Shakespearean Actors and Hollywood Stars: Stage and Screen Celebrities in *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) and *Burton and Taylor* (2013)

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Abstract
In two show biz biopics, *My Week with Marilyn* (2011) and *Burton and Taylor* (2013) – the first one produced for cinemas and the second for television screens – a (male) British actor is shown struggling with a (female) American celebrity in order to define his artistic identity. Both films stage the confrontation between the chosen couple of star-performers (Sir Laurence Olivier/ Marilyn Monroe and Richard Burton/ Elizabeth Taylor) as a troubled one since the protagonists come to be entangled in a love/hate relationship which is articulated through several oppositions: theatrical actor vs cinema star, London vs Hollywood, fame vs celebrity. Even though the scripts of both films are claimed to be mainly based on real episodes that are reported in acknowledged biographical books, they are also interspersed with a series of Shakespearean quotes that come to form a sophisticated and coherent subtext addressing issues of intermedial and intercultural identity.

Key-words: celebrity, Shakespearean actor, British heritage, intermediality.

1. Two biopics on British theatre and Hollywood cinema

Among the many subgenres the biopic has developed since its inception, the actor/ actress biographical film has always had a great allure for audiences with its promise to reveal unknown details of the life of beloved theatre and cinema stars. To critics, as well, the subgenre is particularly compelling for its unique meta-dramatic focus on the art of performing and the industry of entertainment. These appealing aspects also characterise two biopics that were released at the beginning of the 2010s: *My Week with Marilyn* (*MWM*), a feature film directed by Simon Curtis in 2011, with a screenplay by Adrian Hodges, and *Burton and Taylor* (*B&T*), a

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television movie directed by Richard Laxton in 2013, written by William Ivory. In both films a British male actor of acknowledged Shakespearean fame confronts an American female star whose acting talent is, to say the least, questioned by the film narrative. However, in each case the powerful magnetism of the Hollywood star, with her apparently innate hold on a multitude of adoring fans, provokes a sense of identity crisis in her theatrically experienced British partner.

The narrative device of matching two people of renown in order to present, through their interaction, specific aspects of their personalities is typical of "dual biographies", which usually explore the "lives of two persons who are closely related, such as husband and wife, father and son, lifelong friends, mother and daughter" (Winslow [1980] 1995: 20). If the definition is self-evident for Richard Burton and Liz Taylor (*B&T*), perhaps the most famous (twice) married and (twice) divorced international couple of the last century, it may be less obvious in the case of Sir Laurence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe (*MWM*) who were artistically partnered in London for a short time for a movie in 1956. The biopics we are investigating select only one key moment in the career of the couple of actors they portray and stick to that moment, avoiding any form of flashback or flash-forward incursion into their broader lives. For *MWM* the moment is the shooting of the *Prince and the Showgirl* at the Pinewood Studios in London – an event which is recorded in detail in his diaries by Colin Clark, who was at the time on his first job as third director assistant of the production ([1995] 2011) –, while for *B&T* it is the staging on Broadway of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* in 1983, a production which received thorough coverage by the press, and is reported in Taylor's biography by the British film critic Alexander Walker ([1990] 1995). The unique circumstance when these actors set to work together on a common artistic and commercial project becomes, therefore, the special lens through which their lives are focused, thus also conferring to the biographical narrative an intense symbolic meaning. The personality of each member of the couple is contrasted with that of the other through a series of highly meaningful binary opposites: theatre vs cinema, London vs Hollywood, fame vs celebrity.

In the following pages I am going to explore such oppositions by adopting, in particular, a Shakespearean perspective. The

word 'Shakespearean' has been recently explored and revised by Anna Blackwell who contends that "even the loosest reference to [Shakespeare's] name confers prestige", but the word is "far from neutral" because "its uses rely upon the shared understanding of Shakespearean in reference to values which are for the most part gendered, classed and racially specified" (2018: 11) and, I would add, also nationally defined. Typically described as British and male, the two Shakespeareans in *MWM* and *B&T*, Olivier and Burton, are the heir to a grandiloquent and prestigious acting style; the well-read-ness and educated literary tastes with which the filmic narrative characterises them are exhibited in deliberate contrast with an exaggerated illiteracy and lack of trained theatrical skills of the Hollywood female stars. On the other hand, both Marilyn Monroe and Liz Taylor appear more than willing to add prestige to their career by engaging them; it is worth noting that in both cases the female stars acted as producer of the project, that is they funded it and paid for their partner's work. By showing Hollywood investing in Shakespearean shares in order to boost its own capital, these biopics foreground the intertwining of cultural and economic components in the phenomenon called 'Shakespeare', which can be viewed as representing the bulk of British cultural capital (Shellard and Keenan 2016). And it is through the articulated phenomenon of the "great Shakespearean" (Jackson 2013a) as the embodiment of that capital and bearer of "implicit value judgements" (Blackwell 2016: 78) that we are offered a glimpse into the complex and often antithetical relationship between theatre and cinema, a relation which has been paramount in the history of entertainment.

