

GOD AND THE ANGEL

Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier's
Tour De Force of Australia and New Zealand

Shiroma Perera-Nathan

A story of romance, fame, glamour and betrayal to rival that of Princess Diana and Prince Charles.

The 'undisputed King and Queen of the English stage,' Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh toured Australia in 1948 as an adored celebrity couple. *God and The Angel* details the heights of their fame and the beginnings of the end of their 'fairy-tale' love story.

This is the first illustrated book on the 1948 Old Vic Tour of Australia and New Zealand, led by Olivier and Leigh.

Written from an Australian perspective and utilising never-before published photos from the National Library and author's collection, *God and the Angel* diarises a theatrical tour amidst a tense post-war context. The book follows The Old Vic tour's political and financial motivations and explores Olivier and Leigh's star couple relationship, both leading up to and during their travels.

This book retraces the footsteps of one of the twentieth century's most enduring star couples through a 1948 Australian landscape, through which important architecture, socialites, artists and their impacts are rediscovered.



The Author

Shiroma Perera-Nathan is a life-long fan of Vivien Leigh. She has travelled to many places connected with The Old Vic tour and discovered the official tour album held in the National Library collections. She has contributed a chapter to the University of Rennes, Paris, Vivien Leigh conference book, and written several blog entries for classic film websites. With a New Zealand and Australian background, Shiroma has a unique perspective on The Old Vic Tour.

sample spreads

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In 1948, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, acting as actor ambassadors, led The Old Vic Theatre Company on a performance tour of Australia and New Zealand. It was a symbolic gesture by the British Government to thank both countries for their war efforts, underlined by political motives and the remnants of colonialism. Practically it was a way for the theatre to raise much-needed funds. The Old Vic represented the surviving spirit of Great Britain and with an internationally accepted and respected art form, it was a suitable gift. It also exemplified the appropriate 'British' influence on the two countries which had stood alongside her through her darkest days, however, post-war was drawn more to an American influence. Therefore, the company was also the vehicle through which Britain attempted to re-colonise her Dominions, to maintain and further her commercial, political and cultural interests.

The tour was one of many that deployed Shakespeare for British cultural diplomacy. This one was, however, the most influential and successful by an acting troupe bringing Shakespeare to the Antipodes: a type of highbrow culture and fan frenzy that had never been seen there before or since, due mainly to the Oliviers' star personas.

Olivier, the finest Shakespearean actor of his era with Vivien Leigh as his glamorous, world-famous, talented wife, made a stunning couple. Together they embodied for the British a sense of national pride – he the lyrical and she the visual. They were treated like royalty and indeed, by 1948, they were the undisputed King and Queen of the English stage. The public frenzy and anticipation started as soon as the press announced it. The Oliviers were the original global *celebrity couple* and the fever that ensued was compounded by the fact that, by 1948, they had almost mythological public personas: being beautiful, world-famous film stars, as well as accomplished and respected stage actors: a combination that has yet to be challenged today.

It was thought that Australia and New Zealand were treating the Oliviers, who were carrying the informal title of King and Queen of the British stage, as a dress rehearsal for the official visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth the following year. Newspapers wrote of nothing else. They were mobbed, invited to society balls, gave speeches, addressed Parliament, dined with leaders, lectured, and scouted for talent. They were also subjected to the same relentless intrusion that comes with stardom, being hounded by fans, media and the public – decades before the internet, the paparazzi and the enigma that was Princess Diana. Similar to this was the forced public image that needed to be maintained. Although the

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Proceeding page:
In Canberra. Credit: Kendra
Bean Collection
Left:
Making a toast in possibly
Sydney or Brisbane. Credit:
Author's collection

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CHAPTER 6

Left:
At Scarborough Beach.
Credit: Author's collection



PERTH

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no-one knew what or who the Reelers were. Olivier made do with an improvised speech that purposely went over their heads. The only thing he noted of worth was the good beer and only when the Reeler members started singing their anthem did the company realise it was a film society.

