

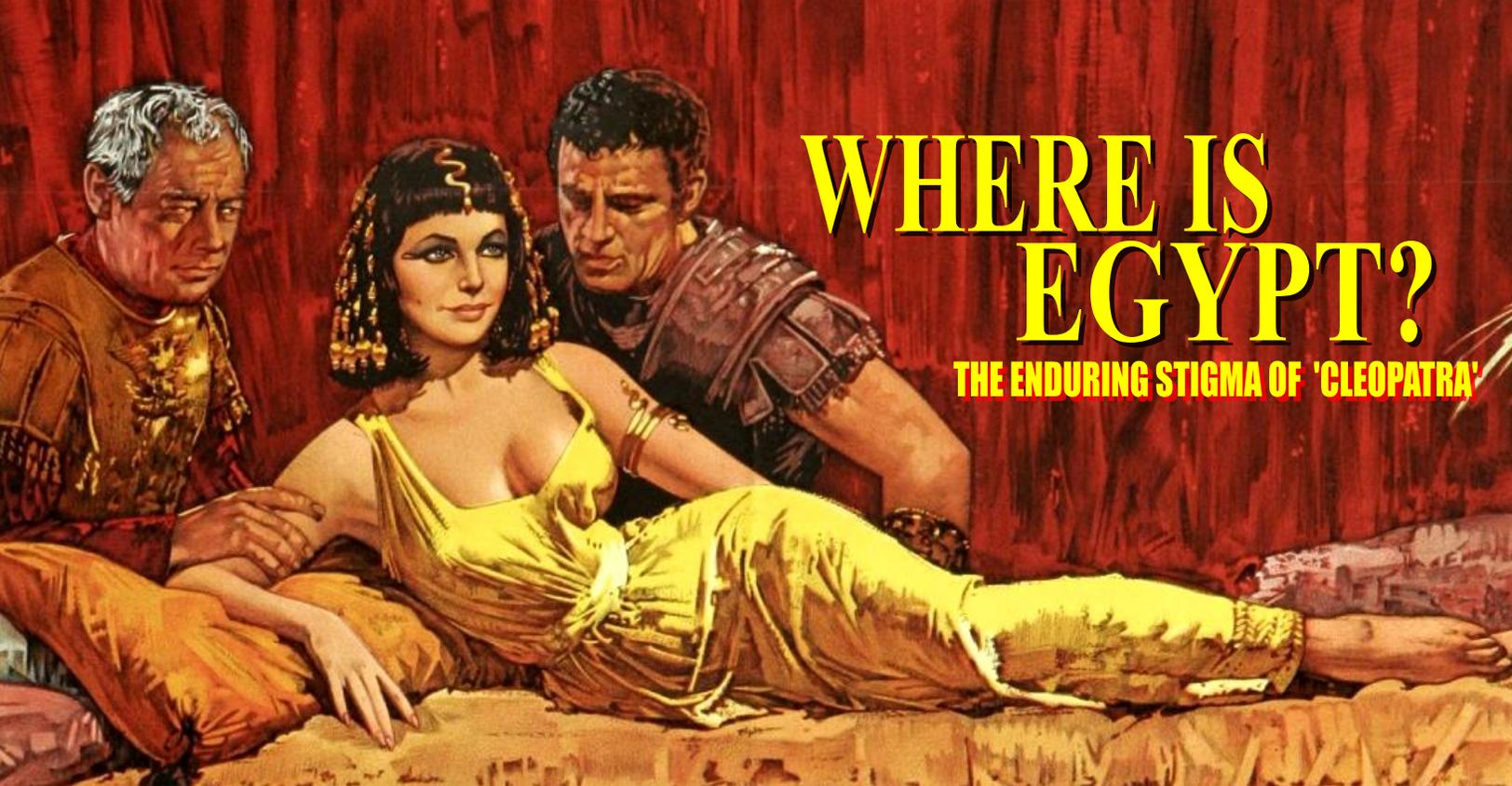


THE

Hollywood

ART

Where is Egypt?



Writer/director Joseph L. Mankiewicz (right) once confessed that 1963's **Cleopatra** was the “*toughest three pictures*” he ever made. Indeed, the project held little appeal for Mankiewicz whose particular strength in movie-making was centered on telling juicy stories about the upwardly mobile in America in their contemporary class and setting. Mankiewicz was one of Hollywood’s premiere directors when he reluctantly accepted producer Walter Wanger’s deal of the decade over the telephone while enjoying the hospitality of Hume Cronyn’s Bahaman getaway. “*Why would I want to make Cleopatra?*” Mankiewicz reportedly told Wanger, “*I don’t even want to see Cleopatra!*” It was an apropos decision; one that Mankiewicz regrettably reneged upon to his ever-lasting detriment and regret after being paid an obscene amount of money to take over the project.

Hollywood’s fascination with the Queen of the Nile had significantly cooled since Cecil B. DeMille’s bountifully appointed 1934 costume drama starring Claudette Colbert. DeMille’s version, made prior to the institution of Hollywood’s self-censoring code of ethics, had benefited greatly from a rather salacious screenplay that hinted at lesbianism, adultery and various profligate debaucheries. Then, **Cleopatra** had been a furious success; one effectively overshadowing the memory of 1917’s silent colossus starring mascaraed vamp, Theda Bara. Throughout the 1930s Hollywood’s penchant for creating incalculably massive exhibitions endured; showcases to their homegrown hedonisms redressed in antiquity, perhaps to deflect suspicions away from their own front door. These were made with increasing frequency by the moralizing cultural mandarins and by the Catholic League of Decency; speculating what other proclivities the entertainment capital





(Above): a composite still of the vast port city of Alexandria, Egypt. John DeCuir's production design exhibits a peerless perfection and grandeur unparalleled in almost any movie before or since **Cleopatra** (1963). The temples may have been plywood and Celotex but they certainly gave the illusion of opulent marble, hand-carved stone masonry and engraved gold. DeCuir's reputation as 'the master builder' was well deserved. He built a Roman forum three times the size of the real forum for **Cleopatra**. Matte paintings extended DeCuir's concrete designs into a seeming infinity. (Right): just a handful of the more than one hundred paintings and sketches DeCuir created for Walter Wanger in the preliminary phase of production. Although not everything in these sketches came into being in the final movie, many of DeCuir's interpretations were willed into a reality on the back lots of Cinecitta Studios in Rome and also abroad, in Egypt and Spain.

might be indulging in behind closed doors.

The outbreak of WWII made it virtually impossible to mount such lush period dramas for nearly a decade. In their absence Hollywood filled movie screens with darker melodramas (collectively lumped together after the fact as 'film noir') intimate family dramas and comedies, and, the occasional glossy/frothy Technicolor musical; the latter either catering to homespun reflections of turn-of-the-century America or an exultation of that fictionalized pampas-grassed paradise better known as Latin America where steamy gauchos and dark and flashing-eyed senioritis roamed. But then the war ended, and with the advent of unimpeded prosperity there sprang anew a sudden renewed interest in 'history for art's sake'. Of particular interest was the Greco-Roman period.

MGM's **Quo Vadis** (1951) was as moneyed and gargantuan as anything the studio had undertaken; a mind-bogglingly lavish melodrama saturated in Technicolor and featuring a cast of thousands. The movie was wildly popular with audiences, although its extravagant layout precluded **Quo Vadis** from turning an impressive profit. However, in its wake, 20th Century-Fox debut Cinemascope and **The Robe** (1953); a poor cousin to **Quo Vadis** in terms of production values, but one that triumphed at the box office. The race was on. Each studio would try their hand at the increasingly gaudy and often lumbering widescreen epic; almost all of them making back their money and a tidy little profit besides.

One possible reason for Hollywood's renewed fascination with these all-star blockbusters is that post-war America arguably regarded itself as an empire. In the Hollywood epic it could look away from those terrible lean years plagued by the European conflict and onto a panacea that seemed impenetrable and enduring for as far as the eye could see. Just as America's industrialization had given rise to its middle class, Americans could ironically accept a parallel between their own burgeoning supremacy on the world stage and that occupied by fictionalized facsimiles of ancient Rome or Egypt flashing across their movie screens, perhaps with a modicum of naiveté that,





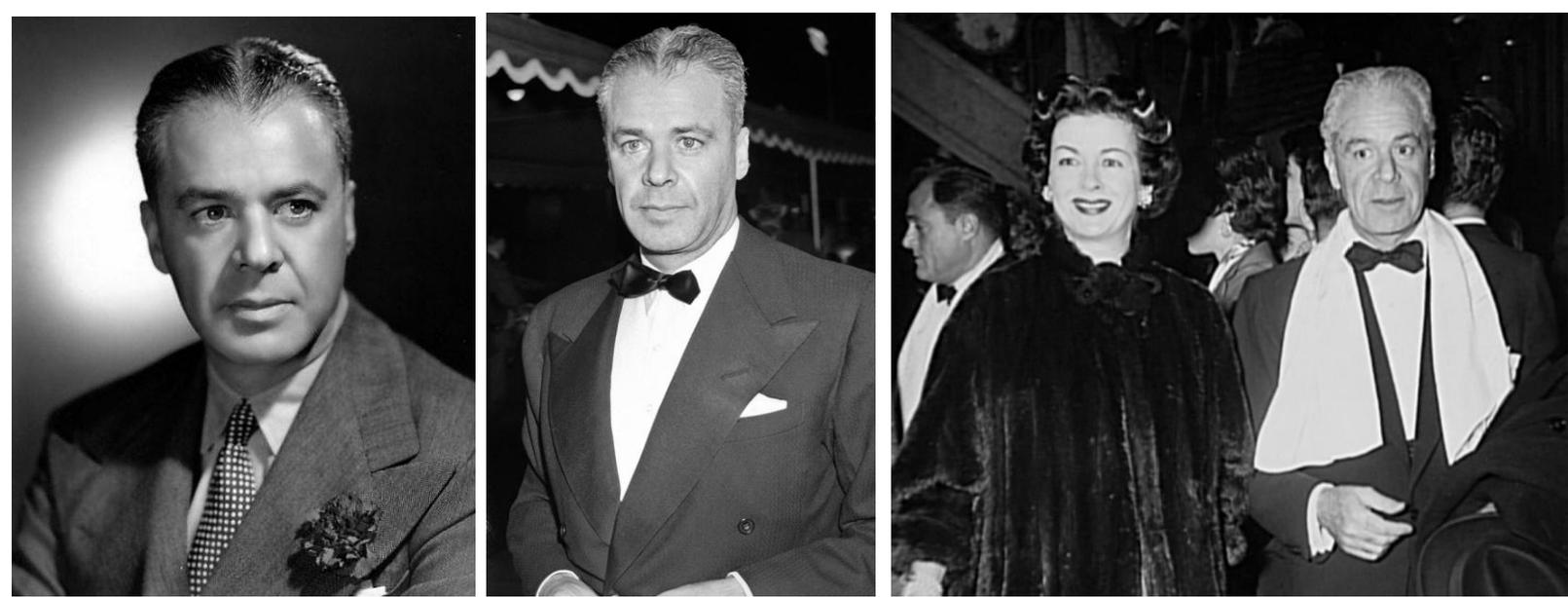
(Above): Cleopatra's three: Theda Bara and Thurston Hall as Marc Antony in the 1917 silent version of **Cleopatra** that emphasized the famed monarch's sexual aura in terms of the movie vamp. Bara's allure, heavily pancaked with harsh dark eye-liner may seem a bit bizarre and over the top from today's vantage, but in her day she was regarded as the epitome of a new kind smoldering sensuality. (Middle): For Cecil B. DeMille's 1934 sound remake, Claudette Colbert sent out decidedly bisexual vibes; a more slinky and refined Egyptian elixir, seen almost constantly caressing a rather phallic scepter, perhaps to insinuate a more uninhibited sexual frustration coursing through her veins. At one point, Colbert's Queen orders her lady in waiting to disrobe and join her in a bath. Made at the cusp of the Production Code, DeMille could get away with such flagrant hedonism. Like the Hollywood musical, the early epics were practically exempt from criticism by the morality police; perhaps because antiquity revealed godlessness at a moment in history before Christ. (Right): Elizabeth Taylor's ill-fated monarch is a curiosity of sorts in that she is neither as overt in her sexual exploits as Bara's incarnation, nor does she ever suggest proclivities other than an obsessive fidelity to two heterosexual relationships presumably divided by many celibate years in between. Her Queen uses sex as a weapon and as a defense; not unlike the real Cleopatra, rumored to have been an exceptional stateswoman who used the boudoir to conquer the boardroom.

unlike all those that had crumbled and turned to dust before it, somehow theirs was an empire destined to reign forever.

There was little reason to believe otherwise. America had emerged careworn but mighty from WWII – an undisputed superpower with its own economic tentacles fast spreading across the hemisphere. At the tail end of the Victorian age the world had given its nod to the model of British efficiency. Now it looked to American ingenuity as holding the deuce in a decisive global game of high stakes poker; a nation eager to share in the promise of their own economic recovery. The dissemination of American culture preceded this pact and had been a very proprietary animal; its popular entertainments dominated by personalities who, in lieu of any genuine aristocracy at home, had morphed into royalty of a different kind; emulated, worshiped and embraced as icons all over the world.

While most of Europe had yet begun to emerge from beyond its still smoldering ruins and thought-numbing loss of life (both civilian and soldier); on the home front, America's sacrifices seemed to be blunted by the fact that its' cities had been spared such modernized wartime devastation and, in fact, had prospered making munitions for the fight against Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. Throughout the 1950s, the American film industry's devotion to Roman, Greek and Egyptian spectacles produced many an elephantine clunker. As America itself remained the envy of the world, Hollywood's reputation as the movie-making Mecca not only endured, but transcended its location on the map to become a mythical Eldorado unlike any other where anything was possible.

Like the Lost City of Atlantis or the riddle behind the sphinx, Hollywood's tenacious professionalism; its ability to procure the greatest stars, the finest story-tellers, the best writers and musicians, all of them assembled under one movie-making culture and churning out approximately fifty-two pictures per year per studio; this galvanic assembly line for disseminating American values everywhere under the guise that the stories being shared were more readily aligned with ancient worlds than its own present philosophizing, largely put forth from a white, affluent European male perspective, created an almost anesthetizing humility.



(Above): producer Walter Wanger – the dapper man about town whose film career never recovered after *Cleopatra*'s perceived failure at the box office. He was born Walter Feutchwanger in San Francisco on July 11, 1894. Wanger's early career at Paramount began in 1921 after he brought the novel, *'The Sheik'* to the studio's attention as a possible vehicle for then rising star Rudolph Valentino. The movie's smashing success catapulted Valentino's reputation as a Lothario into the movie-land stratosphere. From the beginning, an innate bitterness and disillusionment seems to have dogged Wanger's every move. He left Paramount shortly after *The Sheik's* success because he was unhappy with his position at the studio; toiling instead in England as a very successful theater manager for the next three years before Paramount co-founder Jesse L. Lasky recalled him to the studio under renewed and improved terms. That tenure lasted until 1931.

