

BURTON, RICHARD (JENKINS) (1925-1984), stage and film actor

Name: Richard Burton
Date of birth: 1925
Date of death: 1984
Gender: Male
Occupation: stage and film actor
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Gethin Matthews

Richard Walter Jenkins was born in Pont-rhyd-y-fen, Glamorganshire, on 10 November 1925, the twelfth child of Richard Walter Jenkins (a miner who was fond of his pint) and his wife Edith (née Thomas). Following his mother's death barely two years later, Richard went to live with his eldest sister, Cecilia, in the neighboring village of Taibach. The family was Welsh-speaking and Richard retained his facility in Welsh all his life. There he received a decent education in the local primary school and Port Talbot grammar school (until he was 16), where he came to the attention of the schoolmaster **Philip Burton**, an inspirational teacher of English who had the ability to pass on his passion for drama to his pupils. **Burton** was made Richard's guardian in 1943 and the youngster took on his surname: one reason for this was to ease Richard's entry to Oxford, where he went to study for a six-month period in 1944 before beginning his compulsory military service. However, by this time Richard had already enjoyed success on the professional stage, having been spotted by Emylyn Williams and cast in a role in his drama *The Druid's Rest*. After over two years' service in the RAF Richard became a professional actor. He took on a number of roles on the London stage and in BBC programmes, and then he had his first opportunity on the silver screen in a role especially written for him in Emylyn Williams's film, *The Last Days of Dolwyn*. Whilst filming this he met the young Welsh actress, Sybil Williams, whom he married in 1949. During this period Richard took on a number of roles on stage and in minor British films, and he had his first taste of acting on Broadway, but his career took off after he excelled in Shakespearean plays on the Stratford stage over the summer of 1951, in particular when he took the roles of Prince Hal and King Henry V (acting alongside Hugh Griffith).

Richard accepted a contract with Twentieth Century Fox which allowed him enough freedom to pursue two parallel careers: one in Hollywood and one on the London stage. Although he created an impression on Hollywood through his vibrant personality, there is not much to be said about his early films there, in contrast to his performances of Shakespeare's works at the Old Vic which earned outstanding plaudits from the critics. However, he cut himself off from this milieu when he moved to Switzerland to become a tax exile (although he ensured that he displayed his loyalty to his roots through naming his home Le Pays de Galles). His next substantial success was the musical *Camelot* on Broadway, which earned him great praise in 1960-61: from there he went to play the part of Mark Anthony in the film *Cleopatra*, with Elizabeth Taylor playing the title role. This project bloated out to become the most expensive and extravagant film that had been made, and during the overbearing lunacy of the film's production the two main characters fell into a deep, unstoppable passion. Although Richard's eye had wandered previously without jeopardising his marriage, his relationship with Elizabeth Taylor was impossible to ignore or put aside. After Richard had secured a divorce from Sybil (which caused a painful split in his relationship with his family) he married Elizabeth in March 1964. For the next decade they were the world's most famous and glamorous couple, with the global media following in their wake as they flew or sailed between some of the most attractive and alluring spots on the planet.

For those who were not dazzled by the glare of the diamonds or the extravagance of their lifestyle, there was much to be praised in many of the performances that Richard and Elizabeth gave during these years. She won a deserved Oscar for her performance alongside her husband in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but although he would be nominated for the honour seven times, Richard never received the accolade of winning an Academy Award.

Despite the pressures that were imposed on Richard from different directions, he gave a number of strong performances on screen (*Becket*, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, *Where Eagles Dare*), but it is fair to say that by the beginning of the 1970s poor films were appearing more frequently than ones with merit. A turning-point in Richard's life was the accident in 1968 that paralysed his elder brother, Ivor, who had been a companion and a father-figure to him. When Ivor died in 1972 there followed a clear deterioration in Richard's professional and family life: as alcohol strengthened its grasp on his behaviour, he split up with Elizabeth and they were divorced in 1974. Their reconciliation and second marriage in 1975 was a gift to the newspapers but finished inevitably in divorce less than a year later.

Richard then married Suzy Hunt in 1976: during their six years together there were some notable successes (*Equus*, *The Wild Geese*) but also plenty of sub-standard performances in poor films. In the end, problems with Richard's drinking ruined this marriage too, together with health problems that had built up during the years of alcohol abuse. While playing the title role in the epic film *Wagner* Richard met Sally Hay, a production assistant on the film, and after a few months' courtship the two married in Las Vegas in July 1983. During this period Richard was appearing on stage for what would be the final time, starring with Elizabeth Taylor in an American tour of the drama *Private Lives* - perhaps a classic example of life imitating art. Only a short time was left to Richard: after he filmed his part in a production of *1984* he died in a Geneva hospital on 5 August 1984, having suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage at his home in Céligny.

Attempting to sum up his contribution, a number of critics expressed dismay at what they saw as the waste of Richard's talent, and the fact that he chose to follow the path that led to fame and fortune rather than remaining faithful to his remarkable talent to dominate the stage while performing the major works of English literature. On the other hand, Welsh commentators were more keen to focus on how a proud Welshman had succeeded in overcoming every obstacle to become one of the world's greatest film stars. Some of Richard's finest performances were given not on the big screen but in his interviews on television and to the press, in which he charmed his audience, using his enchanting voice to tell captivating witty anecdotes. He never forgot his mother country, and was perhaps the best ambassador that Wales had in the twentieth century, although it is clear that he looked back at his land and his people through the rose-tinted spectacles of a long-term exile. This is one of the many paradoxes in the life of the Welsh miner's son who rose to be a world-famous star and actor. Maybe it can be said that the best performance Richard Jenkins ever gave was his portrayal of Richard Burton.

Marriages: i) Sybil Williams, 5 February 1949. They had two daughters: Kate (born 1957) and Jessica (born 1959). Divorced 5 December 1963. ii) Elizabeth Taylor, 15 March 1964. Divorced 26 June 1974. iii) Elizabeth Taylor, 10 October 1975. Divorced 30 July 1976. iv) Suzy Hunt, 21 August 1976. Divorced January 1983. v) Sally Hay, 3 July 1983.

He was made a CBE in 1970; he won the BAFTA award for Best British Actor in 1966 for his roles in *The Spy who came in from the Cold* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. He won a Golden Globe award in 1978 for his performance in *Equus*. On 1 March 2013 a Star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame was unveiled in recognition of his achievements, next to Elizabeth Taylor's Star. His archive, including his diaries, is in Swansea University. A theatre bears his name in the Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff where there is a bronze bust of him.

Author

Gethin Matthews

Sources

Melvyn Bragg, *Rich: The Life of Richard Burton* (1988)

Paul Ferris, *Richard Burton* (1981)

Gethin Matthews, *Richard Burton: Seren Cymru* (Llandysul 2001)

Christopher Williams (ed.), *The Richard Burton Diaries* (2012)

Further Reading

Additional Links

Swansea University Archives: [Richard Burton Collection](#)

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