# Elizabeth TAYLOR

HER LIFE IN STYLE

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A studio portrait from Elizabeth's early career

# INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Rosamond Taylor was born on February 27, 1932 in Hampstead, London, England. She was born with a genetic 'mutation', as the doctor who delivered her described it, a rare condition called distichiasis – double rows of eyelashes framing her famous violet eyes. Seven per cent of people with lymphedema-distichiasis syndrome also suffer from congenital heart disease, which would ultimately take Elizabeth's life in March of 2011. Elizabeth's father Francis was an American art dealer, and her mother Sara (been an actress before her marriage under the stage name Sara Sothern) devoted herself to her daughter, ensuring she had singing and dancing lessons, and coaching her tirelessly in the craft of acting, until the small girl could even cry on cue. As World War II drew closer, the family relocated to Los Angeles (Pasadena and then Beverly Hills) when Elizabeth was seven years old; and at the age of ten, in 1943, she starred in *Lassie Come Home* for MGM studios.

Her first big hit film was the following year, 1944, when she played the lead role in *National Velvet* and became a major child star. More films followed, including *Life with Father*, and the espionage story *Conspirator*, in 1949, which saw Elizabeth playing a very adult role as the 21-year-old new bride of Major Michael Curraugh (played by Robert Taylor) at the age of just 16. Although the film flopped, the young actress was applauded for her performance.

Aged just 18, in May 1950, Taylor married 23-year-old Conrad 'Nicky' Hilton in an elaborate ceremony in Beverly Hills. Almost 3000 fans waited outside the church to see the couple, and Elizabeth's happiness radiated for all to see. But her ideals of the perfect romance were to elude her for the first time, as Nicky turned out to be a violent and abusive alcoholic with serious gambling and drug problems. Reportedly he once even kicked her in the stomach when she was pregnant, causing her to miscarry. By November of the same year, Elizabeth was citing 'extreme mental cruelty' as the reason she was filing for divorce, and their marriage lasted just 205 days.

The early 1950s saw Elizabeth throwing herself into work, with major roles in films such as *Father of the Bride* (1950), *A Place in the Sun* (1951) and *Beau Brummell* (1954). When Vivien Leigh could not continue with her part in *Elephant Walk* in 1954, Taylor took her place. 1956 saw her starring in *Giant* with Rock Hudson and James Dean, after which she made *Raintree County*, for which she received her first Academy Award nomination in 1958.

In 1952, on February 21, Taylor married British actor Michael Wilding. She was 19 and Wilding was 20 years her senior; they had met while making *Ivanhoe* in London. Wilding was the father of her two sons, Michael Howard (born in, 1953 in London) and Christopher Edward (born in 1955, in Los Angeles), and Elizabeth herself believed that he brought some much-needed stability and maturity to her life. However, the marriage was not to last and the couple separated in 1956 and divorced in 1957.

Elizabeth married her third husband, Broadway and movie mogul Mike Todd, on February 2, 1957. Their daughter, Elizabeth Frances (Liza) Todd was born on August 6 of the same year. Todd adored his new bride and showered her with beautiful jewelry, including such outrageous gifts as a collection of rubies and diamonds by Cartier for swimming laps in the pool! Her engagement ring was a 29-and-⅞-carat diamond engagement ring; Elizabeth claimed that Mike insisted she refer to it specifically as 29-and-⅞-carat, 'because 30 would have been vulgar'. Another notable piece was an antique Belle Époque diamond necklace.

They had been married just thirteen months, and Elizabeth was still only 26 years old and in the middle of filming *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* when she was widowed; Todd was killed in a plane crash on March 22 of 1958. Allowed just a week off by the studio, the actress was compelled to finish filming. The tragedy left Elizabeth devastated, as it did Todd's best friend Eddie Fisher who was at the time married to actress Debbie







LEFT Elizabeth Taylor had her first major film success with *National Velvet*, becoming a recognised child star at the age of just 12

ABOVE Elizabeth Taylor in 1949

Reynolds. Eddie and Elizabeth turned to each other for comfort and consolation, and fell heavily in love. The couple ignited a huge Hollywood scandal as Reynolds and Fisher divorced on May 12, 1959, and Eddie married Elizabeth the very same day in Las Vegas at Temple Beth Shalom. Taylor was branded a 'home-wrecker' by the press, although she defended herself, saying: 'You can't break up a happy marriage; Debbie's and Eddie's never has been'.

