

# TheaterWeek<sup>TM</sup>

July 24, 1989

\$2.00/\$3.00 Outside NYC

A black and white close-up portrait of Laurence Olivier, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored shirt, and a dark tie.

**Laurence  
Olivier  
1907-1989**


# Laurence Olivier



**1907—1989**

**Chronology** *compiled by Gerard Raymond*

Angus McBean



Opposite: Laurence  
Olivier in *Henry V*,  
1937. This page:  
Olivier in *As You Like  
It*, 1936.

**L** Laurence Olivier at his best is what everyone has always meant by the phrase "a great actor." He holds all the cards; and in acting the court cards consist of: **A.** Complete physical relaxation, **B.** Powerful physical magnetism, **C.** Commanding eyes that are visible at the back of the gallery, **D.** A commanding voice that is audible *without effort* at the back of the gallery, **E.** Superb timing, which includes the capacity to make verse swing, **F.** *Chutzpah*—the untranslatable Jewish word that means cool nerve and outrageous effrontery combined, and **G.** The ability to communicate a sense of danger. Watching Olivier, you feel that at any moment he may do something unpredictable, something explosive, possibly apocalyptic, anyway unnerving in its emotional nakedness; the lion's paw may lash out. There is nothing bland about this man. He is complex, moody and turbulent; deep in his temperament there runs a vein of rage that his affable public mask cannot wholly conceal.

—Kenneth Tynan

- 1907** Born 22 May.  
**1924** First appearance on London stage in *Byron*.  
**1929** Title role in *Beau Geste*.  
 First films: *The Temporary Widow*, *Murder for Sale*, *Too Many Crooks*.  
**1930** Marries Jill Esmond.  
 Noel Coward's *Private Lives* (Victor Pryne).  
**1931** *Private Lives*, New York.  
**1933** *The Green Bay Tree*, (Julian Dulcimer) New York 1935.  
*Romeo and Juliet* London. Alternates the parts of Romeo and Mercutio with John Gielgud. Directed by Gielgud.

I was very busy enunciating all the poetry very beautifully, but I was very cold aesthetically compared with him. And I was struck then, as we all have been since, by his extraordinary power and originality, and the way he dashes with a part, and really wrings its neck without self-consciousness or worrying whether he's attractive or good or bad, or what. He's a great performer without caring, you feel, what is said. He doesn't act with the sort of caution and fear that some of the rest of us have.

—John Gielgud

- 1936** Film: *As you Like It* with Elisabeth Bergner (Orlando).  
**1937** Title role in *Hamlet* at the Old Vic directed by Tyrone Guthrie.  
 Film: *Divorce of Lady X* with Merle Oberon.  
**1939** Film *Wuthering Heights*, (Heathcliff) with Merle Oberon  
 Directed by William Wyler.

The narrative of the great novel was truncated, and the Cathy of Merle Oberon transported the Brontë landscape into suburbia. But an actor was there, an actor one had never seen on the screen before. The embers took fire; light blazed; with delighted astonishment one saw a new Olivier.

—Dilys Powell

—film critic

It was Wyler who gave me the simple thought—if you do it right, you can do anything.

—Laurence Olivier

- 1939** Film: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, (Maxim de Winter) with Joan Fontaine.  
**1940** Marriage to Jill Esmond dissolved.  
 Marries Vivien Leigh.  
 Film *Pride and Prejudice*, (Darcy) with Greer Garson.  
**1941** Film *Lady Hamilton*, (Nelson) with Vivien Leigh.  
**1943-**  
**1944** Film: Produces, directs and plays title role in *Henry V*, (wins Honorary Academy Award).

Olivier has been underrated as a film director. For my money, Larry as a stage director was as good as a professional could be. But he had little personality, no "handwriting." In his films though, the handwriting was plain to see. That he could have made *Henry V* from a standing start as his first film is astonishing. It is comparable with Orson Welles's achievement in doing *Citizen Kane*. The way *Henry V* was shot, the composition, the rhythm of editing, the use of music—it is all very personal, quite extraordinary and altogether revolutionary.

—Peter Hall

- 1944** Appointed co-director with Ralph Richardson and John Burrell of Old Vic Theatre,

London.

Title role in *Richard III*.