Since the birth of moving pictures, theatre and cinema have confronted each other and not always in friendly terms: the younger medium ransacked the theatrical repertoire in search of stories to be re-told on screen, just as the older one was financially threatened by the greater popularity of its competitor on the entertainment market. The contention has been the object of several critical studies, and recently the adaptive and intermedial aspects of the relation between the two has been engagingly explored, but the debate over whether one or the other was 'ontologically' more able to represent 'reality' matured very early in British criticism. In the Thirties, Allardyce Nicoll had already devoted a whole chapter of his pioneer book *Film and Theatre* to "Film Reality: the Cinema and

the Theatre" (Nicoll 1936: 164-91), where he drew the difference between the two media stressing the conventional nature of the former and the assumed superior capacity to reproduce reality of the latter on the basis of its specific and advanced photographic technology. Nicoll had also already discerned that one of the main differences between theatre and cinema, according to the general understanding, stood in the acting technique: "[c]haracter on the stage is restricted and stereotyped and the persons who play upon the boards are governed, not by the strangely perplexing processes of life but by the established terms of stage practice" (pp. 166-67). Cinema actors were instead credited by audiences for being 'real', for the camera "cannot lie" (pp. 166-67). However, the Hollywood industry – as a machine churning out celebrities– created its star-system precisely out of the identification of screen roles with the public personae of the performers (Turner 2004: 9-15).

The tension between theatre and cinema is paramount in *MWM* and *B&T*. Both biopics deal with stage plays by British playwrights, respectively Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward. *MWM* might seem to be only a celebration of the British film business since the biopic is based on the diaries of the young Colin Clark, a future film director, who tells of his passion for the world of cinema, and it is also about the making of *The Prince and the Showgirl*. However, the film was, itself, an adaptation of *The Sleeping Prince* by Rattigan (significantly, the only historical character who is never shown on screen). Staged at the Phoenix Theatre, London, in 1953, it starred Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, the golden couple of British theatre. The play had been quite favourably received, and its author was asked to adapt the script for cinema in 1956. Olivier confirmed he would star in it, agreed to direct it, but did not cast his wife in the role of the showgirl, Elsie Marina, because he thought she was too old to sustain it on the screen, a much more age-revealing medium than theatre (Bolton 2017). The part was instead offered to Marilyn Monroe, who had just strikingly hit the mark with *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) by Billy Wilder, becoming an icon of joyful sensuality as the unnamed 'girl' who plays with the wind on a subway grate in a hot Manhattan. Notwithstanding her immense popularity, however, she desired to be acknowledged also as an accomplished actress and not just a dumb blonde who could sing and dance. She bought the

rights to the British play, funded the film (the only one in her career she ever produced with Marilyn Monroe Productions) and flew to London with her new husband, Arthur Miller, the most respected American playwright at the time. She desired the artistic anointment of the prestigious British theatrical establishment, which Olivier embodied. As for *B&T*, it is indeed exemplary of what Russell Jackson calls a "backstage movie", in which "the topography of the theatre's premises lends itself to a variety of thematic and symbolic purposes" (Jackson 2013b: 7). The biopic narrates how Elizabeth Taylor, in London to celebrate her 50th birthday, persuades her twice-divorced husband, Richard Burton, to fly to the US in order to co-star in Coward's *Private Lives*, a play about the heart-rending impossibility of the two protagonists, the divorced Amanda and Elyot, to live either apart or together (Coward [1930] 1986), a theatrical mirroring of the actors own situation. The aim of this TV movie, a much more intimate filmic narration than *MWM*, due to the 'domesticity' of the medium for which it was conceived, is clearly to show what happened behind the curtains. The camera claims to be recreating the actual 'truth' of the tempestuous relationship between the two protagonists more realistically than it was represented, via Coward's words and theatrical conventions, on Broadway. The meta-medial awareness of the film, however, is signalled in the opening credits that roll to the sound of the 1982 pop song *Just an Illusion* by Imagination, a warning for the viewers not to accept too naively the 'facts' presented in the biofiction.

