

ELIZABETH TAYLOR, 1932-2011

# ***A Lustrous Pinnacle of Hollywood Glamour***

By Mel Gussow

March 23, 2011

Elizabeth Taylor, the actress who dazzled generations of moviegoers with her stunning beauty and whose name was synonymous with Hollywood glamour, died on Wednesday in Los Angeles. She was 79.

A spokeswoman at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center said Ms. Taylor died at 1:28 a.m. Pacific time. Her publicist, Sally Morrison, said the cause was complications of congestive heart failure. Ms. Taylor had had a series of medical setbacks over the years and was hospitalized six weeks ago with heart problems.

In a world of flickering images, Elizabeth Taylor was a constant star. First appearing on screen at age 10, she grew up there, never passing through an

awkward age. It was one quick leap from [“National Velvet”](#) to [“A Place in the Sun”](#) and from there to [“Cleopatra.”](#) as she was indelibly transformed from a vulnerable child actress into a voluptuous film queen.

In a career of some 70 years and more than 50 films, she won two Academy Awards as best actress, for her performances as a call girl in “BUTterfield 8” (1960) and as the [acid-tongued Martha](#) in “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” (1966). Mike Nichols, who directed her in “Virginia Woolf,” said he considered her “one of the greatest cinema actresses.”

When Ms. Taylor was honored in 1986 by the Film Society of Lincoln Center, Vincent Canby wrote in The New York Times, “More than anyone else I can think of, Elizabeth Taylor represents the complete movie phenomenon — what movies are as an art and an industry, and what they have meant to those of us who have grown up watching them in the dark.”

Ms. Taylor’s popularity endured throughout her life, but critics were sometimes reserved in their praise of her acting. In that sense she may have been upstaged by her own striking beauty. Could anyone as lovely as Elizabeth Taylor also be talented? The answer, of course, was yes.

Given her lack of professional training, the range of her acting was surprisingly wide. She played predatory vixens and wounded victims. She was Cleopatra of the burnished barge; Tennessee Williams’s Maggie the cat; Catherine Holly, who confronted terror suddenly last summer; and Shakespeare’s Kate. Her melodramatic heroines would have been at home on soap operas.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who directed her in “Suddenly, Last Summer” and “Cleopatra,” saw her for the first time, in Cannes, when she was 18. “She was the most incredible vision of loveliness I have ever seen in my life,” he said. “And she was sheer innocence.”

Mankiewicz admired her professionalism. “Whatever the script called for, she played it,” he said. “The thread that goes through the whole is that of a

woman who is an honest performer. Therein lies her identity.”



Elizabeth Taylor in 1957. CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images

It was also Mankiewicz who said that for Ms. Taylor, “living life was a kind of acting,” that she lived her life “in screen time.”

### **Beauty Incarnate**

Marilyn Monroe was the sex goddess, [Grace Kelly](#) the ice queen, Audrey Hepburn the eternal gamine. Ms. Taylor was beauty incarnate. As the director George Stevens said when he chose her for “A Place in the Sun,” the role called for the “beautiful girl in the yellow Cadillac convertible that every American boy, some time or other, thinks he can marry.”

There was more than a touch of Ms. Taylor herself in the roles she played. She acted with the magnet of her personality. Although she could alter her look for a part — putting on weight for Martha in “Virginia Woolf” or wearing elaborate period costumes — she was not a chameleon, assuming

the coloration of a character. Instead she would bring the character closer to herself. For her, acting was “purely intuitive.” As she said, “What I try to do is to give the maximum emotional effect with the minimum of visual movement.”

Sometimes her film roles seemed to be a mirror image of her life. More than most movie stars, she seemed to exist in the public domain. She was pursued by paparazzi and denounced by the Vatican. But behind the seemingly scandalous behavior was a woman with a clear sense of morality: she habitually married her lovers. People watched and counted, with vicarious pleasure, as she became Elizabeth Taylor Hilton Wilding Todd Fisher Burton Burton Warner Fortensky — enough marriages to certify her career as a serial wife. Asked why she married so often, she said, in an assumed drawl: “I don’t know, honey. It sure beats the hell out of me.”

