

CLEO

Lights come up slowly on three Egyptian handmaidens: Iras, Charmion, and Mara. They stand guard outside of the bed chamber of Cleopatra. Directly behind them are the massive doors which open onto the Queen's chamber.

The three handmaidens sing an ancient hymn to the Nile. In the middle of the Hymn, out of nowhere, a director [speaking role] cuts in, shouting at each of the maidens. Charmion is overacting, Mara is underacting, and Iras is clueless and off her mark.

Now we understand that this is not the real Egypt of Cleopatra's time. We are on the set of the Elizabeth Taylor movie at the Cinecittá studios in Rome, Italy. As the director lays into each of his actresses, the different film crews are discovered on stage. In particular we find the clapstick crew, the camera crew, the sound crew, and a bunch of worried executives.

The director calls for silence and Take Two! This is the Big Death Scene Where the Queen Cradles the Body of Her Lover. The clapstick crew slap the slate and action begins again.

The handmaidens repeat their Hymn. But this time the Hymn is part of a choral quartet of interwoven song. The camera crew discuss the shot angles, the sound crew cue for all the sound effects, and the "suits" worry over the budget and the prospects of this film breaking even. All of this happens at once.

The Hymn reaches its climax this time, and the handmaidens open the door to Cleopatra's chambers. The sliding doors open very wide, at least seven feet. Wide enough to reveal the whole bed chamber inside. The doors open to reveal, not Cleopatra, but pop singer Eddie Fisher wandering around the set of the chamber (dressed in early 1960's snazziest style).

Eddie's entrance, of course, stops the scene. Eddie is looking for his wife, Elizabeth Taylor. The handmaidens report to poor Eddie all the gossip that they've heard about Elizabeth and Richard Burton's love affair. Eddie is driven to distraction and a schmaltzy song. Finally the director gains control, pulling Eddie off the set and Take Three!

The clapstick crew do their work. The trio of handmaidens reach the end of their Hymn again. The chamber doors open again and this time Cleopatra is discovered within. She is kneeling before a pallet, large enough to hold a body. She is in tears, crying over the dead body of Marc Antony. Except that there is no Marc Antony anywhere to be seen. Instead of Richard Burton, Elizabeth has a large long pillow cradled on her lap.

The Director stops the scene again. He is informed that Burton is not yet on the set. Elizabeth had to use the pillow as a stand-in. The real Burton is hungover, or perhaps still drunk. The best boy scurries off to find the actor, and Elizabeth and Eddie are left together to talk. Elizabeth explains that if she could she would love Eddie, but she must follow her heart.

The Director interrupts the couple. Eddie won't stop whining so the Director instructs the gaffer to tape Eddie's mouth. Eddie mumbles mournfully behind the gaffer's tape. Meanwhile, the director asks Elizabeth for her motivation in this scene. Taylor admits that she has no idea about the character she is playing. She sings a plaintive song reviewing her whole film career. The star is famous, the woman is

barely known. Stage hands suddenly arrive carrying Richard Burton on a pallet. They dump him onto Cleopatra's bed and he seems completely passed out. What the hell...Take Four!

Cleopatra repeats her scene. This time she has a real body to sing to...but it isn't responding very well. After a bit of prompting and threatening by Elizabeth, Richard falls right into character. He is a remarkably articulate Marc Antony. Unfortunately, at this point in the film, Marc Antony is dead. But the love scene between Cleopatra and Marc Antony turns into a make out scene with Elizabeth and Richard. They lose both character and perspective.

The Director stops the scene. Elizabeth sings a lovely ballad about her life and while the crowd is distracted Eddie escapes from his gaffers tape and takes one of the prop knives from an Egyptian soldier. Eddie threatens Burton with the knife and pandemonium ensues. Fisher chases Burton around the set until with a British sort of insouciance, Burton runs off stage...with sprinting dignity.

Since the whole death scene has been shot to hell, the Director rehearses the Big Epic Movie Triumphal March Scene. Banners, carts, everything short of elephants that the budget can stand, are paraded across the stage. The bit actors sing ruefully about being the little roles in a big movie. All march off in a triumphal huff.

Elizabeth is alone, at last. For the first time in the opera, Elizabeth is the only person on stage. She sings of her loneliness and her stardom. Running back on stage, Richard interrupts Elizabeth and the two engage in a spirited love duet and finally kiss.

Eddie jumps out of hiding and stabs Richard to the heart. Burton staggers and falls, dead. Elizabeth screams. And Eddie, for once, is triumphant. After the orchestra has played a pure-Puccini death throb, Richard picks himself up with a laugh, telling Eddie, "My dear chap, you don't think we would give actors actual blades!"

Richard was only acting. And Elizabeth is furious. She thought he was dead...She could kill him for being so insensitive! And suddenly the two of them are in a drag out, drag down, screaming match. George and Martha couldn't do better. They berate each other, then beat each other, then lunge for each other and begin wrestling around. The wrestling match turns, improbably, into an embrace. And now they are in love again and practically making love on the stage set bed.

Eddie realizes that this is all beyond him. He calls in his chips and admits defeat. Elizabeth realizes that all they do they do for the people on the other end of the camera. There is an audience out there, and that is what makes their lives make sense. Elizabeth realizes that she is an actress, that this is her highest calling. At last she knows her motivation for the scene and she demands one final Take!

A final choral quartet of 1) Handmaidens 2) Elizabeth and Richard 3) Eddie and 4) the Chorus. urge the audience to dream on. At the climax of the finale Elizabeth stands forward and speaks directly to the audience: "You have fallen into the spell of art. Wake up, and dream!"

NOTE: Even though Elizabeth Taylor's makeup in the actual movie *Cleopatra* constantly verges on the edge of parody itself, the makeup and costumes in the opera should do all they can to keep *Cleo* from veering into sheer farce. Though generally comical, the opera is serious about Taylor's artistry. Costume and makeup can guide the audience along the razor's edge of comedy and truth.