

Prologue



How to Be a Movie Star

FOR ONCE THE SUN overhead was the brightest object around. On a warm morning in September 2006, Elizabeth Taylor, seventy-four, left the diamonds at home and boarded a sightseeing boat, the *Kainani*, off Oahu's North Shore. Wearing a baggy white T-shirt over a one-piece bathing suit, she gripped the arms of her black wheelchair tightly as the craft zipped out of Haleiwa Harbor. Slapping against the waves of the Pacific, the thirty-two-foot *Kainani* was a far cry from the *Kalizma*, the floating palace with six cabins and two staterooms on which Taylor had once navigated the world. But a leisurely cruise was not what the two-time Academy Award winner had in mind.

Three miles out to sea, the *Kainani* arrived at what its captain called "the shark grounds." On another excursion not long before, Elizabeth had sat forlornly while her friends dropped off the side of the boat in a Plexiglas cage to swim with Galapagos sharks. Alone on deck, she'd stewed; the sidelines had never been for her. So she'd insisted on another trip—and this time no one was going to stop her from going down.

In the months leading up to this day, the papers had been filled with tales of Elizabeth Taylor being "near death" or half-mad from Alzheimer's. She'd gone on *Larry King Live* to dispel the rumors, but she knew there were ways of making the point a bit more vividly. So, slowly and determinedly, she rose from that damn chair. Handed a mask, she followed the instructions to spit into it so that the plastic wouldn't fog up underwater. Then she slipped the thing on and bit down on the snorkel. Pushing aides aside, she stepped

into the ten-by-six-foot cage. Lured by the engine, the sharks were already circling. With the pull of a lever and a wave from the star, the cage slid below the surface of the ocean.

Of course, this wasn't the first time Elizabeth Taylor had gone head-to-head with sharks. She'd tangled with lots of them: demanding studio heads, overbearing directors, bluenose columnists, greedy husbands. And she'd done so with a shrewdness and a keen understanding of just how a star went about getting what she wanted. "She was always in control," said her friend, photographer Gianni Bozzachi. "She did not seek fame but she knew how to use it. She was very smart. People don't know how smart." Some chroniclers, perhaps too dazzled by the violet eyes and the glittery melodrama of her life, have missed that salient point. Long before our own celebrity age, Elizabeth Taylor carved the template for how to be a movie star. So many of the tricks of the trade can be traced right back to her.

When the cage finally resurfaced, Taylor smiled at the photographer who was there to record the moment. Her scarlet nails, still perfectly manicured, sparkled in the sun. Getting into that shark cage, she later told columnist Liz Smith, was "the most exciting thing" she'd done—which, given her life, was saying a lot. "To be in that cage and watch the sharks get closer and closer," she told Ingrid Sischy in *Interview*, "I had no sense of fear." Of course not; sitting across from Louis B. Mayer had been far more unnerving. Within a short time, the photos and news of her adventure had zoomed around the world. Soon there was buzz about an eighth marriage and a possible lead in the film version of the musical *Sunset Boulevard*. So much for death's door, baby.

Movie stars—like automobiles, airplanes, and apple pies—are quintessentially American commodities. When we measure what we've given the world, the product of Personality—used to inspire, entertain, endorse, titillate, preach, stoke the flames of our imaginations, and sell, sell, sell—may prove more influential than even the Model T. Elizabeth Taylor—for her performances both good and bad, for her innocence, sexiness, rebellion, honesty, and sheer

life force—has been called the greatest movie star of all. She has become a cultural artifact that transcends temporal value judgments and the hectoring of the moralists who plagued her career. Her life was made into art, soap opera, scandal, tragedy, and even a bit of myth—a transformation begun by the starmakers at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the studio that launched her when she was twelve, and continued by agents and publicists like Kurt Frings, Bill Doll, John Springer, and Chen Sam, and given its final patina by the media, with which Taylor has always had a symbiotic relationship. A creature of newspaper headlines and telephoto images, Elizabeth enjoyed an unprecedented celebrity that made her into an icon of desire, of gusto, of appetites passionately sated, of candor, of courage, of never saying no to big bad life.