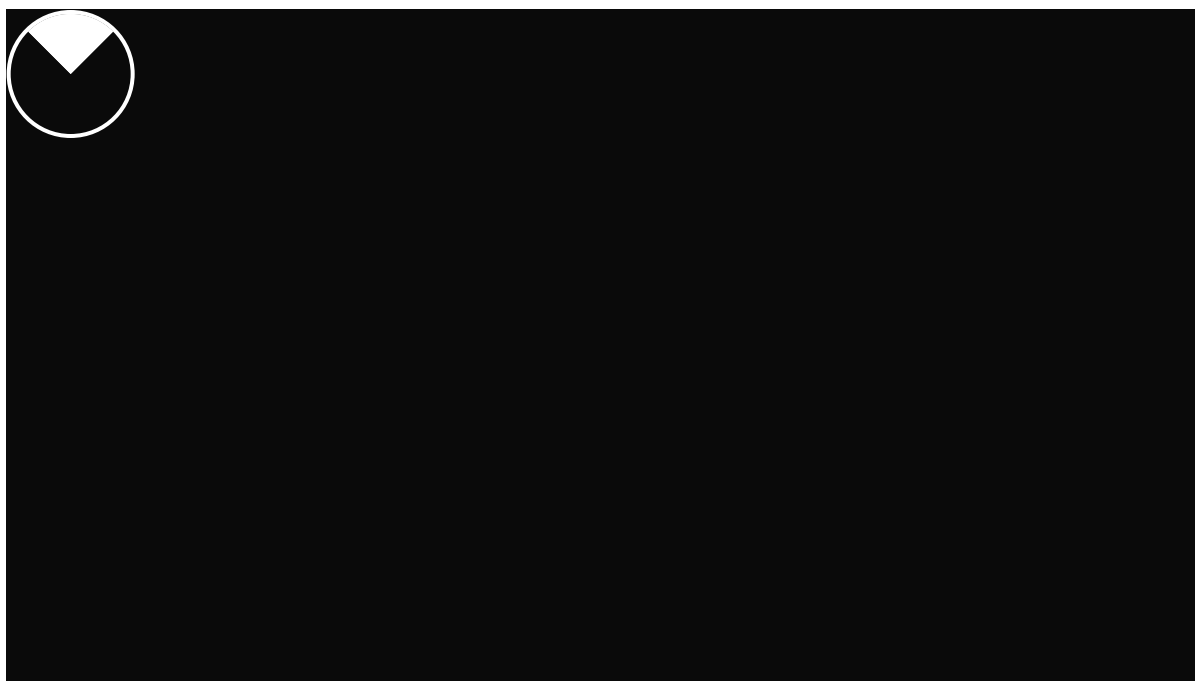
In a lifetime of emotional and physical setbacks, serious illnesses and accidents, and several near-death experiences, Ms. Taylor was a survivor. “I’ve been lucky all my life,” she said just before turning 60. “Everything was handed to me. Looks, fame, wealth, honors, love. I rarely had to fight for anything. But I’ve paid for that luck with disasters.” At 65, she said on the ABC program “20/20”: “I’m like a living example of what people can go through and survive. I’m not like anyone. I’m me.”

Her life was played out in print: miles of newspaper and magazine articles, a galaxy of photographs and a shelf of biographies, each one painting a different portrait. “Planes, trains, everything stops for Elizabeth Taylor, but the public has no conception of who she is,” said Roddy McDowall, who was one of her earliest co-stars and a friend for life. “People who damn her wish to hell they could do what they think she does.”

There was one point of general agreement: her beauty. As cameramen noted, her face was flawlessly symmetrical; she had no bad angle, and her eyes were of the deepest violet.

