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Dark Star: A Biography of Vivien Leigh, by Alan Strachan. I.B. Tauris, 2019, 354 pp.

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John Gielgud once wrote to Vivien Leigh, just as she commenced her career on stage and screen, to observe that her striking beauty might "always be more hindrance than help to your acting. Almost incidentally either it blinds the critical faculty or produces a perverse determination to pick holes" (Strachan xviii). His warning would prove prescient: it is Leigh's beauty—regarded as exotic and, with the knowledge of her mental and physical health problems, "fragile"—that still frames much of the biographical and critical discussion of her performances and of her stardom.

The title of Alan Strachan's new biography of Leigh, *Dark Star*, calls to mind Leatrice Gilbert Fountain's 1985 study of her father, the silent film actor John Gilbert. In *Dark Star: The Untold Story of the Meteoric Rise and Fall of Legendary Silent Screen Star John Gilbert*, Fountain employed a rise-and-fall narrative to chart how a once-luminous career was cast into darkness by the combined forces of Industry machinations and Gilbert's own battles with alcoholism and depression. For many biographers, the narrative of the fallen or forgotten star, or the actor chewed up and spit out by Hollywood, is an irresistible one, containing as it does a classical structure, with a healthy dollop of pathos added to the mix. Though Strachan's title seems to promise another entry into the actor-as-tragic-victim genre, he is at pains to construct a narrative of Leigh's life that offers due consideration of her strengths, as both an actor and an independent woman. As such, he departs from a number of previous biographies, such as Anne Edwards' portrait of Leigh as a troubled woman who was more "sinned against than sinning", and Alexander Walker's 1987 biography in which her acting skills are frequently compared to Laurence Olivier's and exposed as somehow lacking. Strachan himself cites another biography, that written by Hugo Vickers, as being the most successful entry in the Leigh industry, but argues that the new availability of previously unseen material in her archive, deposited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, warrants a fresh consideration of her life and career.

Strachan ably charts her restless movement between theatre and film, and between England and America. The sense of displacement—of Leigh's search for security but also for adventure and for encounters with new people—underpins his account and perhaps mirrors the actress' own origins as a child of the British Empire. Leigh was born in 1913, in Darjeeling, India, to Ernest and Gertrude Hartley, who had left England to pursue business interests on the subcontinent. She retained faint memories of her birthplace—recollections of vivid colours and pungent smells—but the case for her as having been "formed" by India is slight: her time there was brief and she was soon dispatched back to England, and later France and Germany to pursue her (Catholic) education. Strachan argues that Leigh's cosmopolitan attitude, the interest she had in other people—for their own sake rather than merely as raw material for shaping a theatre or film performance—had its origins in this fractured and restless childhood.

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Certainly, it was innate curiosity, and a susceptibility to extremes of emotions, that compelled her to pursue acting as an outlet. Her chosen profession soon became a passionate vocation, one that yielded much pleasure and personal satisfaction, at a time when social roles for women of her class were rather limited (and limiting). Strachan makes a credible case for Leigh as an artist, driven by an overwhelming need to express herself, even if it came at a cost to herself—she often neglected her health—and those around her. Like many creative artists, Leigh was charming and charismatic, but also self-absorbed and prone to callousness in her dealings with those that were most devoted to her (notably, her decent-but-staid first husband, Leigh Holman; her daughter Suzanne; and her partner in later life, Jack Merivale). Strachan resists the temptation to condemn Leigh's less attractive behaviour, to construct her as some sort of monstrous walking ego, but he never avoids noting the impact it had on others: his biography is both a portrait of the artist and of those that are left behind on the path to self-fulfilment. However, as he explains, while some of Leigh's behaviour stemmed from her professional and personal ambition to secure roles (and Olivier), much of it was caused by her bipolar condition and the inadequate treatment she received.

