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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 9

OLIVIA DE HAVILLAND: THE LAST LIONESSE

As one of the last remaining stars of the Golden Age, Olivia de Havilland (July 1, 1916 – July 26, 2020) was a commanding presence on and off screen and not to be mistaken for the delicate beauty she was often associated with early in her career. This was a star never afraid to show a bewitching brilliance and play with the psychological themes that became prominent in the post-war years. She may have received two Oscars and nominated another three times, but this didn't stop her helping to take down Hollywood's studio system with a landmark legal victory in the 1940s. Known for her moralising and high-mindedness, it was also well known that de Havilland and her sister Joan Fontaine *detested* each other; interestingly enough this sibling rivalry echoed in one of her finest films, *The Dark Mirror* (1946); a film noir centred around identical twins.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main:

The Dark Mirror (1946)

Director(s): Robert Siodmak

Studio(s): Nunnally Johnson Productions (distributed by Universal Pictures)

The Snake Pit (1948)

Director(s): Anatole Litvak

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

My Cousin Rachel (1952)

Director(s): Henry Koster

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

Reference to:

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938)

Director(s): Michael Curtiz

William Keighley

Studio(s): Warner Bros.



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In This Our Life (1942)

Director(s): John Huston, Raoul Walsh (uncredited)

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

The Heiress (1949)

Director(s): William Wyler

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte (1964)

Director(s): Robert Aldrich

Studio(s): The Associates and Aldrich (distributed by Twentieth Century Fox)

Notes:

“Famous people feel that they must perpetually be on the crest of the wave, not realizing that it is against all the rules of life. You can’t be on top all the time; it isn’t natural.” — Olivia de Havilland

Young Olivia

Born on the 1st July 1916 in Tokyo ‘Dame’ Olivia de Havilland starred in some of the most iconic movies of the Golden Age era. Best known as Melanie in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) she would go on to star in many movies, some of which challenging her clean cut, vibrant and positive personality.

She would act on stage from an early age including a production of *Alice in Wonderland* in 1933.

Not only is there the aircraft company’s link but Olivia’s heritage was also connected to landed gentry that originated from mainland Normandy. Her mother, Lilian Fontaine was educated at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and became a stage actress. Lilian also sang with the Master of the King’s Music, Sir Walter Parratt, and toured the United Kingdom with the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Olivia’s father, Walter de Havilland (1872–1968), served as an English professor at the Imperial University in Tokyo City before becoming a patent attorney.

Her paternal cousin was Sir Geoffrey de Havilland (1882–1965), an aircraft designer and founder of the de Havilland aircraft company.

She had one sibling, sister Joan Fontaine who took her mother’s name when she too became an actor. They did not get along.

There are some great photographs online with the de Havilland sisters with their mother who passed away in 1975.



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Sibling rivalry

De Havilland once said of her sibling rivalry: “My sister was born a lion, and I a tiger, and in the laws of the jungle, they were never friends.”

Although she didn't get along with her sister she was very close the Joan's daughter Deborah.

They didn't like each other since they shared a room as children. Joan said Olivia would scare her with dramatic readings from the bible so Joan would do something back. They had knock down drag out fights their entire childhood. One broke the others collar bone and one of them planned to kill the other.

The apparent root of the issue was brought about after the sisters' biological father abandoned the family for a mistress. Their mother, Lilian Fontaine, would remarry to George Fontaine who Joan was fond of but Olivia was not.

Rational and Radiant

Before getting married, de Havilland dated the likes of Howard Hughes, actor James Stewart and director John Huston.

Married twice. Her first marriage to Marcus Goodrich was from 1946 to 1953. Not until after they were married did she find out she was his fifth wife.

They shared one son, Benjamin Goodrich, who was born in 1949. Tragically, Benjamin died in 1991 at the age of 42. Olivia's son had suffered from heart disease, which stemmed from treatments he underwent for Hodgkin's lymphoma. (He was diagnosed at age 19).

Her second marriage was with Pierre Galante (m. 1955; div. 1979). They had a daughter Gisèle Galante.

She was a radiant presence on screen, something that shines through in many of the photographs which were taken during this period.



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First appearances

De Havilland caught her big break in 1933 with her stage role as Hermia in a Max Reinhardt production of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the famed Hollywood Bowl. She reprised her role in the 1935 film adaptation with Dick Powell and James Cagney.

Olivia de Havilland signed a 17-year contract with Warner Brothers in 1935.

She hit the ground running – her break out role coming with *Captain Blood* in 1935 with Errol Flynn. They became the most iconic onscreen couple making eight films together in total. Although they were not a couple in real life, Flynn once wrote, "By the time we made *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, I was sure that I was in love with her."