One prominent and perhaps surprising dissenter about her looks was Richard Burton, who was twice her husband. The notion of his wife as “the most beautiful woman in the world is absolute nonsense,” he said. “She has wonderful eyes,” he added, “but she has a double chin and an overdeveloped chest, and she’s rather short in the leg.”

On screen and off, Ms. Taylor was a provocative combination of the angel and the seductress. In all her incarnations she had a vibrant sensuality. But beneath it was more than a tinge of vulgarity, as in her love of showy jewelry. “I know I’m vulgar,” she said, addressing her fans with typical candor, “but would you have me any other way?”



A. O. Scott reflects on the life and career of this star of the silver screen.

For many years she was high on the list of box-office stars. Even when her movies were unsuccessful, or, late in her career, when she acted infrequently, she retained her fame: there was only one Liz (a nickname she hated), and her celebrity increased the more she lived in the public eye. There was nothing she could do about it. “The public me,” she said, “the one named Elizabeth Taylor, has become a lot of hokum and fabrication — a bunch of drivel — and I find her slightly revolting.”

Late in life she became a social activist. After her friend Rock Hudson died, she helped establish the American Foundation for AIDS Research and helped raise money for it. In 1997, she said, “I use my fame now when I want to help a cause or other people.”

Twice she had leading roles on Broadway, in a 1981 revival of Lillian Hellman’s “Little Foxes” and two years later in Noël Coward’s “Private Lives,” with Burton, then her former husband. In the first instance she won critical respect; in the second she and Burton descended into self-parody. But theater was not her ideal arena; it was as a movie star that she made her impact.

In a life of many surprises, one of the oddest facts is that as an infant she was considered to be an ugly duckling. Elizabeth Rosemond Taylor was born in London on Feb. 27, 1932, the second child of American parents with roots in Kansas. Her father, Francis Lenn Taylor, was an art dealer who had been transferred to London from New York; her mother, the former Sara Viola Warmbrodt, had acted in the theater in New York, under the name Sara Sothern, before she was married. (Her brother, Howard, was born in 1929.) At birth, her mother said, her daughter’s “tiny face was so tightly closed it looked as if it would never unfold.”

Elizabeth spent her early childhood in England. It was there, at 3, that she learned to ride horseback, a skill that helped her win her first major role. Just before World War II, the family moved to the United States, eventually settling in Beverly Hills.

### **An Inauspicious Start**

Ms. Taylor’s mother shared with her daughter a love of movies and encouraged her to act. Elizabeth made her movie debut in 1942 as Gloria Twine in a forgettable film called “There’s One Born Every Minute,” with Carl Switzer, best known as Alfalfa, the boy with the cowlick in the “Our Gang” series. The casting director at Universal said of her: “The kid has

nothing.” Despite that inauspicious debut, Sam Marx, an MGM producer who had known the Taylors in England, arranged for their daughter to have a screen test for “Lassie Come Home.” She passed the audition. During the filming, in which Ms. Taylor acted with Roddy McDowall, a cameraman mistakenly thought her long eyelashes were fake and asked her to take them off.

The power of her attraction was evident as early as 1944, in “National Velvet.” MGM had for many years owned the film rights to the Enid Bagnold novel on which that film was based but had had difficulty finding a child actress who could speak with an English accent and ride horses. At 12, Elizabeth Taylor met those requirements, though she was initially rejected for being too short. Stories circulated that she stretched herself in order to fill the physical dimensions of the role: Velvet Brown, a girl who was obsessed with horses and rode one to victory in the Grand National Steeplechase. “I knew if it were right for me to be Velvet,” she said, “God would make me grow.”

In one scene her horse, which she called the Pie, seemed to be dying, and Ms. Taylor was supposed to cry — the first time she was called on to show such emotion on screen. Her co-star was Mickey Rooney, a more experienced actor, and he gave her some advice on how to summon tears: pretend that her father was dying, that her mother had to wash clothes for a living and that her little dog had been run over. Hearing that sad scenario, Ms. Taylor burst out laughing at the absurdity. When it came time to shoot the scene, she later said: “All I thought about was the horse being very sick and that I was the little girl who owned him. And the tears came.”

