

joan fontaine and olivia de havilland

The Legendary Sister Rivalry: Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland

Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland stand as two titans of Hollywood's Golden Age, celebrated for their distinct acting talents and enduring legacies. Their lives, marked by both profound sisterly affection and a legendary, often public, rivalry, offer a compelling narrative of ambition, talent, and the complex dynamics within family. This article delves into their individual careers, the nature of their celebrated rivalry, their significant contributions to cinema, and the lasting impact they have had on the film industry. Exploring their Oscar wins, iconic roles, and personal histories provides a comprehensive look at two of Hollywood's most fascinating figures.

Table of Contents

Early Lives and Hollywood Beginnings

Divergent Career Paths

The Infamous Sister Rivalry

Oscar Victories and Critical Acclaim

Iconic Roles and Cinematic Legacies

Later Lives and Continued Influence

The Enduring Fascination

Early Lives and Hollywood Beginnings

Born to British parents in Tokyo, Japan, Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine's early lives were shaped by unique circumstances before they ascended to Hollywood stardom. Olivia, the elder sister, was born on July 1, 1916, while Joan followed on October 22, 1917. Their parents, Walter de Havilland and Lilian Augusta Ruse, divorced when the sisters were young, and their mother

subsequently moved them to California. This relocation proved pivotal, setting the stage for their eventual entry into the burgeoning American film industry. Their childhood was marked by differing personalities; Olivia was often portrayed as the more serious and studious one, while Joan was seen as the more outgoing and adventurous sibling. These early inclinations would, in many ways, foreshadow their distinct career trajectories and personal styles.

The path to Hollywood for both sisters was not immediate or entirely straightforward. Olivia de Havilland was the first to gain traction in the film world, signing with Warner Bros. in the mid-1930s. Her early roles were often in lighter fare, but her undeniable talent quickly began to shine through. Joan, initially embarking on an acting career under the name Joan Burfield, found her footing slightly later. A pivotal moment came when she adopted the name Joan Fontaine and signed with RKO Pictures. This period of their lives saw them navigating the competitive landscape of studio filmmaking, each striving to carve out their own niche and establish their individual identities separate from their familial connection.

Divergent Career Paths

Olivia de Havilland's career was characterized by a remarkable versatility and a willingness to take on challenging roles that showcased her dramatic depth. She became a consistent star for Warner Bros., often paired with Errol Flynn in swashbuckling adventures and period dramas. Her performances in films like "The Adventures of Robin Hood" (1938) and "Gone with the Wind" (1939) earned her widespread recognition and critical admiration. De Havilland was known for her intelligence and her meticulous approach to her craft, often engaging in battles with studio heads to secure more substantive roles. Her dedication to artistic integrity would later lead her to take on major legal battles regarding actor contracts.

Joan Fontaine, in contrast, often found herself typecast in more delicate, vulnerable roles, particularly in the suspense thrillers for which she became most famous. Her breakthrough came with Alfred Hitchcock's "Rebecca" (1940), a chilling tale that established her as a leading lady. She followed this

with other notable performances in films like "Suspicion" (1941), also directed by Hitchcock, and "The Constant Nymph" (1943). Fontaine's acting style was often described as more ethereal and less overtly powerful than her sister's, yet she possessed a compelling screen presence that captivated audiences. While her range might have been perceived as narrower by some critics, her command of her chosen roles was undeniable.

The Infamous Sister Rivalry

The perceived rivalry between Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland is one of Hollywood's most enduring and discussed sagas. While often sensationalized by the press and the public, the friction between the sisters stemmed from a complex mix of professional jealousy, differing personalities, and childhood competition. Reports suggest that this tension began early, with instances of perceived favoritism from their mother and competition for roles and attention. The competitive nature of their shared profession undoubtedly exacerbated these underlying dynamics.

The rivalry reached a fever pitch during awards season. In 1942, both sisters were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress: Joan for "Suspicion" and Olivia for "Hold Back the Dawn." Joan ultimately won, a victory that, according to many accounts, Olivia found difficult to accept. The infamous incident at the Academy Awards ceremony, where Olivia appeared to snub Joan's congratulatory gesture, became a defining moment of their public feud. While both sisters later offered nuanced perspectives on their relationship, acknowledging periods of estrangement and reconciliation, the narrative of their professional and personal competition has remained a significant part of their shared history and public perception.

Oscar Victories and Critical Acclaim

Both Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland achieved the pinnacle of acting recognition by winning Academy Awards. Olivia de Havilland secured her first Oscar for Best Actress in 1946 for her powerful

performance in "To Each His Own." This win was particularly significant as it came after her landmark legal victory against Warner Bros. over her contract, allowing her greater artistic freedom. She earned a second Best Actress Oscar in 1949 for her role in "The Heiress," solidifying her status as one of Hollywood's most respected dramatic actresses. Her Oscar wins underscored her ability to deliver nuanced, deeply affecting performances.

