

# Elizabeth Taylor: Screen Goddess



## BFI Southbank Salutes the Hollywood Legend

On 23 March 2011 Hollywood – and the world – lost a living legend when Dame **Elizabeth Taylor** died. As a tribute to her **BFI Southbank** presents a season of some of her finest films, this August, including **Giant** (1956), **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** (1958) and **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?** (1966). Throughout her career she won two Academy Awards and was nominated for a further three, and, beauty aside, was known for her humanitarian work and fearless social activism.

Elizabeth Taylor was born in Hampstead, London, on 27 February 1932 to affluent American parents, and moved to the US just months before the outbreak of WWII. Retired stage actress Sara Southern doggedly promoted her daughter's career as a child star, culminating in the hit *National Velvet* (1944), when she was just 12, and was instrumental in the reluctant teenager's successful transition to adult roles. Her first big success in an adult role came with **Vincente Minnelli's *Father of the Bride*** (1950), before her burgeoning sexuality was recognised and she was cast as a wealthy young seductress in ***A Place in the Sun*** (1951) – her first on-screen partnership with **Montgomery Clift** (a friend to whom Taylor remained fiercely loyal until Clift's death in 1966). Together they were hailed as the most beautiful movie couple in Hollywood history.

The oil-epic ***Giant*** (1956) came next, followed by ***Raintree County*** (1958), which earned the actress her first Oscar nomination and saw Taylor reunited with Clift, though it was during the filming that he was in the infamous car crash that would leave him physically and mentally scarred. Further nominations were received for her portrayal as Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the institutionalised Catherine in ***Suddenly Last Summer*** (1959). Her first **Academy Award for Best Actress** was earned for her performance in ***Butterfield 8*** (1960), despite her feelings of animosity for MGM and her vilification for her relationship with her co-star (and husband of Debbie Reynolds) **Eddie Fisher**.

After parting ways with MGM at the beginning of the 1960s Elizabeth Taylor encountered unparalleled creative freedom, fame and glamour, a certain freewheeling madness

exemplified by the troubled epic *Cleopatra* (1962) and the fiery romance with co-star Richard Burton. Two of Taylor's eight marriages ensued. Their tempestuous love affair played out in the international press and on screen, most notably in the blistering *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), which earned her a second Best Actress Oscar. The following year the couple appeared in **Franco Zeffereilli's *The Taming of the Shrew*** (1967) followed by the **Joseph Losey** adaptation of **Tennessee Williams' play *Boom!*** (1968) – a high-camp outing that really should be seen.

From the late 1970s big screen roles grew sparser; the enjoyable Agatha Christie adaptation *The Mirror Crack'd* (1980), co-starring Rock Hudson and Kim Novak, was arguably her last significant credit. Intermittent television work followed, but Taylor had a new purpose, the fight against HIV/AIDS, campaigning passionately for the gay community in its darkest hour and helping to raise some \$300m through her charitable foundations. It was not Taylor's acting but her entrepreneurial spirit that built a staggering personal fortune (her famed jewellery collection alone has been valued at \$150m). The relentless battles with ill health earned her the badge of survivor – perhaps one we never quite thought we'd lose.

### **Programme:**

#### **Father of the Bride**

USA 1950. Dir Vincente Minnelli. With Spencer Tracy, Joan Bennett, Don Taylor, Billie Burke. 93min. U

Taylor's first big success in an adult role was atypical of the audacious projects she later pursued. Yet, as blushing bride-to-be Kay Banks, she brings a seductive edge to this frothy romantic comedy, ably supported by Tracy as the father terrified at the scale of the impending nuptials. Taylor returned for a sequel, *Father's Little Dividend* (1951), while a remake starring Steve Martin and Diane Keaton appeared in 1991.

**W Sat 27 Aug 20.45 NFT2, Mon 29 Aug 16:00 NFT2**

#### **A Place in the Sun**

USA 1951. Dir George Stevens. With Montgomery Clift, Shelley Winters, Raymond Burr. 122min. PG

Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* was the source for the first truly iconic Elizabeth Taylor movie. As privileged Angela Vickers, she is drawn into a dangerous love triangle with troubled outsider Clift and pregnant factory worker Winters. None of the film's six Academy Awards went to its stars, but its success owed much to the pairing of Clift and Taylor – hailed as the most beautiful movie couple in Hollywood history.

**Tue 16 Aug 20.30 NFT1, Sat 20 Aug 18.00 NFT1**

#### **Giant**

USA 1956 Dir George Stevens With Mercedes McCambridge, Carroll Baker, Dennis Hopper 202min + interval PG

This grandiose epic, based on Edna Ferber's 1952 novel, boasts a compassionate performance from Taylor as an erstwhile socialite, whisked away to a Texan ranch by husband Rock Hudson and embroiled in a saga of family rivalry, racism and oil prospecting. Though a year younger than co-star James Dean – who was killed in a car accident before the film's completion – Taylor felt protective of the highly strung actor, despite recalling that 'Jimmy could be very annoying'.