- 1945** Directs Vivien Leigh in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.  
 Double Bill: Title role in *Oedipus Rex* and Mr. Puff in *The Critic*.

*Oedipus Rex*: The thick intolerant voice syncopated perfectly with the lithe, jungle movements of the man; intellectually and physically he was equipped for the heaviest suffering: his shoulders could bear disaster. I know that from the first I was waiting breathlessly for the time when the rack would move into the final notch, and the lyric cry would be released: but I never hoped for so vast an anguish. Olivier's famous "Oh! Oh!" when the full catalogue of his sin is unfolded must still be resounding in some high recess of the New Theater's dome: some stick of wood must still, I feel be throbbing from it. The two cries were torn from beyond tears or shame or guilt: they came from the stomach, with all the ecstatic grief and fright of a newborn baby's wail. The point is not whether these crazy sobs were "tricks" or whether or not they were necessary to the part: the point is that they were overwhelming experiences, and that no other actor in England could have carried them off.

—Kenneth Tynan

- 1947** Receives knighthood.  
 Film: Produces, directs and plays title role in *Hamlet*, (wins Academy Awards for Best Actor and Best Film).  
**1949** Directs Vivien Leigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.  
**1951** *Caesar and Cleopatra*, (Caesar) with Vivien Leigh. *Antony and Cleopatra*, (Antony) with Vivien Leigh.  
**1954** Film: Produces, directs and plays title role in *Richard III*.  
**1955** Title role in *Macbeth* at Stratford.  
 Title role in *Titus Andronicus* directed by Peter Brook.  
**1956** Film: Produces, directs and plays title role in *The Prince and the Showgirl* with Marilyn Monroe.  
**1957** *The Entertainer*, (Archie Rice) at the Royal Court.

At that time I had reached a stage in my life that I was getting profoundly



Laurence Olivier and Viven Leigh in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, 1951.

***Gielgud: "He doesn't act with the caution  
and fear that some of the rest of us have."***

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**Olivier's acting "is an anthology of everything that has been discovered about acting in the last three centuries. It's grand and majestic, but it's also modern and realistic."  
—Franco Zeffirelli**



Angus McBean



Angus McBean

Counter-clockwise from left: Sir Laurence Olivier as the Chorus in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, 1949; Olivier with Tilda Swinton in *War Requiem*, 1988; as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, 1955; with Vivien Leigh in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1940; with Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca*, 1940.



sick of—not just tired—sick. Consequently the public were, likely enough, beginning to agree with me. . . . I was going mad, desperately searching for something fresh and thrilling and exciting. What I felt to be my image was boring me to death. . . . And now suddenly this miracle was happening. I began to feel already the promise of a new, vitally changed, entirely unfamiliar *Me*. In many ways it showed the worst side of me, and that felt good too: something like a confession, a welcome beneficial expulsion of filth. I could feel in this opportunity a great sea-change, trans-

forming me into something strange. I felt, in fact, that I was starting a new life. We all pray for that constantly, and here, with *The Entertainer*, I could sense it already within my grasp.

—*Laurence Olivier*

It was then that he began to turn away from a trivial, voguish theater slanted to please the upper class, and entered the mainstream of his country's theatrical evolution. . . . at the point of vanishing as an artist, he drew himself up and miraculously fought for his maturity.

—*Arthur Miller*

**1959** Title role in *Coriolanus*, at Stratford directed by Peter Hall.

Olivier leapt lightly over the sexual frontiers and suggested that inside the ruggedly arrogant Roman general lurked an element of girlish shyness. Good actors exist securely inside a mono-sexual world. Great performers—an Olivier, a Garbo, a Dietrich, a Chaplin—are often flecked by sexual ambiguity. They embrace opposites and in that way exert a magnetic hold over us: as Henry James pointed out, one test of a great player is that you instantly start to speculate about his or her private personality.

—*Michael Billington*  
drama critic  
*The Guardian*

**1960** Title role in *Becket* with Anthony Quinn, New York. Marriage to Vivien Leigh dissolved.

**1961** Marries Joan Plowright. Appointed first director of Chichester Festival Theatre.

**1962** Appointed first director of the National Theatre 1963. National Theatre opens at the Old Vic. Directs Peter O'Toole in *Hamlet*.