Joan Fontaine's Oscar triumph came in 1941, when she won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in "Suspicion." This award was a validation of her talent and her ability to carry a film, particularly in the suspense genre. The nomination and win for "Suspicion" placed her firmly in the ranks of leading actresses and further fueled the intense public fascination with the competition between the two sisters. While Fontaine received fewer nominations than her sister throughout their careers, her Oscar win remains a testament to her significant contribution to film history.

Iconic Roles and Cinematic Legacies

Olivia de Havilland's filmography is rich with memorable characters that span a wide range of genres. Her performance as Melanie Hamilton in "Gone with the Wind" (1939) is etched in cinematic history, earning her an Oscar nomination and showcasing her ability to portray gentleness and strength simultaneously. Her later work in films like "The Snake Pit" (1948) demonstrated her command of complex psychological dramas, earning her further critical accolades. De Havilland's career extended beyond the Golden Age, with significant roles in television and international cinema, demonstrating her enduring appeal and artistic stamina.

Joan Fontaine's legacy is inextricably linked to her contributions to the thriller and gothic romance genres. As the quintessential "Hitchcock blonde," she brought a captivating vulnerability and psychological depth to characters in "Rebecca" and "Suspicion." Her role in "The Constant Nymph" earned her another Oscar nomination, showcasing her dramatic capabilities outside of suspense. Fontaine's image as a poised, sometimes fragile, leading lady left an indelible mark on cinema, influencing subsequent portrayals of women in similar roles. Her career, while perhaps more narrowly

defined than her sister's, was marked by iconic performances that continue to be celebrated.

Later Lives and Continued Influence

As both sisters transitioned from their peak Hollywood years, their lives took different directions, though their connection, however strained at times, remained. Olivia de Havilland eventually moved to Paris, where she lived for many years and continued to be a prominent figure in the film community, even receiving French honors for her contributions to culture. She remained an eloquent advocate for actors' rights, inspired by her own battles with the studio system. Her later years were characterized by a quiet dignity and a continued interest in the art of filmmaking.

Joan Fontaine also experienced a career evolution, appearing in fewer films as she aged and focusing more on her personal life. She famously expressed a desire to be remembered for her own achievements rather than solely in relation to her sister. While the public narrative often focused on their rivalry, it is important to acknowledge the periods of reconciliation and the underlying familial bond that persisted throughout their lives. Their individual journeys after their initial Hollywood heydays cemented their status as independent artists with distinct, yet equally important, places in cinematic history.

The Enduring Fascination

The stories of Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland continue to captivate audiences and scholars alike. Their parallel careers, marked by immense talent and the dramatic backdrop of a legendary sisterly rivalry, provide a compelling lens through which to view the golden era of Hollywood. The complexities of their relationship, intertwined with their individual professional triumphs and struggles, offer a human element to the glamorous world of filmmaking. Their enduring presence in film history, through their iconic roles and Academy Awards, ensures that their legacies will continue to be discussed, analyzed, and admired for generations to come.

Q: What was the primary reason for the rivalry between Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland?

A: The rivalry between Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland is often attributed to a combination of factors including childhood competition, differing personalities, professional jealousy in the highly competitive Hollywood system, and specific incidents during awards ceremonies.

Q: Which sister won an Academy Award first?

A: Joan Fontaine won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1941 for "Suspicion," making her the first of the two sisters to receive an Oscar.

Q: For which roles did Olivia de Havilland win her Academy Awards?

A: Olivia de Havilland won two Academy Awards for Best Actress: her first for "To Each His Own" in 1946 and her second for "The Heiress" in 1949.

Q: Were Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland estranged for most of their lives?

A: While there were significant periods of estrangement and public friction between Joan Fontaine and Olivia de Havilland, their relationship also had moments of reconciliation. The extent and nature of their estrangement varied over time.

Q: What is Joan Fontaine most famous for in her acting career?

A: Joan Fontaine is most famous for her roles in suspense thrillers and gothic romances, particularly her collaborations with director Alfred Hitchcock in films like "Rebecca" (1940) and "Suspicion" (1941), as well as her Oscar-winning performance in "Suspicion."

Q: How did Olivia de Havilland fight against the studio system?

A: Olivia de Havilland famously took on Warner Bros. in a landmark legal battle over her contract, challenging the restrictive "seven-year rule" and ultimately winning greater artistic freedom for herself and other actors.

Q: Did both sisters always use their given names or did they change them?

A: Olivia de Havilland primarily used her given name, Olivia de Havilland. Joan Fontaine adopted the stage name Joan Fontaine when she began her film career, changing it from her birth name, Joan de Beauvoir de Havilland.

Q: What was the significance of the film "Gone with the Wind" in their careers?

A: "Gone with the Wind" (1939) was a monumental film for Olivia de Havilland, earning her an Academy Award nomination for her portrayal of Melanie Hamilton and cementing her status as a leading actress. Joan Fontaine was not in the film.

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