

A Place in the Canon



A Tribute to Dame Elizabeth Taylor

By Jarrod Emerson

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Elizabeth Taylor shines in *A Place in the Sun* (1951), directed by George Stevens & co-starring Montgomery Clift. In the course of a long & magnificent career, this was her single most beautiful moment on screen: "Tell Mama. Tell Mama all."
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Elizabeth Taylor closed her stunning, double-lashed, lavender eyes for the last time on March 23rd, 2011. Born in a London suburb in 1932 to an American art dealer and a former actress, the Taylor family moved back to the United States when Elizabeth was seven, settling in Los Angeles. Not long after, young Elizabeth began attracting the attention of Hollywood heads. Even at a young age, Taylor possessed an "old soul", a maturity that set her apart from her contemporaries. By the age of 12 she had charmed audiences in *Lassie Come Home* and *National Velvet*.

Elizabeth continued to hold her audiences enthralled as she metamorphosed from child star, to adolescent ingénue, tantalizing seductress, moving on later in life to HIV/AIDS activist and humanitarian. In between, she managed to marry and divorce eight times, put her name to expensive fragrances, and receive the honorary title of Dame from the Order of the British Empire.

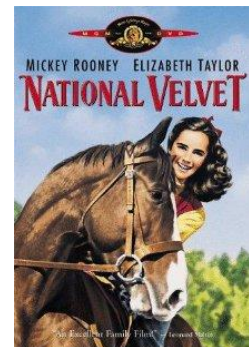
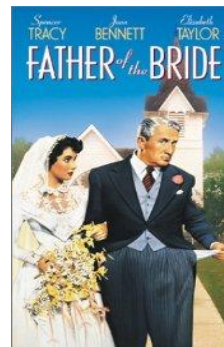
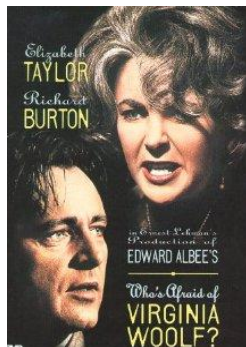
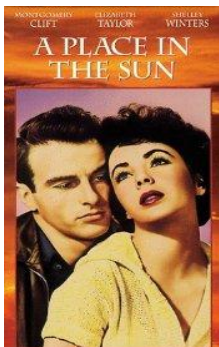
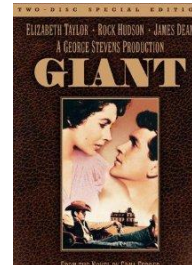
But it all started with a rich, diverse acting career, in which those lavender eyes brought a whole onslaught of characters, most of which shall live on forever for admirers of cinema.

I was only able to view a fraction of Elizabeth Taylor's 71 Internet Movie Data Base credits. For this tribute, I have viewed the following films:

- *A Place in the Sun*
- *Butterfield 8*
- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- *Cleopatra*
- *Elephant Walk*
- *Father Of The Bride*
- *Giant*

- *Ivanhoe*
- *The Last Time I Saw Paris*
- *National Velvet*
- *Suddenly Last Summer*
- *The Taming of The Shrew*
- *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

**Based on my sample,
I recommend you watch
these six Taylor films →**



1) GIANT (1956): “Jordan ‘Bick’ Benedict Jr.” (Rock Hudson) arrives in Maryland to purchase a horse from the Lynnton family. Bick and the Lynnton’s eldest daughter, “Leslie” (Elizabeth Taylor), are immediately attracted to one another. After a brief but intense courtship, the two marry and return to Reata, the Benedict Ranch in Texas. Leslie’s passion and progressiveness put her at odds with many including Bick’s sister “Luz” (Mercedes McCambridge), but spark the interest of ranch hand “Jett Rink” (James Dean, in his final role). As the decades progress, Bick and Leslie raise a family, Rink strikes black gold (rising to prominence), and the trials of life take a toll on everyone.

Released in 1956, the film marks Elizabeth Taylor’s second collaboration with George Stevens. Although *Giant* only took home one Oscar (for Mr. Steven’s directing), it was nominated for ten, including for Dame Taylor’s portrayal of Leslie’s journey from young socialite to old grandmother.

Adapted from Edna Ferber’s novel, Fred Guiol and Ivan Moffat’s screenplay is chalk full of character development. Mr. Stevens has crafted an epic yet intimate film. Even though we are continuously introduced to a barrage of new characters, *Giant* never loses focus of Bick and Leslie’s relationship. Taylor, Hudson, and Dean all succeed spectacularly. Taylor ignites Leslie with spunk and spirit, wonderfully countering Bick’s initial chauvinism. One of Leslie’s greatest moments comes when she attempts to join a conversation between Bick and his male community buddies. Bick repeatedly pushes her away, insisting it’s “man talk”. Leslie, however, refuses to go quietly, firing one witty

comeback after another. The recurring themes of sexism, racism and corruption are true as ever, in this epic, yet intimate tale.

