

# Actor With Two Lives

By ARTHUR AND BARBARA GELB

Richard Burton, urbane star of *Camelot* and *Cleopatra*, darling of the critics, is still a brawling Welshman offstage.



"Mark Antony" Burton and "Cleopatra" Taylor on the set with the actress's children, Michael, 7, and Liza, 3.

In the unstable realm of show business, where the road from rags to riches is taken for granted, the rise of Richard Burton is a legend. Born into an impoverished family of uneducated, Welsh-speaking miners, Burton has become one of the most polished and sophisticated actors in the world.

As a boy, he struggled to learn English, hoping to escape the coal pits of his native Welsh village. He did escape; at the age of twenty-four he was playing leads in Shakespeare. In demand ever since for roles that require classical acting and regal bearing, he recently left the part of King Arthur in the Broadway musical *Camelot* to portray Antony, opposite Elizabeth Taylor in the movie *Cleopatra*.

Despite Burton's glitter, the dark, rough edges of his character are still visible. In fact, he clings to them. The result is a fascinating study in contrasts—a blend of peasant and nobleman.

Today he speaks the queen's English as fluently and wittily as Noel Coward and can hold an intellectual conversation in French. But he often lapses into the mournful-melodic-guttural language of his Welsh heritage.

Burton is a polished raconteur, at ease with Greta Garbo or Winston Churchill, in any place from Hollywood to his estate in Switzerland. But he also likes to visit disreputable saloons and get drunk in the company of his coal-miner brothers during trips to his birthplace, Pontrhydyfen (pronounced "Pontradeven").

Endowed with an animal magnetism, Burton, at thirty-six, is unconventionally handsome; but he doesn't look like a movie star. Because he is barrel-chested and has astonishingly broad shoulders, he seems shorter than his five feet eleven inches. He has unruly brown hair and a pitted complexion. Offstage his appearance suggests the coal miner he might have become.

On a recent visit to his home village, Burton asked an old mining comrade of his father to show him the trick of loosening a coal face with the single tap of a mallet. Highly skilled miners dislodge a wall of coal this way by determining the precise spot where the blow must be struck. Burton's instructor carefully explained the process and handed over the mallet. Burton shattered the huge sheet of coal with one blow.

Burton has felt the urge to demonstrate his physical prowess since childhood, when he first decided to become an actor. Acting was considered a "sissy" profession by the coal-mining population of Pontrhydyfen, so Burton was as unactorlike as possible offstage. Though he had painfully learned to speak flawless English by the time he was in his teens, he spoke only Welsh to his family and friends. He expressed contempt for any show of emotion or sentiment, gave in to black rages, drank hard and was always ready to use his fists.

Burton pays little attention to his wardrobe. Most of the time he wears the same blue sport jacket day after day, and the same green topcoat year after year.

Stewart Granger, one of the first to recognize Burton's talent, told him he looked "atrocious" when he turned up for lunch one day in a baggy, twenty-two-dollar suit. Burton smiled and said, "I'm not a glamour boy."

Burton's taste in food is no more refined than his taste in clothes. His favorite snack is an order of French-fried potatoes between two slices of white bread.

Burton's wild, Welsh rages became legendary in Hollywood during the filming of *The Robe*, with Victor Mature and Jean Simmons. On the set one day he deliberately ran his head into a wall after failing several times in attempts to perform a stunt called for by the script.

"When he explodes on a set," says Henry Koster, his director for the film, "it's usually because he gets annoyed with himself for not doing something the way he thinks he should do it."

John Gielgud, whose acting style most influenced Burton at the start of his career, and with whom Burton has appeared on Broadway, refers to the younger man as "that terribly rough boy." Once, in describing another actor to Burton, Gielgud said, "He's built like a peasant, Richard—like you — oh, terribly sorry!" Burton didn't mind at all, nor does he mind when Gielgud, about to tell a story, says, "It's a terribly filthy joke, which you'll enjoy, Richard."

One outburst of Burton's rage, which was inspired less by artistic frustration than by whisky, occurred after an afternoon of celebrating St. David's Day, March first, a Welsh holiday comparable to St. Patrick's Day. Burton was appearing in a play with Michael Redgrave in England's Stratford-on-Avon. He got so carried away during a fight scene that he lifted Redgrave and hurled him against the scenery, nearly bringing the set crashing down.

