had to deal with the fallout from their decision to remain together. It wasn’t joy galore but it sold tickets and kept Elizabeth in the public spotlight. Interviewed by Barbara Walters in 1975, Taylor openly admitted that she felt their frequent outbursts and ‘knockdown/drag out’ fights were healthy marital sparring. But a year later she obviously felt differently. Burton and Taylor split for the second and last time, putting a definite period to one of Hollywood’s most notorious and scandalized couples.

For a time it can most certainly be argued that Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton were happy – or, as contented as either was capable of being either apart or together. *“When the acting bug bites it bites hard,”* Burton once commented, his mood regarding his profession wildly veering from general boredom into a growing frustration, and finally, absolute hatred. Taylor, on the other hand held tight to the opinion that acting was a necessity, one she tolerated and, arguably, preferred to staying home. It made sense. The couple lived rather extravagantly, travelling all over Europe, renting villas wherever possible, complete with chauffeur-





driven limousines and a gaggle of servants who continued to cut hard into the couple's bottom line balance sheets.

Right in the middle of it all came **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** (1966); the exception to the rule and the one film that people still like to speculate we are seeing the 'real' machinations of Hurricane Taylor/Burton on public display as it actually was behind the scenes. This everlasting impression is wildly open to debate however, even if the movie did play into some of couple's more commonly known peccadillos (eg. Burton's mounting alcoholism, Taylor's general dispensing of the niceties). **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** is the movie that broke all the rules. Even today it remains a force of nature on the big screen. But is this really Taylor/Burton: private lives exposed? Hardly, even if the line between art and reality continues to blur despite the passage of time. Elizabeth was Oscar-nominated for her role as the shrewish and emasculating Martha but lost the statuette to Julie Christie for **Darling**.



In 1969 Elizabeth suffered a more personal setback while wrapping up production on **The Only Game in Town** (1970); the death of her beloved father, Francis. Throughout her heady years in Hollywood Francis Taylor had been an empathetic paternal figure she could turn to; perhaps the only man in Elizabeth's life who truly understood her passions. Elizabeth was also suffering from crippling back pain throughout the shoot, but somehow managed to pull off a performance of great tenderness and heart. Of the film, one critic commented, *"It's old-fashioned, farfetched, trivial, melodramatic, ponderous in parts, and strained in others. Surprisingly, it is also the sweetest, gentlest and saddest film in some time. I loved it."*

It was at this juncture in her life that Taylor repeatedly threatened, but never entirely acted on the whim to leave the movies altogether – perhaps from the boredom of it all. Nevertheless, she continued to take roles in such forgettable tripe as **Divorce His – Divorce Hers** (1973), the disastrous remake of **The Blue Bird** (1976) and, perhaps the biggest misfire of the lot, **A Little Night Music** (1977); the big budget, but sloppily hacked to pieces screen adaptation of Steven Sondheim's Broadway smash, for which Taylor was required to sing - and did so quite badly. By now Taylor's reputation had entered its silver age; reconstituted as an aging movie queen in a cameo walk-on in 1974's all-star musical anthology **That's Entertainment!** There were also a few choice appearances on the talk show circuit but that's about all.



A chance meeting with Senator John Warner in 1975 led to yet another brief marriage from 1976 to 1982. During this interim Taylor devoted her life to her husband's political causes and ambitions. Single again in the eighties, Elizabeth went back to work, appearing in little more than cameos on several popular television programs, with reoccurring roles in **General Hospital** and **All My Children**. It was piece work at best, but Taylor seemed to enjoy it. She even played a Southern madam in the epic and all-star mini-series **North and South**. Taylor also made the rounds on the talk show circuit; her two reoccurring favorites, **Phil Donohue** and **The Tonight Show**.

In these later years Taylor used the clout of her fame and enduring popularity to be seen and help promote the younger generation of celebrities in Hollywood. She was a huge fan of Michael Jackson, and after friend and former **Giant** costar Rock Hudson succumbed to AIDS in 1985, Elizabeth transformed her celebrity once again; this time into spokeswoman for bringing cultural awareness to the disease while tirelessly fundraising for a cure. Taylor also found time to debut a line of perfumes; *Passion* (1987); *White Diamonds* (1991); *Diamonds and Rubies*, *Diamonds and Emeralds*, *Diamonds and Sapphires* and *Black Pearls* (1995).

She married for the 8th and final time to a construction worker and recovering alcoholic, Larry Fortensky (1991-1996). The two had met in rehab. *"I had a hollow leg,"* Taylor later admitted, *"I could drink everyone under the table and not get drunk. My capacity was terrifying."* In 1997, Elizabeth made headlines once again for the successful removal of a brain tumor. In 1999, she was made a Dame by Queen Elizabeth and in 2002 the John F. Kennedy Center Honors were awarded to her. *"There's still so much more to do,"* Taylor declared then, *"I can't sit back and be complacent, and none of us should be. I get around now in a wheelchair, but I get around."*

It is one of Hollywood's ironies that the woman who chronically suffered from various debilitating medical ailments throughout her entire life, including a 2004 scare of congestive heart failure, lived to be 79 and accomplish so much throughout her lifetime. In the last act of her life, Elizabeth Taylor remained steadfast to her favorite charities and causes. She also made plans to build a Richard Burton Memorial Theater in Wales. Asked about her commitments apart from Hollywood, Taylor frankly replied, *"If not to make the world better, what is money for? Besides, success is a great deodorant. It takes away all your past smells."*



Elizabeth Taylor's Hollywood is gone, as she now is too. Yet her career undeniably remains one of the most remarkable and prolific in screen history. It has been marked, and arguably marred, by great strides made against the most insurmountable adversities and odds. Throughout this journey, Elizabeth flourished where most of her contemporaries merely became complacent – even content – to allow themselves to fade from the spotlight. But Taylor defied this natural ebb and flow to stardom almost until the very end. If her movie career cooled after the mid-1960s, she nevertheless continued to crop up in the most unlikely places.

To date, *White Diamonds* remains one of the all-time top-selling women's fragrances on the market. Such resilience is not merely commendable, but in fact, confounding. "It is very strange that the years teach us patience," reflected Taylor in 2005, "that the shorter our time, the greater our capacity for waiting."