Wanger gave up his \$250,000.00 yearly salary with dreams of becoming an independent producer. It never happened and a stint at Columbia followed. It paid the bills but his work there was generally overlooked and/or eclipsed by the stellar projects afforded their resident wunderkind, Frank Capra. Wanger managed to burn a few bridges after refusing a 1949 Oscar for his *Joan Of Arc* because he was displeased with the Academy for not even nominating the film as Best Picture. For attempting to murder wife, actress Joan Bennett's lover, Jennings Lang, Wanger served four months in prison, returning to produce the iconic sci-fi thriller, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *I Want To Live!* (1958): the latter a highly fictionalized bio pic of Barbara Graham's life story that won actress Susan Hayward her Best Actress Oscar. (Right): flanked by James Cagney and Kim Novak on Oscar night, a teary-eyed Hayward singled out Wanger's contributions on the film for her heartfelt thanks. (Bottom): *Cleopatra* would be Wanger's last movie. Seen here discussing the shoot in Rome with *The Washington Post's* premiere columnist and all-around raconteur, Art Buchwald, Wanger's demeanor appears quite serious. Director Joseph L. Mankiewicz seems devilishly amused.



It is safe to say that without the war America's movie culture would not have been either as prolific, or as immense, or even as wildly popular. The mass exodus from Europe had made Hollywood an immigrant's oasis; the gifted, as well as those with starry-eyed aspirations to *be* gifted, streaming into southern California from all corners, pouring their considerable skills into a singular effort – to entertain. In many ways, Hollywood is the embodiment of that proverbial *'melting pot'* that once typified America's overwhelming solidarity as a nation. That Hollywood itself should shift its focus from stories about America at war's end (unless of course one counts – as one must – its ever-continuing embracement of the Hollywood western; arguably the most consistent money-producing genre of them all); this was perhaps as much a byproduct of the almost immediate gestalt in America's sudden beguilement with cultures beyond its own sunny shores.



Where America before the war had been isolationist in both its political and cultural views, resigned to the idea that everything required to make Eden on earth was within its own grasp, post-war America began a thirst for nations abroad – perhaps not to conquer them, rather acquire a smattering of etiquette not indigenous across the fruited plain. Fueled by stories told by returning soldiers and even more so by the mystery surrounding those who had delayed their own homecoming after the war to







(Previous page): the initial ‘cute meet’ between Caesar (Rex Harrison) and Cleopatra (Elizabeth Taylor) takes place late at night with the surprise arrival of the Queen’s loyal servant, Apollodoros (Cesare Danova) carrying a rug. Inside it is Cleopatra, earlier exiled from the palace by her insanely jealous sibling Ptolemy XIII (Richard Sullivan). Ptolemy’s ‘gift’ to Caesar, the head of his military adversary Pompey, is met with sadness and disgust. Cleopatra repeatedly attempts to forewarn Caesar that Ptolemy intends to murder him within the palace walls. Her flirtatious ways do little except to exacerbate Caesar’s growing impatience with what he perceives as “*smug pretenders to the throne*”. After a particularly long night of military strategizing, Caesar suffers an epileptic seizure and is retrained from inflicting harm upon himself by his loyal man servant, Flavius (George Cole). The first act of Cleopatra is superbly constructed. Mankiewicz seems particularly engaged, his writing clever though never prosaic. Herein, Mankiewicz is immeasurably aided by Harrison’s performance, imbued with a polish and flair for which Harrison’s later movie career was well known. Even when the material he was given is less than impeccable, Harrison’s performances proved to be nothing short of brilliant.

(This page above): SFX technician Johnny Borgese helps an extra with Pompey’s head – a wax model never seen in the movie except above the hairline. Perhaps Mankiewicz thought the effect too gruesome or just too fake for audiences to believe. (Middle): Rex Harrison gives Mankiewicz a Cheshire grin in Spain in 1962. After production has wrapped and **Cleopatra** was already well into the editing process 20th Century-Fox production chief Darryl F. Zanuck recalled cast and crew to El Maria, Spain to reshoot the film’s opener anew after he judged the initial footage as looking cheap. (Right): a more introspective Harrison listens intently to Mankiewicz on the steps of the Roman senate built full scale at Italy’s Cinecitta Studios just prior to the filming of Cleopatra’s triumphant entrance into the city.

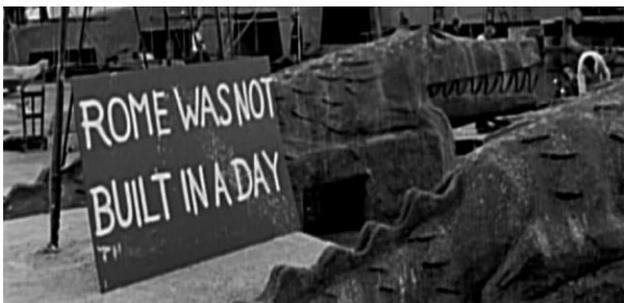
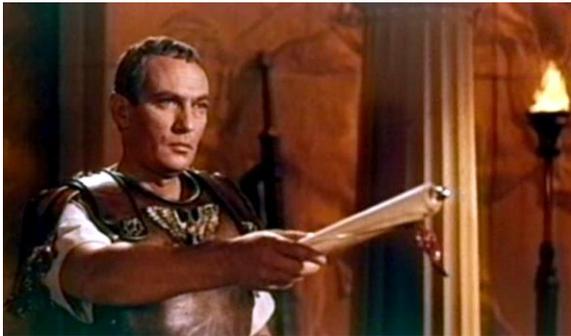
stay on with Uncle Sam’s complicity and financial aid provided by the newly instituted G.I. Bill, history for the layman suddenly extended beyond mere footnotes unearthed from densely-packed volumes mothballed at the local library.

Superficially, Hollywood was America’s goodwill ambassador to the world at large – its celluloid product all-star and glittering; doing more to conjure and maintain that immigrants’ mythology of a country with its streets presumably paved in gold (or ostensibly painted in gold leaf). It all looked very good on paper – or rather, celluloid – except, that in 1949, the U.S. government had begun to intervene in these untouchable monopolistic empires; instituting the anti-trust Consent Decrees that effectively splintered Hollywood’s autonomy. Studios were forced to divest themselves of their theater chains, their music and book publishing apparatuses.

The impact from this divestiture was immediately felt in Hollywood, though it remained unknown to the general public beyond these hallowed gates for quite some time. But it would prove devastating to America’s movie culture in the long run, resulting in the decline and fall of the venerable MGM, the cancellation of ironclad star contracts across the board, and finally, the insane selloff of studio archives (sets and costumes to auction houses and the movies themselves, in some cases purchased outright to fill dead air on late night TV) and last but not least, the demolition of the back lots – those incredibly meticulous recreations of virtually every period in human history, built up over a forty year expansive construction in plywood and pre-molded Celotex (a lightweight and durable plastic precursor to modern-day fiberglass); in short – the absolute implosion of this starlit Mecca. Even today, Hollywood continues to grapple with the remnants from this fallout; what came after it even more of a makeshift and destabilized Babylon.

The government’s interference could not have been more ill-timed. For television, the broadcasting wonder of pre-war America that had been set aside with the advent of the European conflict suddenly emerged after the war like a lion from its cage; offering the consumer a viable alternative to leaving their home on a Saturday night or any other night of the week for that matter. Within two short years of its mass marketed debut in 1950, television effectively cut theater attendance by nearly half.

Ironically, the studios’ collective response to this two-fisted assault was not to join the new technological revolution but instead buck it every step of the way. MGM, the biggest – and arguably, the best of all Hollywood’s dream factories –



(Above, top left): **Cleopatra** in Hollywood – Elizabeth Taylor shakes hands with Fox’s Buddy Adler, to her left, and Cleopatra’s producer, Walter Wanger, signing the one million dollar ‘deal of the decade’; the highest sum ever paid out until then to an actress for a single movie. (Top middle): Director Rouben Mamoulian was mostly famous for coaxing award-winning performances out of temperamental beauties like Greta Garbo. He was an artist with a keen visual sense and a personal friend of Fox’s Spyros Skouras, then head of 20th Century-Fox. Under his tutelage **Cleopatra** promised to be an artistic achievement with old time glamor to boot. (Middle left and center): **Cleopatra** in England: outtake footage of costars Peter Finch and Keith Baxter, cast as Julius Caesar and Octavian respectively. Finch and Taylor had costarred together in 1954’s **Elephant Walk** while Baxter was a noted thespian on London’s West End. Finch hated Cleopatra’s screenplay. It is reported that he would spend hours in Pinewood Studios green room getting paralytic drunk. (Second row from bottom, left): Mamoulian welcomes his star with a bouquet of flowers on the first day of shooting. It was a disaster. Reoccurring bad weather and Taylor’s already ill health robbed the movie of any hope to proceed as planned. (Second row from bottom, middle): Screenwriter Nunnally Johnson was called in to spruce up **Cleopatra**’s dialogue. Nigel Balkan had been the first writer assigned the project. Johnson – Oscar-nominated for his adaptation of **The Grapes of Wrath** (1940) – was brought in at Taylor’s request. However, delay upon delay prevented Johnson from doing anything except cashing his fat check. (Far right): Taylor in one of roughly sixty costume test stills endured during preproduction. Weakened by the damp working conditions, Taylor was often carried to and from the set, her health rapidly deteriorating into a virulent bout of pneumonia that almost claimed her life. Bottom: a composite of Caesar’s arrival into Alexandria – one of the few sequences Mamoulian was able to shoot without his star. Assessing the abysmal gray condition of the sky it looks like more rain is in the forecast – again!



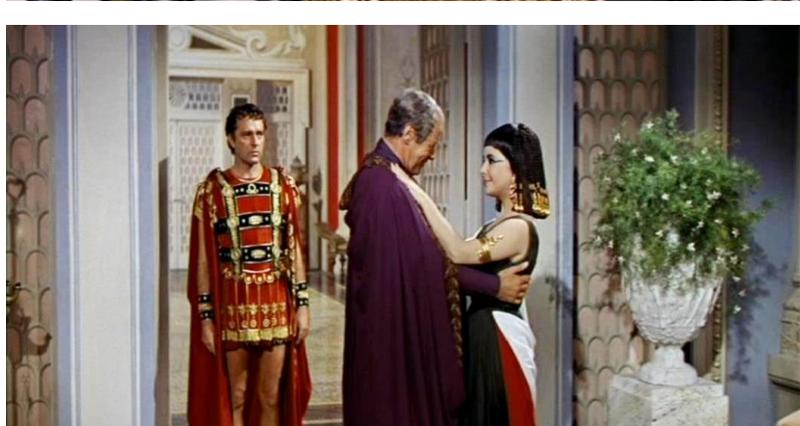
(Above): the Cleopatra that might have been – Joan Collins. **Cleopatra** began life as a modestly budgeted \$2 million sword and sandal quickie. Fox president, Spyros P. Skouras (far right) gave producer Walter Wanger the run of Fox's back to make his movie. In point of fact, the bulldozers had already moved in after Skouras had agreed to a selloff of the property, leveling the studio's iconic plywood facades to make way for Century City's housing development. **Cleopatra** would have been able to take advantage of the property just long enough before whatever sets had been built it suffered the same fate. It didn't happen. Wanger protested the overall cheapening of his pet project and even conducted his own public opinion poll to garner support for his decision to cast Elizabeth Taylor as his star. Taylor, unlike Collins, was an A-list celebrity. Henceforth, **Cleopatra** had to be an A-list production all the way to rival Taylor's stature in the industry. (Middle): Taylor at the famed Hollywood nightclub, The Coconut Grove, flanked by her current husband, producer Michael Todd and future husband, Eddie Fisher. At the time this photo was taken Todd was already well-established in the film industry, having produced the Oscar-winning Best Picture, **Around the World in Eighty Days** (1956). Todd, a rough n' tumble kind of guy, loveable but commanding, is said to have been the one true love in Taylor's turbulent private life. His untimely death in a plane crash left the barn door unlocked, so to speak, allowing Fisher to pursue Taylor and vice versa. Fisher had a lucrative recording contract and variety hour on television. He also happened to be married to actress Debbie Reynolds at the time. The Taylor/Fisher affair branded Elizabeth a home wrecker. CBS dropped Fisher from their primetime programming lineup and his singing career suffered. He was to endure indignation of a different kind when Taylor began her very public affair with Richard Burton in Rome on the relocated set of **Cleopatra**.

literally forbade their roster of talent to appear on the small screen in an attempt to maintain exclusivity and thus force the public into reconsidering their sudden aversion to going to the movies. By the time the studios became involved in producing television serials of their own in the late 1950s and early 60s the damage had already been done; the void more readily filled by fledgling production houses and independents all too eager to take their place. The studios were left with some very expensive real estate and their dwindling coffers. An unease crept into the executive offices; a sense that the beginning of the end was already well under way.

At the same time movies became bigger – literally; with the debut of Cinerama, and later Cinemascope, Todd A-O, VistaVision and Technirama among the earliest in the race. 3D – the equilibrium-altering marvel with its cumbersome polarizing glasses - attempted its own technological revolution; one that barely lasted three years. At a time when Hollywood really couldn't afford to spend more on gimmicks they did exactly the opposite to the point of lavish absurdity and on movies that were increasingly being relied upon to carry the whole load in their domestic gross to ensure that the company could remain afloat to make more of the same the next year. Gone were the B-units that had produced so many lucrative features throughout the 1930s and 40s. Ditto for the newsreel and cartoon departments. In the new Hollywood 'B' belonged on TV, not at the local Bijoux and certainly never again inside cavernous movie palaces like The Roxy or Radio City.

Antiquity seemed ideally suit for this *'bigger is better'* philosophy; with its cast of thousands sumptuously costumed and sandwiched into gargantuan sets. But the fallout from the war had created yet another new consideration for the aging moguls; audiences' demand for authenticity. Where once a painted backdrop and/or matte painting had been enough to sustain the belief that both cast and crew were cavorting in Paris or Rome or Vienna it suddenly was inconceivable that any movie – particularly an epic – would be shot inside a soundstage or on the back lot. Some tried and were lambasted by the critics and all but ignored by audiences for their efforts. No - now movies had to go where the actual story had taken place. Thus, Paramount found itself funding Cecil B. DeMille's lavish excursion to Egypt for the remake of **The Ten Commandments** (1956); MGM, paying out handsomely for William Wyler and **Ben-Hur** (1959) filmed at Rome's Cinecitta Studios. **Ben-Hur** is, in retrospect, the watershed; a huge and popular thing imbued with 'the Wyler touch'; the director's unique ability to create an intimate family melodrama from its unwieldy trappings. Tipping the scales at a cost of \$15 million, it earned back an even more staggering \$75 million in its initial release (and this at a time when movie tickets cost .53 cents). It also broke the mold at Oscar time, winning an unprecedented 11 statuettes.