Burton indulged in his wildest exhibition on his twenty-first birthday, November 10, 1946, a year before he was mustered out of the R.A.F. A bored navigator ("I was the worst that ever flew."), Burton commemorated the day by getting roaring drunk with a fellow airman. They decided it would be amusing to break a few window panes. Burton tapped a pane in his barracks, using a sharp jab of the fist that shattered the glass without cutting his skin. He found the sensation pleasant. With his friend, Burton systematically worked his way through the entire building, breaking 156 windows. The next day he and his friend were sentenced to a week in the guardhouse.

Apparently Burton regards violent physical action as evidence of virility. His father, who spent his life in the coal mines—as did his grandfather—once had his teeth kicked out by a fellow miner. He considered it a joke, and so does Burton, who likes to tell stories about his family's exploits.

"We were called the Jinx family because we were the scourge of our end of the village," Burton says. "I had tremendously rough brothers. We all played

"I'm no glamour boy," says Burton, an explosive ex-coal miner



## BURTON

Rugby and 'proved' we were manly by walking across the ledge of a high bridge between our village and the next. Naturally, you'd crack your skull if you slipped."

The blend of the crude and the refined, the strong hint of the savage lurking beneath the charming manner are vital ingredients of Burton's appeal as an actor. Both qualities are always discernible, whether he is playing a sulky young prince in the Broadway play, *Time Remembered*, or an uncouth Englishman in the motion picture, *Look Back in Anger*.

The late Moss Hart, who directed him in *Camelot*, declared, "Actors like Burton are born once in fifty years. Unlike most stars, he has an imposing personality offstage too. Most stars are not really people. Their magnetism disappears away from the footlights. Burton stays full-size."

To date, Burton has appeared—here and in England—in sixty plays, fifteen movies and five major television productions. His salary keeps climbing, and his popularity shows no sign of diminishing. Perhaps his only failing, professionally speaking, is a lack of selectivity. He has a tendency to pick roles that offer him a chance for bravura acting. He rarely considers the overall quality of a script. As a consequence he has made some notably bad movies.

When Burton left *Camelot*, Hart told him, "You're rich now. Don't waste your gift. The next five years may decide whether or not you'll become the leading actor of the English-speaking stage."

Burton has another view. "You simply have to do movies to keep your reputation—and your earning power—at a peak." But he finds unbroken movie work tedious. "After a while," he says, "your gums begin to ache, and you long to get back on a stage."

Although his tentative commitments for the next few years include a number of movies (among them: *Of Human Bondage*, with Marilyn Monroe, and *Cool of the Day*, with Audrey Hepburn), he definitely plans to play serious stage roles in London and New York in such proven vehicles as *Othello* and *Peer Gynt*.

Burton has opened and sauntered through innumerable doors that remain locked to the less gifted. He won his first London role at the age of seventeen during World War II. The part was that of a Welsh boy in a play by Emlyn Williams called *The Druid's Rest*. After that came a year at Oxford, three years in the R.A.F. and some juicy roles in London's West End. Success was easy thereafter, but the scars of his childhood stayed with him.

Burton was born Richard Jenkins, the twelfth child in a family of thirteen. His mother died two years later, after the birth of his younger brother.

"The ten pounds we borrowed to pay for my mother's funeral haunted us for years," he says. "There was a tremendous celebration when our family finally paid off the debt. We were terribly poor. There were years," he says, "when we lived on free soup doled out by charitable organizations. But we were never unhappy. We were devoted to each other."

Burton maintains that he developed no inhibitions or "anything that people living under such conditions of poverty might he expected to develop." And amazingly, he not only survived but displayed an entirely self-inspired thirst for the life that lay beyond the barren hills surrounding his little green valley.

With the help of a teacher in his elementary school, where the curriculum was presented in Welsh, Richard learned to speak English. At thirteen he became



The Burtons in their Via Appia apartment: he and his wife, Sybil, were married 12 years ago. "She's Welsh too," he says, "but posh Welsh, not like me."

the first boy from his village in thirty-five years to enter an English-speaking grammar school—in Port Talbot, about two miles away. It was there, two years later, that his real battle for self-improvement began—he decided to become an actor.

