

Vivien: The Triumph and Madness of Vivien Leigh

Rick Foster

San Francisco
Magic Theatre
September 8 - October 7



Vivien Leigh, the quintessential southern belle on screen, had a tragic life. She was infected with tuberculosis, which first interfered with her acting career just ten years after her she had begun, and led to her early death at age 53 in 1967. She fell in love with Laurence Olivier, commencing an affair with him when she was 22. But while they worked together in film and on stage, the leading critic Kenneth Tynan accused her of preventing Olivier from fulfilling his promise as England's leading classical actor. Moreover, Olivier was an inconstant lover, dallying with other women and with Danny Kaye. These pressures resulted in Leigh's first manic-depressive breakdown that was treated by electroconvulsive therapy in 1953. Leigh and Olivier had married in 1940, the same year she won her first Oscar for the role of Scarlett O'Hara. Even though she had told Olivier she no longer loved him in 1949, he remained an obsession. They were divorced in 1960 and in 1961 she made a final attempt to regain his affection. She continued to work, but was plagued by depression. She was preparing to appear in the London premiere of Albee's *A Delicate Balance* when she died.

Leigh's story has been adroitly encapsulated by playwright Rick Foster in a one-woman show, *Vivien: The Triumph and Madness of Vivien Leigh*. He uses the device of a series of reminiscences that Leigh conjures up prior to a rehearsal of *A Delicate Balance*. The script touches upon the main incidents of her life and subtly conveys the causes of her insecurities. Foster concentrates on the dynamics of the Leigh/Olivier relationship rather than giving a purely linear recounting of her life. He cares about his subject, and so do we.

Janis Stephens plays the demanding part, which requires brief impersonations of several of Leigh's roles. Her physical appearance is close to that of Leigh's and her skill

with different accents helps complete the illusion. Stephens grows with the part as the evening progresses, creating a portrait of a person rather than a caricature of a celebrity. Mary Campbell has designed costumes that convey the necessary style and are easily changed. Ron Madonia's set also works well, but a few lighting transitions left Stephens unnecessarily in the dark. Incidental music by David C. Eakin complements the action.

September 8, 2001

- Larry Campbell