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## Merle Oberon, 68, Star of Films Including Wuthering Heights'

By **WOLFGANG SAXON** NOV. 24, 1979

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Merle Oberon, the hauntingly beautiful star of "Wuthering Heights" and more than 30 other films, died yesterday afternoon at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles after having suffered a stroke at her Malibu, Calif., home late Thursday. She was 68 years old.

A diminutive 5 feet 2 inches tall, Miss Oberon was of an almost exotic beauty, with perfect skin, dark hair and a slight slant to her eyes that was further accentuated by makeup.

Miss Oberon also was well remembered from such other movie hits of long ago as "The Private Life of Henry VIII," which began her career in 1932; "Dark Angel" and "The Scarlet Pimpernell." In fact, her screen career, first in England and later in Hollywood, extended into the 1970's, but it was her portrayal of Cathy that comes to mind first when considering her qualities for stardom.

"Wuthering Heights," which remains part of the movie fare on late-night television, was adapted by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur from Emily Bronte's novel, directed by William Wyler and produced by Samuel Goldwyn. Miss Oberon starred in it opposite Laurence Olivier's Heathcliff.

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“So Mr. Olivier has played Heathcliff, and Miss Oberon, as Cathy, has matched the brilliance of his characterization with hers. She has perfectly caught the restless, changeling spirit of the Brontë heroine who knew she was not meant for heaven and broke her heart and Heathcliff's in the synthetic paradise of her marriage with gentle Edgar Linton.”

Also in the movie were David Niven as Linton and Geraldine Fitzgerald.

### Liked ‘Healthy’ Things

Miss Oberon's career was a record of persistence, ingenuity, hard work and good luck, and she retained her smooth, youthful looks better than many another film star of her generation. “Luckily, I like all the things that are healthy,” she once said, “like exercise, rest, sensible food, no alcoholic drinks, unless a sip of wine, and no cigarettes.”

Miss Oberon was born Estelle Merle O'Brien Thompson on Feb. 19, 1911, on the island of Tasmania, near Australia, the daughter of a British Army major who died just before her birth. She grew up in Bombay and Calcutta, studying French and Hindustani along with the traditional subjects, and danced at the Calcutta Amateur Theatrical Society.

When she was 16, an uncle, also a British officer, took her for a visit to London, where she enrolled in dancing school and decided to stay. She took a job as a dance hostess at the Café de Paris even though she considered it much beneath her, the product of the highly snobbish British Army presence in India. But the job came with free dinners, and that became the deciding factor.

Even then, Miss Oberon, known as Queenie Thompson, was noted for her beauty. Her first screen test nevertheless ended in disaster, but she soon found herself playing bit parts after a second one turned out better.

Her success came when Sir Alexander Korda, the producer, noticed her in a studio commissary and signed her to a contract. Sir Alexander, who married his young star in 1939, changed her name to Merle Oberon and devised the distinctive makeup that soon made her delicate features familiar to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

In this country, Miss Oberon was first seen as Anne Boleyn in “The Private Life of Henry VIII,” one of the hapless wives of the King, who was portrayed by Charles

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There followed such well-received films as "The Private Life of Don Juan" with Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in 1934 and "The Scarlet Pimpernel" with Leslie Howard the following year. She played leading roles in "Follies Bergere" with Maurice Chevalier, and in "These Three," the 1936 adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play "The Children's Hour."

#### Cowboys and Chopin

An early foray into American films, "The Cowboy and the Lady" with Gary Cooper, in which she played an American character, was a less memorable experience, but Miss Oberon recouped with more substantial fare such as "The Lodger," a Jack-the-Ripper epic with George Sanders and Cedric Hardwick in 1944, and "A Song to Remember," in which she played George Sand to Cornel Wilde's Frederic Chopin.

Miss Oberon was last seen in "Hotel" in 1967 and "Interval" in 1973, a film she helped to finance. She also acted in the television series "Assignment — Foreign Legion" and television specials.

Her marriage to Sir Alexander ended in divorce in 1945. Miss Oberon then married Lucien Ballard, a cameraman. There was a divorce again, after which the star was wed to Bruno Pagliai, an Italian-born Mexican industrialist. She was divorced again and, last year, was married to Robert Wolders, the Dutchborn actor who co-starred with her in her final picture.

Surviving are her fourth husband and two adopted children, Bruno Pagliai Jr. and Francesco Pagliai Bravo.

A memorial service is scheduled for All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills, Calif., on Wednesday at 3 P.M.

Associated Press

Merle Oberon

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