

**IN
CHARACTER:**

**LAURENCE
OLIVIER
and
VIVIEN
LEIGH**
1937-1973



**An exhibition curated by
History of Art MA students
4 May to Autumn 2018**

In Character: Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, 1937 - 1973

Introduction

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were amongst the biggest names in British theatre and film in the twentieth century. After meeting in 1937, the couple began a passionate love affair which resulted in a marriage that spanned two decades. During and after marriage they continued to have successful careers on stage and screen collaborating together on many productions, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949), *The School for Scandal* (1949) and *Macbeth* (1955). While their acting made the duo's roles iconic, the costumes designed for them to wear on stage further consolidated their illustrious theatrical stature.

The University of Bristol Theatre Collection holds a fascinating array of objects related to Olivier and Leigh, which reveal the relationship between actor, character, and costume, as well as the close relationships they shared with costume designers. Through a display of photographs, illustrations, and costume pieces, we see the inventiveness and skill behind the illuminating designs which bridge the gap between actor and character. With the help of designers such as Oliver Messel, Cecil Beaton, Doris Zinkeisen and Julia Trevelyan Oman, Olivier and Leigh completed their transformations to become 'in character'.

Biographies

Laurence Olivier (1907 - 1989) is perhaps the best-known stage actor of the twentieth century. He began his West End acting career in the 1930s and by the end of the decade he had established himself as a star of both stage and screen. He had tremendous range and was celebrated for his portrayals of classic roles such as Hamlet and Richard III, and for his less conventional roles, such as sleazy vaudeville comedian, Archie Rice, in *The Entertainer* (1957). In the 1940s he began co-directing at the London Old Vic Company and was instrumental in establishing the reputation of this renowned company. In his film career he directed as well as acted, and won accolades including Academy Awards, Emmy Awards and Golden Globes. He was knighted in 1947.

Vivien Leigh (1913 - 1967) is best known for her iconic portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress. However most of her career was spent performing on stage. She became an overnight success when she was featured in the 1935 West End production of *The Mask of Virtue*, a play which would ignite her career as a film actress in both Britain and Hollywood. She later starred in a film adaptation of *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946) and both a stage and film adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949 and 1951) for which she won her second Academy Award. She also performed in countless classic Shakespeare productions such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Titania, London Old Vic, 1937), *Titus Andronicus* (Lavinia, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955) and *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955).

***Arms and the Man* (New Theatre, London, 1944)**

1. Jacket worn by Laurence Olivier as Sergius Saranoff

Doris Zinkeisen

1944

EJE/CO/3

The somewhat gaudy, gold and white design of this jacket serves as both a caricature of military style and as a complement to the brazen character of its wearer, Sergius Saranoff. The jacket was conceived by stage designer Doris Zinkeisen (1898-1991) for Olivier's portrayal of Saranoff in a London Old Vic Company production of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. Zinkeisen's design, which also included a 'flowing cloak, vivid cerise trousers, and embarrassing spurs', enhanced Olivier's interpretation of the incompetent Bulgarian cavalry officer. In the photo-feature at 2., Olivier can be seen wearing the jacket across one shoulder.

2. Production Photographs for *Arms and the Man*

Theatre World photo-feature

John Vickers

1944

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/39

Portrait Photograph of Laurence Olivier as Sergius Saranoff

John Vickers [?]

1944

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/39

Here, Olivier can be seen in character as Sergius Saranoff, grinning wildly beneath his comically curled mustache and tilted white fur cap. A review of this production praised Olivier's portrayal of Saranoff, proclaiming that the actor was 'prepared throughout the evening to play the fool with glorious abandon.'