Ms. Taylor gave a performance that, quite literally, made grown men and women weep, to say nothing of girls who identified with Velvet. In his review of the film in *The Nation*, James Agee, otherwise a tough-minded critic, confessed that the first time he had seen Ms. Taylor on screen he had been “choked with the peculiar sort of adoration I might have felt if we were both in the same grade of primary school.”

## The Actress Elizabeth Taylor Dies

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MGM/Photofest

She was, he said, “rapturously beautiful.”

“I think that she and the picture are wonderful, and I hardly know or care whether she can act or not.”

The movie made her a star. Decades later she said “National Velvet” was still “the most exciting film” she had ever made. But there was a drawback. To do the movie she had to sign a long-term contract with MGM. As she said, she “became their chattel until I did ‘Cleopatra.’ ”

At first she played typical teenagers (in “Life With Father,” “A Date With Judy” and “Little Women”). At 16 she was “an emotional child inside a woman’s body,” she later said. But in contrast to other child actresses, she made an easy transition to adult roles. In 1950 she played Robert Taylor’s wife in “Conspirator.” The same year, she was in Vincente Minnelli’s “Father of the Bride,” with Spencer Tracy. And, life imitating art, she became a bride herself in 1950, marrying the hotel heir Conrad N. Hilton Jr., who was known as Nicky. After an unhappy nine months, she divorced him and then married the British actor Michael Wilding, who was 20 years older than she.

By her own estimation, she “whistled and hummed” her way through her



early films. But that changed in 1951, when she made “A Place in the Sun,” playing her prototypical role as a seemingly unattainable romantic vision. The film, she said, was “the first time I ever considered *acting* when I was young.”

In the film she plays a wealthy young woman of social position who is the catalyst for Montgomery Clift’s American tragedy. To the astonishment of skeptics, she held her own with Clift and Shelley Winters.

“A Place in the Sun” was followed by “Ivanhoe,” “Beau Brummel” and “The Last Time I Saw Paris.” Then she made two wide-screen epics back to back, “Giant” (with Rock Hudson and James Dean, who died after finishing his scenes) and “Raintree County” (with Clift, who became a close friend). Her role in “Raintree County” (1957), as Susanna Drake, a Civil-War era Southern belle who marries an Indiana abolitionist, earned her an Oscar nomination for best actress. It was the first of four consecutive nominations; the last resulted in a win for “BUtterfield 8.”

Ms. Taylor was filming “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” with Paul Newman in 1958 when her third husband, the impresario Mike Todd, was killed with three others in New Mexico in the crash of a small plane called the Lucky Liz. They had been married little more than a year and had a newly born daughter, Liza.

A bereaved Ms. Taylor was consoled by her husband’s best friend, the singer Eddie Fisher, who in a storybook romance was married to the actress Debbie Reynolds, one of America’s sweethearts. Soon a shocked nation learned that Debbie and Eddie were over and that Mr. Fisher was marrying Ms. Taylor, continuing what turned out to be a chain of marital events. (In 1993, at an AIDS benefit, Ms. Reynolds appeared on stage 20 minutes before Ms. Taylor and said, to waves of laughter, “Well, here I am, sharing something else with Elizabeth.”) Mr. Fisher died in 2010.

After Ms. Taylor finished “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” MGM demanded that

she fulfill her contract and act in a film version of John O'Hara's "BUtterfield 8." Her performance as the call girl Gloria Wandrous brought her an Oscar in 1961 as best actress.

## Al Hirschfeld Draws Elizabeth Taylor

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The award was bestowed less than six weeks after she had an emergency tracheotomy in London after being overcome by pneumonia and losing consciousness, prompting one of several times that headlines proclaimed her close to death. She and others felt that the Oscar was given to her more out of sympathy for her illness than in appreciation of her acting. Next was "Cleopatra," in which she was the first actress to be paid a million-dollar salary. Working overtime, she earned more than twice that amount. The movie was made in Rome and cost so much (\$40 million, a record then) and took so long that it almost bankrupted 20th Century Fox and caused an irrevocable rift between the producer Darryl F. Zanuck and the director, Mankiewicz.