Young Richard Jenkins seemed to have no potential for the craft; that at least was the initial opinion of Philip Burton, a brilliant scholar of classical and contemporary literature, a writer for the B.B.C. and occasionally a director in the professional theater. Philip Burton had taken a wartime teaching job in Port Talbot. Burton regarded young Richard dubiously when the boy told him of his ambition. Richard was chubby and had a dreadful speaking voice. His English, though serviceable, was neither grammatical nor free of accent. Ultimately, however, Burton was impressed by Richard's determination and personality. He decided to take the boy in hand.

For the next two years Burton drilled Richard, chipping away the rough edges of his manners, erasing his Welsh accent, teaching him to walk unself-consciously and instructing him in voice control.

"I discovered that Richard had quite an unusual talent," Philip Burton recalls. "Most notable was his feeling for poetry and language. He was in love with words even before he could understand them."

Eventually Richard was reciting difficult speeches from *Hamlet* and *Richard II* with silky fluency and vibrant tone. Partly out of gratitude to his mentor, and partly because he did not want to be typed as a Welsh actor with the unmistakably Welsh name of Jenkins, he took Burton's name for the stage.

Today he divides his loyalty between Philip Burton—whom he considers his adopted father—and his brothers and sisters in Wales. He is particularly solicitous of his eldest sister, Cecilia, and her husband, Elved James. Cecilia reared Richard after their mother's death.

Burton attributes to Cecilia his ardent ambition to succeed. "I really set out to conquer the world for Cecilia so she would be proud of me," he says. "She looks years older than her age because of early malnutrition and all the terrible labor of trying to get money. I had an enormous desire to make up for all her years of humiliating poverty."

In spite of Burton's candid identification with his working-class roots, his offstage personality is often flamboyantly theatrical. His language is sprinkled with extravagantly colorful phrases. Like a number of other English-trained actors, he addresses everyone—regardless of sex—as "love" or "dear."

Burton has been told since childhood that he has "the eyes of a devil"—a reference to his habit of casting a penetrating, sidelong glance at a companion. He is aware that this quick flash of his blue-green eyes has an attractively diabolical quality. Lauren Bacall, an old friend, calls him "wicked Richard."

Dawn Addams, who appeared with him in *The Robe*, says "Richard is a remarkable actor on the stage and in films. But in private life he is an even better one. When you're with him, you believe him, but afterward—you wonder."

Burton cannot conceal the fact that he has an actor's ego. But what distinguishes him from some of the other peacocks of his profession is his sharp wit; his most egotistical remarks are delivered with an air of disarming self-mockery.

Telling about the time in 1953 when Winston Churchill paid a flattering visit backstage at England's Old Vic after

seeing him perform *Hamlet*, Burton quipped, "He said some nice things about my performance—but he really came backstage to use my lavatory."

It was Churchill's public enthusiasm for Burton's performance—he called it "The most virile Hamlet I ever saw"—that was largely responsible for a record run of 230 performances. Later Churchill selected Burton to record the offstage voice for a television documentary series, based on his life, and requested that he portray Churchill in the projected Paramount motion picture, *The Early Years*, about the British statesman's youth.

While playing in *Camelot*, Burton tripped one night during a dance sequence with his co-star, Julie Andrews. It happened to be the night that the celebrated English ballerina, Margot Fonteyn, attended the show. When Miss Fonteyn went backstage to see him, Burton had an explanation ready for her: "I tripped on purpose to make you feel superior."

Burton and his wife, Sybil, a former actress, have been married for twelve years. "She's Welsh too," he says, "but posh Welsh, not like me." He admits that he induced Sybil to give up her acting career because she was upstaging him.

They met during the filming of an English movie called *Woman of Dolwyn* in 1948 when Sybil was only eighteen and Burton was twenty-three. They were married in February of the following year. In 1951 they performed together at Stratford-on-Avon in *King Henry IV, Part I*. The press was ecstatic about Sybil, who played Lady Mortimer—but only temperate in its praise for Burton, as Prince Hal, and Michael Redgrave, who headed the cast as Hotspur.

"I think you'd better pack it in, dear," said Burton. At the end of the run Sybil obligingly did.