With her studio-instilled instinct for *presence* (not to mention her refusal to suffer even a moment of boredom), Elizabeth Taylor created the model for stardom and turned it into big business. Before “Liz,” the paparazzi were just a bunch of aggressive Italian photographers; because of her, they became a worldwide phenomenon. Part engineering, part instinct, part fate, part simply the pursuit of good times, her fame continues to set the gold standard. Britney may break down; Angelina may steal Brad from Jen; Madonna may reinvent herself as saint, shepherdess, horsewoman, or action figure. But no one has done anything that Elizabeth Taylor didn’t do first—and without the excess calculation.

Today’s stars concoct their lives for public consumption: Was Britney really that crazy or was it just a quirky twenty-first-century way of staying in the headlines? So much in stars’ lives is suspect today. Taylor, by contrast, was brought up to be a star; and while she certainly took advantage of every twist and turn in her epic life, she wasn’t constantly configuring and reconfiguring her existence for maximum exposure—the way, for example, her first husband’s grandniece, Paris Hilton, would do a couple of generations later. For Taylor, stardom came naturally. She had an affinity for the romance of life. Her fame was a roller coaster of spontaneity and strategy, and all the would-be icons who have followed her

have attempted to retrace that pattern, manufacturing the kinds of developments that came to Taylor so extempore and that she (or those who worked for her) used so brilliantly to her advantage.

She also understood that riding the headlines was never enough; she knew that fame should be an exchange with the public. And so, for every cover of *Photoplay*, there was a *Giant* or a *Suddenly, Last Summer*. After all the hoopla over her affair with Richard Burton, she made sure there was a *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

"I don't pretend to be an ordinary housewife," Elizabeth once declared, and that, in a simple sentence, is the secret of her appeal. Many of her contemporaries *did* pretend to be ordinary housewives, succumbing to the dictum that stars should be like the rest of us. But Taylor stood apart, reveling in her ability to fascinate, to scandalize, to provoke. Swathed in mink, sailing aboard yachts, discarding husbands nearly as frequently as she changed her diamond earrings, Elizabeth dominated the headlines for three glittering decades, rewriting the rules as she went along, inverting paradigms, defying conventions, beating expectations, and in the course of it all laying down the yardstick by which celebrity has been measured ever since.

Part of her celebrity, of course, was inherent, magical, and unquantifiable. "At her best, Elizabeth Taylor simply *is*," writes Camille Paglia. "An electric, erotic charge vibrates the space between her face and the lens. It is an extrasensory, pagan phenomenon." Richard Burton, admittedly not an unbiased observer, thought that Elizabeth "emanated" something onscreen that he frankly didn't understand—a trait she shared with Brando, Clift, and Garbo.

But an equally large part of it was *craft*: Taylor grew up with the camera, after all, both the motion-picture variety and the popping flashcubes of the press corps. By sheer instinct she knew how to position herself in a shot. One of her directors was amazed by her ability to determine the camera's location simply by the heat on her cheeks. She could also be a damn fine actress at times: Hollywood historian Gavin Lambert thought that with the right director, Taylor could "more than rise to the occasion," while Paglia

declared her “the greatest actress in film history”—not for any proficiency in technique but for her mastery of the “liquid realm of emotion.” That’s the point: Of all the lessons Taylor learned so well at MGM, the most valuable had little to do with acting.

Consider this: In 1950, when she was eighteen and making *Father of the Bride*, the studio decided that Elizabeth should take a real-life trip down the aisle for the good of the box office. The marriage was a personal trauma for the sensitive young woman, but it also proved to be an instructive experience in the ways that stardom could be sold—and souls damaged. In such an ambitious and mercenary world, Taylor had to become tough and refuse to crumble like Judy Garland. Her triumph over the studio system meant that she would help lay the foundation for the industry and the ways of doing business that replaced it. She was the first female star to be paid a million dollars a picture *and* to take a share of the profits. When she was told a few years ago that Julia Roberts was making twenty million a picture, Elizabeth simply smiled and said, “I started it.”

