
Vivien Leigh, actress and icon: introduction

Kate Dorney and Maggie B. Gale

This volume of essays has been generated as a response to the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2013 acquisition of twentieth-century actress Vivien Leigh's personal archive made up of, amongst other things: letters, scripts, photographs, personal documents, bills, speeches, appointment diaries, lists of luggage contents for tours and even lists of domestic items for repair. Among the tasks this introductory chapter undertakes is to outline the ways in which the archive has been constructed – which elements were put together by Leigh's mother and daughter, how the archive was and has since been arranged – and what the constructed nature of this evidence might tell us about the curation of Leigh's life and legacy.¹ Many of the essays in this volume have made use of materials from the archive, as well as drawing on other related collections such as the Laurence Olivier archive at the British Library and the Jack Merivale papers at the British Film Institute. These materials have been used in combination with contemporary approaches to theatre historiography, feminist biography and screen and celebrity studies with the specific aim of providing new readings of Leigh as an actress and public figure.

Vivien Leigh: Actress and Icon explores the frameworks within which Leigh's work has been analysed to date. We are interested in how she, and others, shaped and projected her public persona, and constructions of her personal and domestic life, as well as looking at the ways in which she approached the craft of acting for stage and screen. One of the few mid twentieth-century actresses who successfully and serially moved between stage and screen, picking up two Oscars and a Tony award on her way, Leigh's work deserves closer attention than it has hitherto received. Contributors draw on, and will hopefully add to, the growing body of work in feminist theatre historiography recovering

and reconsidering the role of women in performance histories more generally. In doing so we are following Tracy C. Davis's suggestion that to create a feminist theatre historiography we must connect 'the woman to the work and the work with the world at large' (Davis, 1989: 66–69). Davis's chapter appeared a year after the last major biography of Leigh was published, a biography, like so many other treatments of Leigh, in which the focus on the work was somewhat lost among the discussions of her personal life. Celebrity always assumes its subjects are atypical in the world rather than formed by it, and extant accounts of Leigh are no exception. Our aim in this volume is to both interrogate and thicken those accounts.

Vivien Leigh: a brief biography

Born in India in 1913, the daughter of affluent British middle-class and somewhat distant parents, Vivien Leigh was deposited at a Catholic boarding school in Roehampton at the age of 7. She was visited on average once every year by her mother Gertrude, invariably accompanied by Tommy, their 'family friend' (John Lambert Thomson), rather than Leigh's father Ernest, who remained a distant figure in her life (Vickers, 1990 [1988]: 13).² After training briefly at RADA, married and a mother at 20, with less than half a dozen years of stage and film work under her belt, Leigh shot to fame as Scarlett O'Hara in David O. Selznick's 1939 *Gone With The Wind*, winning an Oscar and a generation of avid fans globally, but especially in the US and at home in the UK.³

As her career progressed, and despite her 'star' status as a film actress, she was more frequently noted for the supposed inadequacies of her talent as a stage performer in comparison to her second husband Laurence Olivier. While fans sometimes questioned her choice of roles – and wrote to her concerned that she was doing herself a disservice by taking on professional engagements with socially 'deviant' or uncomfortably sexual roles such as Blanche DuBois – they rarely critiqued her playing of such roles with the vitriol of some professional critics.⁴ For the new *enfant terrible* of British theatre criticism in the 1950s, Kenneth Tynan – whose middle name of 'Peacock' rather suited his style of theatre criticism and the manner in which he inserted himself into the theatre clique he so disapproved of – Olivier was the theatrical genius, and Leigh the demanding, and largely incapable, beauty, riding on the wave of her husband's success and benefitting from his superior knowledge of stage technique. In reality, Leigh was the 'star' commodity in the deeply patriarchal, financially driven world of film, while Olivier struggled to win the same level of acclaim and global

fan base from his film work until much later in his career. Leigh was also ‘out of time’ as an actress, moving into film not long after ‘talkies’ replaced silent movies and after a relatively short stage career. She battled with Selznick’s studio over parts, refusing to leave England during the Second World War (1939–1945), and became embroiled in legal battles over her employment choices. Selznick wanted his own way and so did she: their mutually beneficial position, however, was usually to maintain a harmonious public profile.⁵ Of her generation of actresses, she was unusual in her insistence on continuing and building her stage career after Hollywood success: she continued to move between stage and screen throughout her career, from her early 20s to her early 50s. While other actors such as Bette Davis and David Niven famously fell out with their studios over roles and being contracted out to other studios, Leigh usually won her battles over casting. Although she was sometimes disappointed not to be cast opposite Olivier on screen – for example in *Rebecca*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Henry V* – she rarely took on screen roles she thought unsuitable.⁶ This meant, however, that for most of the 1940s she was embroiled in battles with the studios; as Charles Drazin points out, it was largely a contract that ‘governed Vivien Leigh’s career’ (Drazin, 2011 [2002]: 262).

Professional marriage: a business affair

Her private and professional relationship with Olivier saw them dubbed as ‘theatre royalty’ and they certainly seem to have been as frequently photographed, interviewed and written about as the Queen and Prince Philip. The Oliviers had something to sell: films, stage performances, good causes, goods (through their advertising contracts), so living their lives in public was part of the deal. They were *professional* partners as well as domestic ones: a perspective on their relationship that is often lost in the retelling of the love affair that burned out. That narrative depicts them gradually falling out of love because of Leigh’s health issues, which needed active consideration and prevented Olivier from focusing on his own career, and so he drifted away. They had become lovers in the mid to late 1930s, while still married to Jill Esmond and Leigh Holman respectively. Their colleagues all knew they were having an affair – Leigh had surprisingly followed Olivier and Esmond on a holiday to Capri as early as 1936.⁷ During her year working on *Gone With The Wind* they sent each other cryptic, romantic telegrams using pseudonyms and writing short but ardent messages.⁸ Their divorces and subsequent marriage were carefully staged, with studio intervention: divorce was still socially outlawed and only available to a minority, and adultery was frowned upon. Not long after their marriage and

return to England, they were separated by war, hampered by Leigh's illness and beholden to the implications of both of their demanding ambitions for stage work.