Their most iconic outing together was *The Adventures of Robin Hood* from 1938.

Next came one of her most famous roles as Melanie in *Gone with the Wind* in 1939. She received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actress for the role. According biography.com:

‘Over the years, de Havilland became increasingly frustrated with her situation at Warner Brothers. Good parts seemed to be few and far between, and she was relieved when her contract with the studio neared its end in 1943. Warner Brothers, however, subtracted time that she had been suspended while under contract and claimed that she owed them that time. Rather than comply, de Havilland battled Warner Brothers in court.

The case went all the way to the California Supreme Court in 1945, which reaffirmed a lower court ruling in favor of de Havilland. The case created the de Havilland rule, which limited the length of a contract to a maximum of seven calendar years. During her years away from the silver screen, de Havilland found work in radio and toured military hospitals to show her support to soldiers fighting in World War II.’

Lady Triumphant

She won two “Best Actress” Oscars for *To Each His Own* (1946) and *The Heiress* (1949).

Dark desires

“*Terry and I have never been rivals. Never. Not in the slightest.*” — Terry Collins (?)

If you want a film close to an actor’s life, then look no further than Robert Siodmak’s *The Dark Mirror* from 1946. It’s as transparent as they come with the ‘division’ of sisters. This is excellent tale of duality. After a doctor is murdered, Lt. Stevenson (Thomas Mitchell) questions the man's girlfriend, Terry Collins (Olivia de Havilland). Sensing that she's keeping a secret, Stevenson confronts Terry in her home, where he meets her identical twin sister, Ruth (also de Havilland). Both women appear exactly alike, sometimes even posing as each other. However, when twin



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expert Dr. Elliott (Lew Ayres) analyzes the sisters, he finds that one twin is normal, while the other is psychotic – but which one?

One of thirty feature films produced between 1946 and 1948 whose financial failure resulted in their ownership being taken over by Bank of America for non-payment of loans, and subsequently sold to Mundus Television in 1954 for television broadcast at a reported total of \$45 million.

Directed by Robert Siodmak who was the brother of screenwriter and novelist Curt Siodmak who wrote *The Wolf Man* (1941).

He had two other brilliant movies out the same year: *The Spiral Staircase* and *The Killers*, which was Burt Lancaster's breakout film.

The film is a tight thriller that has some of the best camera trickery to create the twins in the film. It's seamless.

Of course, twins in movies have often been an iconic device in thrillers and horrors from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) – “Come play with us, Danny...” – to the Krays story *Legend* (2015).

The effect is created through a number of methods including, doubles, rear projection and joining film together.

It is an excellent noir that keeps you guessing until the very end. Siodmak's masterful direction setting the perfect stage and tension throughout.

As mentioned, the tricks are of the highest standard with little diffusion seen in the projected elements. But it is de Havilland's performance that lifts the films all the more, especially seeing her cast in a completely different light and moving towards the kinds of roles she was thirsty to play.

There are many clues throughout to decipher who is who. Although the name pendants, monogrammed dressing gowns and brooches are swapped for plot purposes, Terry is consistently left-handed and the only smoker.

Commanding performance

“It was strange, here I was among all those people, and at the same time I felt as if I were looking at them from some place far away, the whole place seemed to me like a deep hole and the people down in it like strange animals, like... like snakes, and I've been thrown into it...” — Virginia Stuart Cunningham

The Snake Pit is a superb psychological drama that really pushed how deep movies were prepared to go in exploring insanity. De Havilland plays Virginia Cunningham, who finds herself put into a mental hospital, with no memory of her arrival at the institution. Tormented by delusions and unable to even recognize her husband, Robert (Mark Stevens), she is treated by Dr. Mark Kik (Leo Genn), who is determined to get to the root of her mental illness. As her treatment progresses, flashbacks depict events in Virginia's life that may have contributed to her instability.



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“It was a small thing and yest Virginia was sure that Mrs Davis was harder on her from then on...”

— Mary Jane Ward, *The Snake Pit* (1946)

Mary Jane Ward's book, the basis for this film, was an autobiographical account of the author's experiences in psychiatric hospitals. The book caused considerable controversy upon its publication in 1946, as it was a scathing indictment of the treatment of psychiatric patients, a subject considered taboo in the 1940s. The book was a runaway bestseller.

Although publicity and some later accounts claim the film was shot almost entirely at Camarillo State Hospital in California, there were only a few location scenes shot there. Most of the interiors were shot on the 20th Century Fox lot.