**Wed 10 Aug 19:00 NFT1, Sat 13 Aug 16:15 NFT1**

#### **Raintree County**

USA 1958 Dir Edward Dmytryk With Montgomery Clift, Eva Marie Saint, Nigel Patrick, Lee Marvin 166min PG

MGM sought to replicate the success of *A Place in the Sun* by re-teaming the red-hot Taylor and Clift in this spectacular Civil War drama. Taylor's portrayal of unstable beauty Susanna Drake heralded a fascination with mentally ill characters and earned her an Academy Award nomination. Taylor's success did little to alleviate her memories of making the film, having been first on the scene of a horrific car accident that saw Clift return to the set physically and mentally scarred.

**Sat 27 Aug 15:20 NFT1, Wed 31 Aug 19:50 NFT1**

### **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**

USA 1958. Dir Richard Brooks. With Paul Newman, Burl Ives, Judith Anderson, Jack Carson 108min 12A

Less than a month after third husband Mike Todd was killed in a plane crash, Taylor began filming the screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play. Her Oscar-nominated performance as the provocative Maggie 'the Cat', trapped in a childless marriage with Newman's despondent alcoholic Brick, would prove a defining role of the MGM era, despite Williams' anger at the toning down of the play's allusions to Brick's homosexuality.

**Mon 1 Aug 20.45 NFT1, Tue 2 Aug 20:40 NFT2, Fri 12 Aug 18.30 NFT1**

### **Suddenly, Last Summer**

USA 1959. Dir Joseph L Mankiewicz. With Katharine Hepburn, Montgomery Clift 114min 15

Taylor's first project after parting ways with MGM was Gore Vidal's reworking of a disturbing one-act play by Tennessee Williams. Much to director Mankiewicz's chagrin, Taylor insisted that Clift – by then uninsurable – was hired as her co-star. Explicit reference to the homosexuality of faceless cousin Sebastian, whose grisly fate confines Taylor's Catherine to a lunatic asylum, was excised, but the film's super-charged Freudian theatrics heralded her new independence.

**Tue 23 Aug 18:00 NFT3, Thu 25 Aug 18.20 NFT1, Sun 28 Aug 20.45 NFT1, Mon 29 Aug 20.45 NFT1**

### **BUtterfield 8**

USA 1960. Dir Daniel Mann. With Laurence Harvey, Eddie Fisher, Betty Field, Dina Merrill 108min. 15

MGM insisted that Taylor fulfil her contractual obligations before making *Cleopatra* for Fox. The resulting animosity, and Taylor's vilification for her relationship with co-star and fourth husband Eddie Fisher, coloured her view of *BUtterfield 8* (her verdict: 'piece of s\*\*t', scrawled in lipstick across a screening room mirror – a nod to the famous 'no sale' scene). The Academy disagreed and, after three successive Best Actress nominations, Taylor won for her mesmerising performance as lost soul Gloria Wandrous.

**Wed 3 Aug 20.45 NFT1, Sat 6 Aug 20:40 NFT2, Sun 28 Aug 16.15 NFT1**

### **Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

USA 1966. Dir Mike Nichols. With Richard Burton, George Segal, Sandy Dennis. 129min. 12A

Taylor defied attempts to pigeonhole her into glamorous roles by gaining weight and playing fifty-something drunk Martha, opposite fifth husband Burton's jaded college professor George, in the hit adaptation of Edward Albee's confrontational study of marital strife. The film secured 13 Academy Award nominations and a second Best Actress win for Taylor, breaking new ground in post-Production Code Hollywood by staying remarkably faithful to Albee's eye-watering dialogue.

**Sat 6 Aug 15:10 NFT2, Mon 15 Aug 18:00 NFT1, Tue 30 Aug 18.10 NFT1**

### **The Taming of the Shrew**

Italy-USA 1967. Dir Franco Zeffirelli. With Richard Burton, Michael Hordern, Michael York. 122min. U

'The world's most celebrated movie couple in the motion picture they were made for!' Taylor and Burton were back for another round of on-screen fireworks, but this time their own money was at stake. Zeffirelli's extravagant film version of one of Shakespeare's most biting comedies capitalised on the pair's notoriously volatile relationship. Taylor throws herself into the role of shrewish maid with hilarious gusto, sending up her image as a rebellious livewire who only mighty men could tame.

**Sun 7 Aug 15.50 NFT3, Mon 15 Aug 20:40 NFT1**

### **Boom!**

UK 1968. Dir Joseph Losey. With Richard Burton, Noël Coward, Joanna Shimkus, Romolo Valli 113min

A real curio in the Losey cannon, this deliriously high-camp Tennessee Williams adaptation bombed at the box office but retains a well-deserved place in the heart of many a Taylor fan. As Sissy Goforth, terminally-ill queen bee of a fantastical island domain breached by Burton's Angelo del Morte, Taylor seems on the verge of corpsing, the outrageous nature of the enterprise written all over her exquisitely maquillaged face.

**Thu 4 Aug 20.45 NFT1, Sat 13 Aug 20:45 NFT1**

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