As already stated, at the core of the debate over the capacity of one medium or the other to reproduce reality better stands the issue of 'authenticity' in performance and, consequently, the contention between the British and the American acting traditions. The British way of acting was based on the solid technique of a well-trained eloquence and the ability to perfectly articulate complex pieces of text as part of an ancient theatrical tradition. The American approach focused less on the language and more on a technique that prompted the actor to look for the psychological 'truth' which lay *under* the words uttered by the character. One of the most important supporting roles in *MWM* is that of Paula Strasberg, the wife of Lee Strasberg who codified the 'method' and founded in 1951 the Actors Studio in New York; she was Marilyn's personal acting coach at the time when the story is set. In *MWM* we see Paula helping her

to prepare for the role of Elsie Marina by "find[ing] in herself all that lies under the surface" of the character (Hodges 2010: 47); only when Marilyn *feels* Elsie's motivations will the camera be able to record the 'authenticity' of her performance. Clearly the Method, though developed by Strasberg from Stanislavski's theatrical approach, was probably also influenced by the media specificity of cinema (a quintessential American art) with its proximity of the camera to the actor's body. However, Sir Laurence Olivier, the film director and an experienced Shakespearean actor, is of a completely different opinion. In response to Marilyn's genuine anguish in not understanding "who Elsie is" (p. 56), he bursts in utter exasperation: "Elsie is all in the script" (p. 57). His is a typical Shakespearean approach to the verbal part of performance, for, as Lisa Hopkins explains:

> [Shakespeare] habitually underwrites characters: he does not make clear what motivates Iago or why Hamlet delays and if he did we would not be so interested in the play as we are. Many film actors, trained in the tenets of method acting, simply cannot tolerate these ambiguities: they regard it as being of the essence of their art to 'fill out' the gaps in the script in a way simply unnecessary to the acting conventions of Shakespeare's own time. (Hopkins 2009: 4)

The point is that Marilyn was not a stage actress and Rattigan certainly no Shakespeare. The competitive relation between theatre and cinema is articulated in both biopics through the skilful comparison of two topical moments which characterise routine practices in the two media: the read-through sessions (theatre) and the viewing of the rushes (cinema). In his diaries, Colin Clark remembers how he was told that: "to have rehearsals at all for a film was a great luxury. They are the essential preliminary of plays in the theatre, but evidently films very rarely have them", also adding that Marilyn "certainly never had this sort of rehearsal before and I expect she was nervous" (Clark [1995] 2011: 100). Marilyn, in fact, was so nervous that she "defer[red to Paula Strasberg] at all times" (p. 100). In *MWM* we are shown the moment when the actors meet for the read-through, a sequence which for the sake of historical authenticity was shot at the same legendary Pinewood Studios. The script, however, adds something new to the materials of the diaries,

namely Olivier's welcome speech to Marilyn and the other members of the cast and crew:

> OLIVIER
> Welcome dear Marilyn, to our little fraternity. (Pause, looks around) We may seem a little strange and quaint to you at first, but I hope that in time you may come to find your method in our madness.
>
> Pleased with his over-contrived rhetorical flourish, he gives Paula a pointed look. She glowers back, obscurely sensing that she has been insulted in some way. MARILYN also looks up in confusion at Olivier's well-intentioned but clumsy joke. (Hodges 2010: 30)

In this short sequence, the screenwriter, Adrian Hodges, uses a (mis)quotation from *Hamlet* ("your method in our madness") and, a few seconds later, a quotation from *Othello* (when Olivier addresses the cast by calling them: "My very noble and approv'd good masters", Hodges 2010: 30)[1]. This reflects Olivier's ornate speech which is referred to in the diaries but not directly reported. According to the script, such high art quotations are clearly lost on Marilyn, who, through Michelle Williams's acting in the film, is shown in all her fragility and sense of inadequacy. Olivier, the great Shakespearean, wins hands down against the American star and, very condescendingly, indulges in teasing the Hollywood celebrity who does not belong with the exclusive group of British theatre actors ("our little fraternity") at the read-through table. The fact is, as the biopic makes clear, that the adaptation of the *Sleeping Prince* into a movie failed precisely because it remained too theatrical.