**1964** Title role in *Othello*, with Maggie Smith.

I was told that this was the last flourish of the romantic tradition of acting. It's nothing of the sort. It's an anthology of everything that has been discovered about acting in the last three centuries. It's grand and majestic, but it's also modern and realistic. I would call it a lesson for us all.

—*Franco Zeffirelli*

**1966** *The Dance of Death*, (Edgar).

**1969** Directs and plays in *The Three Sisters*.

**1970** *The Merchant of Venice*, (Shylock). Directed by Jonathan Miller.

**1971** *Long Day's Journey into Night*, (James Tyrone).

**1972** Film: *Sleuth*, with Michael Caine.

On about the third day of rehearsal he came in and he had a moustache, which was how he played him, and said "Got

**"6000 LAUGHS!"**  
—Joel Siegel, WABC-TV

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Olivier as *King Lear*, Mobil Showcase, 1983.

him!" and the performance suddenly took off. . . . He said. "I'm not like you, you can act as yourself, I can never act as myself. I have to have a pillow up my jumper, a false nose, or a moustache or a wig; I can't do it, I cannot come on looking like me and be someone else like you can." It was amazing, the transformation. If you saw the moustache on the table you would crush it thinking it was a caterpillar or something. Suddenly it changed this man into this extraordinary character.

—Michael Caine

**1973** Resigns as director of the National Theatre.

*Saturday, Sunday, Monday*, (Antonio) Directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

*The Party*, (John Tagg). Directed by John Dexter; last stage appearance.

TV: *Love Among the Ruins*, with Katherine Hepburn (Emmy Award Best Actor).

**1976** Films: *The Seven Percent Solution*, (Professor Moriarty). *Marathon Man*, (Dr. Szell) with Dustin Hoffman

TV: Co-produces and plays Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Granada TV).

**1978** Films: *The Betsy*, (Loren Hardeman Sr.). *The Boys From Brazil*, (Ezra Lieberman). Special Academy Award.

**1979** Films: *Dracula*, (Professor Van Helsing).

**1980** TV: *Brideshead Revisited*, (Lord Marchmain).

**1982** Published memoirs: *Confessions of an Actor*.

**1983** TV: Title role in *King Lear*.

myself, in both age and experience.

—Laurence Olivier

**1985** Films: *The Jigsaw Man*, *Wild Geese II*.

**1986** TV: *Lost Empires*, (Harry Burard); last television role.

Stage: *Time*, (Akash) in the form of a hologram.

Published *Olivier on Acting*.

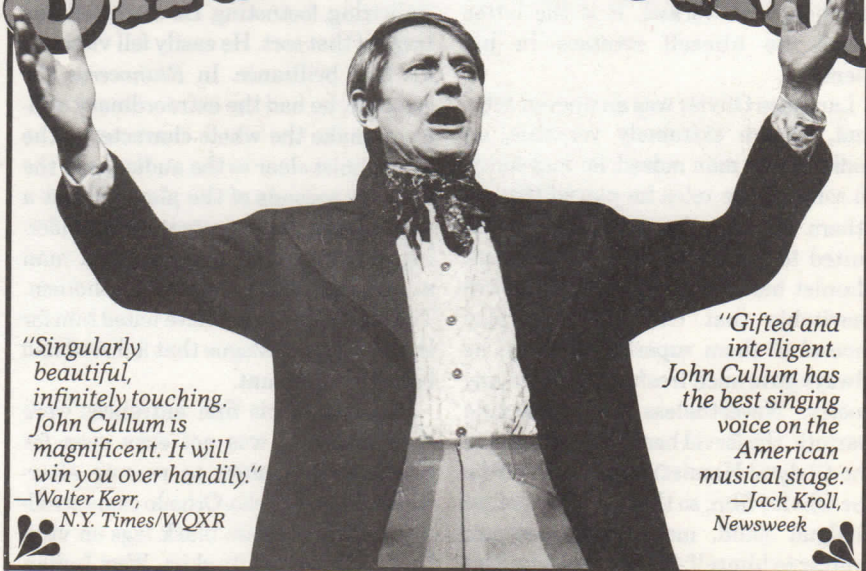
**1988** Film: Derek Jarman's *War Requiem*.

You know, when you get to my age, you are Lear, in every nerve of your body. . . . Here I am, at the very end of

Sir Laurence Olivier, died on July 11, 1989, at the age of 82. □

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