Taylor received her second Oscar nomination for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1959 and her third in 1960 for *Suddenly, Last Summer*. After all these nominations, she finally won the Oscar in 1961 for her role as call-girl Gloria Wandrous in *Butterfield 8*; however, she was convinced (as were others) that this was something of a consolation prize, following as it did the death of Todd and Elizabeth's battle with a serious case of pneumonia.

In 1960, Elizabeth's MGM contract came to a close and she signed a deal with Twentieth Century Fox to make the film *Cleopatra*. The part was originally offered to Joan Collins, and as Elizabeth had not wanted the role she requested the fee of $1million in an attempt to put the producers off. But she took the part and the cash; this was the first time a woman had been paid such an amount for a role. The production was famously troubled; shooting of the film overran its deadlines by a considerable amount of time, taking in the end three years to make. The project went horrendously over budget, ending up costing the studio $37million with its running time almost hitting four hours, and it was an absolute disaster for the studio. In the middle of the project, after $5million had already been spent, Elizabeth fell ill with pneumonia and filming was suspended. Once she recovered, the decision had been taken to scrap everything that had been filmed already in London, to change the director, replace some of the cast, and begin again in Italy. The role of Marc Antony was taken over by Richard Burton, and as he and Elizabeth played out the legendary romance in front of the cameras they fell in love themselves.

Describing the first time he saw the woman who would make him her fifth husband, Richard Burton said: 'She was so extraordinarily beautiful that I nearly laughed out loud. She... [was] famine, fire, destruction and plague... the only true begetter. She was unquestionably gorgeous. She was lavish. She was a dark, unyielding largesse. She was, in short, too bloody much... Those huge violet blue eyes... had an odd glint... Aeons passed, civilizations came and went while these cosmic headlights examined my flawed personality.'

Both married to other people, their flamboyant affair sparked enormous public indignation and outrage, as well as an official condemnation from the Vatican accusing them of 'erotic vagrancy'. It was another very public scandal for Elizabeth; she and Fisher announced their divorce in 1962 and finalized it in March 1964. Nine days after the divorce was finally granted, Elizabeth married Richard on March 15, 1964, in Montreal, proclaiming 'this marriage will last forever'.

The pair earned a reputation as Hollywood's most famous, glamorous, outrageous and volatile couple, and the romance of their relationship captured public imagination. Elizabeth and Richard starred opposite each other in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? (for which Elizabeth won an Oscar in 1967) and Franco Zeffirelli's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as working together on the film adaptation of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Their marriage was passionate, but also tempestuous; Burton explained, 'Elizabeth and I lived on the edge of an exciting volcano. I'm not easy to be married to or live with. I exploded violently about twice a year with Elizabeth. She would also explode. It was marvellous. But it could be murder.'

Burton indulged Taylor's love of jewels, famously showering her with some of the world's most historically-important and beautiful pieces throughout their relationship. The first diamond he bought her was the 33.19-carat Asscher-cut Krupp Diamond, which Elizabeth wore in a ring and can be seen in a number of her films made after 1968 as well as during her appearance on Larry King Live, (CNN, 2003). In 1969, for her 37th birthday, Burton spent $37,000 to acquire the La Peregrina Pearl for his wife. The history of the pearl fascinated them both; it had been owned by Mary Queen of Scots, who was given it during her engagement to Phillip II of Spain in 1554, as well as by the Spanish queens Margarita and Isabel who both wear it in 16th-century portraits by Velasquez. The Bonapartes also owned the pearl, in the early 1800s. Elizabeth wore the pearl in the films *A Little Night Music* and *Divorce His – Divorce Hers*, as well as in 1969 studio photographs to publicize *Anne of the Thousand Days*.