Some people even argue that she spurred the sexual revolution of the 1960s. One of the first big stars to pose nude for *Playboy* (though not fully) and to take off her clothes onscreen (discreetly), Taylor pushed the envelope on all things sexual. Her matrimonial adventures took the sting out of adultery. Her affair with the married Richard Burton—so notorious that it knocked John Glenn’s historic space flight off the front page of some newspapers—occurred just as the public was “questioning old values and trying new ones on for size,” the anthropologist George O’Neil observed; by its very prominence, O’Neil believed that the affair helped “speed up the revolution in moral standards.” Slightly more than a decade earlier Hollywood had exiled the adulterous Ingrid Bergman, but in 1962 Elizabeth Taylor became the biggest star of the year after refusing to apologize for her love affair.

Writer Maureen Orth calls Taylor “the Madame Curie of fame extension.” Indeed, from the sweet child of *National Velvet* who masqueraded as a jockey to win the Grand National, to the ideal-

ized young woman of *A Place in the Sun* who was worth whatever punishment Montgomery Clift risked on her behalf, to the fiery seductress of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* who slunk around in a revealing white slip, to the foul-mouthed shrew of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* who tore everyone and everything around her to pieces, Taylor created characters in her four decades onscreen that were cannily layered onto her real-life persona. "That's how stars became great," said Hollywood agent Dick Clayton. "They had a little bit of everything for everyone."

But the best part she ever played was Elizabeth Taylor. Film theorist Richard Dyer has suggested that the alchemy of true stardom is produced by the reconciliation of contradictions. Certainly few other performers have exhibited as captivating a duality as Taylor. Watching her with Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun*, critic Andrew Sarris decreed them "the most beautiful couple in the history of cinema," calling their gigantic close-ups "unnerving—sybaritic—like gorging on chocolate sundaes." And yet for all her movie-queen beauty, Taylor was also a good old gal who liked her fun and fried chicken. Stories about her 33.19-carat Krupp Diamond ("Big girls need big diamonds") were balanced by tales of the peanut butter and bacon sandwiches she carried in her bag.

It's exactly this kind of paradox, this melding of the ordinary and the extraordinary, that makes a personality memorable. Elizabeth was a smoldering siren who lured helpless men away from their wives, but she was also a bit of an oddball. Liz Smith recalled the time that the star was invited to dinner by a wealthy admirer. "Who is this person?" Elizabeth asked, insisting that she didn't visit people she didn't know. But when told that the man liked to "dress up in satin ball gowns and stick diamond tiaras over his bald spot," she had second thoughts. "Oh, why, he's one of us then," she said. "Of course I'll go."

She was a star without airs. Mike Nichols said that of all the people he'd worked with, Taylor had the "most democratic soul," treating electricians on the set the same way she would a Roth-

schild at a charity gala. After making *The Blue Bird* with the star in 1973, director George Cukor told Taylor that she possessed “that rarest of virtues—simple kindness.” Tom Mankiewicz, the son of the man who directed her in *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* and *Cleopatra*, said Taylor could “spot a phony a mile away.” In her own press she did her best to walk a careful line between hype and truth. “I try not to live a lie,” she told one reporter at the height of the scandal with Burton, when no one was sure what it would do to her career. “I can’t be that hypocritical [just] to protect my public.”

Her authenticity, of course, became its own selling point. In 1966, while helping shape publicity for Taylor’s film *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, no less than Gloria Steinem suggested a campaign featuring the star as the “movie queen with no ego.” Despite Elizabeth’s palatial dressing rooms and other luxuries, Steinem argued that Taylor set herself apart by being “expert at what she does, uncatty in her work relationships with other actresses, and pretty much willing to try whatever the director asks.” After a decade of being known as Hollywood’s home wrecker, it would be this more humane, bighearted view of Elizabeth Taylor that would prevail in people’s minds. “She is the good-bad girl who gives the audience a sense of breaking the bonds of daily life without casting loose from all moorings,” wrote the journalist (and Taylor’s occasional lover) Max Lerner.