In *B&T* the read-through sequence shows an Elizabeth Taylor who, shockingly for the artistic crew, has not even read the play beforehand, thus driving Richard Burton mad; she is not upset and calmly retorts "I like to keep things fresh. That's why rehearsals are called rehearsals", prompting Burton to claim his primacy in theatrical matters: "Don't lecture me on the bloody theatre" (00-

[1] In the Director's Audio Commentary to the DVD version of *MWM* Simon Curtis explains that Kenneth Branagh suggested using Shakespeare to recreate a sense of Olivier's rhetorical style. Olivier actually used the phrase from *Othello* ("My very noble and approv'd good masters") to open the speech he delivered when he received the Honorary Academy Award for his career in 1979. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSgvpol1n2s&t=291s.

15.08-00.15.17). In Alexander Walker's *Elizabeth*, which is one of William Ivory's script sources for *B&T*, the biographer reports that Elizabeth approached the play "treating it as a film script, learning it in parts, only bringing it together when she'd been through all the 'shots'" and concludes that Burton's and Taylor's "rehearsal tactics and their conflicting metabolisms simply didn't match […]. All too often, Burton was left feeling out of temper" (Walker [1990] 1995: 354-55). Elizabeth's behaviour, which is so strongly reproached in the biopic, was therefore a matter of media-specific training and practices.

What is lost in rehearsal though, is gained by the film stars when the camera is switched on. Both Marilyn and Elizabeth are showed as phenomenal on the screen. In *MWM* the last sequence in the viewing theatre shows that if Olivier (theatre) had won a battle, Marilyn (cinema) won the war. It is here that Olivier borrows Prospero's famous words – "we are such stuff/ as dreams are made on" – in order to comment on what actors can bring to the complex illusionistic and yet truth-revealing nature of cinema (Hodges 2010: 116). Marilyn shines on the screen like a goddess to be admired, an admirable Miranda indeed, and to be loved for no other reason but for being herself. It is by watching the rushes that Olivier finally admits her value: "She's quite wonderful. No training, no craft, no guile, just pure instinct. Astonishing", he says and adds, "I tried my best to change her, but she remains brilliant despite me" (p. 116). Elizabeth is spoken of by Richard Burton in similar terms when, in a conversation with his friend Mike, he remembers their first shooting scene on the *Cleopatra* setting:

> when we did *Cleopatra*, I'd come straight from the Old Vic. I went over to Hollywood and she walked out onto the sound stage. She was just tits and make up. And then we had our first scene together and she did nothing. Nothing. No voice, no movement, no performance. I thought she had a bloody stroke or something. And then I saw the rushes, and I was acting Antony. But she was Cleopatra. She just sort of bleeds into the role. It's like osmosis. (00.18.40 -00.19.37)

As in *MWM*, the Shakespearean actor defines the characteristics of the female film star in terms of what is lacking: "no voice, no movement, no performance", but he also acknowledges her medium-specific 'talent', paying a sort of homage to cinema and thus re-establishing the value of the two media.

2. Britishness, the Shakespearean actor and celebrity

B&T and *MWM* were both publicly funded, the former by BBC Film and the latter by the UK Film Council. Despite the strong role of Hollywood in the plot, therefore, these biopics have been judged, since preproduction, as "culturally British", to borrow Andrew Higson's useful definition for those films that, according to the UK institutions which are charged with supporting national cinema, "engage with British subject matter, characters and stories" (Higson 2011: 6).

In particular, *MWM* passed the so called 'cultural test' that qualified it as eligible for public funding and tax relief. The test was originally championed in 2007 by the UK Film Council, which had been established by the Labour Government in 2000, and whose abolition was announced in July 2010 by the new Conservative-Liberal coalition. In the same year the biographical film on King George VI, *The King's Speech* by Tom Hooper – funded through the 'cultural test' process –, won four Oscars and was celebrated by part of the British press as the highest achievement of the UK Film Council. Ironically it was also its swan song. The stunning achievements of the *King's Speech*, a biopic whose metaphorical focus is placed on the huge effort by a committed King (Colin Firth) to cure his disrupted 'British voice' with the help of his Australian vocal coach, who is – importantly – also an amateur Shakespearean actor (Geoffrey Rush), may have influenced the future distribution of public funding for a while yet. Neil Smith, the journalist who reported on the day after the Academy Award Ceremony (28 February 2011), thus writes in a well-informed article published on the BBC News Website:

