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Elizabeth Taylor's Feisty, Feminist Turn in *Giant*

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr. & Cristine Russell
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Her performance as rancher Leslie Lynnton dismantled stereotypes about women and minorities when it graced screens nearly 60 years ago.



Meet Elizabeth Taylor: feisty feminist and ardent social reformer. There she is—a strikingly beautiful and fresh-faced 23-year-old—just off the Mexican-tiled lobby of the historic [Hotel Paisano](#) in the tiny west Texas town of Marfa. In a paean to the Academy Award-winning classic [Giant](#), filmed here nearly 60 years ago, the film plays round the clock on a tiny screen, surrounded by photos and memorabilia of the cast and crew that stayed here.

In addition to Taylor, they included a high-powered team of actors—Rock Hudson, James Dean, Dennis Hopper, and Mercedes McCambridge—who were on location in June 1955 for the Warner Brothers epic *Giant*. Adapted from a sprawling Edna Ferber novel, the film is far from the standard shoot-'em-up westerns of the time. Today it is little remembered as a groundbreaking film that shot down stereotypes of both women and minorities, showcasing Taylor's early acting talents as a strong-willed young rancher.

A recent visit to Marfa inspired us to see the 1956 film again after many, many years. Viewed today, the 201-minute critique of 1920s Texas' feudal ranching baronies and striving, new oil plutocracies shows the origins of Taylor's great celebrity in a surprisingly well-acted role in which her character—ahead of her time—takes on society's sexism and racism.

As Leslie Lynnton, the independent-minded, sharp-tongued daughter of a “horse country” family in the East, Taylor unexpectedly marries Jordan “Bick” Benedict Jr. (Rock Hudson), who has come to buy a stallion in the green, rolling hills of Maryland. He returns to the dead-flat, windswept browns of his West Texas ranch with a wife he loves but doesn't understand.

In Texas, Leslie is a feminist sharply critical of male hierarchies and sarcastically dismissive of misogynist condescension. She's also a social reformer intent on securing equal treatment for Mexican-Americans—who are viewed with disdain as “wetbacks” and treated with discrimination by the ranchers, oil men, and pols who dominate the state. After being rebuffed in her attempts to get doctors for the poor Hispanic families and to join in all-male conversations about Texas business and politics, she tells Bick that she has had enough, and she won't put up with his insensitivity any longer. She leaves him to go home, until he comes back to Maryland, Stetson in hand, to ask her to give him another chance. The climax of the film is Bick's losing fight with a Texas café owner who won't serve his Hispanic daughter-in-law (many years have passed), which is viewed as a heroic transformation by Leslie.

Today, these are, of course, very powerful but very widespread artistic and political subjects. But what is remarkable is that *Giant's* sharp take on misogyny and discrimination is more than half a century old. What are also remarkable are the performances of Taylor and Hudson. The story is, of course, about Texas—the film gets its “epic” character from the vast vistas, sweeping shots of Bick's huge Reata Ranch and the rancher-oil men conflict created under George Stevens, Sr. who won the Academy Award for Best Director. But most of the story and themes are told through the 25-year marriage of Leslie and Bick that frames the movie. Taylor is loving but also tough-minded and sharp-witted; Hudson's humanity struggles to emerge from his tough rancher personality. Despite some clunky lines, both performances are authentic and affecting.

Some critics see this as James Dean's movie (he died at age 24 in a car crash before it opened). As surly ranch-hand Jett Rink, he hates Bick, loves Leslie, and then strikes oil

on his small patch of land. Dean gives us a big dose of the “method” acting of the time: mumbles, heavy-lidded eyes, unexpected grins, suppressed feelings that can explode. But his performance plays off Hudson and Taylor—especially Taylor, who treats his barely hidden passion for her with seductive but mocking lightness.

In *Giant*, Taylor benefited from Edna Ferber’s preference for strong women protagonists, including her novels *Showboat* (1926), which became one of America’s great musicals, and *Cimarron* (1929), which, in its film version, won Best Picture in 1931. After *Giant*, Taylor went on a remarkable run, being nominated as best actress four years in a row: *Raintree County* (1957), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), and *Butterfield 8* (1960), for which she won the first of her two Oscars (the second in 1966 for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*).

Some of Taylor’s traits as Leslie in *Giant* were part of her own personality. Directors, especially in the first 20 years of her career, always remarked on how unpretentious she was, how respectful of everyone on the set and how caring. Her reforming instincts, ironically, were triggered by the 1985 death of her leading man (and good friend) Rock Hudson from an AIDS-related illness, which led her to become a champion for those afflicted with this disease at a time when that was hardly popular and to found the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

The remote town of Marfa, Texas, a three-hour drive from El Paso, is having an artistic revival of sorts—it was also the site for the recent films *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*. But *Giant* still captures the most attention at El Paisano, where we stayed for a recent wedding in a room that housed a baby-faced Dennis Hopper, then 19, who played Leslie and Bick’s bookish son Jordy. You can stay in the Elizabeth Taylor or Rock Hudson suites, but it is James Dean’s room that is the most popular. The atmospherics are great, but you may want to skip the *Giant* baseball cap or mug. Buy or rent the DVD instead.

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