(Previous pages): having exiled Plotemy from Egypt and made Cleopatra the undisputed ruler of the land, Caesar is seduced to remain in Egypt long after his military purpose there has ended. In Rome, Marc Antony (Richard Burton) attempts to do damage control with Caesar's ever-loyal wife, Calpurnia (Gwen Watford) who has already learned of her husband's Egyptian marriage to the Queen and of the birth of their son and heir apparent to the Roman throne. Caesar has been made dictator for life – a title falling short of his expectations and incurring his displeasure. Cleopatra's triumphant arrival in Rome three years after the birth of Caesarian (Loris Loddi) is a grand spectacle met with the blind-sided approval and near hysteria. "Your queen seems to have conquered the people," Marc Antony tells Cleopatra's goodwill ambassador, Sogene (Hume Cronyn), to which he smugly replies, "The people?...oh, yes."

Caesar is beloved by the masses but despised by a select group of senators who plot and later carry out his murder in broad daylight. The brutal slaying is revealed to Cleopatra in a fiery vision. Later that same evening, as she observes the smoke from the pyre where Caesar's remains are being publicly cremated, Cleopatra admonishes Antony, even as he promises to avenge the killing by hunting down and bringing to justice all those responsible for the crime. **Cleopatra's** first act finale just prior to the intermission is a ravishing melodrama indeed; the pageantry arguably unrivaled by any movie before or since. (This page, left): archers rehearse with bow and arrow on Cinecitta's back lot. At right, the sequence as it appears in the finished film.

Ben-Hur's success was not lost on Walter Wanger – a dapper and prolific movie producer from the 1940s whose career had been derailed in 1950 after an impassioned shooting incident involving Wanger, his wife, actress Joan Bennett and Bennett's agent, Jennings Lang who was having an affair with Bennett at the time. Lang survived the ordeal, though arguably without the ability to ever consummate another affair, while Wanger had gone to prison for four months.

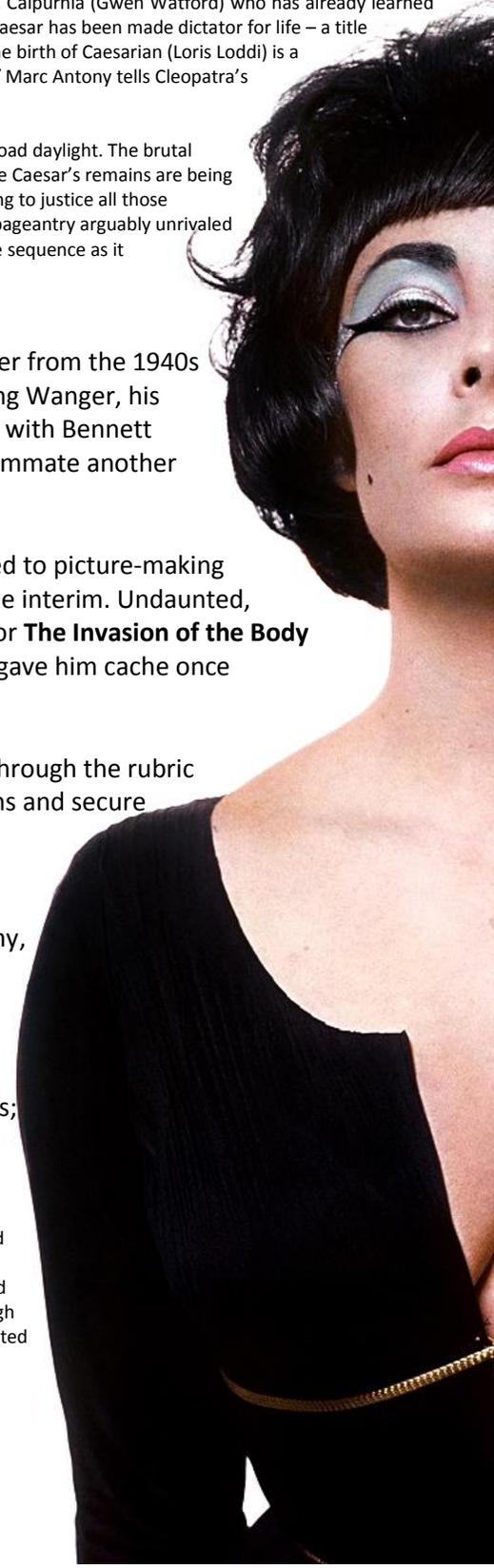
After his incarceration, Wanger - who remained Bennett's husband until 1965 – returned to picture-making only to discover that the doors of opportunity had been padlocked from the inside in the interim. Undaunted, Wanger girded his resolve and gathered together a B-unit at Allied Artists responsible for **The Invasion of the Body Snatchers** (1956) and a surprise Oscar-winning hit, **I Want To Live** (1958) that instantly gave him cache once again in Hollywood.

There are really two ways of reflecting upon what happened next; the first is arguably through the rubric of kismet – all the stars perfectly aligning to green light both Wanger's rising aspirations and secure him his place as one of Hollywood's premiere producers. The other reflection is far less flattering. But however one chooses to remember the moment, history is irrefutable.

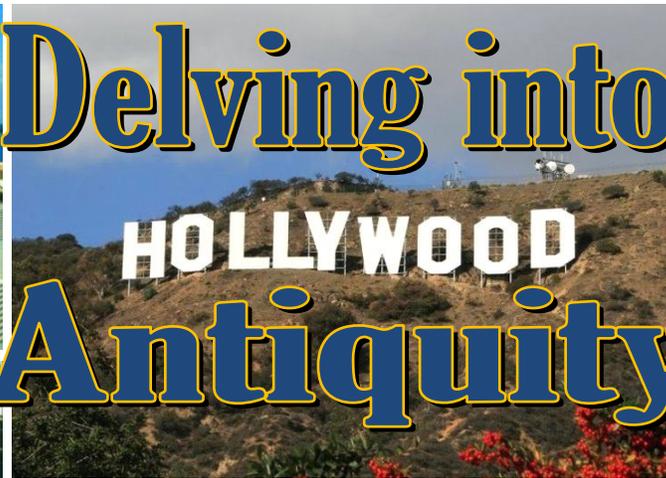
Wanger had come upon the concept to produce his own big screen epic: and not just any, but one that would ultimately threaten his newfound reputation as well as that of writer/director Joseph L. Mankiewicz.

His vision for the resulting film was spectacular. Its execution would border on the titanic. But **Cleopatra** would also bring the once venerable 20th Century-Fox to its knees; push the studio to the brink of self-destruction with the very real prospect that it might have to close its doors forever.

(Right): the Cleopatra 'look' briefly became a runway sensation, its bias-cut, form-fitting, cleavage-revealing fashions and geometric haircuts extolled by Vidal Sasson for his Spring 1963 fashion lineup. Cosmetics giant, Revlon also boarded the band wagon, creating new makeups, particularly sparkled gold and turquoise eye-shadow. Model Suzy Parker introduced the trend as 'uncivilized', the most stunning look in almost 1000 years. Fox's own publicity machinery also kicked into high gear with TV promotions of every kind. NBC's **The Tonight Show** even hosted a live telecast featuring Burt Parks, conducted just outside New York's famed Rivoli Theater.



Delving into HOLLYWOOD Antiquity



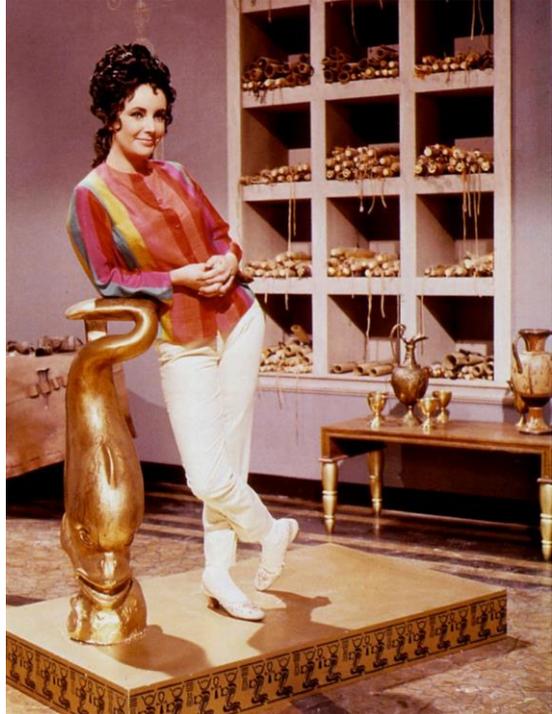
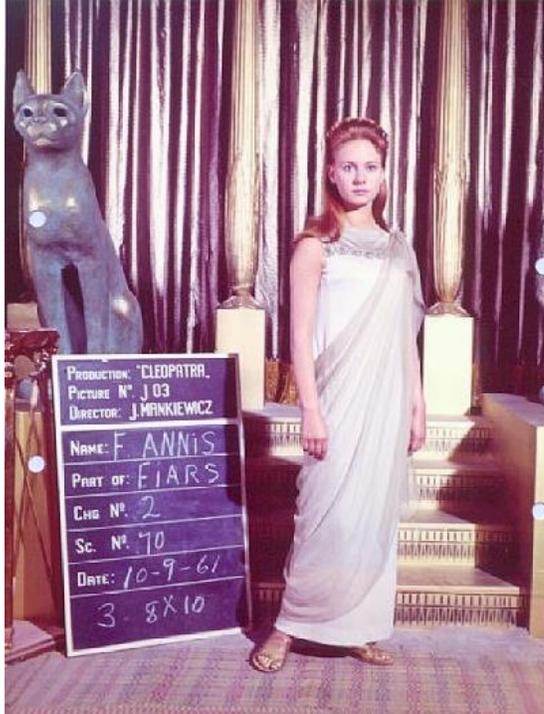
(Above): the ancient worlds of Rome and Egypt begin to take on a very concrete form on the back lots of Rome's Cinecittà Studios. Built by Benito Mussolini before the war in 1937, and exploited to promote fascist propaganda during WWII, Cinecittà was in a shambles by war's end; converted briefly into a refugee camp before being shuttered. An infusion of foreign investment, mostly from America, retooled the studio in the mid-1950s. William Wyler shot most of **Ben-Hur** (1959) at Cinecittà. The studio had only a limited number of craftsmen available at Mankiewicz's disposal. Many who helped build these incredibly massive facades were hired externally for their construction skills. The amount of plaster and cement used in the construction effort dwarfed what had been needed to build Rome's then new Olympic stadium; by far the largest post war building project ever undertaken at the studio. After **Cleopatra**, Cinecittà continued to host American-funded movie production; most notably, 1965's **The Agony and the Ecstasy** and more recently, 2002's **Gangs of New York**.

(Middle): the famed Hollywood sign situated on the rather barren Mt. Lee overlooking Los Angeles, California. Erected there in 1923 by Woodruff and Shoults, a pair of real estate developers to help promote their latest residential project, the famed landmark originally contained the word 'land' immediately following its namesake. In 1940, the sign's caretaker, Albert Kothe accidentally drove his truck through the 'H' while inebriated. While Kothe survived the ordeal, the 'H' remained in a delicate state of disrepair for some time thereafter. Aspiring but failed starlet, Peg Entwistle started the suicide craze, leaping to her death from these thirteen 30 ft. white letters in 1932. Since then, many others have followed suit. By the late 1970s the Hollywood sign was in a pathetic state of disrepair; both the 'H' and second 'O' having crumbled to the point of being virtually unrecognizable. In 1978, rocker Alice Cooper donated a new 'O' and the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce when to work fund-raising to restore the rest of the sign. But the letters seen today are not the originals; actually 45 ft. likenesses made of steel; the Bay Cal Commercial Painting Co. stripping each down to their more durable metal bases and repainting them bright white in 2005. None of this has anything to do with **Cleopatra**, but it remains a fascinating bit of Hollywood history nonetheless.

For fifty years the infamy of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's **Cleopatra** (1963) has effectively obscured most any of its virtues. By design **Cleopatra** was a celebration of production designer, John DeCuir (whose Roman forum set alone was actually one and a half times grander in scale than the actual forum because DeCuir felt the real forum was just not all that impressive). But **Cleopatra** also spoke to Mankiewicz's aspirations to make an epic of scope and quality that he firmly believed would have mass appeal as genuine cinema art. The director toiled night and day, exhausting his own resources as well as those of 20th Century-Fox; the latter nearly bankrupted by the time the film reached theaters where it could never be expected to recoup its initial outlay of \$40 million.

Even before cameras began rolling in Rome **Cleopatra** had already become an epic three times more expensive than **Ben-Hur** (1959) thanks to an extraordinary false start in England and the escalating delays brought about by its star, Elizabeth Taylor's failing health. Rounded up for today's inflation, **Cleopatra** cost Fox roughly \$440 million of which less than half it earned back during its theatrical engagement – despite the sale of tickets months in advance.

Even if the final cut had not veered wildly off course from Mankiewicz's original concept, **Cleopatra** quickly acquired a negative reputation for the perversity of its expenditures. Cast and crew had remained on salary even when they were not working; chauffeur-driven cars being supplied for leisure and a mineral water bill that could have bankrolled a small third world nation. The daily balance sheets left quietly unchecked after the untimely death of Mankiewicz's production advisor



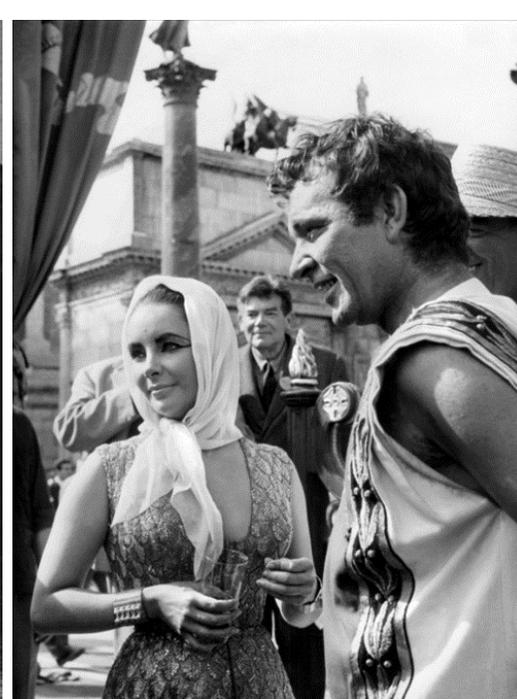
(Above): One of Vittorio Nino Novarese's over 200 costume design sketches made for the film – this one for Marc Antony's imperial robe of state. The exquisiteness of Novarese's artwork was faithfully recreated by seamstresses at Cinecittà; most of whom had come to work on the film from Hollywood. (Middle): Francesca Annis poses in her diaphanous gown for this costume still as Cleopatra's ever-faithful lady-in-waiting, Eiras. Such stills were used as a guide to ensure continuity from day to day when redressing lesser cast for their roles. (Right): Elizabeth Taylor, looking out of step in contemporary clothes but incredibly pleased with herself inside the 'counting room' set never seen in the finished film. Perhaps she's suddenly realized this is the day she's gone into overdraft at \$50,000 per week!