In 1972, Burton presented Elizabeth with an exquisite heart-shaped diamond known as the Taj-Mahal Diamond for her 40th birthday. A yellow-gold rope-patterned necklace set with diamonds and rubies replaced the original silk chord, and the large, flat stone is inscribed with the words 'Love is Everlasting' in Parsee. Burton was very pleased with the piece, remarking: 'This diamond has so many carats, it's almost a turnip.'

The most famous purchase Richard made for Elizabeth was a pear-shaped 69.42-carat diamond, which would be known as the Burton-Taylor Diamond. Taylor first wore it in public for the 40th birthday party of Princess Grace of Monaco, for which it was flown from New York accompanied by two armed guards. When she put the diamond up for sale, in 1978, it won a price of $5million at auction.

Elizabeth went on to acquire one of the greatest private collections of jewelry in the world, including pieces by Boucheron, Bulgari, Cartier, Chopard, Gerard, JAR, Ruser, Schlumberger, Tiffany, Van Cleef & Arpels, and David Webb. She was well aware of her good fortune, but always said that she only ever saw herself as someone who was looking after the pieces in her collection rather than its 'owner': 'I believe that I am their custodian, here to enjoy them, to give them the best treatment in the world, to watch after their safety, and to love them'. Elizabeth was well aware that jewelry is only ever a 'temporary gift', saying: 'Nobody ever owns anything this beautiful. We are only the guardians.'

Her relationship with Richard Burton marked a new stage in Elizabeth Taylor's career, as they appeared together in a large number of productions, but none achieved critical acclaim except for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? Many were still box-office successes though, as the public desire to see the couple together seemed inexhaustible. Taylor made other films with different leading men and excellent directors, but all were commercial failures. It seemed her career had reached a plateau; she was still a star, but only with Burton.



Enjoying tea and cake, a fresh-faced young Elizabeth Taylor looks innnocently radiant in her pink dressing room



LEFT 1957. With her husband Mike Todd, and Debbie Reynolds who was at the time married to Eddie Fisher. Following Todd's death in a plane crash, Fisher divorced Reynolds and married Taylor

OPPOSITE:
TOP LEFT Elizabeth Taylor married Conrad 'Nicky' HIlton in 1950, aged just 18
TOP RIGHT At home with Mike Todd
BOTTOM LEFT With Eddie Fisher and sons
BOTTOM RIGHT Taylor and Burton

The marriage was a passionate one, but fuelled by drinking and fraught with fierce arguments about Burton's alcoholism and infidelities. Elizabeth finally left him, but her announcement of their separation shocked him; he wrote to her repeatedly, declaring his love and devotion to her.

> 'I love you, lovely woman. If anybody hurts you, just send me a line saying something like "Need" or "Necessary" or just the one magic word "Elizabeth", and I will be there somewhat faster than sound.'
>
> 'You must know, of course, how much I love you. You must know, of course, how badly I treat you. But the fundamental and most vicious, swinish, murderous and unchangeable fact is that we totally misunderstand each other. You are as distant as Venus - planet, I mean - and I am tone deaf to the music of the spheres. I love you and I always will. Come back to me as soon as you can.'

Burton's remorse tormented him ceaselessly, but Elizabeth did not reply to his letters and in 1974 they divorced in a Swiss Court. Elizabeth stated that 'life with Richard had become intolerable'. However, despite each entering into new relationships, when they met again in the summer of 1975 to discuss their settlement they realized that they love each other still. Both healthier, happier, and seeming stronger, they remarried again on October 10, 1975 in Botswana. But although Burton had been through a detox program for his problems with alcohol, Elizabeth was still drinking; within weeks of their second marriage, Richard would begin drinking again as well. Not much time passed before they had returned to their alcohol-fuelled rage-and-make-up sessions, and by January 1976 they were sleeping in separate bedrooms. After just five months of their second marriage, Burton left Taylor, furious and humiliated, for another woman. Their second and final divorce was granted in July 1976.















