



Muse of Fire: Richard Burton

# Boom!

## Boom!

Directed by: Joseph Losey

©: Universal Pictures Limited

Production Companies: World Film Services Ltd.,

Moonlake Productions, Universal Pictures Limited

Presented by: Universal

Produced by: John Heyman, Norman Priggen

Associate Producer: Lester Persky

Production Supervisor: Ottavio Oppo

Unit Manager: Valerio de Paolis

Assistant Director: Carlo Lastricati

Continuity: Helen Whitson

Screenplay by: Tennessee Williams

From the play *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here*

Any more by: Tennessee Williams

Lighting Cameraman: Douglas Slocombe

Camera Operator: Chic Waterson

Editor: Reginald Beck

Production Designed by: Richard MacDonald

Miss Taylor's Clothes: Tiziani of Rome

Wardrobe Supervisor: Annalisa Nasalli Rocco

Jewellery: Bulgari (Rome)

Noël Coward's Suit: Douglas Hayward

Elizabeth Taylor's Make-up: Frank La Rue

Richard Burton's Make-up: Ron Berkeley

Miss Taylor's Hairstyles Designed/Created by:

Alexandre de Paris

Miss Taylor's Hairstyles Executed by:

Claudie Etori

Filmed in: Panavision

Processed by: Humphries Film Laboratories

Music Composed and Conducted by: John Barry

Indian Sitar Music by: Nazirali Jairazbnoy,

Viram Jasani

Sound Recordists: Leslie Hammond,

Gerry Humphreys

Sound System: RCA

Dubbing Editor: Alan Bell

Play Produced on the Broadway Stage by:

Roger L. Stevens

Made at: De Laurentiis Studios (Rome)

uncredited

1st Assistant Editor: Roger Wilson

2nd Assistant Editor: David Hitchcock

Art Director: John Clark

Assistant to the Production Designer: Jorie Pepper

Set Dresser: Jill Oxley

Construction Manager: Ron Grundy

Make-up: George Claff

Hair: Bill Griffiths

Boom Operator: Fred Tomlin

Cast:

Elizabeth Taylor (*Flora 'Sissy' Goforth*)

Richard Burton (*Christopher 'Chris' Flanders*)

Noël Coward (*Bill Ridgeway, The Witch of Capri*)

Joanna Shimkus

(*Miss Black, 'Blackie', Goforth's secretary*)

Michael Dunn (*Rudi, Goforth's watchman*)

Romolo Valli (*Doctor Lullo, Goforth's doctor*)

Howard Taylor (*journalist*)

Fernando Piazza (*Etti, Goforth's butler*)

Veronica Wells (*Simonetta, Goforth's maid*)

uncredited

Gens Bloch (*photographer on boat*)

Franco Pesce (*villager*)

Claudie Etori (*manicurist*)

Nazirali Jairazbnoy, Viram Jasani (*sitar players*)

Sergio Carozzi

Giovanni Paganelli

UK/USA 1968©

112 mins

35mm

*The screening on Monday 8 December will be introduced by Charlotte Frances Burton, Richard Burton's granddaughter*

Dubbed 'The Angel of Death', Burton's wandering-poet-cum-gigolo washes up on the isolated Sardinian isle of Taylor's ailing widow, in this visually stunning, alcohol-drenched adaptation of a minor Tennessee Williams play. Compellingly miscast, the pair face off in the sort of unhinged register best relished with an enthusiastic audience. Devoted fans include John Waters, who opined, 'If you don't like this film, I hate you'.

## A contemporary review

Sooner or later in one's life someone knocks the ramparts down. Vulnerability, or the fear of it, are the conditions of mind that follow. Rebuild the defences, and they may never fall again. Leave them down, and the comfortable precincts of self-lie open to erosion. This dilemma seems to crystallise in each of Losey's film: cry for help (like the wife in *The Prowler*) and find betrayal, or preserve a growling independence (like the heroine of *Eve*) and settle for a fatal loneliness. If a balance exists between the two, Losey's characters rarely discover it. Rather, they seesaw wildly from one extreme to the other – the arrogant master changes places with the contemptuous servant, the rational scholar becomes a would-be rapist, the curt army officer turns ardent pacifist. The transitions, of course, do represent a kind of progress from fantasy to actuality, but the pendulum then swings further still and a new fantasy takes over. Whether it is an improvement or not Losey doesn't bother to mention; maintaining an utter detachment, he is content to observe and to leave the deductions to his audience.

In a sense, Losey places himself actually with his audience. An intense curiosity is prominent in his films, as though he too were seeing the characters and their settings for the first time and felt slightly in awe of them. In *Boom!* the slow, contemplative tracking shots take us through richly furnished rooms with an awareness of textures, of mellow lights and shadows, and above all of an atmosphere of expectancy. In the Goforth villa, a servant, a bodyguard or a secretary could be just behind the next pilaster. *Boom!* is constructed around the theme of intrusion, on the narrative level that of unwanted (but clearly vital) arrival on the island of independence, and on the cinematic level that of an inquisitive audience on a series of tableaux which, like rocks, mosaics and furniture, have a centuries-old story to tell whether anyone listens or not. In their construction, *Accident*, *Boom!*, and *Secret Ceremony*, an immaculate trilogy of introspection, resist almost tangibly the invasion of the critic, interpreter or commentator, turning him away with a reflective, flawless surface – the archetypal Losey mirror.

