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## LEE AND LAURENCE OLIVIER

Does anyone still remember Lee-on-Solent's brief encounter with cinematic glory, the part it played in the progress from Larry Olivier, Ronald Colman look-alike, to Lord Olivier, national institution?

Probably not, for in all the autobiographical details offered to the public, London and Hollywood are all, Lee sadly rates never a mention. Yet for a week in the Thirties, Lee spent probably the happiest and certainly the most hilarious period in its history giving a very poor imitation of the South of France for the benefit of the British film industry and, of all people, Gloria Swanson and attendant company.

The great Swanson remains more or less a folk myth as she cocooned herself against the less than Mediterranean environment in what was then the Queen's Hotel (now an old people's home) and made no appearance among the peasantry, but we were delighted to settle for the presence of her leading man, Laurence Olivier.

Young, happy and handsome he was then, with his first wife, Jill Esmond. They sat and cuddled and skylarked in an old beached rowing boat waiting the call for the next bout of accident-prone antics that were eventually to add up to that forgotten epic "Perfect Understanding".

Most of Lee had opted out of its usual occupations to sit on the sea wall and watch the goings-on – which no doubt cured a good few young hopefuls of ambitions to be a film star, the thirties equivalent of dreaming of getting on "Top of the Pops". There was, for instance, the day spent trying to get a take of a raft laden with beautiful people feasting and drinking, which was alright as far as it

went but whenever Larry in his speedboat came dashing by to grab a glass en passant, according to the script, it all went a lot too far. Right over, in fact, which as neither raft nor occupants were dressed or designed for dunking, led to a lot of recriminations, re-organisation and near-apoplexy for the director. Larry, as everyone called him, thought it very funny and so did we.

Then there was the rescue from drowning scene, that would have been so much easier on the tideless shores of the real Mediterranean. The scenario called for a thrilling rescue from a sinking speedboat. Memory fails to recall who it was that was being hauled from the cruel sea, but Larry it was who must dive overboard from a crowded launch and gallantly rescue the perishing. The initial snag was that it was a nice day for a sail so the launch did just that in spite of whistles, shrieks and more apoplexy from the shore, while the tide went quietly out. At last the Samaritans remembered their commitments and swept purposefully in, the cameras rolled, and the future theatrical peer dived elegantly over the side. Only to find it is difficult to make a convincing job of saving a drowning man when the water only comes up to one's knees. So they re-arranged the props a bit further out – and a bit further out – till finally film crew, boat and actors were disappearing into the sunsey [sic] somewhere off Lee pier, with strangled cries of “cut” drifting shorewards.

As well as such delights, there was the opportunity of watching in contrast to the utter unself-consciousness and lack of self-importance of the workmanlike Olivier, the peculiar life-style of Miss Swanson's fourth husband who, accompanied everywhere by his valet, sat upon a breakwater and cosseted his moustache with a little brush when he wasn't gliding up and down before the gallery of riveted villagers, inviting admiration. It is not easy to glide on the brickbats of Lee beach, but if anyone could make a graceful job of it, Michael Farmer did. I wonder what became of him? Perhaps he succumbed to the wasp sting that caused such panic among victim, valet and first-aid party with raw onion and yet another comedy-drama for the watching natives.

Supporting actress in all this hullabaloo was Genevieve Tobin, not exactly another Liz Taylor but fairly familiar to film buffs of the thirties. Amongst the disasters and hysterics she remained as pretty as a piece of painted porcelain and very nearly as animated. A fragile alien on the pebbly beach by the cold grey Solent.

Olivier must have found it cold enough, and boring, when he spent a whole morning on one scene that involved merely swimming out to a moored boat, climbing in and starting the outboard. Of course, with this accident-prone unit nothing was that simple, and it was cut and retake over and over again. Through it all the future Lord Olivier remained patient and good-humoured, and we in Lee all those years ago had a far more favourable impression of the young Larry than he seems, from his autobiography, to have in retrospect of himself. In fact, we decided that for a film actor he was a

pretty nice chap. "Perfect Understanding" itself is no doubt something he prefers to forget. We all went to see it at the old Olympia in due course and even to our uncritical eyes it was a stinker. In fact, if they'd just filmed the making of it as it occurred on the beach at Lee instead of editing all the best bits out they might have made a comedy classic and a worthwhile addition to the Olivier archives.