Numerous biographers frame their relationship almost entirely in terms of Leigh being beholden to Olivier's professional superiority as an actor (see Jesse Lasky Jr and Pat Silver, 1978). Some of the more 'racy' biographers suggest that Olivier's bisexuality drove them apart or that Leigh herself was promiscuous (see Porter and Moseley, 2011). Their film partnership ended early in the 1940s: she was under contract to Selznick but wanted to be near Olivier – now conscripted – in Europe, and Korda, to whom Leigh was 'lent' by Selznick's studio, didn't cast them together after *That Hamilton Woman* (1941). Somehow they had less marketability as a film partnership than Leigh would have liked. It is clear that as the 'golden couple' of theatre their personal relationship was fading at the point at which their professional drawing power was at its height in theatre. Olivier claims Leigh told him she no longer loved him as early as 1948 (Olivier, 1982: 131), but they did not divorce until 1960: he had numerous affairs, and opinion is varied as to how much Leigh indulged in extra marital activity. Either way, their professional cachet as a couple far outlived, it would seem, a consistently intimate marital connection.

Extant biographies: re-inscribing Vivien Leigh

So much has been written about Vivien already and so much of it dwells on the so-called 'dark' side of her life that I felt it was time there was some light. I never experienced the 'dark' side of her – except for a glimpse on one or two occasions – and I see no reason why we should continue to concentrate on what, in her case, was a condition caused by actual physical illness. (McBean, 1989: 10)

Leigh's friend and collaborator Angus McBean's response to accounts of the 'dark' side of Leigh was to produce *Vivien Leigh: A Love Affair in Camera*, a fond account of one of his favourite subjects beautifully illustrated by his own photographs. The book was not his first foray into defending Leigh's reputation. A decade earlier he wrote to the *Observer* to express his shock at an article in their magazine publicising Anne Edwards 'unnecessary, unpleasant and, except at the most superficial level, deeply untruthful book'.⁹ He was responding to the magazine's feature on Edward's 1977 biography described as revealing

quite another Vivien Leigh: a wild screaming vixen who suddenly lashed out at people with obscenities, kicks and punches: even at Larry, the man she loved most in the world. The ultra-fastidious convent-trained paragon

of deportment turned into a promiscuous slut, hungry for one-night stands with working class pick-ups. The masterful controlled beauty – rebuked by critics for her ‘artshop daintiness’ – would suddenly begin to strip off in public, or try to throw herself out of trains and aircrafts. The Gainsborough Lady was afraid of going mad.¹⁰

As this offensively sensationalist summary suggests, the book was very different to the respectful volumes that had preceded it and marked the beginning of establishing a new narrative of Leigh. Gwen Robyns’s *Light of a Star* (Robyns, 1968) and Alan Dent’s *Vivien Leigh: A Bouquet* (Dent, 1969) had painted a picture of an ethereal beauty who worked too hard and consequently suffered from nerves, but was also an intelligent woman with a lightning sense of humour. Dent – journalist, scriptwriter and old friend – drew on answers to a ‘set of six questions to a hundred or so of the actress’ best friends and colleagues’ to outline her public and private faces and then used his experience as a theatre and film critic to consider her as a stage and screen actress. The book is the source of many anecdotes about Leigh that appear in subsequent accounts, notably the contributions from Oswald Frewen, a close friend of Leigh and her first husband. Dent’s biography is, as its title suggests, a mixed affair combining unpublished testimony with fillers from critics. He readily admits in the introduction that although he loved her as a friend he was less enthusiastic about her professional accomplishments, and his questions reflect this ambivalence:

1. When did you first see or meet Vivien, and what was your immediate first impression?
2. What were the qualities you most admired in her personality?
3. Did you have any serious quarrels or misunderstandings?
4. How highly did you rate her as an actress (a) for the stage and (b) for the screen?
5. Where would you place her among the most beautiful women of her time?
6. Have you any anecdote or story about her? Or anything else to say of her?

(Dent, 1969: 12)

There are positive responses from Alfred Lunt (who with his wife Lynn Fontanne were the American equivalent of the Oliviers), Michael Redgrave and Rachel Kempson, Athene Seyler, Terence Rattigan, Noël Coward, Isabel Jeans and George Cukor among others. All comment on her star quality and continual efforts to improve her acting. Dent, a journalist like Robyns, also included much cooler accounts from Anthony Quayle and Kenneth More who disapproved of her ambition and self-assurance.

Edwards's book is the start of a series in which each biographer devotes as much space to Olivier as they do to Leigh. The *Observer Magazine* notes that,

to write this workmanlike, sympathetic but superficial biography she has listened to many people very close to Vivien Leigh. Ms Edwards did not get to see Sir Laurence; and she never met Vivien. It shows. Still, her book is indispensable to an understanding of the Olivier myth.¹¹

Ten years after her death, Leigh was already subsumed into the Olivier myth. This was compounded by Garry O'Connor's *Darling of the Gods: One Year in the Lives of Laurence and Olivier* (1984), in which Leigh and Olivier assumed their now familiar and un-nuanced roles. In 1987, to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of Leigh's death, *Evening Standard* film critic Alexander Walker released *Vivien: A Life of Vivien Leigh*. His book paints a picture of a couple for whom the strain of juggling joint and separate careers is added to by the need to make money and maintain a golden image. What emerges is a suggestion that Leigh was a liability after her public breakdown in 1953, that she had to be 'carried' by Olivier, and this becomes embedded in the myth of their imbalanced relationship.