***A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London Old Vic Theatre,
1937)**

3. Costume Design 'Bible' for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Compiled by Helen Sharp

1937

OV/M/232

The inventiveness of costume designer Oliver Messel (1904 -1978) can be seen in this scrapbook belonging to the wardrobe dresser Helen Sharp. The book is open on a description of materials used to create the dress designed for Leigh as Titania. These include velvet and tinsel which can be seen in detail in the photograph of Leigh (OVP/39/4) also on display. Sharp's book includes numerous pages of elaborate designs, each with their own colourful textile swatches which can be seen when the book is viewed from the side.

4. Portrait Photograph of Vivien Leigh as Titania

J.W. Debenham

1937

OVP/39/4

***Caesar and Cleopatra* (Film, 1946)**

5. Headdress worn by Vivien Leigh as Cleopatra

Oliver Messel

1945

OHM/1/4/2/39

The opulent headdress seen here was worn by Vivien Leigh in the 1946 film adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, strict rationing and shop closures in Britain meant that many costume materials were not readily available. The elaborate construction of this headdress in fact comprises inexpensive mediums that includes tissue paper, cellophane, foil, wire and tinsel, and is a strong indication of Oliver Messel's and his assistant's (designer Hugh Skillen) attention to detail and ingenuity as costumiers.

***A Streetcar Named Desire* (Aldwych Theatre, 1949)**

6. Programme (above case)

1949

MM/REF/TH/LO/ALD/14

The open pages of this programme show the cast of *A Streetcar Named Desire* attired in costumes designed by Beatrice Dawson. At the request of director Laurence Olivier, and in contrast to the original Broadway production, the character of Blanche DuBois was to be dressed in comparatively provocative garments. For instance, he chose to have Leigh attired in a red satin kimono in certain scenes, as Tennessee Williams's original script suggests. This choice may be one reason that many critics were scandalized by the performance, calling the character a 'nymphomaniac' and a 'prostitute'. The production was even condemned by the Public Morality Council.

7. Leather Handbag

Beatrice Dawson

1949

2011/008

This simple leather handbag was used by Leigh in her role as Blanche DuBois in the 1949 London production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* directed by Olivier. The handbag can be seen clutched in Leigh's slender hands in the adjacent black and white production photograph. Although the item dates from the late 1940s, it may be that the bag was deliberately chosen by designer Beatrice Dawson (1908 – 1976) due to its worn appearance, intended to reflect DuBois' destitution. Leigh would later star, alongside Marlon Brando and Kim Hunter, in the 1951 film adaptation of the play, which won four Academy Awards.

8. Production Photograph of Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois

Angus McBean

1949

MM/REF/TH/LO/ALD/14

9. Programme for *A Streetcar Named Desire*

1949

MM/REF/TH/LO/ALD/14

***The Entertainer* (Royal Court Theatre, 1957)**

10. Plays and Players cover featuring Laurence Olivier as Archie Rice (above case)

Anthony Armstrong Jones [?]

1957

MM/REF/TH/LO/RCT/32

11. Programme for *The Entertainer*

1957

MM/REF/TH/LO/RCT/32

12. Archie Rice's Gloves worn by Laurence Olivier

Clare Jeffery

1957

TCO/C/1

These petite white gloves were worn by Olivier whilst portraying the character of Archie Rice, a third-rate Variety comic, in playwright John Osborne's *The Entertainer*. While little has been written regarding the works of costumier Clare Jeffery (dates unknown), her design for Archie Rice - which includes bowler hat, bow tie and white gloves - remains an iconic aspect of the production.

13. Production Photograph of Laurence Olivier as Archie Rice

P.A. Reuter

1957

MM/REF/TH/LO/RCT/32

***The School for Scandal* (New Theatre, 1949)**

14. Cover of *Illustrated* featuring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh as Sir Peter and Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal* (above case)

1949

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/49

This publicity image depicts Olivier and Leigh in the 1949 London Old Vic Company production of Richard B. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*. Leigh's printed open robe dress and Olivier's bright blue coat were conceived by celebrated costume designer and photographer Cecil Beaton (1904 - 1980). In the pursuit of historical accuracy for this comedic commentary on late eighteenth century high society, Beaton's inspiration was the work of painter Thomas Gainsborough (1727 - 1788). The press celebrated these costume choices, but Beaton's decorative flair upset his relationship with Olivier. As director, Olivier was unhappy that some reviewed the production as 'overdressed and underacted'.