> If *The King's Speech* is the UK Film Council's last hurrah, it could hardly go out on a more self-affirming note. Given the nature of film funding, its legacy may still be felt for some years to come. The body has money in a string of upcoming releases, including […] *My Week with Marilyn*, in which Hollywood legend Marilyn Monroe will be played by Oscar nominee Michelle Williams. (Smith 2011)

The demise of the UK Film Council marked the end of an era; the British Film Institute (BFI) – born in 1933 as a "cultural agency, with educational and archival goals focused on nurturing

and valuing a deeper understanding and support for British and international cinema" (Doyle, Schlesinger, Boyle, Kelly 2015: 6-7) – took over as the Government's new strategic body for film industry; this "involved the transfer of new funding responsibilities to an established organisation that had been a cultural film agency" (p. 7). The new test to measure the Britishness of a film came into force at the beginning of 2015 and it put a considerably greater emphasis on the category of 'diversity', "a celebrated feature of British culture and a key determinant of a culturally British film"[2]; specific guidance on 'Diversity standards' has even been made available on the BFI website since, with explicit references to the Equality Act 2010 (disability, gender, race, age and sexual orientation)[3]. Opening up to diversity meant, as the BFI announced in its *Film Forever* plan, to "[…] back new voices, new stories, new ideas and skills, enriching and diversifying British film production" (BFI 2012: 4). However it is also worth noticing that if the 2007 cultural test had already "laid great emphasis on films that dealt thematically with the national cultural heritage" (Higson 2011: 9), the 2015 test even added the adjective "British" to the word "heritage" as if to further remark the strategic importance of "British Heritage" in shaping "a common understanding of representation of British people and their contemporary and historical culture"[4].

The years around the making of *MWM* and *B&T*, the early 2010s, were crucial for the redefinition of "British heritage" in order to advance the debate on the subject which had been discussed at the end of the previous century; in fact, the *GREAT Britain Campaign* was conceived and launched precisely in those years. Defined as "the UK's government most ambitious international marketing campaign ever", *GREAT* was announced by no less than David Cameron, the Prime Minister, in September 2011 and "launched in February 2012 to take advantage of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations and the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics" (Bird, Eliadis, Scriven

[2] http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry/british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film.

[3] https://www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/diversity-inclusion/bfi-diversity-standards.

[4] https://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-film-cultural-test-guidance-notes-2019-11.pdf.

2016: 149-50). The aim of the campaign was to "unify international promotion efforts" and nudge global opinion into thinking and feeling that Great Britain is "the best nation to visit, invest in, trade with, and study in" (p. 150). International research conducted by the British Council proved that Great Britain actually had a face for people outside it, and that face was Shakespeare's, "he is British and is recognized, respected and valued by all nations […] so his brand became formally integrated into the campaign and began to play an important role in promoting the UK" (pp. 152-53). Governments may come and go, but Shakespeare stands and thrives.

Central to my argument is precisely this discourse related to Shakespeare and, in particular, the 'Shakespearean' actor as a specific kind of performer, one who, as Anna Blackwell has acutely pointed out, is "a conduit through which the transferable commodity value of 'Shakespeare' may be relayed, adapted and reasserted" (Blackwell 2016: 78). In the biopics here under investigation Shakespeare is associated, via the exceptional life of the classically-trained British actors depicted in the films, with an ancient and prestigious theatrical tradition, but we should not forget that Laurence Olivier and, to some extent, Richard Burton exported that tradition outside Great Britain through cinema, thus popularising and establishing it within the American film market. Through their lives not only does British theatre come to be celebrated, but also British cinema (as witnessed by the affectionate focus on the legendary Pinewood Studios in *MWM*).