The trespasser in *Boom!*, like the girl in *Accident* who preceded him, is a more complex individual than appearances at first suggest. Discounting, as one must, that he is portrayed by Richard Burton in a mood of cheerful hairiness that Tatsuya Nakadai would put to shame with one elegant eyebrow, his determined scrutiny of the dying days of Mrs Goforth has a cannibalistic hunger about it which rightly goes far beyond what is hinted by the shots that introduce him (from a giant close-up of her jewelled hand to his figure tramping along the road). As he scales her mountain, his shouts echoing into her dictated memoirs, the regal disdain with which she chooses to ignore him has its own echoes of immortal omnipotence. If she is dying (and for all the

## Muse of Fire: Richard Burton

### Look Back at Richard Burton

Tue 2 Dec 18:15

### The Last Days of Dolwyn

Tue 2 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by actor Kate Burton, Richard Burton's daughter); Sun 14 Dec 12:00

### The Night of the Iguana

Fri 5 Dec 18:10; Mon 22 Dec 20:25

### My Cousin Rachel

Fri 5 Dec 20:50; Sat 6 Dec 14:00

### Now Barabbas Was a Robber...

Sat 6 Dec 11:50; Fri 12 Dec 20:50

### Look Back in Anger

Sat 6 Dec 16:10; Mon 15 Dec 20:50

**A Subject of Scandal and Concern** + extended intro by John Wyver, writer and television producer  
Sun 7 Dec 12:45

### The Comedians

Sun 7 Dec 15:00 (+ intro by season co-curator James Bell); Sun 21 Dec 14:30

### Boom!

Mon 8 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Charlotte Frances Burton, Richard Burton's granddaughter);  
Sat 27 Dec 14:15

### The Spy Who Came in From the Cold

Mon 8 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Charlotte Frances Burton, Richard Burton's granddaughter);  
Wed 17 Dec 18:10

### Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Sat 13 Dec 17:50; Mon 29 Dec 20:30

### 1984

Mon 15 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 27 Dec 20:45

### Philosophical Screens: 1984

Mon 15 Dec 20:30 Blue Room

### Exorcist II: The Heretic

Fri 19 Dec 20:45; Sun 28 Dec 18:30

### Equus

Sat 20 Dec 12:00; Tue 30 Dec 17:45

### Where Eagles Dare

Sat 20 Dec 17:20; Sun 28 Dec 14:45

### Villain

Tue 23 Dec 18:10; Sun 28 Dec 12:00

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injections and transfusions Elizabeth Taylor makes this rather too difficult to believe), she needs neither help nor sympathy in the process. But the visitor seems undeterred by her refusal to feed him or by the samurai robe she selects for him to wear, or by the way she describes the death of the original Goforth over a loudspeaker system in the middle of the night, or delves into his luggage at gunpoint. Her armour, encompassing a small tribe of recalcitrant courtiers, is only proof against him for as long as she wears it; when she voluntarily weakens enough to invite him into her bedroom she finds, to her hazy surprise, that her guest has his own brand of integrity.

The splendid consistency of Mrs Goforth is that as she dies she is still giving orders, and is still convinced, despite some early shudders at the Angel of Death label carried by her new parasite, that even if he doesn't want her, he certainly wants her wealth. This pragmatic paranoia has, of course, always been demonstrated by Tennessee Williams' heroines, tragically unable to comprehend how their menfolk could have more perverse obsessions than woman-hunting; like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Mrs Goforth revels in the philosophical turn of phrase ('My next chapter,' she announces sweepingly, 'is on the Meaning of Life') and in nostalgic memories of former loves. She denies strenuously that she is ill, despite the blood on her handkerchief, and composes herself for death on her Borghese bed as if for a brief doze. Whereupon the gleeful houseguest pitches her jewels into the sea. Boom! – 'the shock of each moment of being alive,' he comments, with slightly jaded lyricism, as the waves pound their rhythm below.

It's the miscasting that throws *Boom!* somewhat out of gear, coupled perhaps with the startling transposition from Williams' country to a Sardinian island. Given a magnificent location and the smooth lines of Richard MacDonald's white architecture, however, Losey has created a fable that transcends its players just as kabuki (the analogous references in the film need be strained no further) relies only on the most formal movements and expressions to convey its meanings. The timeless landscapes and luminous beauty of the interiors (the shot of Mrs Goforth at last ordering dinner by the fireside would have been worthy of Dreyer if he had ever ventured into colour) convey far more powerfully than the brittle conversations on the terrace the extent to which the Goforth domain is peopled with living dead.

A flurry of wind breathes the impotent autobiography into chaos, the sunlight is too fierce or vanishes altogether (at one point, by an uncharacteristic lapse in continuity, reappearing firmly after the script has written it out), while the sea, in which the Angel of Death occasionally takes a dip, waits patiently to reclaim the lives that belong to it. Encompassed by such forces, the small span of Mrs Goforth's intellect and influence is made pathetically clear ('I have lots of art treasures in my bedroom – myself included'), and her tyrannical charade rightly seems based on blindness. Her guest gives her a number of shocks by attempting to drag her off into the wilderness, but these serve only to accelerate her decline. Like the aristocrat in *The Servant*, she can be thrown out of her depth rather too easily, whereas her elusive companion seems to be familiar with all the currents, human or elemental. And he has the necessary merit of a sense of humour, obscured as it sometimes is by a ponderous dose of pontification. 'You're not so tough that some day you're not going to need something that will mean God to you,' he snarls, incorrectly as it turns out. But Elizabeth Taylor stands in the folds of a huge golden-headed sculpture, and as usual Losey's imagery speaks volumes more than his script.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1969