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Olivia De Havilland Joan Fontaine

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The Unforgettable Bond and Bitter Rivalry of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine

The story of Hollywood's Golden Age is filled with glamour, talent, and dramatic feuds. Yet few rivalries have captured the public imagination quite like the lifelong conflict between sisters Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine. Born just fifteen months apart, these two extraordinary actresses dominated the silver screen for decades, earning Academy Awards, critical acclaim, and the adoration of millions. But behind the scenes, their relationship was a complex tapestry of childhood competition, professional jealousy, and deep-seated emotional wounds that never fully healed. This article explores the remarkable lives of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine, examining how their fierce rivalry shaped their careers and left an indelible mark on Hollywood history.

Early Lives: A Childhood of Competition

Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine were born to English parents in Tokyo, Japan. Their mother, Lilian, was a former actress, and their father, Walter, was a patent attorney. The family moved to California when the girls were young, and their upbringing was marked by strict discipline and constant comparison. From an early age, the sisters were encouraged to compete—whether for their mother's attention, academic achievements, or social standing. This environment fostered a rivalry that would only intensify as they entered the acting profession.

Both sisters began performing in local theater productions, but it was Olivia who first caught Hollywood's eye. She made her film debut in 1935 and quickly became a popular leading lady. Joan, however, felt overshadowed and later changed her last name to Fontaine to carve out her own identity. This decision, though practical, was seen by Olivia as a betrayal, deepening the rift between them.

Career Breakthroughs and the Shadow of Comparison

The professional lives of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine were inextricably linked by the roles they pursued and the recognition they received. Olivia gained fame for her performances in classic films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), where she played the gentle Melanie Hamilton. This role earned her an Academy Award nomination and cemented her status as a Hollywood star. Meanwhile, Joan was building her own impressive resume with films like *The Women* (1939) and *Rebecca*(1940), the latter of which brought her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress.

The competition between the sisters was most palpable during awards season. In 1942, both were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress—Olivia for *Hold Back the Dawn* and Joan for *Suspicion*. When Joan won, she later claimed that Olivia refused to congratulate her. This incident became a defining moment in their feud, symbolizing the jealousy and resentment that plagued their relationship. Joan's win was a watershed in their rivalry, as Olivia would later describe feeling "devastated" by the outcome, though she eventually won her

To Each His Own (1946) and *The Heiress* (1949).

The Feud Intensifies: Personal and Professional Clashes

As their careers advanced, the animosity between Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine spilled into public view. They made pointed remarks about each other in interviews, and their interactions at family events became notoriously strained. One famous anecdote involves their mother's funeral in 1975, where the sisters reportedly avoided speaking to each other. Joan later wrote a memoir that included unflattering details about Olivia, further inflaming tensions.

Professionally, they rarely appeared together, and when they did, the friction was palpable. A notable exception was their joint appearance on a television talk show in the 1970s, where the coldness between them was evident to viewers. The feud was so intense that it became a topic of fascination for fans and historians alike, with many speculating about the root causes. Some pointed to their mother's favoritism, others to the natural competition of two talented women in a cutthroat industry.

- Parental Preference: Their mother openly praised Olivia's acting while discouraging Joan's ambitions.
- Name Change: Joan's decision to use her stepfather's surname was seen as a rejection of their mother's legacy and an attempt to escape Olivia's shadow.
- Award Competitions: The 1942 Oscar race was a flashpoint that neither sister ever fully moved past.
- Public Statements: Both gave interviews that expressed resentment, often contradicting each other's accounts of their childhood.
- Legal Battles: At one point, Joan sued Olivia for defamation, though the case was eventually dropped.

Legacy and Impact on Hollywood

Despite their personal discord, Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine left an enduring legacy in film history. They were among the few actresses of their era to successfully challenge the studio system. Olivia notably won a landmark legal case against Warner Bros. in 1943, which ended the practice of indefinite contract extensions and gave actors greater control over their careers. Joan, meanwhile, was known for her versatility, starring in everything from romantic dramas to thrillers.

Their rivalry also reflects broader themes within Hollywood: the pressure on women to compete for limited roles, the difficulty of maintaining family bonds under the glare of fame, and the complex interplay between personal identity and professional achievement. In many ways, the story of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine is a cautionary tale about the costs of unresolved conflict, but it is also a testament to their undeniable talent and determination.

The Final Years: Attempts at Reconciliation

As both sisters aged, there were occasional hints of reconciliation. In interviews, Olivia expressed regret over the lost years of friendship, while Joan occasionally softened her stance. However, the damage was too deep to fully repair. They remained estranged until Joan's death in 2013 at the age of 96. Olivia, who survived her sister by seven years, once remarked that she was "deeply sorry" for the feud but added that it was not entirely of her making.

In her later years, Olivia De Havilland reflected on the rivalry with a mix of sorrow and acceptance. She lived to be 104, passing away in 2020. Throughout her long life, she was asked repeatedly about Joan Fontaine, and she consistently maintained that they were simply too different to have a peaceful relationship. Joan, for her part, had said that she would always love her sister, but that the competition had poisoned their bond.

Why the Story of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine Endures

The saga of these two Hollywood icons continues to captivate audiences because it is deeply human. It is a story about love turned to bitterness, about the struggle for individuality, and about the pressure of living up to—

or escaping—a family legacy. For fans of classic cinema, the feud adds a layer of drama to their already remarkable films. But beyond the gossip, the lives of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine remind us that even the most famous people grapple with the same emotions of jealousy, pride, and regret that we all experience.

Their rivalry was not just a Hollywood scandal; it was a real, painful relationship that shaped two extraordinary careers. Today, their films continue to be studied and enjoyed, and their names will forever be linked—not just as sisters, but as two of the greatest actresses of the 20th century. The story of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine is a powerful reminder that even the brightest stars can have shadows, and that some bonds, however broken, can never be forgotten.

Lessons from the Feud

1. Comparison is the thief of joy. The constant comparisons made by their mother and the public fueled lifelong resentment.
2. Professional success does not guarantee personal happiness. Both won Oscars and accolades, yet their personal relationship remained fractured.
3. Forgiveness is a choice. Neither sister was able to fully let go of past grievances, demonstrating the difficulty of reconciling deep wounds.
4. Legacy is complex. The feud has become as much a part of their legacy as their films, showing that public memory often includes both triumph and tragedy.

Conclusion

In the annals of Hollywood history, few stories are as compelling as the lifelong rivalry between Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine. They were two remarkable women whose talents illuminated the silver screen, yet whose personal relationship was marked by bitterness and estrangement. Their lives teach us about the powerful influence of family dynamics, the perils of competition, and the enduring nature of unresolved emotions. While they never found common ground, their combined body of work remains a testament to their extraordinary gifts. As we watch their classic films today, we can appreciate the art they created, even as we remember the human cost behind the camera. The saga of Olivia De Havilland and Joan Fontaine will continue to fascinate, reminding us that even in the spotlight of fame, some bonds are both unbreakable and irreparably broken.

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