Johnny Johnston, **Cleopatra's** utter lack of budgetary supervision and costly delays due to weather, also to satisfy crabby cameraman Leon Shamroy's esthetic eye; these attest to a terrifying level of corporate mismanagement.

Still, it might have all worked out in the film's favor had Mankiewicz been afforded the luxury of time, and granted permission to release two separate movies following a model established by imminent playwright George Bernard Shaw; the first, mirroring Shaw's *'Caesar and Cleopatra'*, the second, *'Anthony and Cleopatra'*. At just a little under eight hours there was enough usable footage to achieve this directorial goal in the editing room. But Spyros P. Skouras, then head of Fox, was leery of this high concept for several reasons, not the least of which was the studio's desperate need for a hit movie in theaters to rebuild its ailing coffers.

The torrid extramarital affair between costars Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor had been tabloid fodder for months – the infamy of the press coverage afforded the lovers also making **Cleopatra** a very high profile and widely anticipated release. Skouras was eager to capitalize on this before the public fascination cooled. Regrettably, two books chronicling the turbulent behind-the-scenes chaos of the film's lengthy shoot in Rome; *The Cleopatra Papers* and *My Life with Cleopatra*, released just prior to the world premiere did much to dampen the movie's reputation. **Cleopatra** quickly degenerated into an easy target for pop camp and rank parody. But even these assaults paled in comparison to Elizabeth Taylor's outspoken condemnation, openly admitting to the press that *"the final humiliation was having to go and see it."* Taylor, who had initially refused to do the movie, had profited handsomely by the arrangement; reaping overdraft in the hundreds of thousands in addition to her already agreed upon million dollar salary (the highest ever then paid to a star for a single picture).

During the movie's false start at Pinewood Studios in England, Taylor had almost succumbed to a virulent bout of pneumonia; an emergency tracheotomy performed to save her life. In transitioning from England to Italy the production gave up its Edie Plan tax breaks, jettisoned most of its cast and crew, and, was begun anew from the ground up; its sets scrapped and demolished, rising again on an even grander scale on Cinecittà's back lot. Under duress, Mankiewicz toiled day and night to will a masterpiece from the staggering amount of raw footage, cobbling together a truncated road show further butchered after his departure to accommodate the smaller venues. Yet even at 320 min. **Cleopatra** occasionally seemed bloated and

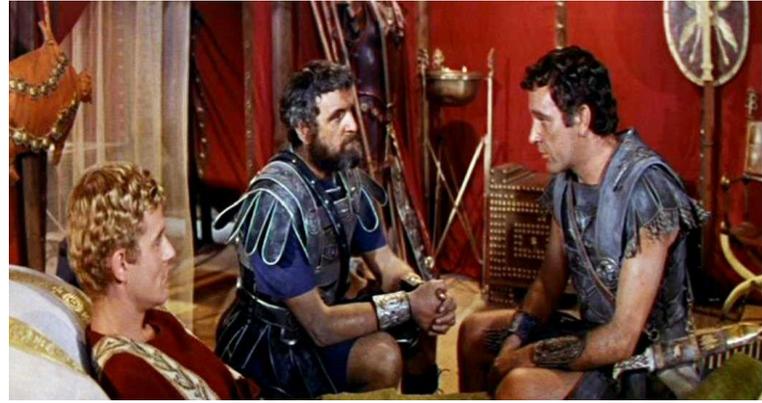


(This page): difficult to say exactly when the relationship between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton officially transgressed from casual co-stars, to mere friendship, to flaming-hot love affair, but soon the couple was seen everywhere; unashamed to be caught cuddling and cooing in between takes on the set, fondling each other's hair and fixing each other's makeup; even taking off for a weekend's getaway aboard a yacht Burton rented expressly for the occasion. Taylor was, of course, married to Eddie Fisher at the time while Burton had a long-standing marriage of convenience with the mother of his child, Sybil (pictured at the very bottom), who presumably tolerated such marital infidelities without complaint. Burton is rumored to have slept with a new woman every other day; his list of conquests tallying more than 2,500 by 1976. Truth or myth? Who can say? After Sybil learned of his tryst with Taylor she opted to fly home to New York, threatening divorce proceedings. Burton countered by breaking off the affair with Taylor, leaving the actress emotionally distraught. At one point she threatened to call Sybil herself and divulge the details; causing Burton to give Elizabeth a black eye. Reconciled, the pair rekindled their passion anew. They were eventually married in 1964. The public's fascination with the couple never waned. Taylor and Burton were frequently costarred throughout the 1960s – but the movies were artistically uneven at best, playing up the turbulence the tabloids readily expounded upon as part and parcel of their private lives. The couple were divorced in 1974, then remarried in 1975 and finally divorced for good the following year. Very messy, indeed.

meandering. Variety's snap assessment of the film as *"a series of coming attractions for something that will never come"* did little to quell the initial giddy anxiety inside Fox's corporate boardroom; a nervous friction easily rivaled by the film's catastrophic failure at box office.

Mankiewicz had committed body and soul to the point of physical collapse and the strain had taken everything out of him. Now, it all seemed hardly worth the effort. *"Perhaps you know something I don't,"* Mankiewicz quipped to Burt Parks, MC at the New York World Premiere after being afforded a glowing accolade about the general importance and overall stature of his movie. It was a prophetic epitaph. For although the careers of costars Rex Harrison, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton would emerge from this financial debacle virtually unscathed, the reputations of producer Walter Wanger and Mankiewicz would never recover. Neither worked in movies again.

The irony, of course is that in re-viewing **Cleopatra** today - some fifty years removed from all the gossip and hype - there is a great deal to admire and absorb; much more than either the critics or audiences of its day gave the film or Mankiewicz credit. Despite the studio's additional tampering, whittling down the run time even further to accommodate multiple showings, **Cleopatra** is





(Above): A director hard at work. Mankiewicz had originally resisted helming **Cleopatra**'s elephantine production. In point of fact, it wasn't his kind of movie. But once invested Mankiewicz toiled night and day: on occasion even pulling 20 hour shifts and taking injections throughout the shoot to keep him going. It is an understatement to say that **Cleopatra** was a drain on Mankiewicz's health. At one point, Mankiewicz had taken so many shots that his doctor couldn't seem to find a new area to penetrate his skin, accidentally hitting and paralyzing his sciatic nerve. Doubled over and having to be carried to and from the set, Mankiewicz persisted; spending the necessary time with cast and crew, ultimately to ensure that his vision reached the screen. (At left): going over the scene with Richard Burton where Antony finally agrees to relinquish the various Roman territories under his command to Cleopatra. (Middle): helping Rex Harrison to create the role of Julius Caesar during the reshoot in El Maria Spain in late 1962. After production had wrapped and editing was well under way, Zanuck ordered Mankiewicz, principle cast and crew back for a retake on the movie's opening sequence where Caesar learns that Pompey has fled to Egypt. Fellow actor Andrew Keir, cast as Agrippa, is barely glimpsed giving Harrison's shoulders a massage. (Right): contemplating Cleopatra's triumphant entrance into Rome atop the Roman senate steps with crabby cameraman, Leon Shamroy. Initially planned to be photographed early on in the production schedule, Shamroy informed Mankiewicz that the angle of the earth's rotation in relation to the sun was creating cavernous shadows across the set. The sequence, already begun, was scrapped – the shoot delayed by six months to satisfy Shamroy's keen cinematographer's eye.

perhaps *'the most influential film of the sixties'*; an assessment first offered by eminent commercial artist Andy Warhol.

To his dying day Mankiewicz pleaded with Fox – unsuccessfully - to reassemble the story into two separate films. Mankiewicz himself did not live to see the day. But in 1995 Fox launched a worldwide search for **Cleopatra**'s missing footage – nearly three hours in all, long since excised and now – regrettably – presumed to have been discarded by the studio in a cost-cutting effort to 'manage' their archives in the mid-1970s. What a thrill it would have been to have the opportunity to re-judge **Cleopatra** on Mankiewicz's terms as the movie masterpiece(s) he had originally envisioned; two super colossuses instead of one preposterous and occasionally leaden, claptrap.

Cleopatra had been a resounding success for Fox in 1917; a silent screen classic starring Theda Bara. In 1934 Cecil B. DeMille melodrama starring sultry Claudette Colbert had once again set cash registers ringing around the world. Yet the decision to remake **Cleopatra** in the fall of 1961 and on such a titanic scale had followed a very insidious run of bad luck for Fox. Even with John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley at their disposal Fox had struggled to turn a profit. Now the studio needed a hit; mega preferred, but sizable at least, if Fox was to continue making movies. With television uniformly cutting theater attendance by nearly forty percent and the added stress of divestiture from its once prominent theater chain, Spyros Skouras had compounded the exodus of talent and real estate by liquidating Fox's back lot to a high-rise developer. Yet even this financial reprieve was temporary at best.

In its initial phase of preplanning and preproduction **Cleopatra** seemed destined to be made as a modestly budgeted (under two million) sword and sandal quickie starring Fox contract player, Joan Collins. Two mitigating factors prevented the project from proceeding as planned; one - Walter Wanger's driving ambition and two; a gross naiveté on Skouras' part and his belief that a heftier investment would yield even more impressive box office returns. As **Cleopatra**'s budget swelled to \$5 million Wanger pursued Elizabeth Taylor for its star, a proposition Taylor thought ludicrous until Wanger willingly agreed to her demand for a million dollar salary. Taylor was frankly shocked; even more so when her additional edicts to shoot the picture abroad, and, in Todd A-O with her own choice of director were also accepted at face value. Regrettably, the English shoot was anything but smooth. Perpetual rainfall took its toll on both the paper mache sets and Taylor's health. Unable to distill clarity from the chaos, director Rouben Mamoulian was fired, the film's cast – except for Taylor – dismissed, and Joseph L. Mankiewicz brought in. Shifting locales from London to Rome generated heat of a different kind when Taylor began carrying on with co-star Richard Burton.



(Above): a production under way. (Top): a composite of Cleopatra's coronation with Mankiewicz seated off to the side, far right) and Taylor (at far left) quietly observed by the high priestess, Pamela Brown. Shamroy is dead center setting up a medium close-up. (Bottom row): whether helping Elizabeth Taylor ride atop a towering black onyx sphinx or teaching an extra how to dismount an elephant (bottom middle left), **Cleopatra's** production created immense challenges; some not met without a modicum of disappointment and even danger. The aforementioned extra, barely clothed in the final sequence accidentally slipped from her perch, the elephant's razor-backed skin sheering off her skin along her buttocks and outer thighs. Rushed to hospital, the sequence was completed with a double who weighed more, thus causing Richard Burton (who was to help in the dismount) to topple backward. Thankfully, his fall was cushioned by a bank of flowers. (Middle right): shooting Antony's confession of love in Cleopatra's boudoir. (Right): Burton looking dapper but sullen in this impromptu photograph taken on the set.

Taylor was no stranger to scandal. In 1958, shortly after the death of her third husband, producer Michael Todd, she had begun a then notorious affair with popular singer, Eddie Fisher, who was married to actress Debbie Reynolds at the time. Todd and Fisher had been best friends. But when Fisher rushed to be with Elizabeth in New York, presumably while the widow was still recovering from her grief, the sudden four day long disappearance of the pair took on the flavor of a very dangerous liaison. After learning of their affair Reynolds gave Fisher some sound advice. *"She's too big for you,"* Debbie told Eddie, *"It won't last."* And so it didn't.

The Taylor/Burton affair began inauspiciously when he arrived on the set suffering the shakes from a night of heavy drinking. Previously Taylor had found Burton brash and arrogant. But now, giddy and feeling ever so slightly insecure as he took a cup of coffee into his nervous hands, he seemed to arouse the 'mother instinct' in her. The ire created by the Burton/Taylor affair was an entirely different matter. While the Catholic Arch Diocese made vain threats about revoking Taylor's passport, and the pair was denounced on the floor of the U.S. senate – particularly Elizabeth, whose sanity was even called into question – the couple was seen and photographed all around Rome, not terribly conspicuous about concealing their rendezvous from the paparazzi flashbulbs.

Joseph L. Mankiewicz had little time, or opportunity for that matter, to worry about what Taylor and Burton's flagrante delicto was doing to the reputation of his movie. Forced into the director's chair before a satisfactory screenplay had been written, Mankiewicz directed scenes he had penciled in the night before by day, then wrote more scenes that same night after screening the daily rushes. The toll the film was taking on Mankiewicz's health was becoming quite obvious to those nearest him, including actor Hume Cronyn who, at one point seriously worried that Mankiewicz might collapse from exhaustion or worse.



(Above): Mankiewicz with his production designer John DeCuir, whom he had labeled '*the master builder*'. Indeed, DeCuir never thought small and worked at a time when such grandiosity could be achieved within the studio system. DeCuir was an undisputed master at set design; his other movies including **There's No Business Like Show Business** (1956), **South Pacific** (1958) and **Hello Dolly!** (1969). What makes **Cleopatra's** production so rare is that virtually all of its 78 sets are full scale and shot mostly without the benefit of mattes painted on glass to extend the upper portions of the set as was traditionally done. (Middle): DeCuir grins on the steps of Alexandria's towering palace. He built a Roman forum three times the original's size simply because he felt the real forum was just not all that impressive. The craftsmanship that went into making all of this plywood and Celotex look like real marble and stone is impeccable. Even upon close inspection, visitors to the set were left marveling at the accuracy of its recreations. (Right): the vast Roman set where Cleopatra makes her triumphant entrance, populated with extras and camera crew in the foreground, awaiting the Queen's mind-bogglingly lavish debut.