15. to 16. Production Photographs of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh as Sir Peter and Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal* London Old Vic Company Australian Tour

John Vickers

1949

OVP/11/6

17. Copy of *The School for Scandal* featuring design for Lady Teazle by Cecil Beaton

Published by the London Folio Society

1949

YQ S552

***Duel of Angels* (Apollo Theatre, 1958)**

18. to 19. Production Photographs featuring Vivien Leigh as Paola in *Duel of Angels* (translated by Christopher Fry from Jean Giraudoux's original *Pour Lucrèce*)

Angus McBean

1958

MM/REF/TH/LO/APO/24

Costumes for this production were produced by the fashion house of Christian Dior (1905 - 1957), a highly influential designer of the period. Leigh, dressed in scarlet, played Paola, a character who embodies feminine passion. In contrast Claire Bloom, who wore white, played Lucile, a character representing purity. The dresses reflect the fashion of 1868, the time in which the play is set, as well as Dior's groundbreaking New Look style made popular in the 1950s. Both styles can be characterized by opulence, tiny waists, and full skirts. However, one of the featured design elements, the box pleated skirt, is unmistakably characteristic of the 1950s.

20. Programmes for *Duel of Angels*

1958

MM/REF/TH/LO/APO/24

21. Ticket Stub from a performance of *Duel of Angels* at the Apollo Theatre on 19 May 1958

1958

MM/REF/TH/LO/APO/24

***Hamlet* (Kronborg Castle, Denmark, 1937)**

22. Photograph of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh as Hamlet and Ophelia

Angus McBean

1937

OVP/39/2

The photograph depicts Olivier as Hamlet wearing a black velvet court-suit and Leigh as Ophelia wearing the velvet dress described at item 24, both designed by Thomas Osborne Robinson (1904 - 1976). In 1937 Olivier and Leigh were invited by the Danish government to take part in a production of *Hamlet* to be staged at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore, presumed to be the actual setting for Shakespeare's tragic play.

23. The Old Vic Costume 'Bible' for *Hamlet*

Compiled by Helen Sharp

1936 - 1937

OVP/M/233

Assembled by Helen Sharp, this costume inventory includes details of the dress worn by Leigh as Ophelia in the 1937 Danish production of *Hamlet* and records how the garment was later restyled to suit a subsequent version of the play. The book contains a complete inventory of costumes owned by the London Old Vic Company from 1936-1937.

24. Portrait Photograph of Vivien Leigh as Ophelia

Angus McBean

1937

OVP/39/2

25. *Play Pictorial* Cover of Laurence Olivier as Hamlet (above case)

Angus McBean

1937

MM/REF/TH/LO/OLV/34

Richard III (New Theatre, 1944/1949)

26. Laurence Olivier in costume as Richard III

John Vickers

1944

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/39

Olivier's approach to acting was to start first with the exterior details, before working inwards to explore a character's psychology. This photograph of Olivier as Richard III illustrates how his make-up and costume helped him to create this character. Here, Olivier is presented as the ruthless and evil king, character traits that are suggested through his beak-like nose, inflated tunic, and shaded gaze.

27. Production Photograph of Laurence Olivier as Richard III

John Vickers

1944

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/39

This embroidered velvet tunic worn by Olivier is based on the typical dress of a Royal Duke of the period. Both the tunic and the background curtain include a pattern featuring the coat of arms of Richard III. By echoing these details in both costume and interior the designer is trying to suggest the King's pursuit of power.