Cecil Beaton's biographer Hugo Vickers had full access to family papers and, as reviewers noted, more sympathy for Leigh. Rachel Billington reviewing his book in 1988 suggests he,

makes less of a tragedy of Vivien Leigh's life – the drinking, the hopeless lack of discipline – than other biographers. He is at pains to establish her education and culture and her practical kindness. He builds up this image through concentrating on her background and her long-lasting friendships. However, he does seem to have achieved this at the expense of a true understanding of her manic urge towards self-destruction [...] Vickers is not keen to show his beautiful and brilliant heroine as a neurotic victim. Yet, finally that is exactly how she appears: victim to a beauty that was always just a bit more evident than her talent.¹²

It is difficult to ignore the underlying agenda that Billington brings to her assessment of this work. Obviously, for her, Vickers's biography is not enough to undo the popular myth – Vivien Leigh as a tragic but beautiful victim – in which she, it would appear, is a strong believer. Kendra Bean's celebration of Leigh marking the centenary of her birth is the first to make use of the Laurence Olivier archive at the British Library, noting:

This previously untapped treasure trove of archival material, which includes everything from personal correspondence between Vivien and Olivier to film contracts, director's notes, interview transcripts, and legal and medical records, sheds new light on these two topics [her mental illness and personal and professional relationship with Olivier]. (Bean, 2013: 14)

Written by a devoted fan without an agenda of negativity, Bean uses the Olivier archive with the express purpose of accruing more evidence of Leigh's professional practice: to open out more dimensions for our readings of her life and work.

Perspectives on Leigh

There are a number of books on Vivien Leigh which collate anecdotes and recollections of her as a colleague and friend or trace her career as a film star and her working and domestic relationship with Laurence Olivier; but there are none which assess the different aspects of Leigh's life and career from a critical perspective. While many biographers approach Leigh with the clear intention of talking about her career, they inevitably end up focusing on her work and personal life as if the two are inevitably the same thing rather than two co-dependent 'lives' entwined. Thus John Russell Taylor, for whom there 'never was, and never has been since, anyone remotely like her on the British stage or the English speaking screen', suggests that the revelations about her mental health should make 'little or no difference to our evaluation of her professional career' (Russell Taylor, 1984: 10). He then, however, moves on to describe her illness as 'disruptive forces in her psyche', which presented some 'cost to her abilities as an actress' (ibid: 81). To some extent he too is caught up in the predicament shared by other critics of Leigh's career: they have to find a balance between being drawn to anecdotes about her ascribed, or predetermined, celebrity, as compared with analysing the evidence of her achieved celebrity. Leigh had a great deal of ascribed celebrity: a form of celebrity status which is less to do with achievement and more to do with existing assets or assigned roles. So her ascribed celebrity was constructed around her dazzling beauty, the publicity generated from her being cast in high-profile screen roles – just being *cast* as Scarlett O'Hara ascribes one celebrity status – and, of course, by her marriage to Olivier. Her *achieved* celebrity is never as clear cut. She can't just be a fabulous stage and screen actress, a box-office draw and have an extraordinary ability to play a range of challenging roles over a career spanning more than thirty years. Instead she has to be 'mad' in performance because she is 'mad' in life, a tragic beauty plagued by a fatal flaw – either ambition or her illness. Thus her achieved celebrity is not just shaped by her professional accomplishments, but also by her social notoriety. McBean and Russell Taylor avoid this trope as far as possible, but it is often lurking in the background (see McBean, 1989). In part this is a problem with historiographical approaches to the analysis of performing women's professional lives more generally: the domestic often ends up being foregrounded over the professional and questions of the

nuanced quality of labour. With Leigh this foregrounding has hardened into an established narrative of her life and one can sense that the few who have written about her work in an evaluative or critical mode – Vickers and Bean might be counted among these – have had to persistently attempt to escape this narrative, structured like a three-act play: Act I: early life and rise to fame; Act II: being famous and married to Olivier – one half of the golden couple of theatre; Act III: tragic decline and early death. This constant over-privileging of life over art is a typical part of what Michael Quinn identifies as the quality of ‘celebrity’:

Celebrity in its usual variety [...] is not composed of acting technique but of personal information. The first requisite for celebrity is public notoriety, which is only sometimes achieved through acting. In the context of this public identity there then comes to exist a link between performer and audience, quite apart from the dramatic character (or in only an oblique relation to stage figure and character). (Quinn, 1990: 156)

As the archives show, Leigh’s connection to her audience was strengthened by their identification with the roles she played and, later, with the struggles she appeared to be having with her health and her marriage. Among the many touching letters written to Leigh and Olivier after news of her breakdown during the filming of *Elephant Walk* in 1953, Sara Dallwin, a ‘young drama student’ from Rotherham, writes to offer her comfort:

Oh Miss Leigh, if you knew how much you are loved – not merely admired or envied, but loved. Here, in this industrial Northern town, where the words ‘theatre’ and ‘drama’ mean nothing to most people, during your illness your name was on almost every tongue, the tongues of men and women who have seen you only on celluloid.

This makes everything ‘the weariness, the fever and the fret’ all worthwhile. For to be loved by thousands, millions of people, not only as an actress, but as a woman, is a blessed thing.¹³

As Kendra Bean’s chapter in this volume investigates, Leigh knew what it was to be a fan and responded generously to her own. But the blurring of actress and woman voiced in Dallwin’s letter was achieved at some cost. Access to Leigh’s veridical or ‘true’ self, her ‘I’ as Chris Rojek, following George Herbert Mead, names it, was either limited or carefully stage managed in terms of press coverage during her lifetime (Rojek, 2001: 10). Her ‘public’ often assumed or treated her ‘me’ – the constructed self presented to the world – and her ‘I’ – her ‘veridical’, true or private self – to be one and the same. Leigh, like many celebrities, is someone for whom both her constructed self and her veridical self have been ‘the site of perpetual public excavation’ (ibid: 19).