According to IMDb: Director Anatole Litvak insisted that the cast and crew spend three months visiting mental institutions and attending psychiatric lectures to prepare themselves for the film. Olivia de Havilland willingly threw herself into the research. She attended patient treatments at the institutions, and observed electric shock therapy and hydrotherapy first-hand. When permitted, she sat in on doctor-patient therapy sessions. She also attended social events for patients at the institutions. After seeing the film, a "Daily Variety" columnist questioned whether any mental institution would really allow violent inmates to dance with each other at a social event. De Havilland personally called the columnist to confirm that she had attended several such dances at institutions.

It's a miraculous performance for its time and really pushes storytelling and subject matter. It is, therefore, no surprise the New York Film Critics awarded Olivia de Havilland Best Actress for the film. It was the first time since the awards' inception in 1935 that a performer won unanimously... and, as of 2014, the only time.

Other psychological films during this period involving the gaslighting and mental breakdown of women include Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* from 1940 starring Olivia de Havilland's sister Joan Fontaine. There is also *Gaslight* from the same year, the MGM remake (only four years later) starring Charles Boyer, Ingrid Bergman, Joseph Cotten and Angela Lansbury in her film debut.

One of the best is Joseph H. Lewis' *My Name is Julia Ross*, also released in 1944.

“Why did you ask me here?” — Rachel Sangalietti Ashley

In this twisted romantic tale Richard Burton plays Philip Ashley's whose wealthy cousin, Ambrose (John Sutton), dies suddenly, his suspicions drift to Ambrose's new and icy wife, Rachel (Olivia de Havilland), who stands to benefit greatly from his cousin's death. When Ashley is introduced to Rachel at Ambrose's funeral, however, his fears are immediately laid to rest: how could such a beautiful young woman possibly be a murderer? But when the estate is left to Ashley, he begins to fear for his life.



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'The point is, life has to be endured, and lived. But how to live it is the problem. He was like someone sleeping who woke suddenly and found the world...all the beauty of it, and the sadness too.' — Daphne du Maurier, *My Cousin Rachel* (1951)

Joan Fontaine made an unsuccessful bid to purchase the film rights losing out on her attempt to produce and star. This could have only added to the divide between the sisters.

There is a devouring threat of the female figure throughout which is most typical of du Maurier. According to IMDb: Richard Burton's posthumously-published diaries reveal that he accepted the role of Philip in this film because it was being planned as a comeback vehicle for Greta Garbo under the direction of his friend George Cukor, whom he regarded as one of the great Hollywood directors. He claims that Garbo personally told him she would only do the film with him as her leading man. After negotiations with both Garbo and Cukor fell through (Garbo never made another film, and Cukor was replaced by Henry Koster and he and Burton never worked together), Burton remained attached to the project, which was re-fashioned as a vehicle for Olivia de Havilland.

This is an early Richard Burton role and his first for a US studio. It marked his only Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination.

It might appear to be a simple “did she/didn't she?” tale but it is absolutely (and inescapably) a story about sex. Most specifically female sexuality: its ambiguity, its mystery and its potentially fatal – as perceived by men – power.

There are some incredible shots and compositions throughout.

There is an excellent 2017 remake that is worth watching starring Rachel Weisz and Sam Claflin

Some overlooked classics include: *Hold Back the Dawn* (1941), *In This Our Life* (1942), *To Each His Own* (1946), *Not as a Stranger* (1955) and Robert Aldrich's *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* from 1964 in which she was hired by her friend Bette Davis to replace Joan Crawford after she walked away from the film after a few days shooting.

She remained lifelong friends with Bette Davis, a friendship which began while making the film *In This Our Life* in 1942.

Final years...

Later films included disaster movie *Airport '77* (1977).

De Havilland retired in 1989, living in Paris, often becoming involved with TCM specials and the promotion of earlier works. On November 17, 2008, at the age of 92, de Havilland received the National Medal of Arts, the highest honor conferred to an individual artist on behalf of the people of the United States.

In 2017, Catherine Zeta-Jones played de Havilland in the FX series *Feud: Bette and Joan*, which dramatized another notorious Hollywood rift, between leading ladies Davis and Joan Crawford. Not



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pleased with the portrayal, de Havilland subsequently sued FX for depicting her in a "false light, with intentional or reckless disregard for the truth."

Final screen appearances include her last movie *The Fifth Musketeer* released in 1979 and Wallis and Edward drama *The Woman He Loved*, a TV movie from 1988.

She certainly aged gracefully, and although saw herself as the Tiger of the family... was a natural lioness... the very last.

There are many interesting interviews online, especially her first encounter with the infamous Errol Flynn.

"I would prefer to live forever in perfect health, but if I must at some time leave this life, I would like to do so ensconced on a chaise longue, perfumed, wearing a velvet robe and pearl earrings, with a flute of champagne beside me and having just discovered the answer to the last problem in a British cryptic crossword."

As one of the last surviving actors of the Golden Age, Olivia de Havilland passed away in her sleep at 104.