2) A PLACE IN THE SUN (1951): Young, working-class “George Eastman” (Montgomery Clift) lands a job at his rich uncle’s factory, intent on climbing the social ladder. As a lonely outsider, George begins a clandestine affair with frumpy co-worker, “Alice” (Shelly Winters). Not long after, George meets gorgeous young socialite, “Angela Vickers” (Elizabeth Taylor), and he’s ready to drop the unfortunate Alice. However, a desperate Alice reveals she is pregnant, threatening to unravel his dreams. Driven by his obsession with Angela, George begins to contemplate something truly horrific.

Adapted from Theodore Dreiser’s novel, *A Place In The Sun* follows one man’s brief rise and painful downfall. Angela’s beauty makes us believe she’s capable of driving a man to insanity - particularly a man as morally weak and reckless as George. Montgomery Clift does a masterly job of showing his character crumble bit by bit. Meanwhile, Shelly Winters (in an Oscar winning role) delivers a chilling metamorphosis, going from sweet love interest to an intimidating creature who will stop at nothing to get what she wants.

Although billed a drama, *A Place In The Sun* delivers a fair share of thrills, especially during the fateful boat trip George and Alice take together. Indeed, this movie is as tragic and thrilling as ever.

3) WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? (1966): Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton are married couple George, a history professor and Martha, his wife. Returning home from a party, Martha reveals she has invited a younger couple, “Nick” and “Honey,” (George Segal and Sandy Dennis) back for drinks. The unsuspecting lovers are sucked into a night of alcohol-soaked verbal and physical abuse as both couples reveal painful, bitter truths.

Mike Nichols directed this adaptation of the Tony winning Edward Albee production, and retains the spirit of the play. Set almost entirely in George and Martha’s house, the film is generally credited with the creation of the modern MPAA Ratings system due to its many innuendos. Nominated for 13 Academy Awards, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* took home a total of 5 – including Best Actress for Elizabeth Taylor and Best Supporting Actress for Sandy Dennis.

I believe Dame Taylor was most deserving of her Oscar, for this beloved glamour icon has never been more un-glamorous. Taylor, who packed on 30 pounds for the part, dives right into the psyche of spiteful, bitter Martha. Her many tirades create a unique, eerie chemistry with Richard Burton. One of the more memorable aspects of Martha is her reluctance to discuss the couple’s son, of whom more is learned in a startling reveal before the evening is out. This raw film hasn’t aged a bit, for I’m still very afraid of Virginia Woolf!

4) CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF (1958): “Brick Pollitt” (Paul Newman) has isolated himself. Buried in self-pity, depression and alcoholism, Brick spitefully resists the advances of his wife “Maggie” (Elizabeth Taylor). Meanwhile Brick’s father, “Harvey ‘Big Daddy’ Pollitt” (Burl Ives) discovers he is terminally ill on his 65th birthday, while the rest of the clan squabbles over his estate. Before the night’s out, Brick must forgive

both his wife, and more importantly himself for the death of a friend, while rekindling his relationship with Big Daddy.

Based on Tennessee Williams' Pulitzer-prize winning play, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* was nominated for 6 Academy Awards. Despite muting the play's implied homosexual affair Brick shared with his late friend, director Richard Brooks generated a raw, intense and emotional silver screen counterpart. Elizabeth Taylor's portrayal of "Maggie the Cat" proved another Oscar nomination for the actress. Maggie knows she is beautiful and while using her beauty in an attempt to reach Brick, Taylor convincingly shows Maggie gradually stripped of her façade. Likewise, Newman does a fine job building up Brick's pent-up anger, until he can hide it no longer. Another highlight is Burl Ives' intense, and occasionally humorous performance as the bitter, old patriarch in this timeless drama.

5) FATHER OF THE BRIDE (1950): "Stanley Banks" (Spencer Tracy) is slumped in a chair, surrounded by confetti and empty champagne glasses. His daughter "Kay" (Elizabeth Taylor) has just gotten married. We follow Stanley as he recalls when he and his wife "Ellie" (Joan Bennett) first meet Kay's fiancé "Buckley" (Don Taylor), continuing up to the wedding. From that point on, Stanley is in for a hectic and emotional journey, as he struggles to cope with a fact of life: his little girl has grown up, and now he must let her go.

This sweet little story was adapted from a novel by Edward Streeter. Vincente Minnelli clearly has fun with the material, as does his cast. Spencer Tracy couldn't be better as the good-natured, but stressed out father, who has to accept the idea of his daughter as an adult. As for Taylor, she shines as Kay. Taylor was just eighteen when she made this picture, and it feels symbolic of her transition from an adolescent star into an adult one. Kay is on the cusp, and so is Taylor. Life's exhilarating rate of change couldn't be portrayed better!

