



Elizabeth Taylor Incomparable, Unrepentant, and Always Intriguing

You can say this about Elizabeth Taylor: After 8 marriages and about 25 surgeries, including a hysterectomy, tracheotomy, double hip replacement, and removal of a brain tumor, she still retains her wicked sense of humor. "I feel like 45," she said last year as she celebrated her 70th birthday. "I don't look too bad for someone my age, with my history of illnesses and operations and all those anesthetics. When they knock you out, it gives you time to catch up on your beauty sleep." **BY MARJORIE ROSEN**

The many husbands of Elizabeth Taylor

(first column, top to bottom):

Nicky Hilton (m. 1950)

Michael Wilding (m. 1952)

Michael Todd (m. 1957)

Eddie Fisher (m. 1959)

(second column, top to bottom)

Richard Burton (m. 1964 and 1975)

John Warner (m. 1976)

Larry Fortensky (m. 1991)



Celebrity Dossier

NAME: Elizabeth Rosemonde Taylor

DATE OF BIRTH: February 27, 1932

PLACE OF BIRTH: London, England

PARENTS: Sara, a former actress, and Francis, an art dealer

MARITAL STATUS: Single after eight marriages

CHILDREN: Two sons, two daughters

FYI: Taylor has been a very successful businesswoman with her popular perfumes, named White Diamonds, Gardenia, and Elizabeth Taylor's Passion. Her fragrances earn an estimated \$200 million a year.

Even so, today at 71, Taylor bears the scars of the high living and hard drinking that marked her glory days. Sometimes it's hard to reconcile the reclusive and slightly ditsy blond who appeared on *Larry King Live* last February with the exquisite creature once regarded as the world's most beautiful woman. Back then, no one was as breathtaking as the raven-tressed screen goddess of *Ivanhoe* (1952), *A Place in the Sun* (1951), or *Giant* (1956). And no one led a life more full of love scandals, physical and mental breakdowns, and assorted tragedies. No wonder she was the first actress to earn a million dollars a picture.

Laurence Mark, who executive produced her last TV movie, *These Old Broads*, in 2001, believes that Taylor's aura still exists. "The one thing Elizabeth will never lose is those violet eyes," he says. "She will always be beautiful. It starts with the eyes and goes from there."

Yet these days the actress is hardly concerned about her looks or her next role. She considers herself retired from the movies and devotes herself primarily to raising money for AIDS, the illness that killed her good friend Rock Hudson. "I've put aside everything else and I have dedicated my life to working for AIDS," she told Larry King. Last September, coinciding with the publication of her book, *Elizabeth Taylor: My Love Affair with Jewelry*, she held an auction for The Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation, donating an emerald and diamond Bulgari ring that Richard Burton gave her as an engagement present in 1962; it brought in \$80,000, and the benefit, \$258,000. Taylor, in 1985, also co-founded The American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), and has helped raise more than \$200 million for amfAR alone.

"Her AIDS work has been more impor-



With Rock Hudson, who became a close friend, in *Giant* (1956)



Taylor and granddaughter Naomi Wilding at an amfAR benefit, 2000



The actress and her children on the set of 1963's *Cleopatra*—the film that famously brought her together with Richard Burton



Gorgeous even as a child; with mother Sara and brother Howard; the family moved from London to America just before World War II



Surrounded by sons Michael and Christopher and their wives, and daughters Maria and Liza, after being made a Dame of the British Empire, 2000

tant than acting to her, much more," insists screenwriter Gavin Lambert, who adapted the screenplay for Taylor's 1989 TV production of Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*. "She always had that very generous side. I know that Rock's death touched her a great deal." In addition, Lambert points out, "Elizabeth had quite a lot of talent, but she didn't work at it. She didn't really care about acting, I think. It was something she simply *did*."

Elizabeth Rosemonde Taylor doubtless can barely remember a time when she *didn't* act. Born on February 27, 1932, in London, she was 7 when her American-born parents, Sara Sothorn, a former actress, and Francis Taylor, an art gallery owner, decided to take her and her older brother Howard home to America just months before World War II broke out. The family settled in Los Angeles, and it was perhaps inevitable that the beautiful child with the violet eyes and double row of black lashes would soon be discovered.

At first, the youthful MGM contract player was cast in small roles in *Lassie Come Home* (1943), *Jane Eyre* (1944), and *The White Cliffs of Dover* (1944). Then, at age 11, Elizabeth won the plum assignment of *National Velvet*, playing a spunky girl who, disguised as a boy, rode her wild horse to victory in an English steeplechase. *Velvet* made her a star.

Although Elizabeth attended school on the studio lot with such classmates as Jane Powell, Margaret O'Brien, and Roddy McDowall, her girlhood was lonely—she would do her homework, then take her horse out and ride until she was exhausted.