In the meantime, **Cleopatra** had slowly begun to spiral out of control. Falling behind schedule and going way over budget, Mankiewicz endured constant threats from the studio, that they might either cancel the movie or simply fire him. Such filibustering added strain to an already unwieldy production. Extras grumbled about their skimpy costumes and the hot sun. At some point Skouras, who had been flying back and forth from Los Angeles to Rome with his worry beads while incessantly fretting over the way he was expected to explain away **Cleopatra's** overages to Fox's stockholders, asked Mankiewicz for a final budget; the monumental – though never disclosed - figure quoted by the director only a vague ballpark of where the movie's final tally was headed. Unable to go to the shareholders with this princely sum, Skouras instead indulged in a bit of his own creative book-keeping and elected to show the stockholders reels of footage in an attempt to quell their fears. His stagnation of the real debacle unraveling in Rome would get Skouras booted out of the executive suite, though not just yet.

Cleopatra is basically the story of three formidable titans doomed to a notorious quagmire in history. We first meet Julius Caesar (Rex Harrison) in his final military campaign against the forces of Pompey. Having secured a decisive victory, Caesar is forced to pursue Pompey to the port city of Alexandria, Egypt for an audience with the joint rulers of the land: Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII (Richard O'Sullivan) and his sister, Cleopatra (Elizabeth Taylor). Caesar quickly discovers that Ptolemy has already formulated a palace coup forcing Cleopatra into exile. Ptolemy makes Caesar a gift of Pompey's severed head; a gruesome spoil of war that does not gain Caesar's favor.

Later, Cleopatra reenters the palace, disguised in a rug slung over the shoulder of her trusted protector, Apollodorus (Cesare Danova). She warns Caesar that her brother's forces have his quarters surrounded, intent on murdering him. In response, Caesar orders his Centurions to burn the Egyptian fleet. The fire spreads to the city, destroying the library where many sacred documents, including the original remnants of the Bible are stored. Cleopatra is outraged. Ptolemy's forces attack. Yet Caesar's brilliant military strategies keep them at bay. Ptolemy and his lord chamberlain, Theodotos (Herbert Berghof) are brought to justice and sentenced to death for their assassination attempts and Cleopatra is shortly thereafter crowned the undisputed Queen of Egypt.

Cleopatra's happiness is tied up with Caesar; a bond made more precarious for the Romans when their illegitimate son, Caesarion (Loris Loddi) is born. Caesar's pride and acceptance of the child as his heir becomes a scandal for Rome heatedly debated in the Senate. Two years pass. Caesar is made dictator of Rome – a ceremonial post that falls short of his expectations to be king; an anathema to his people. Nevertheless, Caesar sends for Cleopatra who arrives resplendent in a lavish procession that instantly garners the adulation of the Roman people. Despite symbols of foreboding from both his wife Calpurnia (Gwen Watford) and Cleopatra herself, the latter employing mysticism and fire to see the future, Caesar enters the Senate where he is brutally stabbed to death by twelve senators.



(Above): generally the purpose of publicity stills snapped on the set is to recapture moments from the movie in freeze frame to be circulated in advance of the movie in promotional materials and to help build up the public's appetite for the scene as it appears in the pending release. But a good many of the gorgeous color reproductions made available for **Cleopatra** show cast and crew at candid moments with their guard down. Take the photo at top left, with Burton relaxed and smiling while Taylor's gaze reveals hidden affections for the man rather than the character he is playing. In the movie, this sequence is punctuated by a virulent and very mutual animosity, the pair verbally sparring as she belittles him and he ridicules her. (Middle): Taylor looking tired and ever so slightly bored in between takes of Cleopatra's coronation. (Right): a seductive pose from behind a translucent curtain in Cleopatra's boudoir. By the time this costume change occurs in the film the affair between Marc Antony and the Queen of the Nile has not only cooled, but reached its penultimate self-destruction. Neither Taylor nor Burton's characters have the desire to smile.

Caesar's nephew Octavian Caesar Augustus (Roddy McDowell) is appointed heir apparent, tendering Cleopatra's position in Rome tentative at best and highly volatile at its worst. Marc Antony (Richard Burton) spirits the queen and her young son away on a barge, promising to avenge Caesar. Two years later Antony's mission is accomplished. He has caught and put to death all responsible for Caesar's murder and established a second triumvirate with Octavian. The Roman Empire is divided. Antony takes control of the eastern provinces and, like Caesar before him, makes pilgrimage to Egypt where he too finds passion in the queen's arms. Cleopatra is consumed by her love for Antony and equally devoured by a venomous rage when she learns he has returned to his wife Octavia (Jean Marsh). Hence, when Antony returns to Egypt many months later on a military campaign in Parthia, Cleopatra coolly denies him an audience; eventually agreeing to a *détente* in Tarsus aboard her royal barge.

There, Antony becomes a piteous and slovenly drunk. Cleopatra exploits the moment to make a fool of him in public. Bursting into her bedchamber for a night of violent love-making, news of Antony's seduction reaches Octavian who uses the affair to smear Antony's good name back in Rome. Antony is forced to grovel at the queen's behest; an acquiescence that includes a divorce from his wife. Branded 'the Egyptian whore' by Octavian, who uses the circumstances of Antony's will – that he should be buried in Egypt/not Rome – for his own campaign of war against Egypt, Rome's forces begin their preparations to march on Alexandria; a decision stirred into near religious fervor when Octavian publicly murders the ever-loyal Egyptian Ambassador, Sosigenes (Hume Cronyn) on the Senate steps.

The naval Battle at Actium decimates Antony's legions. His devoted second in command, Ruffio (Martin Landau) commits suicide. Cleopatra stirs Antony to challenge Octavian's forces on Egyptian soil – a battle already lost in Antony's mind and affirmed when the Romans refuse to fight Antony, but instead regard him as a pathetic figure of fun. Disgraced Antony returns to the palace where Apollodorus - believing him unworthy of the queen - convinces Antony that Cleopatra has died, whereupon Antony falls on his own sword. Octavian conquers the city without bloodshed. But his plans to return to Rome in triumph with Cleopatra as his slave are thwarted when she arranges to be bitten by a poisonous asp. Infuriated, Octavian asks Cleopatra's devoted servant, Charmian (Isabelle Cooley), who has also been bitten and lays dying at her queen's feet, if the deed was done 'well' to which Charmian replies, *"Extremely well, as befitting of the last of so many noble rulers."*



(Above): Elizabeth Taylor's various makeup applications were in constant need of a touch up. The stiflingly hot conditions caused mascara to run, foundation to peel and lipstick to fade. Fitted with absurdly lavish headdresses or elaborately beaded wigs, Taylor must have sweat profusely throughout the shoot, none of it miraculously showing for a second on film. Particularly in the middle photograph, Taylor's Queen is as imperious as she appears physically flawless.

Cleopatra is an undeniably resplendent epic – perhaps the last of its kind. Yet, it is not like other epics of its vintage, but rather something of an impressively overwrought and overproduced soap opera; its central appeal still the rumored badinage between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. The acting throughout is very fine; the production values finer still, and Mankiewicz's direction, although curiously uncustomary from his usual, nevertheless more than serviceable with the material. Yet, **Cleopatra** never seems to attain the sort of immortality afforded epics like **The Ten Commandments** (1956) or **Ben-Hur** (1959). Perhaps the absence of a religious subtext is to blame. The 1934 version of **Cleopatra** had done more than merely hint at Paganism. But the 1963 remake never concerns itself with anything more, or perhaps even better than this romantic ménage a trois.

Rex Harrison is a formidable presence in the first half of the movie. The void created by his absence immediately following the intermission is never entirely filled by Richard Burton, an impressive actor to be sure and arguably then considered a successor to Harrison. But his Marc Antony is a lumbering, heart sore and very weak-kneed sister to Harrison's towering figurehead. Also, it remains one of the movie's many oddities that the smoldering heat so obviously generated by the Burton/Taylor affair behind the scenes never escalates to anything greater than embers on the expansive Todd A-O screen; the couple's slinky embraces and tender pas deux bested by their backstage reputations as red-hot lovers.

Without question, the real star of **Cleopatra** is John DeCuir's production design; utterly regal and meticulously researched down to the last detail. Regrettably, here too the spectacle is distilled into a sort of absurd fashion parade with the antiquity spilling over into the then contemporary high-trend fashion marketplace; endlessly aped and exploited by clothing designers and makeup companies.

To say that Mankiewicz's involvement on **Cleopatra** instantly elevates the film's potential from B-grade quickie to A-list colossus is a bit much, but there is no denying that the buzz in Hollywood then anticipated **Cleopatra** becoming one of the greatest movie epics of all time. Tragically, this never happened. What began as a ten week scheduled shoot in Rome quickly escalated into a ten month ordeal buffered by bad timing and ill-planning. At one point, it was estimated that the delays were adding \$70,000 of debt to the movie's bottom line per day, with Elizabeth Taylor's overtime alone costing the studio \$50,000 a week. Hence, the obvious virtues of the production were being submarined by its grotesque budgetary mismanagement; a sentiment echoed elsewhere in the corporate boardroom and slowly trickling out to the press. Regrettably, the responsibility entirely rested on Mankiewicz's shoulders – an overwhelming and daunting ordeal that unfortunately becomes visibly apparent in the finished film.





(Previous page): After an absence of several years, Marc Antony returns for an audience with the Queen. However, in the interim he has incurred her wrath by marrying Octavian's sister to appeal to Rome. Barging into Cleopatra's throne room unannounced with Rufio (Martin Landau), Antony demands to be seen and heard. Cleopatra explains, "You come before me as a suppliant, therefore you will assume a suppliant's role...you will kneel – on your knees!" Begrudgingly, Antony complies and is shortly thereafter informed by Cleopatra that in exchange for the badly needed funds he requires he will agree to secede to Egypt all of the Roman territories currently under his command. "You ask for one third the Roman empire?!?" Antony mutters in disbelief. "Put another way," Cleopatra gloats, "I give you two thirds." In Rome, the senate is locked in heated debate over where Lord Antony's loyalty remains. Is he a noble warrior bent on keeping the peace, or a cuckold being manipulated by the woman Octavian (Roddy McDowell) has branded as Antony's Egyptian whore. After Antony decides to remain in Egypt, and in fact relinquishes the territories to her, Octavian insights war against Egypt. He is given the spear of warfare by his peers and marches proudly to the senate steps where the people are calling out for blood. "Where is Egypt?" Octavian chants. The crowd points in the general direction, just as Sogenese (Hume Cronyn) attempts to stave off the fervor for conflict. Instead, he is murdered by Octavian who thrusts his spear into the ambassador's chest from the senate steps. (Above): a grip holds a clapboard as Mankiewicz stands off to the side with Elizabeth Taylor (only seen from the back). In Mankiewicz's original edit this deleted sequence was meant to be our introduction to Cleopatra, seen living in exile at a camp far removed from her palace walls. In being forced to prune his movie down from a five hour rough cut to the four hour and thirteen minute road show, this sequence was lost. Nearly eight hours of footage was shot by Mankiewicz for **Cleopatra**, most of it destroyed in the late 1970s by Fox as a cost-cutting measure.

At times, Taylor seems bored or at the very least displeased, while Burton infrequently appears to have found his lines merely amusing. This leaves Rex Harrison as the standout performer – delivering a peerless and very stately Caesar indeed. But he is only a third of the show and featured in less than half of it. Without him, the narrative waffles – at times, badly – in a sort of 'what's to become of me?' limbo, infrequently shored up by Mankiewicz's attempts to seize the reigns and steer his production back on course. Undeniably, the last act is hampered by a final insult – Fox's eleventh hour cost-cutting measures after Darryl F. Zanuck's triumphant takeover of the studio and ousting of Spyros Skouras; the latter a middling executive and exhibitor at heart instead of a film-maker who blindly believed he could ride out the maelstrom. In the final edit, **Cleopatra** also falls victim to Zanuck's tampering.

Zanuck began to tinker with Cleopatra's continuity without Mankiewicz's approval or input. It was an impossible intervention; one in which Zanuck eventually swallowed his pride and recalled the director back into the editor's chair. But by then even Mankiewicz had had quite enough of the doomed Egyptian queen. At 320 min. **Cleopatra** is elephantine without ever achieving its trajectory as a truly epic masterpiece; rather accurately dubbed 'the monumental mouse' by the New York Times. In retrospect it remains a fascinating catastrophe; a mangled masterwork, though undeniably marvelous spectacle all at once; a collaborative misfire the likes of which Hollywood had never seen before and is unlikely to ever bear witness to again. The artistic merits of the movie are as gargantuan as its mistakes. This keeps the movie in a sort of precarious 'checks and balances'; impossible to dismiss outright. Real failure is easy to spot and label. But **Cleopatra** is not the genuine article. It rises to the occasion, occasionally even above it, as an enthralling entertainment periodically, somehow salvaged from becoming a total waste of time. The threat of absolute implosion never fully materializes and this keeps the audience's fascination perennially afloat. Is this manipulation deliberate? Hardly - more likely an unhappy, or very lucky accident; the staving off of ennui that makes the movie more impressive as a perennial topic of discussion all these many years later. **Cleopatra** therefore holds a very dubious distinction. It isn't a bad movie. Haplessly, it isn't a great one either.

Getting Underway and Behind



(Above): Caesar (Rex Harrison) contemplates the senate's refusal to appoint him master of all Rome. The senators are a wily bunch, plotting against the man who has afforded them the luxuries of the world through massive and successful campaigns that had secured Rome's supremacy on the world stage. Earlier, the senate elected to make Caesar 'dictator for life' – a ceremonial post at best and still beholden to the passage of their vote in order to secure his bidding.

At least by design, **Cleopatra** had been envisioned as a resplendent and groundbreaking epic. That the film quickly degenerated into a colossus of micro-mismanagement and tabloid scandal now seems to speak more to bad-timing and the final death knell of a struggling studio system, than to any issues of quality in the final cut – a massive undertaking by most any critical assessment. Yet, the stigma surrounding the film continues to brand it as Hollywood's most costly and disastrous flop – a record **Cleopatra** held until Kevin Costner's **Waterworld** (1995); despite the fact that Mankiewicz's driving force for perfectionism in every facet of **Cleopatra's** production yielded some of the most stunning movie sequences ever put on celluloid.

Even before cameras began to roll on a single strip of useable footage in Rome in June of 1962, **Cleopatra** was already three times more expensive than William Wyler's **Ben-Hur** (1959). Rounded up in today's dollars, **Cleopatra's** expenditures are equivalent to a \$440 million dollar budget, by far the most expensive movie ever financed by a single movie studio. Even if the final cut veered more toward Variety's assessment as "*a series of coming attractions for something that will never come*" the initial giddy excitement inside 20th Century Fox's corporate boardroom easily rivaled the film's catastrophic box office returns.

