



DRAMA · HISTORY · ROMANCE

Cleopatra

1963 · Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Historical Epic

Melodrama

Classical Hollywood

The young queen of Egypt, caught between a dynastic rivalry at home and the growing power of Rome, sets out to secure her throne through alliance with the most powerful men of the age. A talky, richly staged epic that treats politics and romance as one subject.

DIRECTOR	Joseph L. Mankiewicz
YEAR	1963
RUNTIME	4h 11m (251 min)
COUNTRY	USA/UK
GENRES	Drama, History, Romance
CAST	Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Rex Harrison, Pamela Brown, George Cole
MUSIC	Alex North
IMDB	7.0 / 10 (40,521 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	61% (critics)
METACRITIC	60 / 100
TMDB SCORE	7.1 / 10 (890 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): Philo Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The most extravagant studio-era epic ever made

Sets of Alexandria and Rome were built at full scale, with thousands of costumed extras. Its production nearly bankrupted 20th Century-Fox and marks the high-water point of the Hollywood spectacle.

2 Taylor, Burton and Harrison in a literate script

Joseph L. Mankiewicz, known for dialogue-driven films, gives the epic wit and political argument. Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra and Rex Harrison's Caesar carry long scenes of talk as much as spectacle.

3 A film that is also a story about filmmaking

Its troubled shoot, the Taylor-Burton affair and its enormous cost became as famous as the film. Knowing that history helps explain why Hollywood changed course afterwards.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining late example of the roadshow epic, made at the moment the old studio system could no longer afford its own ambitions. It is as much an ending as a peak.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a political drama in which romance, costume and spectacle are all tools of power.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often scenes turn on conversation: negotiations, arguments and wry exchanges carry as much weight as the large set pieces.
- Cleopatra's costumes and entrances: how each is staged to project authority, and how the camera lets her control the frame.
- The contrast between the Egyptian and Roman worlds in colour, architecture and manner, which sets up the film's central tension.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Is Cleopatra presented as a woman in love, a ruler playing a long game, or something harder to separate?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** By the early 1960s television was eroding cinema attendance, and studios answered with giant-scale, widescreen roadshow epics sold as special events with intermissions and reserved seating.
- **Technology:** Shot on 65mm Todd-AO, the film used the wide, sharp frame to show vast sets and processions, with colour design and costuming central to its appeal.
- **Dominant styles:** Ben-Hur (1959) had just shown how profitable an epic could be, and Fox, in financial trouble, bet heavily on a similar success.
- **Director's moment:** Mankiewicz, a celebrated writer-director of sharply talkative films, took over a production already in difficulty and shaped it as an epic of conversation and intrigue.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Cleopatra (1934)

Cecil B. DeMille's earlier version made the story a showpiece of glamour and spectacle, setting the template Mankiewicz expanded and made more talkative.



FILM

Julius Caesar (1953)

Mankiewicz's own earlier Roman drama showed his ability to turn political intrigue and speech into compelling cinema.



FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)

Its enormous success proved that a long, lavish Roman-era epic could be a major hit, encouraging Fox's costly bet.



THIS FILM

Cleopatra (1963)

NEW AT THE TIME *It combined the scale of a Hollywood spectacle with the verbal sophistication of a drawing-room drama, and ran far longer than most epics dared.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made as Hollywood's studio system faltered and television drew audiences away, with 20th Century-Fox staking its future on one enormous, troubled epic.

- **Studio in crisis:** By the early 1960s 20th Century-Fox was losing money as cinema attendance fell. Cleopatra's costs ballooned far beyond its budget, and the studio came close to bankruptcy, selling off its backlot land to stay afloat.
- **Troubled production:** Filming began in London, where bad weather and the star's illness caused delays, then moved to Rome's Cinecittà and Egypt. Rising costs and a changed director and script made it among the most expensive films ever made at that point.

- **Press and celebrity:** The off-screen romance between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, both married to others, became a worldwide scandal. It was condemned by the Vatican and by moralists and covered obsessively by the press, shaping how audiences approached the film.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Joseph L. Mankiewicz, known as a witty screenwriter-director, took over a project already in disarray. He wrote and rewrote the script during filming under heavy pressure, and the studio's later cuts of the film angered him.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Slow and deliberate. At over four hours, it unfolds in long scenes of talk punctuated by a few huge spectacles.
- **Format:** Made as a roadshow epic with an intermission. Plan to watch it in two sittings if needed.
- **Style:** Lavish, theatrical, and heavily dialogue-driven, with a literate, ironic script rather than constant action.
- **Colour and ratio:** Colour, widescreen 65mm Todd-AO, best seen on the largest screen available.
- **Versions:** The original release ran about 251 minutes. Shorter cuts were later circulated, so check which version you are watching.
- **Performance:** Grand, stagey playing, with Harrison's dry wit and Taylor's commanding presence at the centre.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

11+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from US G and French all-ages to German 12, with GB at PG; the heavy political talk and four-hour length make it better suited to older children.