And what makes her unique in the Hollywood pantheon is that none of the images that spun around her circled too far from the truth. Garbo’s supposed preference for being alone was simply part of a manufactured mystique. Katharine Hepburn’s all-American public self (the “Creature,” she called it) was crafted to disguise her unorthodoxy and ensure her legacy. But if “Kate” was largely fiction, “Liz” was real—no matter how much Taylor despised the press’s ubiquitous nickname. Yet just because the product was more genuine than most doesn’t mean that she was above merchandising it; every great star has to be a great peddler as well. Elizabeth knew how to make every scandal work for her and turn criticism

on its head. “There’s no deodorant like success,” she once stated. Her grasp of the tricky business of fame meant that she’d outshine other greats like Garbo and Monroe who never knew how to cope except when in front of the cameras. Elizabeth, by contrast, was equally at home on the soundstage or the world stage. Critic David Thomson once proclaimed Elizabeth “the most ambitious of them all.”

True enough—but Taylor’s ambition wasn’t quite what one might expect. Certainly she knew how to play the game better than most; when her marriage to Eddie Fisher was crumbling, she distracted the press with a shopping spree in Paris, loading herself down with boxes from Chanel, Dior, and Yves Saint Laurent. And even during her frequent hospital stays, the reports issued by her publicists were timed to have the maximum effect on public sympathy. Yet it was never about fame for fame’s sake; stardom for Elizabeth was a means to an end. “Taylor seems more to co-exist with fame than to dwell within it,” the writer Ethan Mordden observed.

Indeed, the primary function of her extraordinary celebrity was to enable the kind of rarefied lifestyle that she considered hers by birthright. The spotlight alone was never enough, the way it was for Hepburn or Joan Crawford. For Taylor fame was merely the currency that allowed her to do what she wanted when and where she wanted. Her friend, the producer Hank Moonjean, remembered being sent to Switzerland to look for a house for her. “Where the *fuck* are you?” the star demanded when she reached him on the phone. She wanted him back in time for a game of hearts she was setting up for the next day. Moonjean told her he’d found a house and that it cost \$400,000 (a king’s ransom then). “Buy it!” she commanded. But didn’t she need to see it? “No, just fucking buy it!” Should he try to negotiate down the price? “No,” she cried, “just buy the damn thing so you can get back here and we can play fucking hearts!” What was fame if she couldn’t play cards when and with whom she wanted?

Elizabeth once remarked to Dominick Dunne—“without an iota of braggadocio”—that she couldn’t remember a time when she wasn’t famous. That’s key to understanding her. Even though she didn’t become a star until the age of twelve, her early entitlement sprang from a privileged childhood as the daughter of middle-class Americans who’d found the good life in British aristocratic circles and who, like MGM a few years later, indulged her every whim. Yet while she was always more a red-blooded broad than a blue-blooded dame (her designation as a Dame of the Order of the British Empire in 2000 notwithstanding), her love for the finer things would serve her well as a movie star.

Of course, such luxury meant that she never experienced “ordinary” life. Shooting a scene in *Butterfield 8*, director Daniel Mann handed his star a couple of eggs and told her to pretend to make breakfast as she stood at the stove. Taylor’s eyes grew wide. Holding an egg out in each hand, she implored, “But what do I *do* with them?” She had never made breakfast in her life. Neither had she ever been to a baseball game or a school dance that wasn’t arranged by the Metro publicity department. Yet studio press releases, cranked out on mimeograph machines, tried—not always successfully—to create the illusion that Elizabeth was just a simple girl with ordinary dreams.

This is the trap that biographers have sometimes fallen into, swayed by those long-ago press releases into chronicling Taylor’s romances and marriages as simply the narrative of a passionate woman’s heart. In most accounts, Elizabeth moves from Glenn Davis to Bill Pawley to Conrad “Nicky” Hilton (and beyond) without any other consideration than “love.” Yet while Taylor’s passion is undeniable, such an approach misses the far more interesting story of how these relationships were used by the studio and later by her own press agents to further her fame—and always with Elizabeth’s compliance.