Taylor in one of her extraordinary evening gowns, tightly laced to accentuate her tiny waist







Sun-drenched glamour on set in Italy

The next man to sweep Elizabeth Taylor of her feet was 50-year-old John Warner, a former US naval secretary from Virginia who became Republican Senator. After the tumult of her love for Richard Burton, Warner seemed a safe pair of hands, with his Southern charm and important public role. They married in 1976, making this Elizabeth's seventh marriage, and for a time Elizabeth found politics and the role of Senator's wife fascinating. Her public profile made her an enormous asset in terms of publicity and fundraising, and she played the role perfectly for a time – perhaps imagining herself as a Jackie-Kennedy-type figure. But Warner was a workaholic and Taylor had to admit that the life of a Washington Widow was not for her. Eventually the campaigning and the loneliness became too much for her, her weight ballooning in a physical manifestation of her dissatisfaction. The marriage ended in 1982.

Elizabeth was reunited with Richard Burton, professionally at least, for a revival of Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, which toured the USA the following year. She received poor reviews for her performance and the play ran for only 63 performances. Finally realizing she had to deal with some of her demons, a depressed Taylor checked into the Betty Ford Clinic to confront her addictions to alcohol and prescription painkillers.

In 1984, aged 58, Richard Burton died suddenly from a massive brain haemorrhage. His family refused to invite Elizabeth to the funeral, fearing the media frenzy that would accompany her. Days after his death, a letter from Richard arrived at Elizabeth's home. Written just a few days before he died, in the letter Burton declared that he had been happiest with her, that he wanted to 'come home' to her, and asked whether there could be another chance for them to be together. Elizabeth kept this



On the set of the adaptation of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, a play originally written for radio. With Peter Cooke and Richard Burton. Elizabeth played the part of Rosie Probert

ultimate love letter close for 27 years, and, in accordance with her dying wish, it was buried with her.

In 1985, Elizabeth's old friend and ex-co-star Rock Hudson was diagnosed with AIDS and it was announced that he was dying. Elizabeth had already taken an interest in charities raising money for the fight against AIDS, but the tragedy of losing her friend spurred her on to even greater efforts to raise awareness of and funds to research the disease. At a time when there was still an enormous amount of fear, bigotry and prejudice about AIDS, Taylor made it her mission to support and promote AIDS fundraising. Understanding both how the media works, and also the power of celebrity, she used her influence and public profile to promote interest in and support for the fight against AIDS. In September 1985 she became Founding National Chairman of amfAR (The American Foundation for AIDS Research) and established The Elizabeth Taylor HIV/AIDS Foundation in 1991. As education about the epidemic improved, increasing numbers of celebrities began to lend the weight of their public profiles to fundraising events, Elizabeth could be more selective about the events that she attended. It was estimated that her appearance at a fundraiser would bring in ten times more money than one without her.

By the late 1980s, Taylor was again struggling to control her use of prescription drugs to deal with the constant pain from old injuries and illnesses. The height of her addiction saw her consulting with three different doctors at the same time, none knowing about each other and each prescribing her strong medication. In December of 1988 she entered the Betty Ford Clinic a second time. When she emerged, it was with a new friend – Larry Fortensky, a construction worker and carpenter from





Southern California. Despite the unlikely nature of the match they became a couple, based in no small part on their mutual commitment to sobriety and in October 1989 Larry moved into Elizabeth's Bel Air estate. In 1991, the pair married at Neverland Ranch in a ceremony hosted by Elizabeth's close friend Michael Jackson.

Media interest was enormous – some guests couldn't hear anything of the ceremony because of the swarm of helicopters overhead – and Elizabeth sold photographs of the event to magazines and newspapers around the world to raise money for her Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation. But Fortenksy was never really comfortable in the showbiz world, whereas Elizabeth had never known any other kind of life. By 1996 Taylor had filed for divorce, and her eighth marriage was over.