When "Cleopatra" was finally released in 1963 it was a disappointment. But the film became legendary for the off-screen affair of its stars, Ms. Taylor,

then married to Mr. Fisher, and Richard Burton, then married to Sybil Williams.

## **Opposites Attract**

Taylor and Burton: it seemed like a meeting, or a collision, of opposites, the most famous movie star in the world and the man many believed to be the finest classical actor of his generation. What they had in common was an extraordinary passion for each other and for living life to the fullest. Their romantic roller coaster was chronicled by the international press, which referred them as an entity called Dickenliz.

After finishing the film, Ms. Taylor went with Burton to Toronto, where he was on a pre-Broadway tour with “Hamlet.” In Toronto, and later in New York, the two were at the height of their megastardom, accompanied by a retinue as large as that of the Sultan of Brunei and besieged by fans, who turned every public appearance into a mob scene. In New York as many as 5,000 people gathered outside the Lunt-Fontanne Theater on West 46th Street after every performance of “Hamlet,” hoping Ms. Taylor was backstage and eager to see the couple emerge.

They were married in 1964, and Ms. Taylor tried without success to keep herself in the background. “I don’t think of myself as Taylor,” she said, ingenuously. “I much prefer being Burton.” She told her husband, “If I get fat enough, they won’t ask me to do any more films.” Although she put on weight, she continued to act.

The life of Dickenliz was one of excess. They owned mansions in various countries, rented entire floors of hotels and spent lavishly on cars, art and jewelry, including the 69.42-carat Cartier diamond and the 33.19-carat Krupp diamond. (In 2002 Ms. Taylor published “My Love Affair With Jewelry,” a coffee-table memoir as told through the prism of her world-class gems.)

Since childhood Ms. Taylor had been surrounded by pets. When she was

not allowed to take her dogs to London because of a quarantine rule, she leased a yacht for them at a reported cost of \$20,000 and moored it on the Thames.

After “Cleopatra,” the couple united in a film partnership that gave the public glossy romances like “The V.I.P.’s” and “The Sandpiper” and one powerful drama about marital destructiveness, the film version of Edward Albee’s play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” As Martha, the faculty wife, a character 20 years older than she was, Ms. Taylor gained 20 pounds and made herself look dowdy. After she received her second Academy Award for the performance, Burton, who played Martha’s husband, George, offered a wry response: “She won an Oscar for it, he said, bitterly, and I didn’t, he said, equally bitterly.”

The Burtons also acted together in “Doctor Faustus” (1968), in which she was a conjured-up Helen of Troy; “The Comedians” (1967), with Ms. Taylor as an adulterous ambassador’s wife in Haiti; Franco Zeffirelli’s film version of “The Taming of the Shrew” (1967), with Ms. Taylor as the volatile Katharina to Burton’s wife-hunting Petruchio; “Boom!” (1968), based on the Tennessee Williams play “The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore,” with Ms. Taylor as a rich, ailing woman living on an island; “Under Milk Wood” (1972), an adaptation of the Dylan Thomas play; and “Hammersmith Is Out” (1972), a retelling of the Faust legend in which she played a diner waitress. On her own, Ms. Taylor was an adulterous Army major’s wife in “Reflections in a Golden Eye” (1967), with Marlon Brando; a fading prostitute in “Secret Ceremony” (1968); an aging Las Vegas chorus girl in “The Only Game in Town” (1970), with Warren Beatty; a rich widow who witnesses a murder in “Night Watch” (1973); and a wife who tries to save her marriage through plastic surgery in “Ash Wednesday” (1973).

After 10 high-living and often torrid years, the Burtons were divorced in 1974, remarried 16 months later (in a mud-hut village in Botswana), separated again the next February and granted a divorce in Haiti in July 1976.