Urged by nervous Fox President, Spyros P. Skouras to scour the script archives for "*some big pictures,*" executive David Brown unearthed the 1917 silent version of **Cleopatra**. The decision to remake it followed Fox's recent and very insidious run of back luck with anemic receipts on **The Barbarian and the Geisha** (1958) and **Satan Never Sleeps** (1962); two of the studio's bigger duds that, in hindsight, seem to foreshadow the public's change in cinematic tastes away from glamor that had once been Hollywood's main staple. With the success of television and added stress of being forced to divest itself of its theater chain, 20th Century-Fox began to pillage its own history in the late 1950s merely to survive. The implosion occurring at Fox was hardly unique. Virtually all of the majors found themselves quietly sinking into the mire of red ink; a combination of events buffeting the movie industry on all sides and providing the perfect recipe for disaster.

The shortsightedness of Spyros Skouras negotiations to sell off Fox's back lots – considered by many to be second in scope and quality only to MGM's – effectively wiped clean these magical and escapist fantasy backdrops from the Hollywood landscape; all of them bulldozed to the ground, the land sold to a high-rise developer where present day



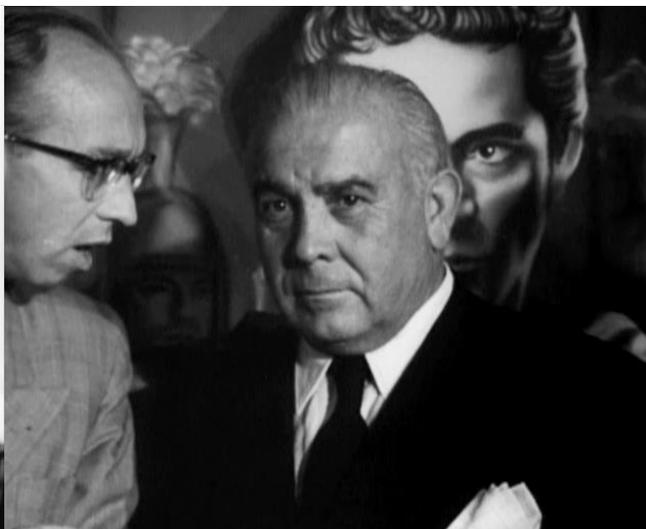
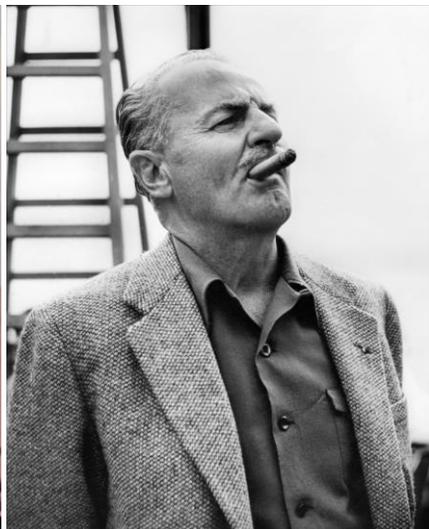
(Above left): Mankiewicz sets up a shot; the exhaustion clearly showing on his face. It was a crap shoot, really, whether he would finish the film or it would finish him. In the end, only his reputation as a film maker suffered. Mankiewicz lost the autonomy of choosing his own projects after **Cleopatra** and, in effect, became just another director for hire – and not a very popular one at that. If he harbored regrets about ever agreeing to do the movie then he mostly kept these private, electing instead to poke fun at the movie and his stature as its director. “*I feel as though the guillotine were about to drop,*” Mankiewicz told Burt Parks during the live ‘Tonight Show’ telecast of the New York premiere; in hindsight a very telling statement indeed. (Right): a gaggle of extras looking bored and deflated. There was too much down time on the set. With nothing to do, the extras began to grumble about their skimpy costumes, taking their concerns to the union. They were quickly shot down.

‘Century City’ stands. But the financial reprieve derived from this sale was temporary at best; what has forever been lost in the exchange incomparable to the affixed dollar amount spent to acquire the land. If Fox was to excel once more as a production company beyond mere survival in the coming decade then it would need to compete within a very fickle marketplace dominated by the television age.

In its initial production phase, **Cleopatra** seemed destined to become a modestly budgeted (under two million) sword and sandal quickie starring Fox contract player, Joan Collins. Yet, two overriding factors prevented the film from proceeding as planned; one - producer Walter Wanger’s zeal to elevate the film from mere movie to event status, and two; a gross naiveté on the part of Spyros Skouras and Fox management in believing Wanger’s claims, that their hefty investment would yield considerable box office returns – particularly after Wanger hired Production Designer John DeCuir to create models and art work that heralded the coming of a monumental masterpiece.

Following John DeCuir’s pitch in inner-corporate salesmanship, Skouras optimism swelled, enough to raise Cleopatra’s budget to \$5 million with an option for Wanger to consider bigger stars for the lead. Fox suggested Sophia Loren or Audrey Hepburn. But Wanger had already marked Elizabeth Taylor for the plum role and even conducted an audience poll to back his decision. Taylor was still viable box office. However, by the rigid moral standards of the 1950s Taylor’s string of messy marriages (first, to hotel tycoon Nicky Hilton, then actor Michael Wilding and then currently producer Mike Todd) had considerably dimmed her appeal. If Todd’s premature death in a plane crash temporarily bolstered public sympathy for Taylor as a widow, her liaisons with Todd’s close friend, Eddie Fisher shortly thereafter proved cutthroat to her own popularity once again. Fisher was then married to actress Debbie Reynolds. Taylor was labeled a home wrecker. She was even denounced by both the Pope and on the floor of U.S. Congress as an unfit mother.

Fox execs were more likely weary of Taylor’s frequent bouts of ill health that had intervened on most of her film shoots delaying production. Nevertheless, Walter Wanger was adamant that with Taylor as Cleopatra the film would be one of the most popular of all time. For her part, Taylor seemed unconvinced of this typecasting, flippantly telling Fisher to inform Wanger that she would only do the film for a salary of one million dollars – an unheard of sum Taylor was certain Wanger would refuse. Given the strapped cash flow of the studio Taylor was shocked when Wanger agreed to her demand. So was Skouras, who did his own damage control in Fox’s corporate boardroom to justify the agreement.



(Above): when things just don't add up. (Left): While Mankiewicz was shooting **Cleopatra** at a fairly aggressive pace in Rome he was entirely unaware of the snafu taking place back in Hollywood and the forces that were conspiring to short shrift him on time and the monies necessary to complete his film. But by mid-1962 Darryl F. Zanuck (center), the former President of 20th Century-Fox had seen the writing on the wall for his once seemingly indestructible studio. Gone independent in the mid-1950s, partly to escape the scandal that had erupted over his extramarital affair with the exotic Bella Darvi, Zanuck was shooting his opus magnum, **The Longest Day** (1962) on the beaches of Normandy. Earlier, Zanuck had begun to realize that the company in Rome was sending up flares when co-stars Roddy McDowell and Richard Burton both pleaded with him to find them cameo work in his all-star epic about the Allied invasion.

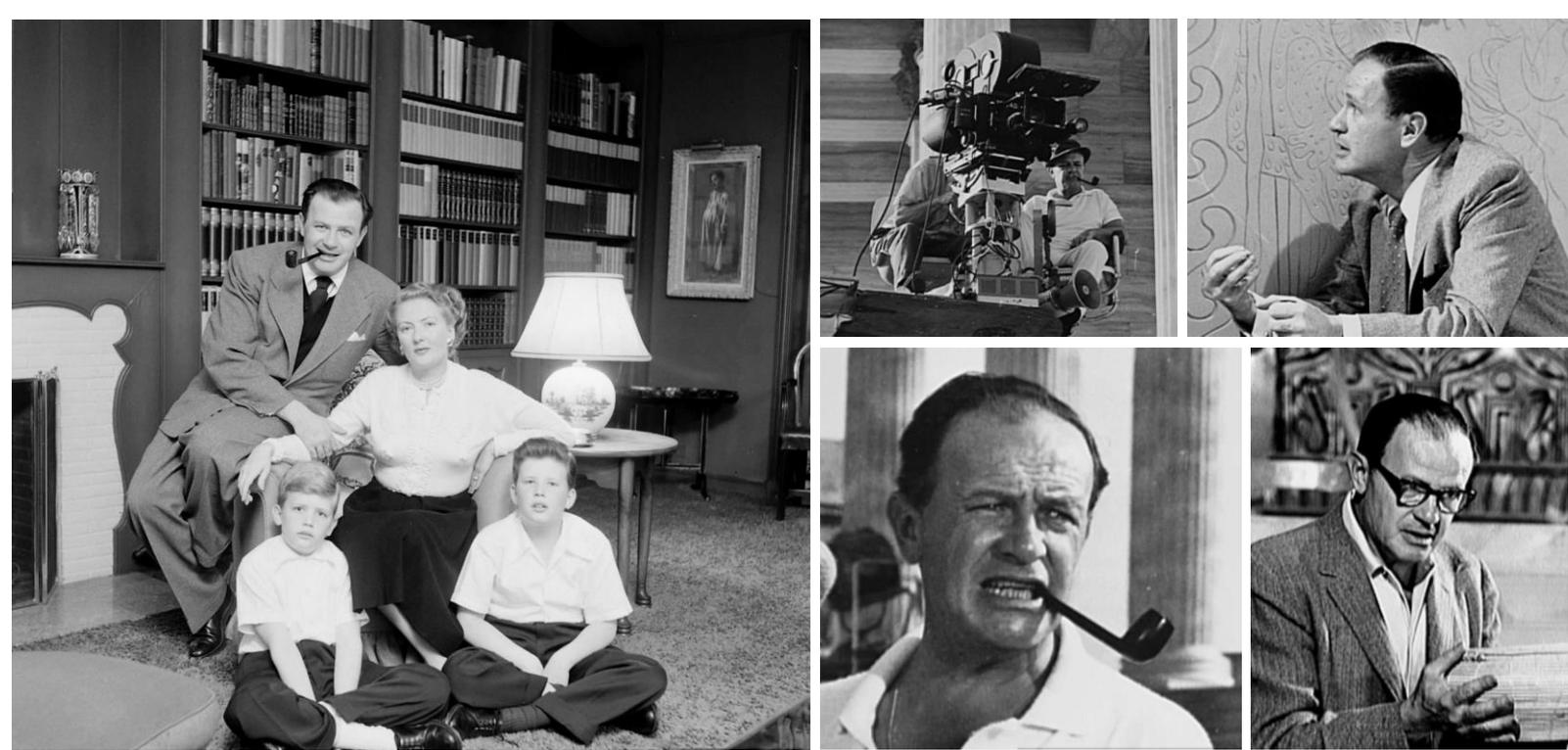
Zanuck willingly complied. But when word from Hollywood came, denying him an additional million to finish up his own masterpiece, and further rumors brewed that the studio might yank **The Longest Day** away from Zanuck before he was satisfied with the final cut, then ram it into theaters for some quick cash, the old-time mogul flew to Los Angeles on the redeye and lit into Skouras and the board members on a gut level; chastising them for their profligate spending and shutting down of the studio. The board was shocked, but more over convinced that something had to give. The decision was made then and there. Zanuck was in. Skouras was out. The old fox had taken back control of his beleaguered domain. (Right): Skouras seems dower in this still, even though it was taken at the premiere of **The Robe** (1953); the studio's first Cinemascope movie and a colossal hit that spawned a sequel; *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, made the following year. Skouras was an exhibitor, not a film maker like Zanuck; hence, a bad fit to run a studio as large and as then thriving as 20th Century-Fox. It seems like some bizarre foreshadowing now, but the image directly behind Skouras' head is a painted likeness of Richard Burton from **The Robe**.

Wanger made further provisions at Taylor's request, giving his star both script and director approval – again, unheard of autonomy. He also agreed to shoot **Cleopatra** abroad and in Todd A-O: a widescreen process patented by Taylor's late husband.

After some consideration, England's Pinewood Studios was chosen primarily because of the British government's tax plan that afforded considerable subsidies to any international production employing a specified percentage of British cast and crew. Noted British actors Peter Finch and Keith Baxter were cast opposite Taylor as Caesar and Octavian respectively, while Welsh born Stephen Boyd was tapped to costar in the movie as Marc Anthony. Boyd's inclusion promised at least a hint of built-in security for the film. He had made a stunning success of the role of Messala in **Ben-Hur** and looked very commanding in a Roman breastplate.

In its initial phase of construction \$600,000 was spent transforming Pinewood's back lot into the port city of Alexandria – an undertaking so vast in its scope and detail that the studio ran ads in local cinemas to recruit craftsman and other construction personnel. At the behest of Skouras, veteran Rouben Mamoulian was assigned to direct. Despite the fact that Mamoulian's forte did not include epics, he agreed to helm the production. Regrettably, the director quickly discovered that he had met his match in Elizabeth Taylor who, backed by Finch, neither appreciated Mamoulian's direction nor his script. In between debating these points of artistic merit Taylor's health began to falter. Carried to and from the set for screen tests only – the actress eventually abstained from appearing on the set all together, forcing Mamoulian to begin shooting **Cleopatra** without her participation.