Taylor showed herself for the survivor she was, enduring brain surgery in February of 1997 to remove a tumour, which was pronounced benign following the operation. She emerged into the public eye just six days later. She continued her fundraising work, and by the turn of the century, Elizabeth Taylor had raised $120million for the fight against AIDS through her fundraising efforts. In 2000, this queen of Hollywood's royalty was honoured in the UK with the title of Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and in 2001 she received the Presidential Citizens Award for her humanitarian work.

Having suffered another bout of pneumonia, in 2000, Elizabeth went straight back to work, this time starring in the 56th film of her career *These Old Broads*. Her co-stars were Shirley MacLaine, Joan Collins, and her former romantic rival Debbie Reynolds.

Taylor's health continued to deteriorate, and in 2004 she developed scoliosis and congestive heart failure, leaving her dependent on a wheelchair. In February of 2001, Taylor was admitted to Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre in LA, as further symptoms of congestive heart failure developed. After six weeks she died, aged 79 and surrounded by her four children, on March 23. Buried in a private Jewish ceremony at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in California, her funeral was delayed by 15 minutes at her request, so that 'she could even be late to her own funeral' as her publicist explained it to the media.

Adored by millions around the world, Elizabeth Taylor's talent, intelligence, charm, wit, tremendous sense of fun and passion for life were legendary, as of course was her beauty. In the words of director Austin



Sharing a cigarette with David Bowie; this was the first time the two met

Pendleton: 'There was something about her beauty that included you rather than excluding you, which isn't always the case with extraordinarily beautiful people.' She was an inspirational figure, surviving personal loss and heartbreak, severe health problems and significant physical pain. Throughout it all, her iconic celebrity status never waned and for decades her face adorned countless magazine covers around the world. As her son Michael Wilding put it, she was 'a tremendous woman who lived life to the fullest, with great passion, humour and love.'

Idolized as a goddess of the silver screen, her very public private life was both turbulent and thrilling. Married eight times, to seven different husbands, no one would deny that Elizabeth Taylor adored romance and longed for love, a soulmate, a home, and children. She knew that companionship, respect and affection



LEFT Taylor in the 1980s, when she began her groundbreaking work to promote the importance of AIDS research and fundraising

must not be taken for granted, and, rather than valuing marriage too lightly, in fact went further than most in search of true love. She even converted to Judaism for her marriages to Fisher and Todd, and of course married Richard Burton twice.

When Elizabeth Taylor was asked why she got married eight times to seven different men, she replied, 'I don't know, honey. It sure beats the hell out of me.' Launched into the world of Hollywood-style romance when she as a young teenager, Taylor herself admitted it was an odd way to learn about the emotions and feelings of a grown-up. 'I suppose I learned about love the wrong way,' she said in a letter to Donald Zec In April of 1952. Attempting to explain the failure of her marriages to Richard Burton, Taylor poignantly declared, 'Perhaps we loved each other too much.'

Taylor's overwhelming commitment to the people she loved and her urge to protect and nurture meant she was much more than her work on stage and screen; a movie-star since the age of twelve, Elizabeth had lived almost her whole life in front of the cameras. One of Hollywood's last great stars, she lived her life from the age of 12 in the spotlight. She was one of the most-photographed celebrities in the world, appearing on countless magazine covers (including *Esquire*, *Life*, *TV Movie Screen*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Vanity Fair*) throughout her career.

Her acting career was packed with memorable roles, spanning 1942-2001, from *There's One Born Every Minute* to *These Old Broads*. Her filmography is testament to her versatility as an actress, as are her two Academy Awards (for *Butterfeld 8* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) and the further three for which she was nominated as Best Actress. She was *Velvet Brown*, *Cleopatra*, *Rosie Probert*, *Maggie the Cat* and *Katharina*, but above and beyond everything she was herself.





RIGHT Glamorous and shimmering, this studio portrait shot from 1953 shows Taylor smouldering in a red halterneck bedecked with sequins and diamonds