6) NATIONAL VELVET (1944): Elizabeth Taylor portrays "Velvet Brown", a twelve-year old with a passion for horses. She meets and befriends drifter "Mi Taylor" (Mickey Rooney). The two meet a powerful runaway horse, Pirate. "Pie", as she nicknames him, has been deemed too difficult to ride due to his speed and agility. With Mi's help, Velvet and her family win Pie in a lottery. Together Velvet and Mi train Pie for the Grand National Race. But come race day, not everyone believes in Pie, forcing Velvet to take matters into her own hands.

British author Enid Bagnold's novel makes for a very good story when translated into film. Director Clarence Brown delivers an inspiring story of hope. This is one of Elizabeth Taylor's most notable early roles, as she handles the part of Velvet very well. The attachment and bond she shares with Pie is undeniably a template for many tales of childhood friendship, whether it's with another person, animal, or dare I say, alien! Angela Lansbury also makes an impressive turn as Velvet's sister Edwina. And the finale remains a thrilling race sequence.

7) CLEOPATRA (1963): Dame Taylor is the historical Egyptian Queen, in this much-maligned epic. The story chronicles the trials of Cleopatra's personal life, as well her leadership. From her affair with "Cesar" (Rex Harrison, in an Oscar nominated performance), to subsequent rise to power, along with her infatuation with "Marc

Antony” (Richard Burton) and her quarrels with “Octavian” (Roddy McDowell), the Queen endures a turbulent tenure, until the bitter end.

Infamous may be the best word for *Cleopatra*. Originally budgeted at 2 million, Fox forked out an astronomical 44 million (over 3 hundred million in today’s money), and switched directors, nearly bankrupting themselves in the process. And while contemporary critics were rather unkind, this flawed, but entertaining epic sports plenty of highlights.

Alluring, bold, and beautiful, Taylor succeeds in dramatizing the life of the famous Queen, particularly in scenes shared with Rex Harrison’s Cesar. The scene in which Cesar seduces Cleopatra proves a memorable moment. Harrison’s performance easily elevates the film above a run-of-the-mill costume drama. Mankiewicz and his cameramen also produce some stunning visuals, ranging from mammoth sets and battle scenes, to brooding-dark imagery. Cesar’s murder (and Cleopatra’s psychic connection to it) is one of the film’s most hauntingly dramatic images. Like Cleopatra’s reign, there were many obstacles, but the film emerges a surprising victor.

Even a career as rich as this one, however contains a few misses.

Despite the presence of Dame Taylor, I cannot recommend these two:

1) BUTTERFIELD 8 (1960): Dame Taylor stars as “Gloria Wandrous”, a promiscuous call girl. She wakes up in the apartment of “Weston Liggett” (Laurence Harvey), disgusted to find \$250 in cash left for her. Gloria has a rocky relationship with her mother “Annie” (Mildred Murdock), and is criticized by her friend “Steve” (Eddie Fisher) for her lifestyle. But the married Liggett and Gloria decide to explore their relationship further. Can Gloria shed her ways?

One of Taylor’s 2 Academy Award wins was for the role of Gloria, and her performance is a diamond in the rough of this messy film. While Laurence Harvey (of Manchurian Candidate fame) also turns in a decent performance, the rest of the film simply fails to ignite. The story and its melodramatic tone are severely dated. Much of the rest of the cast simply amplifies this tone with serious overacting. This leaves the film a rather diluted piece of cinema, reportedly hated even by Taylor herself. I’m right there with you Liz!

2) THE LAST TIME I SAW PARIS (1954): As Paris celebrates its liberation after World War II, “Charles” (Van Johnson) meets “Marion Ellsworth” (Donna Reed) in his favorite Parisian café. Instantly attracted to Charles, Marion invites him back to her family’s liberation party. There he meets Marion’s younger sister “Helen” (Elizabeth Taylor), who had previously grabbed and kissed him during a street celebration. Charles and Marion fall in love, first marrying, then raising a child in Paris. The couple however, struggles with affairs and financial troubles, as Charles’ novels are repeatedly rejected.

And an unexpected tragedy leaves a crucial decision in the hands of Marion, who still harbors a grudge because Charles rejected her when he chose Helen.

Based very loosely on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited*, *The Last Time I Saw Paris* does Mr. Fitzgerald no justice. While the story is decent, it is poorly carried out. Elizabeth Taylor's socialite wannabe is an over the top performance. Van Johnson's character is more annoying than anything else. He only whines, and never seems able to lift himself out of his own misery. While story had potential, the execution reeks of the gooey melodrama that plagued many films of the era.

My Bottom Line:

**While not all of Elizabeth Taylor's filmography has aged well,
the good far outweighs the bad in this rich, diverse career!**

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Ohio-native Jarrod Emerson has been residing in Chicago for the past four years. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, and is currently enrolled in courses at the Second City Training Center. He has been working with FF2 since 2007, and leaps at any opportunity (or excuse) to see more classic films!

FF2 Editor's Note:

Although we've seen most of the films mentioned in this piece, we saw them before we began FF2, so, alas, most of them are not listed in our database. We are very grateful to Jarrod for going back into the archive to create a personal record of Liz Taylor's most memorable moments on screen.