National Velvet made her an expert rider, but a bad spill from her horse jammed together two vertebrae in Taylor's back and inadvertently launched her accident-prone life. "If she opens a beer can, she cuts herself," said her friend, Richard Brooks, her director on *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1954) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). "If there is a chair in the middle of the set, she falls over it while talking over her shoulder to someone."

If that's true, Taylor is surely the world's most breathtaking klutz. She was so lush-looking that at 16, she was cast romantically opposite Robert Taylor in *Conspirator* (1949). By 19, she was steaming up the screen opposite Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun*. Her voice may have been a bit tinny, but already she understood the camera and the subtleties of screen acting. Yet in real life, the actress was naive, dependent, and chomping at the bit to break away

Marital Roll Call

Elizabeth Taylor's matrimonial history is such an integral part of the pop culture that placing several of her husbands in order was once a "fastest finger" test on the quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Rarely one to stay single for long, Taylor said her wedding vows with Mike Todd within days of her divorce from Michael Wilding and became Mrs. Richard Burton shortly after her divorce from Eddie Fisher. Would she ever want Husband No. 9? Taylor told TV talk show host Larry King in 2001 that she would not marry again—but wouldn't rule out living with a man if he had a great sense of humor. Here are Elizabeth's Eight:

- 1. Conrad ("Nicky") Hilton Jr:** Married May 6, 1950; divorced February 1, 1951. The heir to the Hilton hotel fortune was not at all hospitable to his 18-year-old bride—he turned out to be abusive and short-tempered, and the marriage was short-lived.
- 2. Michael Wilding:** Married February 21, 1952; divorced January 30, 1957. The debonair British actor was 20 years her senior. They had sons Michael Jr. and Christopher before Taylor, who was ambivalent about Wilding from the start, was wooed away by Michael Todd.
- 3. Michael Todd:** Married February 2, 1957; widowed March 22, 1958. The film producer, born Avrom Hirsch Goldbogen, was one of Taylor's two true loves and father of her daughter Liza. Taylor was ill or would have been with her husband on his private plane when it crashed and he was killed.
- 4. Eddie Fisher:** Married May 12, 1959; divorced March 6, 1964. The popular singer had been Todd's best friend, and the devastated widow turned to him for comfort. Leaving the perky girl-next-door actress Debbie Reynolds and their two small children for Liz severely damaged the crooner's career.
- 5. & 6. Richard Burton:** Married March 15, 1964; divorced June 26, 1974. Remarried October 10, 1975; divorced August 1, 1976. Despite their many explosive battles, Burton was the other love of Taylor's life. He died on August 5, 1984.
- 7. John W. Warner:** Married December 4, 1976; divorced November 7, 1982. Having met Warner on a blind date, Taylor campaigned for her husband and helped him win the U.S. Senate seat from Virginia. The politician wasn't being politically correct when he once referred to his heavy-set wife as "my little heifer."
- 8. Larry Fortensky:** Married October 6, 1991; divorced October 31, 1996. Taylor met the 20-years-younger construction worker while both were in rehab, and held the wedding at the Neverland ranch of her close friend Michael Jackson. Few expected their union to last as long as it did.

from her strict mother. Enter Nicky Hilton, the handsome hotel heir. In May of 1950—ironically, days before the premiere of *Father of the Bride*—they wed.

The marriage barely outlasted the three-month European honeymoon. Hilton repeatedly beat his teenage bride and ignored her. Her happily-ever-after dreams shattered, Taylor suffered a nervous collapse and was hospitalized. Thus began a dramatic stress-related pattern that would plague her throughout her life.

Even so, Taylor wasted no time bouncing back and finding Husband Number 2, the dapper British actor Michael Wilding, 20 years her senior. They wed in 1952 and in short order she gave birth to their sons, Michael, now 50, and Christopher, 48. But soon she grew restless. In 1956, Mike Todd, the high-living showman who was producing the star-studded movie *Around the World in 80 Days*, invited the Wildings for a yachting weekend and followed it up by courting Taylor with gifts like a \$30,000 pearl ring and a

\$92,000, 29.4 carat diamond ring. She was hooked. She dumped Wilding and in 1957 became Mrs. Mike Todd. Todd spoiled his already-spoiled, unpunctual, and messy wife. But 13 months later, he died when his private plane, *Lucky Liz*, crashed into a mountain. He left behind a desolate, near-suicidal widow and their 6-month-old daughter, Liza.

Seeking comfort in the arms of Eddie Fisher, the boyish crooner who was Todd's closest friend, Taylor was labeled a Jezebel for breaking up his fan-magazine-perfect marriage to perky actress Debbie Reynolds. When the gossip columnist Hedda Hopper asked Taylor what Todd would think, she reportedly retorted, "What do you expect me to do? Sleep alone?"