Official ratings: US G · UK PG · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and teens curious about ancient history may enjoy the huge sets, lavish costumes, grand processions and big performances, especially Elizabeth Taylor's, in a classic Hollywood epic.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Epic-style battle scenes and moments of political violence, staged in a dated, mostly non-graphic way, though some may still feel tense.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult romance, ambition, betrayal and grief run through the story; handled with restraint and little explicit detail, but emotionally heavy at times.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Over four hours long, with lots of dialogue and political scheming. Younger viewers may lose interest without breaks.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** A 1960s Hollywood view of ancient Egypt and Rome, with Western casting and period-typical views of power and gender.
- **Explain first:** Cleopatra was a real queen of Egypt, and the film is based on real history, though it dramatises and embellishes it.
- **Explain first:** Rome was a powerful empire in this era, and leaders often competed fiercely for control, so many scenes involve politics and rivalry.
- **Explain first:** The film is very long and has an intermission, so plan to watch it in two or more sittings.

Talk about it after: *Why do you think powerful people in this story make the choices they do, and would you have chosen differently in their place?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how personal desire and political power become inseparable at the top of an empire. Its story can be read as a study of two worlds, Egyptian and Roman, each trying to use love to serve ambition, and each undone by it.

THEMES

- **Love as political strategy:** Cleopatra's relationships with Caesar and Antony are both romantic and diplomatic, and the film keeps asking where one ends and the other begins.
- **Ambition and its cost:** Caesar's drive for supremacy and Antony's collapse show how power corrupts judgment, with the Roman republic's fear of kingship at the heart of it.
- **East versus West:** Egypt's sensuality and ritual are set against Roman discipline and practicality, an opposition the film stages through costume, setting and manner.
- **Image and legacy:** Cleopatra stages herself as a goddess and queen, and the film is repeatedly concerned with how history will remember her.

Key scenes

Cleopatra's entrance into Rome

The huge procession is the film's most famous spectacle, but it is also a political act: she arrives as a performer-queen, announcing Egypt's power to Rome and establishing the film's link between theatre and rule.

The first meeting with Caesar

It establishes the film's mix of wit and strategy. Cleopatra is not a passive seductress; she is bargaining for her kingdom, and Harrison's dry Caesar matches her.

Caesar's assassination

A turning point that shifts the film from one relationship to another and from ambition to its consequences. It also shows Mankiewicz's careful handling of historical drama as political intrigue.

The battle of Actium and its aftermath

The naval battle gives the film its large-scale action, but what matters is the personal decision inside it, which shows love and power finally pulling in opposite directions.

Filmmaking

- **Writing and structure:** Mankiewicz built the script as a series of debates and private conversations, using epigram and irony. The film is divided into two halves, one for each of Cleopatra's great relationships, and the weight falls on dialogue.
- **Production design:** Enormous sets of Alexandria and Rome were built at full scale, with detailed architecture, ships and processions. The design won the Oscar for colour art direction.
- **Costume:** Cleopatra's many elaborate costumes work as characterisation: each public appearance is planned as an act of power, and the costume design also won an Oscar.
- **Cinematography:** Leon Shamroy's wide 65mm images give grandeur to processions, interiors and sea battles alike, and he won the Oscar for colour cinematography.
- **Music:** Alex North's score underlines ceremony and romance with a mix of grandeur and restraint, and was nominated for an Oscar.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Julius Caesar, having defeated Pompey, arrives in Egypt, where the young Cleopatra is in a power struggle with her brother, King Ptolemy. She is smuggled into Caesar's presence and wins him over by wit and charm, and with his help becomes sole ruler. She bears his son, Caesarion.

Cleopatra follows Caesar to Rome, entering the city in a vast procession. But Caesar's growing ambition frightens the Senate, and on the Ides of March he is assassinated. Cleopatra flees back to Egypt, her hopes for a Roman-Egyptian alliance in ruins.

Power in Rome passes to a triumvirate of Antony, Lepidus and Caesar's heir Octavian. Antony summons Cleopatra to Tarsus, and she turns the meeting into a spectacle that wins him. He neglects his duties, marries Octavian's sister Octavia for political reasons, then returns to Cleopatra.

Octavian declares war. At Actium, Cleopatra's ships withdraw from the battle and Antony follows her, losing the fight. Defeated, Antony hears a false report that she has died and falls on his sword. He dies in her arms in her tomb.