It was probably this decision that has enabled the Burtons, despite their peripatetic existence, to maintain domestic unity. Sybil, who has prematurely gray hair, is slim and crisp-mannered with sharp, delicate features softened by a ready smile. With the assistance of a Swiss nursemaid, she sees to the well-being of the two Burton children, four-year-old Kate and two-year-old Jessica, while they accompany Burton on his far-flung filmmaking journeys.

Burton has little time to spare for his children. Shortly before he left for Rome in September to film *Cleopatra* he obliged a photographer by accompanying Sybil and the children to a Manhattan playground to pose for pictures. Awkwardly guiding Kate across the street on her tricycle, he admonished her for lagging and reduced her to tears. When his coaxing failed to bring a smile to Jessica's face as he pushed her in a swing, he shrugged, tugged nervously at his tie and abandoned her to Sybil.

"Richard's never been to the park with the children before," said Sybil. Burton, mopping his face with a handkerchief, explained that he spends time with his children at home in the late morning. "The park is very exhausting," he says.

Out of his element as the patient father of two small girls, Burton is very much in it as the center of attention at any gathering, whether it is a huge Hollywood party or a small get-together in his dressing room. He seems to have an urgent need to surround himself with hordes of fellow celebrities and hangers-on. The apartment he has rented in Rome during the filming of *Cleopatra* is, by design, big enough to accommodate not only his family but also fellow actor Roddy

McDowall and McDowall's partner in a photography business.

During his ten-month tenure in *Camelot*, Burton's dressing room at the Majestic Theater was always jammed with actors and an entourage of secretaries, agents and a scattering of worshipful young women with no apparent ties. On most matinee days, at least a half dozen people accompanied Burton to dinner at a nearby restaurant between his afternoon and evening shows. His majestic departure through the theater's stage door—where patient autograph seekers immediately closed in on him—was a spectacle to see.

His dressing room was known throughout the theater district as "Burton's Bar." Stuffed with a couch, armchairs, a costume rack and a large refrigerator, it was a daily rendezvous for such celebrities as Alec Guinness, Tammy Grimes, Mike Nichols, Jason Robards Jr. and Phil Silvers. "Why not?" Burton remarked. "It's the cheapest bar in town."

But it also happened to be the best free show in town. Apparently inexhaustible, Burton would keep up a patter of jokes, stories, imitations and recitations while changing into street clothes and removing his make-up, seeing to it all the while that his guests were supplied with drinks.

A remarkable mimic, Burton can take off almost anyone with uncanny skill. His forte, though, is fellow actors, particularly Gielgud, Redgrave and Laurence Olivier.

At a party in New York he once flabbergasted Vivien Leigh, then still married to Olivier, by mimicking her husband's voice from across the room. Miss Leigh, who believed Olivier to be in England, swung around in astonishment, convinced that her husband had somehow turned up at the party.

Olivier is an old friend, to whom Burton bears a passing resemblance, and whose mannerisms (probably unconsciously) he sometimes uses on stage. One of the stories Burton likes to tell includes an exchange that took place between himself and Olivier when they were both in Hollywood.

Burton had just been offered the role of King Arthur in *Camelot*. Though eager to accept, he hesitated because he had never done a musical. The authors of *Camelot*, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, insisted Burton could sing, assuring him they had heard him harmonize with Olivier at a party. Puzzled, Burton took his problem to Olivier.

"Larry," Burton asked, "have we ever sung a duet at a party?"

He mimics Olivier's reply in a dry, clipped, nasal voice: "Not to my knowledge."

"What shall I do?" asked Burton. "The money's good," replied Olivier. "Say nothing and carry on."

Burton did. As a result he now commands one of the top salaries in show business. Recently, with typical Burton swagger, he confided to a friend that Twentieth Century-Fox valued him so highly it gave the producers of *Camelot* \$50,000 to release him from his Broadway contract six weeks early to film *Cleopatra* in Rome—a premium paid in addition to the \$250,000 promised him for the movie. He noticed that the friend was somewhat less than bowled over. Remembering that Elizabeth Taylor's \$1,000,000-plus for the film had been highly publicized, he admitted with a mocking grin, "Of course, the girl is getting more."

THE END

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