If Laurence Olivier is doubtless *the* most renowned Shakespearean of all times, perhaps the reason for his popularity lies in the fact that soon after WW2, at a time of national identity redefinition, he established the practice and right of adapting and performing Shakespeare in British movie productions on an international distribution scale, starting from *Henry V* (1944) and continuing with *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1955), thus also "paving the way for future film-makers including Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh" (Rokison 2013: 62). However, he achieved this only after he had 'conquered' Hollywood in two American adaptations of British literary classics, *Wuthering Heights* (1939) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), thus first strengthening his global reputation for raising the cultural standard of US cinema. Richard Burton's fame as a Shakespearean was established in his maturity

when, at almost forty years of age, he played the lead in John Gielgud's *Hamlet* in 1964, a theatrical British production which was filmed for distribution in cinemas in the US (Jackson 2013a: 34-42). A couple of years before, in 1962, Burton had played Antony in the *Cleopatra* directed by Joseph Mankiewicz on whose Cinecittà set, in Rome, the Burton & Taylor affair had erupted, invading the tabloids worldwide. In two accounts made by members of the cast – *John Gielgud Directs Richard Burton as Hamlet. A Journal of Rehearsals* (1967) by Richard L. Sterne and *Letters from an Actor* by William Redfield – we find "vivid pictures of the difficulties caused by the celebrity of Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who married during the rehearsal period" (Jackson 2013a: 35). The quarrelsome couple was engaged few years later, in 1967, by Franco Zeffirelli to play in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the only (explicitly) Shakespearean film Taylor ever made.

It is through these "great Shakespeareans" trade with cinema that the controversial but also inevitable relationship between the British show business world and Hollywood is placed centre stage in both biopics; the two films bring to the fore what has always been characteristic of the British film industry, the fact that, as Andrew Higson aptly highlights: "[b]y the 1920s, Hollywood had already become established as the major force in the English film business, and had remained so ever since" (Higson 2011: 4).

Clearly both Olivier and Burton were involved in the Hollywood star-system, with its shrewd promotion and publicity mechanisms. Hollywood spawned the celebrity industry, an industry which was invented with the primary aim to sell products, be it a show, a toothpaste, or the body of an actor. In *MWM* and *B&T* we are shown the "great Shakespeareans'" ambivalent attitude towards celebrity and its power to transform human beings into commodities. Suffice it here to remember that during the sequence in which Olivier is first introduced in *MWM* he offers Colin a packet of cigarettes with his name on and Vivien Leigh amusingly comments:

> They named them after Larry. The
> first actor since Du Maurier to
> have his own brand and they pay
> him an absolute fortune. (Pause)
> I'm afraid they're rather ghastly. (Hodges 2010: 11)

Vivien's irony is a witty rhetorical tool used to contain Colin's perplexity in the sequence, but this kind of narrative strategy does not erase the ambiguity represented in Olivier's attitude towards celebrity in the film.

In *MWM* and *B&T* an element of merit, 'theatrical education', seems to characterise Olivier's and Burton's fame, two artists who apparently reject the mere fact of being "known for [their] well-knownness" to quote Daniel Boorstin's famous early definition of celebrity (Boorstin [1961] 1992: 57) – revised and updated by more recent publications on Celebrity Studies (for example, Elliott 2018). The merit of Marilyn and Elizabeth, their special 'talent', as we have seen, is instead to be found in the unfathomable shallowness of their iconic status, their *being* their screen image. As icons they can still be easily either 'sold' or associated to products and turned into a brand. This special quality of theirs is what inspired Andy Warhol to *transform* the two stars *into (pop)art objects*; discussing the *Marilyn Diptych*, Hermione Lee rightly remarks that: "Warhol's images of Monroe are the opposite of everything we want biography to be. They are flat, repetitive, banal, synthetic, journalistic, unrevealing. But they also offer a highly appropriate version of her life-story: endlessly exposed, instantly recognisable, unable to communicate anything except what has been constructed for public consumption" (Lee 2009: 121).

Despite what Lee writes, however, to be worshipped as an icon by masses of adoring fans can have its advantages, like that of acquiring an immense influence over thousands of consumers and consequently gaining immense economic power. That power surfaces in both biopics where the two female protagonists embody a strange mix of fragility and awareness of their extraordinary economic value. Olivier and Burton, on the other hand, are depicted as keen to support an élite notion of fame, the fact of being known for a special quality they possess, their 'genial' management of Shakespearean theatrical language. However, in their more or less frustrated desire to artistically control their American co-stars, they betray their ambiguous fascination for celebrity status, which does not seem to depend only on talent. As Leo Braudy so thoroughly explained more than thirty years ago, celebrity culture sprung, historically, from the long process of the "democratisation of fame" (Braudy 1986: 313-598).