Meanwhile, the production had run into a union snafu over the presence of Hollywood hairstylist, Sidney Guilleroff – whom Taylor had insisted upon but who was in direct violation of the Edie Plan concessions for tax credits and exemptions. Eventually a détente of sorts was achieved; the union agreeing to allow Guilleroff his artistry in Taylor's hotel room rather than at the studio; the union 'touching up' his work on the set. In the meantime, England's bad

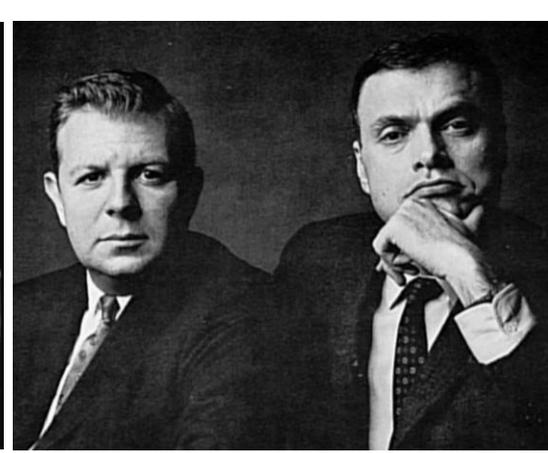


(Above): To date only Joseph L. Mankiewicz has won back to back Oscars for writing and directing; first, for 1949's **A Letter to Three Wives**, today largely considered an unremarkable B-melodrama with a mild twist, and 1950's sublime and esoteric comedy/romance, **All About Eve**. Beginning his career in 1931 at Paramount, Mankiewicz became disillusioned with the studio's workman-like disregard for writers. He migrated over to MGM in 1933 where he graduated from writer to writer/director by 1940. But in 1943 a rift with L.B. Mayer led to relocation once again, this time at 20th Century Fox where Mankiewicz excelled. Zanuck, a storyteller at heart, appreciated Mankiewicz's abilities and allowed him to make the kinds of pictures he wanted to without intervention – provided, of course, the movies made money. Shortly after **All About Eve's** success Mankiewicz left Hollywood for Broadway – an ill-advised move where he miserably flopped. He returned to Hollywood with a somewhat more chaste opinion of his talents by the mid-50s as directing such high profile movies as Brando's **Julius Caesar** for MGM and **Guys and Dolls** (1955) – the latter made independently for Samuel Goldwyn. Mankiewicz was married three times, pictured at left with his second wife, Rose Stradner in 1955 and their two sons Tom and Christopher. Tragically, Stradner – a failed actress - committed suicide in 1958. On **Cleopatra** Mankiewicz doubled, then redoubled his efforts in his overriding determination to will a memorable movie experience out of its episodic narrative. If only he had been afforded the luxury of time to do a full rewrite in longhand, and had the opportunity to edit two 3 hour epics instead of one gargantuan travelogue, then **Cleopatra** might have indeed lived up to Mankiewicz's own scrutinizing and expectations. Somewhere along the way, Mankiewicz bitterly concluded that **Cleopatra** would never be 'a great film'. He was, as ever committed to making it a fine one. Years later Mankiewicz would merely smile and quip that *Cleopatra* was "the toughest three pictures I ever made!"

weather began to take its toll, not only on Taylor's health but also the paper mache sets and tropical vegetation imported for the shoot. Palms wilted and statues peeled; the latter almost daily retouched at considerable expense.

After spending months in creative toil with only a few minutes of usable footage to show for his efforts, Mamoulian had had enough. He put forth an ultimatum to Fox that he would resign unless he received further cooperation from his star. Taylor counterbalanced Mamoulian's threat; encouraging the studio to accept the director's resignation or be faced with her own. As a result, on January 18, 1961, Rouben Mamoulian was fired, the English shoot shut down and cast and crew disbanded until further notice. The original terms of Taylor's contract had afforded her director approval. Now Taylor selected but two names from the A-list roster: George Stevens or Joseph L. Mankiewicz. As Stevens was off shooting **The Greatest Story Ever Told**, Mankiewicz proved the de facto choice to satisfy Taylor's terms and conditions. Mankiewicz came on board very reluctantly; his resolve to make a great movie considerably bolstered by a lucrative agreement made worth several million dollars.

To say that Mankiewicz's involvement on **Cleopatra** instantly elevated the film to A-list status is an understatement. With his signing rumors abounded throughout the industry that **Cleopatra** would become one of the greatest – if not, in fact, *the greatest* films of all time. Indeed, Skouras and Fox had every reason to believe as much. Mankiewicz had been the studio's golden boy with back to back writing and directing Oscars for **A Letter to Three Wives** (1949) and **All About Eve** (1950); two of the studio's biggest and brightest money makers of their respective years. Mankiewicz, a highly literate individual who was able to examine and dissect the foibles of mankind in dramatic/often comedic terms, had repeatedly exercised his strengths as both a writer and director in the medium.



(Above left): days before the axe was about to fall on Wanger's participation on the film, he attempted to pry loose some information and perhaps some gossip from actor Hume Cronyn who was a close personal friend of Mankiewicz. "I wasn't about to tell him anything," Cronyn later confided in an interview, "As such I quickly became the bearded hypocrite." As **Cleopatra** neared completion everything about the movie seemed ripe for parody. Appearing on **The Perry Como Show** in 1962, Don Adams and Sandy Stewart (middle) brutalized the Taylor/Burton affair, taking particularly fiendish delight at humiliating Eddie Fisher. "I'm still wearing last year's asp," Stewart tells Adams; the pair dressed as a pseudo Egyptian queen and Roman statesman in laurels and a toga slung over his three piece suit. "What do you want?" Adams cynically replies, "A new asp ever year. Who do you think you are – Liz Taylor?" A little later on the barbs become vicious. When Stewart invites Adams to take a 'slow boat down the Nile' Adams' lashes out with, "Sure – just you me and a thousand slaves rowing. Just my luck and one of them will be Eddie Fisher!"

(Right): Fox publicists Jack Brodsky and Nathan Wise were assigned by Skouras to keep tabs on the Rome shoot through almost daily telegrams. Their correspondences, detailing not only a production spiraling out of control but also its backstage machinations became the basis for their co-authored scathing memoir, **The Cleopatra Papers** published just prior to the movie's world premiere. The pair quickly learned that there were repercussions to biting the hand that feeds you. Wise was fired as publicist by Stanley Kubrick who was determined that no such tell-all accounts would be forthcoming from the sets of any of his movies.

Moreover, his vision for movies harbored literary ballast that, at least in **Cleopatra's** case, and perhaps in retrospect, seems moderately out of sync with the traditional requirement of action over dialogue in the Hollywood epic. Mankiewicz's approach to the material is undeniably melodramatic. He saw **Cleopatra** as a struggle of wills played out in the Egyptian antechambers and dimly lit corridors of the Roman forum rather than taking place in grand charges on the battlefield. At first, Mankiewicz did not think much of the assignment. It was not his kind of movie.

In retrospect, monetary inducement seems to have colored his thinking. The deal between Mankiewicz and Fox has never been fully disclosed, but it is rumored to have been of a particularly princely sum. Nigel Balkan and Nunnally Johnson had been first to toil on the screen adaptation. In the end, Mankiewicz judged their efforts grossly inferior and began his rewrites anew, almost from the ground up; writing day and night and in moments in between on the set – struggling to piece together a rich tapestry with his usual flair for crackling dialogue and sparkling wit.

On February 1, 1961, Mankiewicz arrived at Pinewood Studios to look over the damage. He was appalled by the condition of the sets that he reported judged as "a garish nightmare." In a curious way, Elizabeth Taylor's continuing recovery back in America from her near-death experience abroad gave Mankiewicz a false sense of security that he had enough time to polish the rewrites to his liking. The Pinewood set was permanently shuddered, then dismantled; the entire enterprise relocated to Italy's Cinecitta Studios where Mankiewicz personally supervised John DeCuir's lavish recreations of Egyptian palaces and the Roman forum – the latter, built to three times its original's scale. With \$12 million dollars already invested, Mankiewicz based his rewrites loosely on Bernard Shaw's **Caesar and Cleopatra**.

Forced to recast after both Stephen Boyd and Peter Finch cited 'previous obligations' and bowed out of the revamp, Mankiewicz first entertained the notion of Laurence Olivier as his Caesar before turning to Rex Harrison instead. Richard Burton and Roddy McDowell were also brought in to assume the roles of Marc Anthony and Octavian. Burton's involvement in particular proved costly – with Fox buying up his Broadway contract in the stage musical **Camelot** for a then whopping \$250,000. Taylor arrived in Rome newly invigorated by her rest and recuperation and with a renewed resolve to get the project underway. The working relationship that had been adversarial with Mamoulian was most congenial with Mankiewicz; director and star getting on famously throughout the lengthy ordeal.



(Above): while composer Alex North was still in the throes of writing and conducting roughly three hours of film underscore for **Cleopatra**, fashion designer Vidal Sassoon launched 'the Cleopatra look' to take full advantage of the movie's debut – a bizarre corporate branding of the geometric haircut and diaphanous-styled gowns, each updated to take full advantage of the burgeoning decades zeal for spangles and beads. "Fear is a problem with film music and films," North later reflected, "People want to be conventional and there's far too much commercialism today. But if you're not daring in your art then you're bankrupt." **Cleopatra's** score is daring to say the least. At a time when the musical tradition for epics meant a bombastic flourish of trumpets and kettle drums, North's score chooses a strangely quiet – almost snake-like slithery approach. The main title sneaks up on the listener. North did allow himself a flourish during Cleopatra's triumphant entrance into Rome, but even here he uses minor – rather than major – chords; not so much playing to the pageantry of the processional as hinting at its more insidious purpose; to baffle and woo the rabble to her side through a sort of visualized bribery of their senses.

What began as ten weeks in Rome quickly escalated into ten months. Cast and crew sat around for days at full salary while Mankiewicz feverishly endeavored to get a tighter hold on the reigns of the production. At one point, it was estimated that the delays on **Cleopatra** were costing Fox \$70,000 per day. After perusing the film's budget and realizing that he could not go back to his shareholders with its bottom line, Spyros Skouras quietly fired **Cleopatra's** accountant – installing one of his own to draft a fictitious figure, even as the production continued to hemorrhage funds. Despite Skouras' mounting concern that **Cleopatra** had already gone way beyond the point of no return, cast and crew continued to be afforded every luxury befitting an A-list production. After it was suggested to Rex Harrison, along with others, that he relinquish his chauffeur-driven car in the spirit of cost-cutting, Harrison politely informed Skouras that he would not be coming to work that day or any other. His car and driver were quickly reinstated. Some of the other suggestions attempted did not fare much better; as when a bulletin appeared in the commissary encouraged everyone to share their paper cups. Such micro-management seems absurd, particularly when the cost of the mineral water being poured into the aforementioned was tipping the scales at roughly three thousand dollars a week.

Mankiewicz had more pressing concerns to grapple with; including a strike narrowly averted after extras began to gripe about the skimpiness of Vittorio Nino Novarese and Renié's costumes. "I never saw a man more invested on a movie," Martin Landau later said of Mankiewicz, "He was just tireless in wanting to make a good movie." But Mankiewicz was also reaching a level of burn out that threatened his own health. Taking daily injections to keep him going, Mankiewicz infrequently let his guard down and on occasion even his patience lapse. When Mankiewicz reasoned that an ornate walking stick crafted for Herbert Berghof's character of Theodotos was slowing down his performance in a particular scene Berghof was instructed to get rid of it. The stick was a prop, exquisitely hand-crafted at considerable expense. Stepping aside after the scene had been shot, Berghof turned to costar Martin Landau, making a comment that now seems very apropos: "That's the trouble with the movie, Martin," Berghof reportedly told Landau, "It is full of such sticks!"

In Rome, over 20,000 costumes, 15,000 bows, several hundred thousand arrows, thousands of helmets and hundreds of wigs were created anew, and, 79 sets constructed on a mammoth scale. The gilded rigging on Cleopatra's barge – built full scale – alone, cost \$277,000.00; the cement used to construct the port city of Alexandria twice the amount utilized for Italy's then new Olympic stadium. Only a fraction of the original designs had been salvaged from Pinewood, but even these remnants did not include the five imperial robes of state hand-embroidered with laurels by the seamstresses responsible for Queen Elizabeth's coronation gown. On September 29, 1961 cameras rolled. Skouras





(Previous page): the last act of **Cleopatra** is very dire indeed. Having been forced into an impossible sea battle at Actium by Octavian's superior forces, Antony's strategies are no match for the Roman fleet. In the middle of the conflict Cleopatra is told that Antony's ship is sunk, and, with the very real prospect that he has been drowned, she sets sail for Alexandria. Antony, however, has not been lost and cannot believe that his lover would desert him in his moment of crisis. In an act that will forever typify just how weak-willed a man he has become, Antony elects to abandon the battle; his wounded and his dying to follow Cleopatra on a clipper back to Alexandria. Confronting her disloyalty, she begs his forgiveness. It is eventually given, but not before the pair come to blows inside the newly erected tomb Cleopatra has designed as her final resting place. As Octavian's forces advance on the port city, Antony commits suicide by falling on his own sword after Cleopatra's ever-faithful servant, Apollodorus lies that the queen has forsaken him. As Antony lay dying, Apollodorus confesses the truth; that she is actually awaiting him in her tomb. Raised on a stretcher into the darkened temple, Antony dies in Cleopatra's arms. Having sent her son away with loyal merchants who will presumably see him to safety beyond the city limits, Cleopatra awaits Octavian's arrival. His intentions are to take Cleopatra back to Rome in chains; an abject humiliation denied him when Cleopatra instead sends a messenger with news that she has committed suicide, stung by a poisonous asp. *"Was this well done of your lady?"* Agrippa bitterly declares as Octavian marches from the tomb without his prize. *"Extremely well done,"* a stricken lady-in-waiting replies before expiring *"...as is befitting the last of the noble rulers."* If **Cleopatra** has a fundamental weakness, it remains this decidedly bleak final moment; without pathos or foreboding, or even a hint of foreshadowing on Mankiewicz's part to suggest something greater than death as the finale to his movie.

(This page): The crowded lobby of the Pantages Theater in downtown Hollywood bursting with foreign dignitaries and stars from stage and screen. Fox launched three impressive premieres for **Cleopatra**, the first in Hollywood, the second in New York and the third in London, England. (Right): fans clutter the street and perch themselves atop the roofs of various businesses facing the Pantages, attempting to catch a glimpse of their favorite stars. Elizabeth Taylor denied her American fans the spectacle of her own arrival. She attended neither showing in the U.S. but was coaxed by Zanuck to make an appearance in London.

needed footage to justify Cleopatra's growing expenditures. However, the net result of his haste was that the film was shot in sequence; not in the way that best utilized or maximized sets and crew. The folly of such costly extravagances reached a zenith in profligate spending on November 17 when, as per the stipulations of her ironclad contract, Elizabeth Taylor went into overtime at a cost of \$50,000 per week. Meanwhile, Mankiewicz, a skilled though arguably slow writer, had penned only a third of his first draft shooting script in long hand.

Assigned the thankless duty of tracking down financial corruption and performing waste management on all expenditures, Production Manager Johnny Johnston suffered a fatal heart attack. His position remained unfilled while **Cleopatra's** sets became something of a party Mecca for visiting dignitaries and the press corps. The slow progression of the shoot also made cast and crew restless. From his dressing room, Roddy McDowell telephoned Darryl F. Zanuck (the former President of Fox – currently making films independently in France) for any film work to fill his hours. Zanuck obliged McDowell and Richard Burton with cameos in **The Longest Day** (1963), his epic WWII depiction of the allied invasion of Normandy then currently filming in England and France and being funded by Fox. However, when Zanuck's own request for a two million dollar extension was denied the old mogul's concerns turned from personal dismay to the current mismanagement of the company he had co-founded.