Unwilling to be paraded as Octavian's captive, Cleopatra dresses as queen and dies from the bite of an asp, leaving Octavian master of the world.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A troubled start:** Filming began in England under Rouben Mamoulian, but Elizabeth Taylor's serious illness and the weather halted work. The production later restarted in Rome with Mankiewicz directing, and much of the earlier footage was discarded.
- **Recasting:** Peter Finch and Stephen Boyd were originally cast as Caesar and Antony. Scheduling delays meant they were replaced by Rex Harrison and Richard Burton.
- **Writing on the run:** Mankiewicz was reportedly rewriting scenes while shooting, working under heavy pressure. He had hoped to release the film in two parts, but the studio insisted on a single feature.

- **The cost:** Taylor was reportedly the first actor to be paid a million dollars for a film. The huge budget and delays drained Fox and led to a change in studio leadership.
- **Taylor and Burton:** Their off-screen affair began during the shoot and made headlines worldwide. They went on to make several films together, including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966).
- **Myth:** The film was a box-office flop that destroyed Fox. **Reality:** It was a major hit in 1963, one of the year's top earners in North America. Its cost was so great that it took years to recover, and it did severely strain the studio.
- **Myth:** Mankiewicz's version was the film he wanted to release. **Reality:** He intended a much longer work, possibly in two parts. The released version was shortened by the studio, and later cuts were shorter still.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

Cleopatra (1934)

Cecil B. DeMille's earlier version made the story a showpiece of glamour and spectacle, setting the template Mankiewicz expanded and made more talkative.



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Mankiewicz's own earlier Roman drama showed his ability to turn political intrigue and speech into compelling cinema.



FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)

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THIS FILM

Cleopatra (1963)



FILM

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966)

Taylor and Burton's partnership, publicly shaped during this production, reached its most acclaimed screen form in this very different, intimate drama.



TRADITION

Hollywood's retreat from the roadshow epic

Studios became wary of costly historical spectacles, and by the end of the decade the genre faded in favour of smaller, more personal films.

Reception and reputation

Reviews on release were divided. Many praised the production design, Harrison's Caesar and the intelligent script, while others found the film overlong and slow. Public interest was enormous, driven partly by publicity around Taylor and Burton, and it drew big audiences despite its cost.

Long remembered mainly as an expensive cautionary tale, the film has gained more respect as a work in its own right. Modern viewers often value Mankiewicz's dialogue, Harrison's performance, the production design and Taylor's presence, while still noting its excessive length and uneven pace.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 9 nominations, 4 wins (Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction, Best Costume Design, Best Visual Effects). Nominations included Best Picture, Best Actor (Rex Harrison), Best Film Editing and Best Score.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Taylor–Burton scandal:** The affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, begun on set while both were married to others, became a defining tabloid story of the early 1960s. It was condemned by the Vatican press and fed the celebrity-couple culture that followed them through two marriages.
- **Taylor's star image:** Taylor's Cleopatra, with her dramatic eye makeup and lavish costumes, became a lasting image of screen glamour. She was reportedly the first performer paid a million dollars for a film, which made her fee a talking point of its own.
- **Entrance into Rome:** Cleopatra's grand procession into Rome, with its dancers, sphinx float and golden throne, became shorthand for Hollywood excess. It has been echoed in later screen depictions of Egypt and Rome.
- **Parody and pop references:** The film's costumes and Egyptian styling were imitated in 1960s fashion and makeup trends. Its title and star power have also been lampooned in comedy, notably in the Carry On series' Carry On Cleo (1964), which parodied the film's sets and publicity.

Its lasting influence

Its financial fallout made studios more cautious about enormous productions, and it became the standard warning about budgets running out of control. Its mix of spectacle and star-driven romance also shaped how later historical dramas were marketed.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

All About Eve (1950) COMING SOON

Mankiewicz's best-known film shows his true strength: sharp dialogue and character in a compact setting, a useful contrast with this sprawling epic.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Ben-Hur (1959)

The hit that inspired the epic boom, it shows the genre at its most successful and offers a direct comparison of scale and tone.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Another 1960s epic from the same period, but one that uses spectacle to explore a complicated individual rather than political intrigue.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966) COMING SOON

See Taylor and Burton in a stripped-down, intense drama that shows what they could do away from the epic.

JUMP FORWARD

Doctor Zhivago (1965)

A late-1960s big-budget romance set against historical upheaval, showing how the epic evolved as the studio era waned.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Joseph L. Mankiewicz
DIRECTOR



Elizabeth Taylor
ACTOR
as Cleopatra



Richard Burton
ACTOR
as Marcus Antonius



Rex Harrison
ACTOR
as Julius Caesar



Pamela Brown
ACTOR
as High Priestess



George Cole
ACTOR
as Flavius



Alex North
COMPOSER

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