Taylor married Fisher in 1959, after she converted to Judaism. But like his predecessors, he would soon become expendable ("I don't even want to mention his name," Taylor said recently). First, however, Fisher saw her back from death's door after an emergency tracheotomy and a life-threatening



At age 12 in 1944, already on the road to fame and stardom



Glowing in 1950, the year she married for the first time



The two-time Oscar winner looking every inch the film legend in 1989

bout with pneumonia. (Her near-death experience restored her to Hollywood's good graces and helped win her an Oscar for *Butterfield 8*, a movie she detested.) He also gifted Taylor with jewels and accompanied her to Rome, where she had agreed to play the title role in *Cleopatra*. "If someone's dumb enough to offer me a million dollars to make a picture," she said, "I'm certainly not dumb enough to turn it down."

Cleopatra would change Taylor's life forever. For that was where, in 1961, she met her match in Richard Burton, the brilliant, hard-drinking Welsh actor and ladies' man who was to play Marc Antony. Their romance made the Eddie-Debbie scandal seem like a high-school flirtation, with the international paparazzi doggedly hounding them and turning all Rome into an international circus. "I've had affairs before," Burton observed, "but how did I know the woman was so f*****g famous? She knocks Khrushchev off the bloody front page."

True, the world had never seen anything like it. The headlines, including Taylor's rumored suicide attempt and the global fascination with her every move, signified not just that she was an unrepentant temptress, but a star of unparalleled fame. The Vatican City weekly newspaper even denounced Taylor for "erotic vagrancy."

No matter. Against all odds, Taylor and Burton's flame burnt brightly. On March 15, 1964, the couple, having finally shed their respective spouses, married in Montreal. "He is the ocean," she said. "He is the sunset."

During their tumultuous years together, they co-starred in 11 movies. Most, like *The V.I.P.s* (1963), *The Sandpiper* (1965), and *Boom!* (1968), were awful, and one was good—*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), which won Taylor her second Best Actress Oscar. Offscreen, the Burtons, often traveling with her brood of dogs and kids (including Maria, a German orphan with a malformed hip—later corrected by surgery—whom she had adopted), indulged their lavish tastes. In what Taylor had come to consider husbandly fashion, Burton, too, showered her with baubles like the Krupp diamond, the \$900,000 Shah Jahan yellow diamond, and the famed La Peregrina pearl.

"I remember seeing Elizabeth and Richard occasionally," says Gavin Lambert, "and I thought they were going to hell in a hand basket together. They were living it up too desperately. Let's face it, they both

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ELIZABETH TAYLOR: A BRIEF FILMOGRAPHY



National Velvet (1944)



Butterfield 8 (1960)



Cleopatra (1963)



Giant (1956) with James Dean



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958)



A Place in the Sun (1951) with Montgomery Clift



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966) with Richard Burton



These Old Brides (2001) with Debbie Reynolds, Shirley MacLaine, and Joan Collins

Liz Taylor from page 73

became drunks. There was something glamorous and doomed about them."

By 1973 the profligate pair had pleased their marriage to death. Their careers now in shambles, they divorced, remarried each other once, and divorced again. "I think we loved almost too hard," she admitted. "I think you become so much in the other person's pocket, in their mind, in their soul that you begin to lose your own identity."

Burton was by now wracked with ill health and in 1976 wed again. Four months later, Taylor married Richard Nixon's former Secretary of the Navy, John Warner, and helped

him win a Senate seat. But as a Washington wife, Taylor grew hugely fat with discontent and left Warner in 1982. The following year she and Burton appeared together on Broadway in a critically savaged version of Noël Coward's *Private Lives*. In 1984, at age 59, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. On hearing the news, Taylor collapsed.

In the following decades, she was plagued by her own health problems—viral pneumonia, a fall aggravating an old hip injury, two hip replacements (one was botched and redone), skin cancer, a brain tumor, and addictions to alcohol and pills. As she once observed, "I've been through it all, baby, I'm Mother Courage."

Then Taylor again did the unexpected. In 1988, during a second stint at the Betty Ford Center at the insistence of her children, she met, and later married, a much younger construction worker named Larry Fortensky. It was a touching bid for happiness, but their differences were unbridgeable. Worse, Fortensky developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder and was unable to leave the house. "And our marriage completely fragmented," she said.

These days Taylor has trouble walking unassisted. Still, she continues to devote

herself to AIDS. And after 60 years in the public eye, she is finally receiving the humanitarian recognition she deserves. Last December she was a Kennedy Center Honoree, and in 2000 Queen Elizabeth made her a Dame of the British Empire, the female equivalent of a knighthood. "You can call me Dame Elizabeth," Taylor cracked. "I've been a broad all my life. Now I'm a dame."

If life has gotten progressively more difficult for Dame Elizabeth Taylor Hilton Wilding Todd Fisher Burton Burton Warner Fortensky, she would never admit it. "I have no plan to succumb," she has insisted. "I am a survivor." ●

MARJORIE ROSEN IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS MAGAZINE.