Unlike many actresses and performers whose careers began in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, Leigh left no autobiography and never engaged a biographer. It is ironic that while she may not have had any interest in writing such a volume, her letters, speeches and notes indicate that she would have had a commanding, intelligent and acerbically witty authorial voice as the writer of an autobiography. The construction of her auto/biographic narrative thus far has been created without interventions from Leigh herself: although of course one might argue that in keeping so many of her private and professional papers she was effectively 'self-archiving'. Even though we cannot be certain of her role and intention in the gathering and keeping of such materials, the breadth and depth of extant materials, beyond the usual scrapbooks of reviews and interviews, is extraordinary. Her business-like attitude to life is evidenced through her orderly approach to maintaining correspondence and household administration: letters from and to fans, to her employees, friends and professional acquaintances, lists of the contents of luggage, invitations to exhibitions, lists of instructions for household items to be repaired while she is on tour, of clothes and shoes to be sold and so on.

Her life story has also been heavily framed by the auto/biographies of Olivier, and others who worked with her, or encountered her professionally (see Maggie B. Gale's Chapter 4). Auto/biographical reference to iconic professional collaborations often legitimate the career of the writer or the subject of the biography; while they might provide useful insights they are not 'truths'. Outside of her own archive, and apart from numerous and often unsubstantiated screen and theatre anecdotes, Leigh's own voice is largely absent. In Chapter 2 in this volume, Kate Dorney provides an analysis of Leigh's voice as expressed in letters and interviews and the strategies she employed to stage manage her encounters with the press and, through them, the public. She often charmed interviewers, going out of her way to put them at ease because she had a clear understanding of the importance and the nature of the professional exchange that such encounters signify. While at pains to create a pleasant atmosphere in interviews, there is sometimes a quality of defensiveness in her voice caused, in part, by her sense of needing to steer the questioning or defend herself as an artist. Not dissimilar to other actresses of her era – and some would argue that this approach persists even today – interviews are often framed by questions about how she manages motherhood and work, or about how she manages the pace of her work while maintaining her social life, about how she manages the balance between her beauty and the requirements of a part, and whether she 'is' in fact the parts she plays.

Leigh sought out many of the roles she played, not just Scarlett O'Hara or Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Not only did she design and define her career as much as was possible for a woman of her generation, but she was also meticulous in the method and level of preparation she undertook for both stage and film roles. This narrative does not sit comfortably with the popular image of Leigh as an unstable and fragile beauty, the jilted wife of one of the most renowned actors of the twentieth century. A voracious reader, Leigh had her own views of the construction and function of biography expressed here in her review of a biography of Emma Hamilton whom she played on screen:

It is no pleasure to me to add that – but I do feel it strongly [...] the scope of this book seems to me to be out of all proportion to Emma's importance. She lived for another 15 years after this book had done with her [...] this biography, you see, tells only the first half of Emma's story, and my chief contention here is that the book should have told the whole story in *half* the number of words. (Dent, 1969: 124–5)

We might make a similar observation here and suggest that in focusing chiefly on Leigh's personal life, we have only half the story. Or, that half the number of words might be devoted to her life and half to her work. The acquisition of Leigh's archive by the V&A in 2013 was the subject of great press and public interest. Purchased from her daughter, Suzanne Farrington, it includes more than 7,000 letters,



Figure 1.1 Vivien Leigh on tour during the Second World War.

postcards and telegrams, over 2,000 photographs and a number of scrapbooks, annotated scripts, appointment diaries and awards. The collection reveals an astonishing range of correspondents and projects with whom, and with which, Leigh was engaged and offers remarkable insights into the film and theatre worlds in which she moved. Equally, the materials offer a very differently nuanced version of the intersections between Leigh's domestic and professional environments during a career that spanned the early 1930s to the late 1960s. Leigh ran her household with military precision instructing secretaries, housekeepers and maids in the management of her homes, clothes, jewellery and artworks as well as keeping up correspondence with friends and hundreds of fans. The authors who had access to this material, or parts of it (Edwards and Vickers), make little use of this information. Instead they have used the correspondence and interviews with friends and colleagues to add weight to the established narrative of Leigh as a determined and ambitious beauty who was professionally opportunistic, chased after a married man from whose professional shadow she could not extract herself, and suffered from an unmanageable illness. In other words she was a tragic beauty and a ruthless operator.

The press release issued by the V&A announcing the acquisition of the archive stressed the variety of Leigh's correspondents – from T.S. Eliot and Winston Churchill through to schoolgirl fans – and the insights the archive offered on productions like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but very few of the journalists eagerly awaiting the opening of the archive to the public were interested in this.¹⁴ What they wanted to know was what further light the archive might shed the established narrative; on her frequently documented relationship with actor-director Laurence Olivier and on her mental health. Over the next year or so, it became clear that the media were happy with the version of Vivien Leigh that they knew: beautiful and mad, the woman who had risked everything to pursue her career and the man of her dreams. In short, a version of Scarlett O'Hara.

While waiting for the archive to be catalogued and made available, *Mail on Sunday* journalist Chris Hastings marked the centenary of Leigh's birth by publishing an article headlined 'Frankly my dear, you won't be a dame! How Vivien Leigh was snubbed for the ultimate honour ... and why cuckolded husband Laurence Olivier might be to blame'.¹⁵ The article was based around Hastings' discovery in Cabinet Office papers that Leigh had twice been considered for a DBE but deemed only to be worthy of a CBE by the two anonymous reviewers. One suggests: 'Personally I think she is underrated, and see no reason why she should not have a CBE, but certainly not a DBE.': the other declared that although a 'great admirer of her work and acknowledging

