

# Passion for fame

The word 'star' could have been invented for Elizabeth Taylor. Violet-eyed and luminously beautiful, she brought a burning intensity to her film roles, her marriages and her work as an Aids campaigner.

Austin Mutti-Mewse meets her at home in Bel Air

**D**AME ELIZABETH Taylor was the most magnetic actress of her generation, commanding the spotlight and an unprecedented \$1,000,000 fee per picture, the ultimate film star. Few have won such adoration or, at times, such ridicule. However, where some were crushed by the weight of their fame – one thinks of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean – Elizabeth Taylor has thrived. Celebrity is her lifeblood: she has known little else.

From Burbank in the Valley, I take the 101 freeway to Bel Air. I pass mansions hidden behind massive gates and guarded by high-tech security systems. Gardeners appear on every corner and verge, collecting fallen palm leaves with vacuum cleaners. Others snip stray blades of grass with the smallest of scissors from emerald lawns reminiscent of English bowling greens.

Elizabeth Taylor's house, when I reach it, is suitably opulent. I enter the gates, park the car, and am shown inside. I sit down and wait in an antechamber. At last, I am invited to make my entrance and find Elizabeth Taylor, dressed in turquoise, seated in a beautifully decorated drawing room. She welcomes me with hands aloft as a companion proffers a crystal glass of iced tea. Soon

she is telling me about her early career.

Elizabeth Taylor was born in Hampstead, London, in 1932 but her parents moved to California on the outbreak of the Second World War. 'In the beginning, the eyes had it. My looks impressed people. Mother, Sara Southern Taylor, was a Broadway actress before marrying Father. She had enjoyed the profession and believed I would too.'

Everyone remembers Taylor in the role of Velvet Brown, a young English girl in love with a horse, in *National Velvet* (1944). 'I grew up on horseback, so I enjoyed the riding and performing most of the stunts. I think my love of horses shows through in *Velvet*, bringing the film depth and believability. I had the line, "I'd sooner have the horse than go to heaven," and I meant that, not just as the character but also as Elizabeth Taylor. Children are passionate creatures; I certainly was and on many levels still am.'

It was *National Velvet* that made her a star and landed her a long-term contract to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 'Being at a studio that boosted "More stars than in the heavens" was suffocating.' Taylor's eyes widen as she recounts life at MGM. 'Judy [Garland] had a difficult time at the hands of studio bosses and, unlike me, had little support from her archetypal stage mother. Joan

Crawford, Norma Shearer, Gable, Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, Ann Sothorn, Robert Taylor and then players like Anne Revere, Bess Flowers, Hattie McDaniel... so many really great stars were under contract and, although fine and mature adults, were often treated like children. Actually, there was a schoolhouse on the lot, complete with white picket fence. Schooling was interrupted as pupils were constantly pulled out of class for acting jobs. I was in class for two years as MGM wanted to save me for a suitable lead and not put me forward for bits.'

She returned to the screen in the third of the *Lassie* series, *The Courage of Lassie* (1946). The dog was, as usual, the star of the show, and the story failed to give Taylor the acting opportunities she had had in *National Velvet*. 'I was that awkward age, the time of life which all too often marked the end of the road for child stars.'

Any awkwardness Taylor might have felt was, however, entirely invisible to others. She was dubbed by the gossip columnist Hedda 'the hat' Hopper 'the Most Beautiful Woman in America'. MGM arranged everything for her, including her first 'boyfriend', the football hero Glenn Davis, and a staged high-school graduation with fake classmates and a fake diploma. 'All con-



suming...' she recalls. 'I couldn't breathe for myself under that regime.'

Nevertheless, there followed a series of intense and unforgettable films: *Giant* (1956) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with Paul Newman, in which, as the dark-bobbed, white-satin-cocktail-dressed Maggie, Taylor was the epitome of seductiveness. As the niece of the Southern matriarch played by Katharine Hepburn in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), Taylor smouldered. 'Giant was the beginning of a new phase in my career; director George Stevens was a genius, and Jimmy Dean, Rock Hudson, the late Mercedes McCambridge simply divine. The movie, a multi-generational romance, took on issues of racial prejudice and is still fresh today – our looks are somehow contemporary.'

