



Vivien: The Life of Vivien Leigh

Alexander Walker

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“My birth sign is Scorpio and they eat themselves up and burn themselves out. I swing between happiness and misery. I am part prude and part non-conformist. I say what I think and I don’t pretend and I am prepared to accept the consequences of my actions.”—Vivien Leigh

When Vivien Leigh died in 1967, headlines around the world proclaimed, “Scarlett O’Hara is Dead!” Perhaps more than any of her contemporaries, Vivien Leigh became the very embodiment of the roles she made famous, from *Gone With the Wind*’s immortal heroine to her harrowing portrayal of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Vivien’s beauty, determination, and enormous charisma were her triumph, whether it was a matter of charming George Bernard Shaw in order to become his personal choice for the part of Scarlett—or winning the then-married Laurence Olivier as her husband. Her twenty-years’ partnership with Olivier, both onstage and off, made them the “royal couple” of the theater, and garnered unparalleled critical and popular acclaim.

But the achievement had its darker side, for Vivien became so immersed in her roles that she began to take on their characteristics in real life—often at enormous cost: playing Blanche DuBois actually “tipped her into madness”; and while filming *Ship of Fools*, she found herself hammering co-star Lee Marvin’s face with very real—and painful—blows of her spiked heel. The public glamour of her fairy tale marriage to Olivier—so desperately important to them both—hid a private nightmare of violence and frequent infidelity. She was consumed by devastating battles against tuberculosis, to which she finally succumbed, and manic-depression, which she sought to keep at bay through a voracious sexual appetite, having affair after affair—sometimes serious, as with Peter Finch, sometimes with whichever taxi driver happened to bring her home.

Based on previously unpublished interviews with her friends, family, and colleagues, as well as with Vivien Leigh herself, *Vivien* is an extraordinary picture of a unique and complex woman, as willful as she was beautiful, who knew what she wanted—whether the coveted role of Scarlett or that, equally coveted, of Lady Olivier—and got it. With its telling anecdotes, fascinating insights, and unforgettable glimpses into Hollywood’s heyday, it is sure to stand as the definitive portrait of one of the most talented and tormented actresses of all time.

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