that, ‘she has won great public admiration for the courage with which she has in recent years faced illness [...] I doubt whether she is at present quite what may be called “The Dame Class”, e.g. Edith Evans, Sybil Thorndike. I, therefore, venture to express the view that CBE appears to be more appropriate than DBE.’¹⁶ Hastings goes on to suggest that it was her adultery, and, working on a suggestion from Vickers, Olivier’s professional jealousy, that were behind the decision. It is depressing, but not entirely surprising that Leigh was not considered to be in the ‘Dame Class’ in either 1952 or 1954. The actresses she is compared to, Evans and Thorndike, were more than twenty years her senior and had impeccable stage pedigrees untainted by the suspect touch of Hollywood.¹⁷ Of Leigh’s close contemporaries, Peggy Ashcroft, Wendy Hiller and Celia Johnson, only Ashcroft received the honour under the age of 40, and she too was very much a classical stage rather than screen actor at the time.¹⁸ Whatever the reasons for the Cabinet Office’s decision, it is clear that from the point of view of selling papers, the story is ‘Leigh in relation to Olivier’. Once the Vivien Leigh Archive was catalogued and opened to researchers, Hastings was first in the queue to access it and first into press with: ‘From Larry with lust ... Olivier’s X-rated letters to Vivien Leigh seen for the first time’.¹⁹ Billed as ‘a revealing selection of Olivier’s correspondence’, the focus is once again on Olivier and also on re-inscribing the same narrative of grand passion that ends in Leigh’s undignified scramble to keep her prize. The contents of the article were then repeated in articles in the *Guardian* and the *Express* – the old stories, it seems, are still the best.

The archive

Some of the material in the archive clearly forms part of the Suzanne Farrington Papers referred to by Hugo Vickers in his biography, which he described as including the following:

all the letters that Vivien wrote Leigh Holman between 1932 and 1967, the diaries of Vivien’s mother, Gertrude Hartley, from 1920–1972, the letters from friends which Mrs Hartley kept, and the albums of press cuttings and photographs compiled (and frequently annotated) by Mrs Hartley. Amongst these papers were a number of letters written by Vivien to her parents and to her daughter, and similar letters from Laurence Olivier, Leigh Holman, and John Merivale. There were theatre programmes and all the letters of sympathy received by Mrs Hartley at the time of Vivien’s death. (Vickers, 1989: xiii–iv)

The V&A collection does not contain Gertrude Hartley’s diaries nor letters from Leigh to Holman, her parents – although there are some notes and cards from each of them to Leigh – or her daughter. It is

assumed that these, if they still exist, are in private hands. But the letters from Leigh's friends and family are now in the V&A along with letters from Jill Esmond to Olivier and condolence letters to Olivier on Leigh's death, suggesting that when Leigh and Olivier divorced, their papers were never fully separated. This is borne out by the contents of the Olivier archive purchased by the British Library in 2000, which contains letters written by fans to Leigh after her nervous breakdown, and indeed letters from various doctors to Olivier about Leigh's health.²⁰ His archive has been a valuable source of information on Leigh's relationship with fans, the business details of LOP Productions, of which Leigh was an employee, and in evaluating their collaborative endeavours. The vast majority of the letters relating to her health in the Olivier collection appear to be from fans and medical practitioners who have written directly to Olivier about his wife. There is a sense in which the dutiful curatorship of this correspondence was underpinned by whoever kept them originally needing to display Olivier's role as gatekeeper or carer. Some of the correspondence from medical practitioners is very personal with an odd sense of Leigh's behaviour being meticulously dissected in her, especially now, ghostly absence.

Often actors' archives contain a small proportion of correspondence compared to photographs, press cuttings and annotated scripts. Leigh's archive is light on annotated scripts but rich in letters to and from colleagues and friends discussing every aspect of her life. As the chapters in this volume explore, Leigh was an active collaborator in her public presentation whether it be through costume and clothing, domestic decoration, roles, interviews or interaction with fans, and the letters in the archive demonstrate her wit, intelligence and commitment to her work. The archive also stands as testament to qualities often pointed out by her close friends, qualities that Leigh's sister-in-law Dorothy Holman (sister of her first husband Leigh Holman) noted when commenting on the booklet produced after the memorial event at the University of Southern California:²¹

The book is very well done [...] what is missing is how clever she was in ordinary life, lovely little meals, just the present you like, the way she paid attention to people she was with, drew them out. No wonder she had hundreds of friends. (Quoted in Vickers, 1988: 360)

Since that book was produced, the clever, funny, considerate woman has receded to be replaced by the accounts we are familiar with today. Our aim with this volume is to try and restore some of the 'ordinary life' qualities that Dorothy Holman identifies. As Holman notes, Leigh was known to be lively, witty and charming – a prolific giver of thoughtful gifts to her friends and those she loved: her archive is full of letters of instruction to buy opulent gifts and letters of thanks from those who

received them. She took great care to make sure those around her knew she appreciated them, that they were loved. She was intelligent and sociable: she invested in productions of plays, spoke a number of European languages, was musically trained and could dance well. She read voraciously, and had done so since childhood.²² Leigh was a knowledgeable art collector and an accomplished interior decorator (see Hollie Price's Chapter 10).²³

Actresses of an age

One of the pressing realities to which we have returned as editors of this collection, both in the commissioning and editing stages, is that there is very little written about actresses from the mid-twentieth century that attempts to contextualise and critique their professional practices. While there are studies of actresses from the nineteenth century that address technique, development of professional profile, self-fashioning, celebrity, artistic partnerships and so on, this historiographic process has not as yet mapped so well onto academic treatments of actresses and performers working in the twentieth century. Some comprehensive studies of individual actresses have emerged in recent years, such as Margaret Leask's on Lena Ashwell (Leask, 2013) or Helen Grime's work on Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies (Grime, 2013), but these have often struggled with the relationship between individual careers and the critical integration of assessments of historical and contextual materials about women's working lives and the development of professional practice in theatre more generally. There are more studies of popular screen actresses, but these often neglect cross-overs with stage work or indeed necessarily focus on actresses whose work happens almost exclusively in film. Some useful recent approaches to reading screen women's lives offer 'new' readings of the ways in which actresses 'self-fashion' beyond the textually autobiographic: for example Amalie Hastie's work on Colleen Moore and Louise Brookes in *Cupboards of Curiosity* (Hastie, 2007). Biographies tend to focus more on lives – tragic or otherwise – friendship, professional networks and sequences of acting achievements more than they do on questions of labour or ideas of professional practice and, as we suggest here, this is certainly the case with Vivien Leigh's numerous biographies.