If we change perspective, we can perhaps acknowledge that Marilyn and Elizabeth possessed the *art* of fashioning their own public image through mass-media, they were not mere objects of celebrity but active creators of their renown, as the 'press conference' sequences in *MWM* and *B&T* show, reproducing their perfect mastering of body and voice and the carefully chosen few words they utter (a piece of *bravura* by the actresses who impersonate them, Michelle Williams and Helena Bonham-Carter). Historically speaking, as we read on the page dedicated to *B&T* on the BBC Four website, the time was over "when Hollywood had been able to control its stars and the press coverage they received"[5]. Some of the stars had in fact evolved into celebrities, maturing an art of self-exposure that conferred on them a stronger agency than ever. That art has been democratised, for better or for worse, in our contemporary social media-ruled society when any person owning a smartphone can (and does) construct his/her life through digital reproduction of his/her image; perhaps this is also the reason why such historical lives, and these biopics in particular, are attractive to us: they tell of a mythical 'beginning' of celebrity culture, an imagined 'origin' moment in time when it all started.

Facebook and Instagram are, indeed, the ultimate development of the private-self/ public-self dichotomy, whose origin, very interestingly, Braudy locates precisely in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre and in the body of the (Shakespearean) actor:

> With the increasing importance of the actor as a cultural figure in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the duality of earthly body and heavenly soul has been complicated by the distinction between self alone and self before others, between individual nature and that nature displayed through art. (Braudy 1986: 331)

Considering Braudy's hypothesis, we can perhaps see why in both *MWM* and *B&T* the identity of the Shakespearean actors, unlike the Hollywood celebrity, is defined by a 'mirror sequence'.

The mirror sequence is a cinema trope, as Russell Jackson highlights in *Theatres on Film. How the Cinema Imagines the Stage*

[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/5DGRlY71rZjyl9rjDDFjHnd/richard-and-elizabeth.

(2013b), that carries highly symbolic implications, being a moment when differences and tensions between the *persona* and the self are more likely to emerge. Olivier's most intimate lines are spoken in his dressing room at the make-up mirror; the close-up straight-angle shot in which Olivier looks directly into the camera is realised by positioning the camera in the place of the mirror, thus enticing the viewer into believing that cinema, as a medium, is 'transparent' and that, unseen, we are snatching an intimate moment. However, in this intimate, 'authentic' moment of truth what we get is Olivier reciting Othello's words (III.iii.349-52) in order to give vent to his troubled feelings towards Marilyn:

OLIVIER
"O, now, for ever Farewell the
tranquil mind/Farewell content/
Farewell the plumed troop and the
big wars/That make ambition
virtue O, farewell/Farewell..."
(Pause, exasperated) Paula's not
an actress. She's not a director,
not a teacher. Her only talent is
buttering up Marilyn. (Hodges 2010: 58)

The choice of this multi-layered fragment – which resonates to those who know the play as a crucial moment of identity crisis triggered by the jealousy of one who feels he is too old for of his young partner – opens up to a number of interpretations of Olivier's feelings. The camera could not possibly display those feelings without delimiting them, thus the density of the theatrical language and its fertile opacity is instead brought to the fore. The same dynamic applies to *B&T*, when Richard Burton, in his dressing room, empties the bottles of liqueur he has just bought in a moment of weakness and, in front of the mirror, in voiceover as if in his mind, utters the mantra he has already used at the beginning of the story, that is "Never, never, never, never, never" (*King Lear*, V.iii.307) (1.04.43-1.06.20), which matches "Thou art a soul in bliss but I am bound upon a wheel of fire/ That my own tears do scold like molten lead" (*King Lear*, IV.vii.46-8) (00.37.10-00.37.30). By remediating these quotations from *King Lear*, the biopic aptly evokes a father/ daughter plot which fashions the

relationship of the aged Richard to Elizabeth as a tangle of desire and revulsion, care and rage, grief and forgiveness, so complex that it can only be said through the inexhaustible emotional potential of the Shakespearean play-text[6].