Passionate on-screen, her off-screen life in the Fifties was sometimes even more so, though she herself claims to be quite simply an old-fashioned romantic. 'I always liked fairytales – especially ones where a prince on a white charger sweeps the maiden off her feet and into his arms.' Taylor certainly sought her princes in many guises – she has been married seven times. She was only eighteen when she married the hotel heir Conrad 'Nicky' Hilton in May 1950. 'I had been dating Howard Hughes and broke off our short spell to marry Nicky Hilton. The wedding made international headlines – I've always made headlines.'

She went on to marry Mike Todd in what seemed at the time a true Hollywood wedding, with the actress Debbie Reynolds as her matron-of-honour and her husband, the singer and actor Eddie Fisher, as best man. 'I was at my happiest with Mike Todd – ours was an excellent marriage,' says Taylor. Their marriage was cut short when Todd died. His plane, the Lucky Liz, crashed in New Mexico. 'I should have been on that flight, but I was sick and stayed home,' Taylor says.

The death left a void in her life. Friends rallied round offering support, including Eddie Fisher. Whatever sympathy audiences held for Taylor vanished when she was identified as the other woman in the break-up of Reynolds and Fisher's marriage. 'It was a rather eventful period – in hindsight, we were not that well suited.' However, as a result of the scandal, the careers of all three

were boosted. 'I was suddenly attractive in new ways. I never saw myself as a femme fatale, though; I was sexy in the old-fashioned way – not overly obvious like some of today's leading actresses.'

Although she says that Mike Todd made her happiest, her most compelling relationship was with Richard Burton. 'Burton brought out the tiger in me,' she explains, simply. The pair met on the set of *Cleopatra*, the Joseph Mankiewicz film of 1963 that nearly bankrupted the Fox film company. 'We fell in love over a cup of coffee,' Taylor recalls. 'He had a hangover during the first visit to the *Cleopatra* set, and I helped squash it by fixing him coffee.' (Joseph Mankiewicz commented at the time that the love scenes in *Cleopatra* were so intense that he felt like a stranger on his own set.) Others who witnessed that intensity still remember it vividly. The actor John Alderson, now 89 and living at the Motion Picture Home, who had been a friend of Richard Burton in Hollywood, told me, 'Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton were inflamed from their first scene in *Cleopatra*; it needed a blow torch to separate them. Minutes after a row, Burton would break down and ask me how he could win back her favour. They were very sexual and would book hotel rooms above, below and adjacent so fellow guests would not witness their lovemaking and battles. Each drank to escape the intensity of the other.'

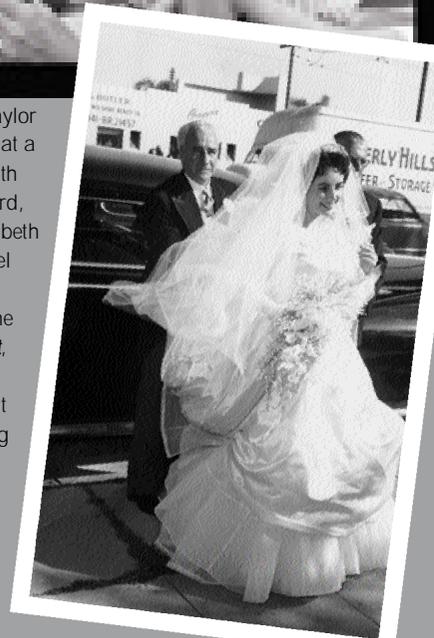
When Taylor was announcing her divorce from Eddie Fisher, Burton, torn between his wife, Sybil Williams, and his mistress, started to drink more. He portrayed himself as aggressively macho, a womaniser and drinker. Taylor, meanwhile, saw herself as a homemaker and perfect wife, telling reporters, 'In the evening, beside the fire, we shall read all the books in the world. That will be heaven.' She took a year off to accompany him on location, which she spent curled up in their Winnebago knitting. 'Knitting! Hell, I think I made a scarf, but I wouldn't call myself any kind of seamstress. It's true, though, I did follow Richard. He was everything I adored, masculine, strong, a rough-and-tumble Welshman with a booming voice like one of the gods. What woman



Photograph: Edward Coxsey (Tory)



Photographs: Frank Worth



From top Taylor and Burton at a wedding with Noel Coward, 1965; Elizabeth with Michael Wilding, 1953; on the set of *Giant*, 1956; with her father at her wedding to Conrad Hilton, 1950

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wouldn't have fallen for him?' To Burton she was 'the most sullen, uncommunicative and beautiful woman I have ever seen.'