28. Colour Photograph of Laurence Olivier as Richard III

John Vickers

1944

MM/REF/TH/LO/NEW/39

29. Programme for *Richard III*

1949

OVP/10/7-8

30. Production Photographs of Vivien Leigh as Lady Anne in *Richard III*

John Vickers

1949

OVP/11/5/1

Here, Leigh is depicted wearing a Hennin headdress, the name for a tall and pointed cone-like cap, usually made from buckram and covered with thin silk. This style of headdress was introduced during the reign of Edward IV. It was worn by Leigh in the London Old Vic's 1949 touring production of *Richard III*. The costumes were designed by Doris Zinkeisen (1898 - 1991) and demonstrate her fidelity to historical accuracy within her work.

***Macbeth* (Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955)**

31. Costume Sketch for Vivien Leigh as Lady Macbeth

Roger Kemble Furse

1955

MM/REF/PE/AC/LO/1

32. Portrait of Vivien Leigh as Lady Macbeth

Angus McBean

1955

OVP/CA/213/3

33. Programme for *Macbeth*

1955

MM/REF/TH/RE/60

34. Costume Sketch for Laurence Olivier as Macbeth

Roger Kemble Furse

1955

Photograph of original design

MM/REF/PE/AC/LO/1

This design is for Olivier's costume as Macbeth in the 1955 production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The sketches portray a medieval-inspired look and reflect the character's nationality with the inclusion of a sporran - a purse traditionally worn over kilts in Scotland. Leigh also performed in the production, portraying Lady Macbeth. Costume designer and art director Roger Kemble Furse often collaborated with Olivier, winning two Oscars - for costume design and set decoration - in the 1948 film version of *Hamlet*.

35. Portrait of Laurence Olivier as Macbeth

Angus McBean

1955

MM/REF/PE/AC/LO/1

***The Merchant of Venice* (The National Theatre, 1970)**

36. Correspondence between Laurence Olivier and Julia Trevelyan Oman

1970

JTO/296, JTO/016/012/02

The letter on display expresses Olivier's gratitude to the costume designer Julia Trevelyan Oman (1930 - 2003) and opens with the following: 'As we play our last performance of *The Merchant*, we look with such loving gratitude at our surroundings.'

On the card, Olivier thanks her for the 'great lustre which your lovely working is giving us', referring to her costumes for *The Merchant of Venice*. Olivier was deeply invested in his on-stage appearance and built close relationships with many of the designers he worked with, sometimes sharing ideas about costumes and characters with them.

37. Polaroid Headshots of Laurence Olivier for *The Merchant of Venice*

Julia Trevelyan Oman (for reference for the character Shylock)

1970

JTO/016/015

38. Costume Design and Fabric List for Laurence Olivier as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (on side wall)

Julia Trevelyan Oman

1970

JTO/016/041

This intricate costume design for the character of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* emphasises Julia Trevelyan Oman's exquisite eye for detail. She often gave extra attention to the invisible details

such as buttons and socks in order to create an authentic experience for both actors and audience. For this production, Trevelyan Oman found her inspiration from a visit to Venice – she believed that physical immersion in the actual location in which a story was set would inspire her to revive the history.

39. Screen Images

Vivien Leigh preparing for her role as Ophelia in *Hamlet*,
Elsinore, Denmark, 1937 (OVP/39/2).

Holiday photograph of Vivien Leigh and friends at Sandy Bay
beach, from the personal photo album of playwright John Perry,
summer, 1943 (JP/1).

Holiday photograph of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in a pool,
from the personal photo album of playwright John Perry,
c.1940s (JP/1).

Vivien Leigh with pet cat, Durham Cottage, Chelsea, c.1945 (MM/
REF/PE/AC/1168).

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh on board a Pan American
Airways flight, c.1950s (OVP/39/24/26).

Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh alighting in America, c.1950s
(MM/REF/PE/AC/1168).

Cover photograph: Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh as Sir Peter and Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal*, London Old Vic, 1949.
Photographer: John Vickers.

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