Lastly, a few words should be dedicated to the actors who contribute to adapting the historical characters whose lives are reproduced on screen (Minier 2014: 9). In both biopics it is certainly a case of stars playing stars, but if in *B&T* – a production made for the domestic UK market (BBC) – both leads, i.e. Helena Bonham Carter and Dominic West, are British, in *MWM* the US/UK structural dichotomy of the film is quintessentially preserved in the choice of the leading actors, with American *Dawson's Creek* star Michelle Williams playing Marilyn and the acknowledged heir to Olivier, Sir Kenneth Branagh, impersonating his putative 'theatrical' father. As Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst highlighted in their pioneering book of interviews *Playing for Real*: "the critical academies currently confer greater prestige on actors who perform roles based on an actual person. In this respect the Oscar awards for Best Actor and Best Actress over the last 15 years make for instructive reading" (Cantrell and Luckhurst 2010: 1). And indeed the quality of the performance achieved in these two biopics is witnessed by the number of nominations gained by the actors engaged in the challenging task of playing these icons of the world of entertainment: Michelle Williams playing Marilyn was nominated "Best Actress in a leading role" by the Academy Award and won the Golden Globe in the same category, while Sir Kenneth Branagh playing Sir Laurence Olivier was nominated "Best Actor in a Supporting Role" both by the Academy and the Golden Globes Committee; Helena Bonham Carter was nominated for the Golden Globe as "Best Actress in a mini-series or a motion picture made for television" while Dominic West was nominated by the BAFTA Committee as "Best Leading Actor".

The impersonation of real people on the screen as a star vehicle to show exceptional acting skills is, after all, as Deborah Cartmell

[6] I would like to acknowledge that I was prompted to think of the function of the Shakespearean fragments in the overall structure of the culturally British biopic by Mariangela Tempera when she invited me to speak at the last International Conference she organised at the University of Ferrara: *Shakespeare in Tatters* (2013).

and Ashley Polasek point out in their introduction to *A Companion to the Biopic* "one of the richest areas of interest for the biopic genre", because it displays:

> layers of performance: the performance of reality or a perceived reality, the subject's performance of his or her own identity, the actor's performance of the subject's public and private identities, and the actor's performance of his or her own celebrity identity as it reflects on the embodied subject. (Cartmell and Polasek 2020: 7)

All the artists starring in the two biopics inevitably talk about the moral responsibility they felt in 'inhabiting' the life of a real person, and how challenging it was to play a fellow-actor who was also an acknowledged legend in the profession. With reference to her almost uncanny interpretation of Marilyn on the screen, Michelle Williams declares – in "The Untold Story of an American Icon", the short documentary on the making of the film in the extra materials of the DVD – that she did a huge amount of research, not only reading biographical materials, but watching any photographic and audiovisual record she could find, but in the end, she had to "filter all the noise out" and find "[*her*] Marilyn", who, to her, was simply the "girl spinning in the trees" in a "white dress" in the picture Williams had in her bedroom as a teenager for ten years (5.17-6.24). In the *Behind the Scene* documentary of *B&T*, now on the BBC Four website[7], Bonham Carter, a notoriously idiosyncratic actress, talks about her effort at playing a woman who was so much loved, while West confesses his huge difficulties in trying to cope with Burton's voice, which was an incredible instrument to express "his manliness": a case that Harold Bloom would have happily described as the "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1973). As for such specific "anxiety", the case of Sir Kenneth Branagh impersonating Sir Laurence Olivier should at least be pointed out. In the documentary mentioned above Branagh admits that "like many young actors [he] had the privilege, honour and flattery of being compared to Laurence Olivier, a kind of great thrill and a burden for some" but that he "found the opportunity of playing Olivier finally irresistible" (8.30-9.00). Notwithstanding the elegant

[7] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01dojzh.

restraint of the statement, his whole career seems to spring from the 'fight' with his Shakespearean precursor; while he benefited greatly from the "spillover effect between the role incarnated by the actor in performance and the public perception of the actor", as Chris Rojek calls this osmotic phenomenon (2001: 77); perhaps he did not need the role in this biopic to further validate his 'British heritage' status as the rightful heir to the title of most renowned Shakespearean of the new millennium.

As Simon Curtis writes in the "Introduction" to the new edition of Clark's diaries, *MWM* "plays as a love letter to a lost England" (Clark [1995] 2011: 8) and indeed the biopics we have here explored look back to the British past with some feeling of nostalgia and a sense of longing for the exceptional people they portray. But, more than that, what *MWM* and *B&T* really celebrate is British excellence in the field of the entertainment industry *today*. Even when the budget is low in comparison to Hollywood, "if you have a good script and the right creative people, you can achieve almost anything", the BBC producer of *B&T*, Lachlan McKinnon, quite proudly remarks[8]. And we frankly cannot but agree.

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[8] https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/entries/1228877f-bdb7-3ff5-990b-7342da7722d1

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