Olivier and Vivien also organised a daring midnight bathing party for the company at Scarborough Beach. Beyer wrote:

We arrived at the beach and there wasn't a soul about. I really do think the bus driver thought we were 'mad dogs and Englishmen' because most of the company including Larry and Vivien immediately undressed and into the water they went. Floodlighting is a very good idea because it does enable you to see just how far out the water is and whether there are any rocks. Those of us who didn't bathe got the supper ready and when the others came out of the water and dressed again, we all set to and had a most wonderful feed and plenty of wine and beer. Then all sorts of games were played until about a quarter past one when the lights went out.²⁴

On the last Saturday, the 27th, having rashly promised to be professionally photographed at the beach, Olivier wrote:

Norman drove us to a quiet one near Scarborough v beautiful but v rough and treacherous looking sea. We posed in a few agonising positions and then jumped in. Poor Mr. Watson had stayed over all week to get these rather ravishing pictures. Feet were badly burnt by roasting sand on way back to car.²⁵

Their pain and Mr Watson's patience were worth it because these photos are some of the most stunning of the tour.

Their time in Perth was a breathtaking success. Having only played *School for Scandal*, in Perth they had been able to concentrate and stay focused on one play. One lady had flown all the way from Darwin to see them and was featured in the newspapers. At the last performance on Tuesday 30th March, Olivier gave a witty speech expressing gratitude to Perth and the audience for their kindness and reception. 'We have all got indigestion at the thought of leaving you. You have spoilt us – you have given us a bonzer time.'²⁶

On the day they left, Vivien insisted on having one last swim at Scarborough beach first thing in the morning. They didn't end up swimming but just basked in the brilliant West Australian sun. After their last performance, the audience had no intention of leaving until they saw them off and a large unmoving crowd blocked the roads outside the theatre. They gave them a riotous send-off as the buses taking the cast to the airport were mobbed. When the Oliviers appeared, police motorcycles had to pave a path for their taxi to leave. The Oliviers and their team had enchanted the most isolated city in the world and left a lifelong impression in two very short weeks.

sample spreads

— Chapter 3 —

VIVIEN LEIGH
BRITISH FASHION AMBASSADOR
ON THE 1948 OLD VIC TOUR

DUNEDIN

The Oliviers drove with their secretary Floy Bell and the Ralphs to Dunedin from Christchurch, appreciating the chance to see at least a little of the countryside which they had not had much of a chance to do. Uniquely, Dunedin was known as the Edinburgh of the South with its Scottish history. Although initially inhabited by the pioneering Polynesians at the same time as the rest of the country (exact date is still contested) it was formally settled by the Europeans of the Lay Association of the Free Church of Scotland in 1848. In this picturesque setting at the foot of a canopy of mountains and a pretty harbour, the surveyor of the city was given the brief to reproduce the characteristics of Edinburgh.

They were to perform at His Majesty's Theatre, originally the city's agricultural hall that eventually became a theatre. In the '70s, much of its exterior was remodelled to become Dunedin's iconic music venue Sammy's. In 2017, it was bought by the Council and currently awaits feedback from the public as to its preferred future, standing neglected with no progress.

The box office had opened on September 27th to limited seats and as usual the line-up had started the day before to hundreds of people. Dunedin had never seen such an unbroken queue before. They stayed at The City Hotel and all of Dunedin's three cinemas were showing *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Waterloo Bridge* and Olivier's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Olivier said to the interviewer of the Otago Daily Times, when he visited them backstage,

'You may not know it but you are talking to two walking corpses.'¹⁰ It is an often-quoted line. He noted that it was a big ask of anyone to perform nine shows a week but they were insistent on completing the tour so as not to deprive anyone from seeing them.

They were welcomed to the city by Dunedin's Mayor Sir Donald Cameron at a function held in the Council Chambers. Various theatrical associations of the country had been present.

Otago in New Zealand's South Island is renowned for its brown trout and Olivier's observation that trout season had started and how he would love to taste the New Zealand fish was taken to heart by a group of trout farmers. The journey to get a decent trout to them was filled with angst and mishandling. First, they couldn't find one suitable and when they did, it got lost in transit. Eventually, once the Oliviers had left the South for Wellington, the lovely 'five-pounder in the pink of condition' found its way to their plates, much to Olivier's delight! He commented it was 'delicious' and cooked exactly as New Zealand trout should be.¹¹

When he addressed students at Otago University in the still-existing Allen Hall, the topic of a National Theatre was brought up as it had been all the way through the Australian cities. Olivier's respected opinion was sought by all. He admitted he didn't know but made suggestions:

I think you should, first of all, get a few people like your chancellor, and your best painter, best poet, and other learned gentlemen to get together and form a trust, perhaps bring out a



Left:
Picnic on the way to Dunedin. Credit: Athol Shmith, 1948 – Australian Tour 1948, Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh and The Old Vic Company, Bib ID 3044576. Credit: National Library of Australia