Studies of actresses in the twentieth century would be well served, therefore, by a second volume of Tracy C. Davis's *Actresses as Working Women* (Davis, 1991), because of its critical emphasis on the socio-historic and the economic contexts of actresses' labour and working lives. Similarly, the paucity of contemporary academic analyses of the theatre industry in the first half of the twentieth century more generally

has created a vacuum in terms of readings of the commercial sector, and its cross-overs with the more experimental or independent aspects of the industry which have historically received more attention. It should be noted here that both actresses and women playwrights predominantly made a living in the commercial sectors of the theatre industry of the time. In terms of the discipline of theatre and performance studies as a whole, the *works* often receive more attention than the *worker*, the director and the writer more than the performer.

When it comes to different perspectives on actresses working lives in the twentieth century, we have numerous autobiographies which, while some focus on networks, partnership, friendships and domestic life, also offer extraordinary considerations of the working practice of many female performers. The list of these is endless but many offer detailed insights into rehearsal, touring and performance booking, marketing, dealing with the press, with fans, with managements, production as well as offering anecdotes of encounters with professional colleagues and the management of family life (see Gale in Gale and Dorney, 2018). These autobiographic ‘histories’ provide useful ways into understanding the shifts in practice and labour for working actresses. Many were written at turning points in the professional lives of their authors – Gladys Cooper’s *Gladys Cooper* (1931), for example, was written in her early 40s; having reached the end of her management of the Playhouse Theatre in the West End, she was moving towards Broadway and Hollywood.²⁴ Constance Collier, who became a friend of Vivien Leigh’s, wrote *Harlequinade* (1929), in her early 50s, having recovered from a life threatening illness and in the wake of her hit collaborations with Ivor Novello, which began with the stage and screen version of their play *The Rat* (1924 and 1925). It was published just prior to her moving to the US to begin a new career in the film industry. These actresses, however, were from the generation before Leigh. Born in 1913, Leigh’s career moved far more swiftly into film – still in its silent era when Cooper and Collier were predominantly working on stage. Her formal training took place primarily at RADA, although it was not extensive, and her other training took place outside of the framework of a stock company or any extended period working with a particular group of actors, with individuals from whom she sought advice. She moved into film within the first ten years of sound and, in a way, developed her stage work in reverse – after having etched a place for herself in the film industry.

While later in her career Leigh took on the more traditional role of theatrical wife and company manager, or investor in productions,²⁵ her early career maps more onto the fault lines of the historical shifts in practice and employment for actresses in the mid decades of the

twentieth century; this slippage impacts on our understanding of her career. Taking Cooper and Collier as oppositional examples, they etched out later careers in film as 'older' women, having both had their early careers equally bound by their market value as stage or 'postcard' beauties. Less known to American audiences from their early work, both had successful careers from middle age onwards in Hollywood – Collier's was as a mixture of sought-after voice-coach and playing niche roles as the older woman. Cooper also returned to stage work in the UK in her 60s and 70s. Others of their generation, such as Irene Vanbrugh and Sybil Thorndike, for example, did not make such an easy or successful relocation into film.

Leigh's high-profile screen career from the late 1930s was originally composed around two key film producers – Selznick and Alexander Korda – and unusually for an actress in this position, she was to some extent able to use the currency created by her playing of Scarlett O'Hara. Despite the critical hounding from Tynan (see Maggie B. Gale's Chapter 3 and John Stokes' Chapter 4 in this volume), stage productions in which Leigh starred usually did extremely good box office both in the UK and the US: she chose her parts with care, often taking roles she found technically challenging. Her illnesses created a hiatus in her career, as motherhood might have done for other actresses, and the momentum created by her success as Scarlett was punctuated by the Second World War, as were the careers of other actresses of her generation who stayed in the UK. However, Leigh tried to negotiate the type-casting of which she might have become a victim in her 40s, overly conscious of her ageing perhaps because so much had been made of the outshining of her talent by her beauty. When we see photographs of her from the 1950s, after her breakdown and her further bouts of tuberculosis, it is clear that her health conditions and the ensuing medical treatments have aged her prematurely, even taking into account the fact that the appearance of youthfulness was often undermined by the ways in which women beyond 40 were fashioned and photographed compared to today. There were not distinctive fashions for women in mid life: the same clothes might be worn by women from the upper-middle classes in their 40s through to old age. Generally speaking, it was less easy for women in their 40s who had made their names in film rather than on stage, to find 'new' careers beyond being ingénue or lead romantic heroine once they hit middle-age: a frequent complaint of our own contemporary actresses, older women in the mid-twentieth century were not as easily marketable on screen and age was more discernible on screen than on stage.

Some of the actresses of the era in which Leigh was working have left, often in autobiographic form, frequently anecdotally, the kinds of

articulations of professional experience and even theoretical and practical advice on their art and forms of labour as actors. Leigh's ideas on acting, however, are woven throughout her interviews and correspondence as opposed to being written down in one place, as Kate Dorney (Chapter 2) and John Stokes (Chapter 4) explore in this volume. The Leigh archive at the V&A testifies to the manner in which her questions and ideas – about performing, about the many scripts she read and rejected, about her assessments of audience responses – developed and deepened alongside her career. In her correspondence with directors – George Cukor, Glen Byam Shaw, Peter Brook, Elia Kazan – and with actors and writers – Noël Coward, John Gielgud, Ralph and Meriel (Mu) Richardson – and with fans, she explores repeatedly over the years what works, what doesn't and why, on both stage and screen.

