

# Conjuring ghosts

*Former Oroville resident and actress Janis Stevens calls up the spirit of a screen legend*

By [John W. Young](#)

She didn't look a whole lot like her. But former Oroville resident Janis Stevens both sounded and *projected* like British actress Vivien Leigh at the Birdcage Theatre in Oroville last weekend.

Performed without intermission, the 80-minute one-woman play, *Vivien*, careens through the career and private life of one of the silver screen's most enduring and alluring figures. It was a tour de force of acting skill on the part of Stevens. She fluidly shifted mood and mindset as the mercurial script by award-winning playwright Rick Foster demanded.

Foster has set this piece in London in July of 1967. It is only days before Vivien Leigh is found in her apartment dead from tuberculosis at age 53. She has recently auditioned for and won the role of Agnes in Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*, a work she frankly admits to friends that she doesn't understand. It is from here that the play proceeds, presuming an "actor's nightmare"--a nerve wracking dream in which an actor frantically asks for a script she has never seen while being told she must go on *now*.

With the dream aspect established, we accept Stevens' Leigh as she alternately jokes about her predicament, reminisces about her theater days, greets unseen visitors, suffers hellish bouts of depression alternating with relentless giddiness, and describes her relationship with husband Laurence Olivier.

Leigh suffered from what is today known as bipolar disorder, a mental disease consisting of sudden and sometimes violent mood swings, now readily treated with medication. In the '50s, however, when she was finally diagnosed a manic-depressive, the only treatment was literally mind-numbing electro-shock therapy. And one of the most grueling segments of the play is when Stevens re-enacts Leigh's first treatment, the simple yellow light oscillating on her face proving devastatingly effective.

But the play jumps around in time like busy, somewhat convoluted thoughts. Her fluctuating longing and loathing for Olivier is made palpable by Stevens' economic body language, her beautifully controlled voice--she goes from languidly longing for "Larry-Boy" to violently spitting out "You fucking bastard!" in an eye's blink. It's a stunning portrait. On at least three occasions during the show, I forgot about my review and became utterly immersed in Stevens' performance: She *was* Vivien Leigh.

Effective costumes were created for the show by Mary Campbell-Dohring. Whether she was playing Scarlett O'Hara or Antigone, the housewrap-like garments and robes Stevens slipped in and out of onstage seemed to simultaneously evoke the personality of the particular character from her. Lighting and sound were good, although there seemed to be a few times when cues were a tad late (I was sitting near the booth and unfortunately could overhear some of the technicians' frantic commands).

Apart from Stevens' portrayal, the most effective image in the show was the ghost light, a lamp that traditionally was left on in British theaters so that the space was never completely dark. Within the show, whenever the character was lost or depressed, she would return to this lamp, clinging to it, as if it were the source of comfort and life. That image works on many levels, one of the most obvious being that it was only by returning to the stage that Leigh was able to center herself again. But beyond that, it was far more effective as a tool for conjuring, for attracting ghosts. And in that respect, one feels as if the spirit of Leigh has been called back into the world, called back into the theater to perform once again through the medium of Ms. Stevens.

And that concept is beautifully moving.

While the show played in Oroville last weekend only, *Vivien* is scheduled to be performed for a month beginning in September at San Francisco's Rainbow Theatre. It is definitely worth the drive. And definitely worth seeing.



*Vivien repossessed: Actor Janis Stevens (pictured) practically channeled the spirit of famed British actress Vivien Leigh during her outstanding one-woman performance of Vivien last weekend at The Birdcage Theatre in Oroville. The show will play for a month at the Magic Theater in San Francisco beginning in September.*

**Vivien**  
**The Birdcage Theatre, Oroville, Friday,**  
**May 25, Written by Rick Foster, Directed**  
**by Barbara Bosch**