Burton died of a cerebral hemorrhage at 58 in 1984 in Switzerland. Thirteen years later Ms. Taylor said that Todd and Burton were the loves of her life, and that if Burton had lived they might have married a third time. For years after his death, she told *The Times* in 2000, she couldn't watch when the films they had made were on television.

After her second divorce from Burton, she wed John W. Warner, a Virginia politician, and was active in his winning campaign for the United States Senate. For five years she was a Washington political wife and, she said, "the loneliest person in the world." Overcome by depression, she checked into the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif. She later admitted that she had been treated as "a drunk and a junkie."

### **Battling Drugs and Food**

In addition to alcohol and drugs, she had a problem with overeating, and it became the butt of jokes by the comedian Joan Rivers. ("She has more chins than a Chinese phone book.") Ms. Rivers later apologized to Ms.

Taylor through a friend, though Ms. Taylor shrugged off the insults, saying they did not “get me where I live.” Ms. Rivers said, “From then on, I was crazy about her.” Ms. Taylor wrote a book about her weight problems, “Elizabeth Takes Off: On Weight Gain, Weight Loss, Self-Image & Self-Esteem” (1988). When she returned to the Ford Center for further treatment, she met Larry Fortensky, a construction worker, who was also a patient. In a wedding spectacular in 1991, she and Mr. Fortensky were married at Michael Jackson’s Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Ynez, Calif., with celebrated guests sharing the grounds with Jackson’s giraffes, zebras and llamas. Although the press was not invited, a photographer parachuted in and narrowly missed landing on Gregory Peck. Five years later, the Fortenskys were divorced. Ms. Taylor, a longtime friend of Jackson’s, was a visible presence at his funeral in 2009.

Through the 1980s and ’90s, Ms. Taylor acted in movies sporadically, did “The Little Foxes” and “Private Lives” on Broadway, and appeared on television as Louella Parsons in “Malice in Wonderland” in 1985 and as the aging actress Alexandra Del Lago in Tennessee Williams’s “Sweet Bird of Youth” in 1989.

In 1994 she played Fred Flintstone’s mother-in-law in “The Flintstones,” and in 1996 she made appearances on four CBS sitcoms. In 2001 she and Shirley MacLaine, Joan Collins and Debbie Reynolds made fun of their own images in “These Old Broads,” a tepidly received television movie — written by Carrie Fisher, the daughter of Ms. Reynolds and Eddie Fisher — about aging movie stars (with Ms. Taylor, getting little screen time, as their caftan-wearing agent) who despise one another but reunite for a TV special.

Ms. Taylor was often seen as a caricature of herself, “full of no-nonsense shamelessness,” as Margo Jefferson wrote in *The Times* in 1999, adding, “Whether it’s about how she ages or what she wears, she has, bless her heart, made the principles of good and bad taste equally meaningless.”

Increasingly, Ms. Taylor divided her time between her charitable works,

including various Israeli causes (she had converted to Judaism in 1959), and commercial enterprises, like a line of perfumes marketed under her name. She helped raise more than \$100 million to fight AIDS. In February 1997, she celebrated her 65th birthday at a party that was a benefit for AIDS research. After the party Ms. Taylor entered Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles for an operation on a brain tumor.

There were other medical setbacks. In recent years she had to use a wheelchair because of osteoporosis/scoliosis. In 2009 she had surgery to address heart problems. This year she refused to undergo a back operation, saying she had already had a half-dozen and wasn't up for another. In February she entered Cedars-Sinai for the final time with congestive heart failure.

She is survived by her sons Michael and Christopher Wilding; her daughter Liza Todd; another daughter, Maria Burton; 10 grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

In 2002 Ms. Taylor was among five people to receive Kennedy Center Honors in the performing arts.

Married or single, sick or healthy, on screen or off, Ms. Taylor never lost her appetite for experience. Late in life, when she had one of many offers to write her memoirs, she refused, saying with characteristic panache, "Hell no, I'm still living my memoirs."