Conclusion: 'Riding the crests of waves with grace and skill'

In Dent's *Vivien Leigh: A Bouquet*, actor Brian Aherne gives a wonderful summary of the way in which many of her friends and colleagues viewed Leigh:

we should not grieve for Vivien. As I came into the University this evening, I saw a young man taking a surfboard from a car, and the thought came to me that Vivien had ridden all through life like a brilliant surfrider. All of us who knew her had watched, spellbound, while she rode the crests of the greatest waves with grace and skill, and then, when often happened, she fell off and then disappeared from sight we shook our heads sorrowfully. 'Poor Viv' we said 'She's gone this time!' but no – even as we turned to look, there she was, up again in the sunshine, riding another great comber, as we gasped with astonishment, admiration and relief. (Dent, 1969: 52)

Without wishing to over-extend the metaphor, our intention as commissioning editors has been to try and bring Vivien Leigh 'up again in the sunshine': questioning and challenging the established narrative and inscribing her in a feminist theatre history. Our goal is not to rewrite history and to canonise Leigh in the process, but to look again at the woman in relation to her professional world. To analyse her work on stage and screen, her collaborations with designers and photographers, her fans and her own artistic work with the interiors she created, within which to live and to accommodate and nurture her many and long-lived friendships with her professional colleagues.

The chapters in this volume have been divided into three sections. The first, Re-reading Vivien Leigh, includes two chapters which unpack the complex relationships between our understandings of Leigh's private and public persona, the construction of her mediated self and

her issues with two health conditions which impacted on her work, or at least became part of the rhythm and practice of her working life. In Part II, 'The actress at work', John Stokes (Chapter 4), Lucy Bolton (Chapter 5) and Arnaud Duprat De Montero (Chapter 6), consider Leigh in performance, not just in terms of the reception of her work, but also in terms of her collaborative qualities as a performer. She had continuous working relationships with directors on stage and screen, as well as an impressive range of roles, especially in Shakespeare and in comedy, in addition to her iconic playing of Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche DuBois. Bolton suggests the roles played by Leigh on screen as epitomising a chronology of age and maturity. Stokes and Duprat de Montero assess her work from the perspective of reception: the latter focuses on her, as yet unconsidered, work with French directors, and on her particular reception as an actress and artist with French audiences. In Part III: Constructed identities, Susanna Brown (Chapter 9) and Keith Lodwick (Chapter 8), both curators based at the V&A, navigate us through and around Leigh's relationships with portrait photographers and costume designers in terms of collaboration and self-fashioning. Film scholar Hollie Price theorises the ways in which Vivien Leigh's feel for interior design, her collecting of paintings and antiques, afforded the creation of, sometimes, lavish interiors which were almost theatrical in their composition (Chapter 10). While film scholar and seasoned Vivien Leigh fan Kendra Bean's Chapter 7 takes us on a personal journey into the particular world of fandom that surrounds Leigh's work and life. Her approach operates as a dismissive to the fact that, as her *Guardian* obituary suggests:

There was division among critics about whether or not Vivien Leigh could be called a 'great' actress. She often chose to play in an emotional undertone where others had preferred something more electric. In doing so, however, she impressed herself and her 'star quality' on playgoers who never shared the critics doubts, and at any time after 1945 her name alone could fill a theatre.²⁶

Our hope here is that this volume goes some way towards re-viewing and re-appraising Vivien Leigh as the quote above demands, and that in doing so it opens out her work and, by implication, possible approaches to the work of other actresses from the twentieth century to a new generation of scholars, critics and enthusiasts.

Notes

- 1 This book is not the only outcome of the acquisition. The V&A mounted a number of events shortly after acquiring the archive and launched a touring

- exhibition, *Vivien Leigh: Public Faces; Private Lives*, curated by Keith Lodwick in November 2015.
- 2 In the Vivien Leigh Archive, there are very few letters to or from her father Ernest Hartley, who when the family returned to England lived separately from Gertrude Hartley, Vivien's mother.
 - 3 The film's global release was later – (see Arnaud De Montero's Chapter 6 in this volume).
 - 4 There are numerous letters from fans expressing their opinions about the parts she has chosen, and indeed assessments of her performances: Leigh often answered this with barbed tact. One Mrs Watts, who had written to complain of her dislike, on moral grounds, of *A Streetcar Named Desire* on its pre-London tour in Manchester in 1949, received a polite but firm reply from Leigh suggesting that because of the size of the theatre 'crudities are always more apt to survive than subtleties ...'. Vivien Leigh Archive THM 433/3 'Other Correspondence'.
 - 5 Letters from Joynson-Hicks and Co. to Olivier's lawyers between 21 September 1945 and 9 October 1945 – at the end of the Second World War – suggest Selznick wanted to end one such legal dispute in case of poor publicity while Leigh was suffering with TB. Vivien Leigh Archive, THM/433/3.
 - 6 Correspondence in the Laurence Olivier Archive suggests that Leigh spent a great deal of time researching possible projects and roles, especially through Vivien Leigh Productions, a subsidiary of Laurence Olivier Productions (LOP) in the 1950s.
 - 7 Jill Esmond (1908–1990) was the daughter of actor manager and playwright H.V. Esmond and actress and activist Eva Moore: Olivier had become part of an emerging theatrical dynasty through marriage. Her son, Olivier's first child Tarquin (b. 1936), suggests that Jill Esmond was 'ruined [...] for serious relationships with men', and that certainly by the 1950s she 'had become bisexual: anything for company' (Tarquin Olivier, 2012: 24).
 - 8 Telegrams sent to Vivien Leigh as Mary Holman during the filming of *Gone With The Wind* opened variously with phrases such as 'Dear Little grey Squirrel'; 'Dear Little Herring'; 'Wee Spider' with comments such as 'Naughty, Keep your tail brushed' or 'A stout of heart little pussling, keep ears up and whiskers bristling my love washing your face'. In the early war years Olivier signed himself her 'most loving ... hysterical boy', Vivien Leigh Archive, Correspondence from Laurence Olivier to Vivien Leigh, THM/433/1.
 - 9 'The Legend of Leigh', *Observer*, 14 August 1977, Vivien Leigh Biographical File, V&A.
 - 10 'The Private Hell of a Golden Couple', *Observer Magazine*, 31 July 1977, 26, Vivien Leigh Biographical File, V&A.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
 - 12 Rachel Billington, 'Beauty and the Manic Beast', *Financial Times*, 29 October 1988, Vivien Leigh Biographical File, V&A.
 - 13 Sara Dallwin, to Vivien Leigh, 22 March 1953, Laurence Olivier Archive, Add MS 80634.
 - 14 http://www.vam.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/236217/Vivien_Leigh_acquisition_press_release.pdf, accessed 23 August 2016.
 - 15 Chris Hastings, 'Frankly My Dear, You Won't be a Dame!', *Mail on Sunday*, 22 March 2013.

- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Edith Evans (1888–1976) was awarded a DBE in 1946 at the age of 58. Sybil Thorndike (1882–1976) was awarded a DBE in 1931 at the age of 49.
- 18 Peggy Ashcroft (1907–1991) was awarded a DBE in 1956 aged 49; Wendy Hiller (1912–2003) in 1975 aged 63 and Celia Johnson (1908–1982) in 1981 aged 73.
- 19 Chris Hastings, 'From Larry with Lust', *Mail on Sunday*, 1 February 2015.
- 20 Olivier Archive, British Library Add MS 79766-80750.
- 21 Alan Dent explains that the event, at the University of California in the summer of 1968, was set up as a 'Symposium' in celebration of Leigh's life and work (Dent, 1969: 12). His biography is in large part built on his correspondence with her colleagues and friends who attended the event, as well as his own reminiscences of working with Leigh.
- 22 During her first diagnosed bout of tuberculosis, she managed the total refurbishment of Notley Abbey, an estate bought at Olivier's insistence, and read through the works of Charles Dickens during the year she was supposed to be recuperating (see Vickers, 1990 [1988] and Walker 1994 [1987]).
- 23 Leigh left a number paintings to the state in her will, including a Renoir and a Degas – reportedly worth some £100,000 at the time (roughly over £1.5 million in today's money) see *Sunday Express* 'Vivien Leigh's Secret – She Left Art Treasures to the Nation', 25 August 1968; she also left paintings to friends: for example, she left Godfrey Winn a painting by Sickert (see Winn, 1970: 396).
- 24 Leigh worked with Cooper on the film *That Hamilton Woman* (1941). Leigh also had an affair with Cooper's son, John Buckmaster, and her last partner, Jack Merivale, was Cooper's stepson.
- 25 Vivien Leigh provided financial backing for a number of productions of note, including Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. Laurence Olivier Archive, Add MS 80096, Correspondence on Laurence Olivier Productions and Vivien Leigh Productions.
- 26 'Vivien Leigh – Actress with an Intelligent Approach', *Guardian*, 10 July 1967, Vivien Leigh Biographical File, V&A.

References and bibliography

- Bean, Kendra (2013) *Vivien Leigh: An Intimate Portrait*, London: Running Press.
- Collier, Constance (1929) *Harlequinade*, London: John Lane and The Bodley Head.
- Cooper, Gladys (1931) *Gladys Cooper*, London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd.
- Davis, Tracy C. (1989) 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History', in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie, eds, 59–81, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- (1991) *Actresses as Working Women*, London: Routledge.
- Dent, Alan (1969) *Vivien Leigh: A Bouquet*, London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Drazin, Charles (2011 [2002]) *Korda: Britain's Movie Mogul*, London: I.B. Taurus.
- Edwards, Anne (1977) *Vivien Leigh: A Biography*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Gale, Maggie B. and Kate Dorney eds (2018) *Stage Women: Female Theatre Workers, Professional Practice and Agency in the Twentieth Century, 1900–1950s*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Grime, Helen (2013) *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies: Twentieth-Century Actress*, London: Pickering and Chatto Publishing Ltd.
- Hastie, Amalie (2007) *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection and Film History*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lasky Jr, Jesse and Pat Silver (1978) *Love Scene: The Story of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh*, Brighton: Angus & Robertson.
- Leask, Margaret (2013) *Lena Ashwell: Actress, Patriot, Pioneer*, Herefordshire: Herefordshire University Press/The Society for Theatre Research.
- McBean, Angus (1989) *Vivien: A Love Affair in Camera*, Oxford: Phaidon.
- O'Connor, Garry (1984) *Darlings of the Gods: One Year in the Lives of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Olivier, Laurence (1982) *Confessions of an Actor*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Olivier, Tarquin (2012) *So Who's Your Mother?* London: Michael Russell Publishing Ltd.
- Porter, Darwin and Roy Moseley (2011) *Damn You Scarlett O'Hara: The Private Lives of Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier*, US: Bloom Moon Productions Ltd
- Quinn, Michael (1990) 'Celebrity and the semiotics of acting', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6 (22): 154–161, Cambridge University Press.
- Robyns, Gwen (1968) *Light of a Star: The Sensitive and Intimate Story of the Bewitching Vivien Leigh*, London: Leslie Frewen Publishers.
- Rojek, Chris (2001) *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Russell Taylor, John (1984) *Vivien Leigh*, London: Elm Tree Books.
- Vickers, Hugo (1990 [1988]) *Vivien Leigh*, London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Walker, Alexander (1994 [1987]) *Vivien Leigh*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- Winn, Godfrey (1970) *The Positive Hour*, London: Michael Joseph.