

She broke hearts, will break yours too

The vulnerable side of the ultimate Hollywood diva in My Week with Marilyn

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FILM REVIEW

SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE. How do you make a movie about a great star — the greatest of them all — without resorting to their iconic status and retracing their rise to that position? How do you reconstruct their transformation from mere mortal to demigod? A 20th century icon that fits the category was Marilyn Monroe, because she embodied all the traits and qualities inscribed in the collective unconscious.



Michelle Williams and Eddie Redmayne in My Week with Marilyn

Like most icons, it's apparently easy to come up with visual recreations of Marilyn: a slight physical resemblance, the appropriate hairstyle, makeup, outfits and accessories, and an attitude to match. Impersonators or actresses who've attempted to bring back to life a larger-than-life personality like Marilyn know better: being equipped with the right props and accoutrements is not enough to create the illusion of authenticity.

Sometimes a few snapshots and recorded lines of actual dialogue will do the job. Instead of the colossal task involved in full reconstruction, Colin Clark, a studio assistant who forced his way into Warner Bros. to take a job in any category, decided to write an account of the one week he spent with Marilyn when filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1956) started in London.

AFTER YOU GET WHAT YOU WANT. "Everyone remembers their first job. This is the story of mine. I was the youngest in a family of overachievers. My father was a

world-famous art historian, and my brother was ahead of me in everything. I was always the disappointment,” a 23-year-old Clark says at the beginning of *My Week with Marilyn*, a film that exudes pure perfection in its account of the Hell-on-Earth battle between the renowned actor Lawrence Olivier and the US “dumb blonde” for export known as Marilyn Monroe.

Monroe was at the height of her career and was already the most famous woman in the world. Olivier had long cemented his status as the UK’s greatest actor, but his popularity was waning. As Clark himself, addressing Monroe, states in his book of memoirs and in the film, “It’s agony because he’s a great actor who wants to be a film star, and you’re a film star who wants to be a great actress. This film won’t help either of you.”

As was often the case when Marilyn stepped on a studio set to begin a new movie, cast and crew were well aware what lay in store for them. The insecure, mercurial, pill-popping Marilyn showed up hours late for the day’s shoot, or did not show up at all. Monroe, the man eater, was personally vulnerable, fragile and diffident as a performer in spite or perhaps on account of her training as a “serious actress” under the controversial Method devised by Lee Strassberg.

Monroe came to London chaperoned by Strassberg’s sister Paula, who not only coached Monroe’s lines but also supervised every aspect of her daily activities. At the time, Monroe, after a failed marriage to baseball great Joe Di Maggio, was married to America’s most prominent literary figure: playwright Arthur Miller. In the public eye, it was a staggering contrast: a high-ranking intellectual partnered with the beautiful but empty shell Marilyn was supposed to be.

Mirroring Monroe’s and Miller’s union, the leads in *The Prince and the Showgirl* could not be a more unlikely pairing. Monroe’s stellar shine could have overshadowed Olivier’s, however gifted and unchallenged in his domain.

On the other hand, Olivier was perceived by some (Monroe and Paula Strassberg themselves) as a potential threat to Marilyn’s standing as a performer. Monroe, full of fright, turned to Strassberg for professional and personal reassurance. But things were not that different at the other end: Olivier was in awe of Monroe’s beauty and innate star power, but unconsciously made every possible attempt to crush her acting skills to prove who was the boss at Warner’s lot.

I WANNA BE LOVED BY YOU. Unknown to the public and the media, when Miller flew back to the US to visit family, there was a one-week gap during which the movingly fragile and desperate Monroe turned for comfort to a young, very young “assistant-assistant” director by the name of Colin Clark.

In spite of being an Etonian destined for higher pursuits, Clark had it his way when he decided to break with family tradition and work his way up in the movie industry. Lanky, distinguished and handsome, Clark caught the eye of Monroe, who, like the helpless child she was at heart, wooed Clark to her side when Miller left.

MY HEART BELONGS TO DADDY. It was just one week, but it sufficed for Monroe to steal — and break — the young Clark’s heart. He would treasure those days for decades, and published a book of memoirs — *The Prince, the Showgirl and Me* — in 2004, the same year a TV documentary was made based on his cherished days with Monroe.

Answering the question of how to portray a larger-than-life personality, filmmaker Simon Curtis — with an extensive background on TV as writer, producer and director — found the perfect source material in Clark's book of memoirs. So this was how he went about it: he coproduced and directed an anecdotal biopic based on Clark's books *My Week With Marilyn* and *The Prince, the Showgirl and Me*.

LIKE A WOMAN SHOULD. Starring the powerhouse of an actress named Michelle Williams (*Brokeback Mountain, I'm Not There, Wendy and Lucy, Blue Valentine*) *My Week with Marilyn* is a bittersweet, nostalgia-ridden film that packs raw emotion and sensitive performances by Williams as the troubled Monroe, and Eddie Redmayne as Colin Clark. With a personal history curiously resembling, in more than one aspect, the real-life Clark, Redmayne too is an Etonian (he went on to Trinity College, Cambridge).

Redmayne's sweet, dreamy-eyed performance as Colin Clark smoothly drives the action in *My Week With Marilyn*, and all through the film's 99-minute runtime he seems to be voicing the events of the seven achingly beautiful days during which he provided solace to the forlorn Marilyn Monroe, pitifully alone at the top.

Physical resemblance between Monroe and Williams is not apparent — not even after the beauty rituals that allowed Marilyn herself to transmogrify into an unparalleled sex goddess. But Williams still does an overwhelming job exploring the frailty, insecurity and excruciating agony experienced by Monroe during her UK sojourn and, as intimated by the film, throughout her brief life. Williams' performance is nothing short of pure perfection, so much so that you soon forget that this is an actress in Monroe garb speaking the lines written for her.

Deftly directed by Simon Curtis, *My Week with Marilyn* details the Monroe -Olivier showdown and Monroe's seven-day liaison with a young man who provided love, warmth and comfort when most needed. Eddie Redmayne could have been no better choice for the role of the young man infatuated by, in love with, a woman who could never allow herself to be the subject of unconditional love.

The great Shakesperian actor Kenneth Branagh plays Olivier with the passion, rage and ultimate admiration for Monroe the real Olivier himself owned up to when filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl* wrapped up. And when the end credits start to roll to the music Monroe will always be associated with, you cannot help identifying with Colin Clark's despair and the glamorous blonde's resignation to be the woman everyone wanted her to be: Marilyn Monroe.

PRODUCTION NOTES

My Week with Marilyn. UK / US, 2011. In English with Spanish subtitles. Written by: Adrian Hodges, based on Colin Clark's memoirs. Directed by: Simon Curtis. With: Michelle Williams, Kenneth Branagh, Eddie Redmayne. NC13. Running time: 99 minutes.