It seems inevitable that any biography of Leigh will place Laurence Olivier at its centre, a fact that Strachan acknowledges. Happily, he brings Olivier in only to consider how the dynamics of their relationship affected Leigh. For the most part, the wearying tendency to portray Leigh as perpetually deferential to the sometimes petty and always insecure Olivier — memorably described by Katharine Hepburn as a "Great actor. Small man"—is avoided (306). This is in the face of Leigh's own attitude, which tended to support critical appraisals that proclaimed Olivier the "greatest actor" of his generation (a title the actor himself readily accepted), and play down her own achievements. Strachan quotes a caution that Joan Plowright received from a friend, after she had revealed that she was involved with the still-married Olivier but had hopes to marry him: "marry him if you must. But don't act with him too often or he will destroy you" (146). It was a warning from which Leigh might have profited: over the course of their long relationship their genuine passion for each other and for their craft encouraged them to collaborate, to build up a professional partnership that would be the English equivalent of Broadway's Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, but it was almost always Leigh that would be regarded as the supporting player or "just" a visually pleasing presence. Though reviewers were generally respectful, even deferential, their discussion of her performances usually commented on her beauty or expressed some surprise that she had "held her own" opposite her husband. Few went as far as critic Kenneth Tynan, who waged a campaign of viciousness and condescension against Leigh, which was apparently prompted by his revulsion at the thought that she might "taint" (or overshadow) the glorious presence of his hero, Olivier. Particularly damaging were the snide references he made to her ageing—of her performance on stage as Cleopatra he remarked that the 39-year-old Leigh had "already reached the height of her powers"—and his vindictive dismissal of an otherwise acclaimed performance as Lady Macbeth at Stratford in 1955 (257). As Strachan delineates, Tynan's astonishingly vitriolic campaign against her, coupled with her own masochistic sense that she could never be Olivier's equal (nor should she try), did much to undermine Leigh's sense of herself as an artist and as a woman.

And yet, as Strachan points out, there was much that should have made her proud of her achievements. Olivier may have been more acclaimed, but in truth his acting prowess was mainly confined to theatre performances: as a film actor his work is decidedly mixed. It is all too easy to suggest that Olivier's indifference to the film medium, which he regarded as an inferior art form, was the reason for indifferent work, but the truth is more complex. As Strachan recounts, Olivier's disdain was shaped by his early experience in Hollywood, when

he was fired from *Queen Christina* by MGM (at Garbo's request) and was humiliated further when he learned that David O. Selznick was far more interested in signing Jill Esmond, Olivier's first wife, than in developing him as a star. Olivier's initial encounters with Hollywood, but more broadly with the film medium, then, were negative and it took him some time to make his peace and shape his skills to better suit film acting. Leigh had the same insecurities but she had, at least in these early years, a more flexible conception of herself as an actor, coupled with a humble willingness to understand, and respect, the medium of film. As Strachan discusses, even in her minor film work she seems at ease in front of the camera and adept at conveying some sense of an inner life of the most banal of characters. In the best of her performances, her skilful technique—pared down/reactive facial expressions, small gestures, fluid body movements—marry with a seeming natural spontaneity. Impressive, too, was her willingness to thoroughly immerse herself in, and *inhabit*, her roles: her two most famous characters, Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and Blanche Du Bois in *A Streetcar named Desire* (in Elia Kazan's 1951 production), may be cited as irrefutable proof that Leigh was selfless in her commitment to using her craft to sculpt complex, credible and unforgettable characters, rather than as a mere vehicle to enhance her stardom or prop up her ego.

Overall, Strachan's biography is informative and paints a generally sympathetic portrait of a woman that in many respects was before her time. Strachan draws from already published accounts to chart Leigh's concerted campaign to win the role of the decade, that of Scarlett O'Hara, but makes what is probably the most effective use of the information by any Leigh biographer. In revealing just how dogged she was in her canvassing for the role, how deeply she identified with Margaret Mitchell's heroine, and how she held her resolve in the face of Olivier's attempts to undermine, Strachan points to what he sees as her greatest virtues: her resilience and her courage. In doing so, he offers the reader a more nuanced (and less clichéd) portrait of a leading creative force of both stage and screen. Strachan's book, then, is to be commended, but there are some regrettable instances of typos and factual errors, as well as a tendency to construct overly convoluted sentences and to employ unnecessarily florid prose. To list a few examples: George Cukor is credited as the director of the Garbo version of *Anna Karenina* and its release year is given as 1938—neither is correct; Claude Rains is listed as "Claud"; and William K. Howard's *The Power and the Glory,* featuring Spencer Tracy and generally regarded as a precursor to Welles' *Citizen Kane,* is here listed as *The Heart of the Matter* (perhaps revealing that the author's mind might have been on Graham Greene, although Howard's film has nothing to do with that novelist's 1940 work). Idiosyncrasies of style include rather "chummy" turn-of-phrases (at one point he records that the Oliviers are "squiffy on port"); a penchant for animal metaphors (Leigh's intelligence is "monkey-quick" (xix); Olivier has "pantherine vigour" (xxii); and the actor John Buckmaster is "as clever as a box of ferrets" (36)) and some sentences that in their convolution test the reader's patience (for instance, in a reference to Oliver Messel's production design for a 1937 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Strachan writes that it featured "a ravishing Victorian-style setting incorporating a corps of flying fairies choreographed by Ninette de Valois on little more than the usual skimpy Old Vic budget, designs that were talked of for years, creating an entrancing vision of Athens framed in an elaborately decorated proscenium with the forest scenes a romantic world of gauzes painted with oversized calyxes of orchidaceous blooms and exotic giant bell flowers" (61).

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