Indeed, the two central memes of Taylor’s career—her marriages and her illnesses—were marketed for every last dollar of

their commercial value. That doesn't mean they weren't real; it simply means that everyone involved understood the considerable gain that they promised to yield.

It is my job with this book to not only separate fact from fiction, but to also consider the ways in which they inform each other, and to document as best as possible the sometimes practical, sometimes mysterious ways in which Elizabeth Taylor became a movie star—and how she managed to stay on top for four magnificent decades.

How to Be a Movie Star is not a traditional biography. I do not cover every year of Taylor's life, or every film, or every up and down of every romance. There are plenty of other books that do that. I'm not here to repeat well-known anecdotes merely for form's sake. Instead I take instruction from the book's title. What intrigues me are those areas that haven't been fully investigated before: the mechanics of Taylor's fame and the alchemy that assured her enduring celebrity. By considering these, I hope to understand fame itself a little better. And for that, what better model than Elizabeth Taylor?

For my purposes, I concentrate on (to use Sarris's term) her "chocolate sundae" years, zooming in on key periods of Taylor's life that tell the larger story of her walk with fame: the campaign to be cast in *National Velvet*; the productions of *A Place in the Sun* and *Giant*; the jet-setting celebrity she enjoyed with Mike Todd (back when air travel was still a novelty to most people); the hysterical public reaction to her affair with Fisher; the transformative scandal with Burton; and the behind-the-scenes stories of *Cleopatra* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I fade out with *The Little Foxes* and Elizabeth triumphantly taking her curtain calls on Broadway, basking in the affection of her public.

Her life went on from there, of course; her heartfelt advocacy on behalf of those with AIDS will likely be remembered as her greatest achievement. But after the late 1960s, Taylor ceased being a movie star, strictly speaking. Although she still made the occasional appearance in film or on TV, her fame was now carried along

largely by the momentum of the previous forty years. And so grand and glamorous were those years that they could palliate the sometimes painful gaucheries of Taylor's later life: the trips to the Betty Ford Clinic, the marriage to construction worker Larry Fortensky, the friendship with Michael Jackson, *The Flintstones*.

To re-create Taylor's many different worlds, I have drawn from sources that were either never previously used or seriously underutilized, such as director George Stevens's personal papers for *A Place in the Sun* and *Giant*, which included Elizabeth's private medical records tucked away in one folder; the FBI files of Mike Todd; the business records of the Todd organization; the hundreds of letters Hedda Hopper received during the Eddie Fisher scandal; the studio marketing plans for *Butterfield 8*; the private letters between Burton and his former lover Claire Bloom; court depositions given by Taylor and Burton when Fox sued them over *Cleopatra*; the journal kept by producer Ernest Lehman during the making of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; and Taylor's working script for *The Little Foxes*, complete with her own handwritten notes. For the most part, the quotes I use come from fresh sources, such as transcripts of unpublished interviews with Elizabeth, Burton, George Stevens, Hedda Hopper, and others.

I also spoke with many of Taylor's friends, colleagues, and family, most of whom are here on the record. Only a few asked that their names not be used; I agreed to their anonymity because their proximity to Taylor offered valuable insight. Yet equally as important were those who, even if their connection to the star was tangential, offered commentary on the mechanics of her celebrity. Among these were publicists and agents who described for me the elaborate process of studio starmaking; Elizabeth's fellow contract players who shared their own experiences at the MGM lot and studio schoolhouse; and the original paparazzi who conveyed their unique perspective on the power and allure of fame.

If not the greatest star, Elizabeth Taylor is certainly the last. Her singular journey through the popular imagination tells us everything we need to know about fame and public life in the twentieth

century. It also provides some telling insight into what it's become today. The old adage that they don't make stars like Elizabeth Taylor anymore is true. Even when they were making stars like her, she had few rivals. Some years ago, Elizabeth called herself "Mother Courage" and vowed she'd be dragging her sable coat behind her into old age. Whether sable or shark cages, Elizabeth Taylor has kept her word.