Upon marriage in 1964, Taylor and Burton became Hollywood royalty. 'Traffic stopped in London, Paris and Madrid if news had it that we were in town,' recalls Taylor. If she had felt suffocated at MGM, her new incarnation as Queen of the Nile, Empress of Hollywood and Mrs Richard Burton would make her the most photographed, most publicised woman of the Sixties. 'I crossed the street and made news.'

But film producers seeking to cash in on their celebrity hoped in vain. Although the pair made eleven films together, that explosive chemistry did not come across on-screen. Apart from her blowsy, embittered, alcoholic and his equally alcohol-dependent professor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), each Taylor-Burton collaboration seemed worse than the last. 'We couldn't continue to parody ourselves. We had been simply happy to be in each other's company. It was fun as it was dark, oceans of tears, but the good times we had were explosive. I did believe, however, that we would last a lifetime – what women who walks down the aisle doesn't think marriage is for ever?'

Their first marriage ended in 1973, but they were to marry for a second time in Botswana on 10 October 1975. 'I thought we'd make it happen. We were good together much of the time. Alas, we couldn't,' she says. They divorced four months later. I ask if she would have returned for a third time. 'Without hesitation, Burton and Todd were the two great loves of my life.'

After her second divorce from Burton, there followed a quieter period, but in the



Photograph: Frank Verita

Elizabeth Taylor on the set of *Giant*, 1956

second half of the Eighties, she took on a new public role, having been shocked by the death from Aids of her close friend Rock Hudson in 1985. As a campaigner, she has made an enormous impact. 'I am still on my crusade in the fight against Aids and will battle for ever even after a cure is found. Making people aware of the disease and comforting and embracing those sufferers has been my greatest role off-screen.'

Her charity, the American Foundation for Aids Research (amFAR), is one of the world's leading non-profit organisations dedicated to the support of Aids research, prevention, treatment, education and the advocacy of sound Aids-related public policy. 'Since Rock's death, amFAR has invested nearly \$4,207 million in support for its programs and awarded grants to over 1,960 research teams worldwide.'

Meeting Elizabeth Taylor today, one cannot fail to be impressed by her energy, and it is this which has fuelled her passions. Indeed, the word one most associates with Taylor is passion – as an actress, as a lover, as a campaigner. It is not surprising that when she launched a fragrance in 1987 it was called 'Passion'. Five others followed, all named in reference to jewels, another of her well-

known enthusiasms. Taylor is the owner of the famous 33-carat Krupp diamond, as well as the legendary La Peregrina pearl. (The Krupp diamond was Richard Burton's first jewellery purchase for Elizabeth Taylor in 1968. It had been part of the estate of Vera Krupp, second wife of the steel magnate Alfred Krupp.)

Taylor's third element apart from her energy and passion is her courage. She has been dogged by illness for her entire career. She injured her back on *National Velvet*, had an emergency tracheotomy after contracting double pneumonia during the filming of *Cleopatra*, and at one point was pronounced dead. She was the first celebrity to admit to having stayed in the Betty Ford Clinic, and in 1997 had a benign brain tumour removed. 'I am a tough survivor. I have my mother to thank for good genes: she lived to be 99 years old. I'm a constant optimist; I've been through it all. I'm mother courage.'

Still a presence in all our lives, Taylor remains a star, on- and off-screen. 'If Elizabeth Taylor were up and coming today, she'd be one of the industry's leading sex symbols,' she insists. Why? 'Because the look I had defies the generations. Jimmy Dean's look has that same ageless quality, wouldn't you say?' The answer has to be yes. ■