Meanwhile in Rome, **Cleopatra** had become a runaway production. By day, Mankiewicz feverishly shot scenes he had barely the time to write and edit the night before, viewing dailies after midnight and penciling in new scenes to be shot the next morning. It was a hellish and breakneck schedule. But the biggest scandal was yet to come. For several weeks cast and crew had noted a growing 'friendship' between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, one that finally revealed its deeper involvement between when Taylor arrived early for her makeup, but planted a French kiss on Burton who



(Above): New York's famed Rivoli Theater paid the highest sum ever for bragging rights to premiere **Cleopatra** on the east coast. Broadway traffic was brought to a standstill as an estimated 20,000 crowded the sidewalks and streets. The New York premiere had fewer stars than the Hollywood premiere, but infinitely more dignitaries from the world of politics and from the 'legitimate' Broadway Theater including Richard Rodgers and Leonard Bernstein. The New York premiere also had a live satellite hook up to Johnny Carson and **The Tonight Show**; featuring MC Bert Parks interviewing Joseph Mankiewicz and receiving a perhaps unintentional earful of glib repartee for his efforts. It made the audience watching at home on their televisions laugh, but no one was in particularly jovial mood when, just as Mankiewicz had predicted, the movie's exorbitant costs precluded it from turning a profit or breaking even for that matter.

was already seated in the chair. Taylor had met Burton several years before but had been unimpressed by what she then deemed as his male ego working overtime. Reunited on the set of **Cleopatra** however, Taylor's assessment of Burton had softened to the point where she found him strangely fragile, completely innocent and almost child-like. This initial attraction quickly escalated beyond a mild flirtation into a three alarm blazing affair, so much that when Mankiewicz hollered cut after the scene in which Marc Antony seduces Cleopatra, Burton and Taylor continued to passionately neck for several long moments thereafter, enduring jeers and modest applause from the crew.

As the Burton/Taylor romance sizzled both on and off camera, Richard's wife of thirteen years, Sybil left Rome in a huff; though arguably merely wounded by her husband's latest philandering. Richard Burton's rumored penchant for seducing every leading lady he had ever co-starred opposite had been quietly tolerated by Sybil in the past. Eddie Fisher, however, was utterly humiliated as the paparazzi laid siege on the couple's every move. As time and the affair wore on, Fisher became visibly disheveled and morosely distraught. He had been forewarned by his ex of this day and now it had come to pass. To keep the peace and arguably spare Fisher further indignations, Mankiewicz encouraged that Fisher go home to New York. In the meantime a suddenly circumspect Burton had attempted to distance himself from Taylor's advances. Mankiewicz now found a new responsibility to tack onto his formidable array of management skills; marriage/relationship counselor. At one point Taylor became so distraught over the temporary split she told Burton she would be telephoning Sybil with the sordid details to wreck whatever hope there might be for reconciliation between them. In response, Burton reportedly struck Taylor in the eye with his fist, forcing makeup artist Alberto de Rossi to apply some heavy pancake to conceal the discoloring welt.

Like the characters in the film, the elixir that was Elizabeth Taylor proved too great for Burton to resist. After the aforementioned quarrel and resolution, the couple began their courtship anew – hotter than ever. The Taylor/Burton scandal ballooned from mere sideshow attraction into a three-ring circus, causing the Vatican to label the affair an 'erotic vagrancy (oh, now there's a terminology!) and declare that Taylor's children (two sons from her second marriage to Michael Wilding) should be removed from her custody. In the meantime, Eddie Fisher found no peace in New York. He was mobbed at the airport for interviews, taking up refuge in an apartment where he later attempted suicide. It is perhaps a little cruel to suggest that Fox executives were basking in the afterglow from this tabloid fodder taking place half way around the world. But the press coverage undeniably had been good for the movie.



(Above): good PR can often save a bad movie. In *Cleopatra*'s case the movie was neither as terrible as some might have expected, though regrettably not nearly as memorable as others had hoped for. Fox solicited accolades in an attempt to enhance its stature. "Never before has a spectacle been more carefully, lavishly, stunningly produced!" raved *Life Magazine*. *The New York Times* was even more gushing, calling *Cleopatra* "surpassing entertainment...one of the great epic films of our day." They might have first examined the fact that *Cleopatra* was the only epic made in 1960; groundbreaking only in terms of its lavish expenditures though hardly in its reception at the box office. The crowds did come – for months, in fact. Just not enough to pull Fox's bottom line out of the red ink.

Better still, it had deflected from Fox's other homegrown scandal. After spending three million on Marilyn Monroe's penultimate movie, *Something's Got To Give* – something, indeed, did. Monroe's chronic tardiness, her frequent 'no show' status, and her noncompliance and utter lack of concentration when she was on set eventually led to her firing. The production was permanently shelved. Mere weeks later, a détente seemed to be in the works between Fox and Monroe when the actress was found dead of an apparent self-inflicted overdose. Nine hours of raw footage, incomplete and unusable, lay dormant in Fox's vaults for nearly three decades. The implosion of *Something's Got To Give* meant that Fox had no new projects either in preproduction or ready for general release. With all of its assets tied up in *Cleopatra*, from this moment on, with the exception of a skeleton crew merely kept on to maintain the property, 20th Century-Fox effectively shut down its daily operations.

Darryl F. Zanuck had had enough. When asked by Fox's management to quickly rush *The Longest Day* into theaters for some much needed quick cash, the producer/director instead flew to Los Angeles, attacked the board of directors on their excessive spending, and reclaimed control as head of the studio. In Rome, Walter Wanger was stripped of his title as *Cleopatra*'s producer; a rather moot distinction since his health had forced him to relinquish almost all his duties to Mankiewicz months earlier. Zanuck gave Mankiewicz a three month ultimatum to wrap production – a daunting task even as Elizabeth Taylor was nearing the end of her participation on the project at a very hefty \$7 million dollar payout in overages. Moving to Egypt, Mankiewicz toiled relentlessly to finish *Cleopatra*'s battle sequences under the gun. Yet, in his final flourish of creative genius Mankiewicz was hampered by Fox's sudden penny-pinching. Almost instinctively he concluded that *Cleopatra* would never be a great film. He was, however, still as ever committed to making it a good one.

To this end, Mankiewicz envisioned two separate three hour movies; *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. It might have worked out, except that after prescreening Mankiewicz's five hour rough cut Zanuck flew into a tirade. Fox needed a movie in theaters yesterday, and preferably one to take advantage of the groundswell of publicity the Burton/Taylor affair had garnered in the media. Unimpressed by what he deemed as wanton wastefulness and utter extravagance lacking melodramatic spark, Zanuck fired Mankiewicz on the spot, before setting about to begin hacking into the raw footage. Although a skilled editor, Zanuck was hampered in his efforts by the fact that no final shooting script had ever been approved for *Cleopatra*. It was impossible for anyone other than Mankiewicz to know for sure exactly where all the pieces fit; the final concept existing only in Mankiewicz's head. Rehired, Mankiewicz spent twenty hours a day re-cutting his opus magnum into one, four hour and thirteen minute epic. But Zanuck was still unimpressed by what he saw. Reluctantly, Zanuck ordered his director and principle cast to El Maria, Spain to re-shoot the film's opening sequence in February of 1963.

Meanwhile, Fox publicity crafted a national ad campaign with bizarre tie-ins to everything from geometric haircuts to Revlon eye makeup. Even *Playboy Magazine* did an exposé on *The Chicks of Cleopatra*. New York's famed Rivoli Theater



cut Fox a \$1,250,000.00 exhibitor's check for the bragging rights to premiere the movie – the highest sum ever paid, opening night tickets selling at \$100.00 a pop to benefit the Will Rogers Hospital Memorial Fund. For the California premiere ticket prices rose to \$250.00. While the luminaries filed past the crowds from their chauffeur-driven limousines, over 10,000 star gazers on Broadway and an estimated 23,000 in Los Angeles lined the streets outside, climbing on top of roofs and standing on top of cars merely to catch a glimpse of the glittering assemblage of movie land's finest. Rivoli's blind faith was only superficially justified when seating sold out four months in advance. However, two books released just prior to the world premiere - *The Cleopatra Papers* written by Fox publicists Jack Brodsky and Nathan Wise, and, *My Life with Cleopatra*, co-authored by an embittered Walter Wanger, each chronicling the turbulent behind-the-scenes chaos, did much to scandalize – if, ever so slightly downgrade - the movie's reputation.

Yet, even these literary assaults paled by comparison to Elizabeth Taylor's outspoken public condemnation of the movie. Describing Cleopatra as the “*worst experience*” of her career and “*just ridiculous and idiotic*” Taylor also refused to attend the New York world premiere – a glittering festivity hosted by Burt Parks and scheduled to air live as part of NBC's **The Tonight Show**. Taylor was eventually ‘persuaded’ by Zanuck (threatened is more like it, with a lawsuit owing to breach of contract) into making an appearance at the British premiere in August. Begrudgingly Taylor attended. Afterward she had her own sweet revenge, telling the eager press waiting outside that “*the final humiliation was having to go and see it.*”

By the time the general public was permitted to view the film Zanuck had cut **Cleopatra** down even further from its road show engagement, to barely over three hours in order to squeeze in at least two viewings per day. Any hope of salvation for **Cleopatra** as one of the all-time masterpieces in American cinema was henceforth irreversibly destroyed. Despite the fact that on ticket sales alone **Cleopatra** was undeniably the most ‘successful’ release of its year, the film's exorbitant production costs prohibited the movie from even the notion that it might turn a profit.

As is now the case, then box office dictated a movie's success. **Cleopatra's** inability to break even forever branded it a turkey. And yet, allowed to exist as just a movie rather than an event **Cleopatra** remains an undeniably stunning creation; one imbued with Mankiewicz's zeal to make a truly memorable movie. He is far more successful in this endeavor during the first half leading up to the intermission than in the second; perhaps, due in part to Rex Harrison's absence and Richard Burton's genuine inability to captivate in the same way. **Cleopatra's** ending too proves problematic; without fanfare or the proverbial happy ending, **Cleopatra** ends on a decidedly dower note; Shakespearean in its layering of murder, violence, shame brought upon two mighty nations and finally, death by suicide.



"Remember me...I want you to remember."

This, of course, attests to Mankiewicz's fidelity to the historical record. But the tragedy itself does not achieve some reflexive tome. Rather, it sustains a faint whiff of formaldehyde that embalms the entire last act; envelopes it in a shroud not so easily excoriated or expunged from the mind as one exits the theater. The final half hour leaves the viewer neither shell-shocked nor dumbstruck with awe, but rather mildly depressed for having sat through four hours of this faux history lesson: that it should all come to nothing better or more prolific and/or satisfying than this.

In 1995 Fox began an exhaustive search for the shelved missing footage, looking first to its own extensive archive, then globally to other holdings in America and abroad. Mankiewicz had implored the studio to reinstate this footage as early as 1979. Until the mid-1980s Mankiewicz had, in fact, even been willing to return to the project and reassemble the movie himself. In an era burgeoning with the promise of home video revenue and an unexpected sudden nostalgia for 'old movies' perpetuating the re-issue of many classics to VHS and laserdisc, particularly when other studios had already begun such mammoth undertakings in film restoration and preservation – most notably, Columbia with **Lawrence of Arabia** (1962) and Universal's commitment on **Spartacus** (1960), restoring **Cleopatra** might have proved a resurrection for both Mankiewicz's enduring reputation as a film-maker and the legacy of the movie itself. Regrettably, Fox sat on the project too long. Mankiewicz died in 1993 leaving the mantel of his swan song for another generation to investigate. By then even they were too late to do it justice.

For in the mid-1970s some middling executive brain trust had banded together to reassess the viability of maintaining an expansive archive that presumably had absolutely no resale value. Unlike other studios, Fox had resisted the urge to sell off or even rent out its vintage catalogue for television broadcast. As such the immensity and scope of their impressive libraries had been allowed to quietly fade from the public consciousness. Movies like **The Song of Bernadette**, **How Green Was My Valley** and **Miracle on 34th Street** sat in un-air-conditioned vaults, enduring the indignity and very real threat of turning to dust while reputations of such luminous Fox stars as Tyrone Power, Alice Faye and Betty Grable were quietly left to memory and a few still photographs.

By the time Nora Ephron's **Sleepless in Seattle** (1993) created a minor fervor to rescreen 1957's **An Affair to Remember**, the iconic Cary Grant/Deborah Kerr romance unseen anywhere since its big screen debut, Fox suddenly realized that what they had was a vintage catalogue in a perilous state of decay and disrepair. In the mad scramble to

release *'An Affair...'* and other movies to home video the new regime was to discover an even more insidious oversight perpetrated by the previous custodians in charge of maintaining the archive.

Someone in the mid-1970s had reasoned that since there could be no resale value in these libraries it therefore made absolutely no sense to maintain original nitrate or vintage 3-strip Technicolor negatives. One by one, these elements were transferred over to unstable acetate, but with virtually little to no care involved to ensure that optimal reproduction quality was being achieved. Worse, virtually all of the original Technicolor movies were printed onto this new stock as full composites of their independent magenta, cyan and yellow records rather than individual records to be combined at a later time and date. **Cleopatra** was photographed on single dye transfer film stock with color by DeLuxe and hence at least escaped this indignation. But when archivists attempted to recall the excised footage from their vaults they were quick to discover that virtually all of the materials; deleted scenes, outtakes, alternates and all surviving soundtrack elements had been junked along with the aforementioned; rumor suggests, having been loaded onto a barge and dumped off the coast of California. Given such gross oversights it truly is a wonder that any movies from Hollywood's golden age have survived today; the shortsightedness and ignorance that infested the front offices during the mass collective purge of the 1970s as the transfer of power from the old time mogul-dominated Hollywood gave way to the corporate-mismanaged entities of the then present; the latter having effectively stripped down Hollywood's illustrious past to its mere skeletal remains; wan and ghost-like from its former robust glory.

Cleopatra today endures in its four hour and thirteen minute road show edit; arguably, the version Mankiewicz intended audiences to see; or at least, the one closest to his own vision of what the film ought to have been given the edicts imposed upon him by the studio. Is it a perfect picture? Hardly. The storytelling remains uneven and mildly inconclusive in spots. What were once extensive contributions made by actors Hume Cronyn, Roddy McDowell, Martin Landau and Andrew Keir have long since been distilled into mere cameos. Employing the technique of a dissolve from presumed still framed, ancient art into the actual movie, results in an episodic narrative at best.

Arguably, the first half of the movie fares better than the second; Mankiewicz somehow more engaged with the material and enamored by Rex Harrison's marvelous turn as Julius Caesar. But in Harrison's absence the film falls apart; the entire last act a prolonged and increasingly turgid soap opera in which Burton's Marc Antony cannot commit himself one way or the other to his marriage of state or the woman who so obviously has consumed – nee devoured – his heart, along with his male initiative. That **Cleopatra** should remain a fractured masterpiece today is regrettable indeed. For in absence of the movie(s) that might have been under Mankiewicz's original vision, fans and film scholars alike have been left grappling with a gnawing question ever since: where is Egypt? Where indeed?

