

# A product of society

He photographed the stars of the era, but his name remains largely unknown.

**Matthew Butson**, director of collections at the Hulton Archive, reveals the story behind the exotic-sounding Sasha

**Below** Vivien Leigh, 1938, as the title character in the play, *Serena Blandish*. One of Sasha's favourite sitters, shortly afterwards she was to leave for Hollywood

**S**ASHA? With a name like that, surely he had to be Russian. That's what many thought, until they heard his accent. Sasha was, in fact, born in Edinburgh. Though his main body of work only spanned the 16 years between 1924 and 1940, he shot some of the most memorable stage images ever taken. These days his work is sadly overlooked

and the name Sasha is largely forgotten.

Sasha, real name Alexander Stewart, was born in 1892. After serving an apprenticeship to a master photographer he turned professional in 1914. He opened his first studio in 1924 and later that year *Tatler* published his full colour portrait of American film actress Julianne Johnson on its front cover – Sasha had very much 'arrived'. This fiery Scot was ultra competitive and would claim he had exclusive rights to a particular shoot, often physically ejecting a fellow photographer from a set with a shout of 'This 'boy' must leave!' Very much of the Cecil Beaton school of portraiture, he would carefully, though rather grandly, compose and light his subjects, although it was usually his assistant that would click the shutter – Sasha rarely handled the camera himself. Though difficult to work with on occasion, he was in great demand by London society and theatrical venues, and regularly had his images published in high-brow magazines such as *The Sketch*, *Tatler* and the *Illustrated London News*.

Sasha developed a great love and appreciation for London's theatre and society scene and from 1926 his work centred around opening nights, society balls and related upmarket events. During his time he shot some of the greatest theatre stars this country has known – John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Noel Coward, Gertude Laurence and Peggy Ashcroft to name but a few. Many of his subjects, at that time, were the rising stars during a golden age of London stage





**Left** Margot Fonteyn, 1937. This image alone demonstrates the lengths to which Sasha would go to set up the lighting for a portrait

production which make Sasha's images all the more fascinating. His obsession with the theatre also took in the ballet and his studies of Leonid Massine, Alexandra Danilova and a young Margot Fonteyn amongst others, are also noteworthy due to their spectacular lighting effects.

A technical pioneer as well as a gifted portrait photographer, Sasha invented a number of photographic apparatus during his career – the most famous of which he called the Sashelite. Sasha was obsessed with the arrangement and modelling of light and his patented flash system allowed him to develop dramatic lighting effects – instantly recognisable as his. The Sashelite system was in great demand by the rapidly growing moving picture business and Sasha devoted a great deal of his time to the British film industry from the early 1930s as a publicity stills photographer. One of his favourite subjects was Vivien Leigh, who sat for Sasha a number of times.

Shortly after the start of World War Two, Sasha's output began to decline and his last known shoots were at the end of 1940. Though Sasha died in 1953, aged 61, he

effectively retired from photography in his late forties for some unknown reason. Sasha is yet another of those British photographers like Baron, Alfred Hind Robinson and William England (covered in previous *Golden Oldie* features) whose work is almost forgotten these days. Even an exotic name such as Sasha has not helped Alex Stewart rise from the legion of the lost, which is a great shame. Not only a wonderful exponent in the art of lighting but also a gifted technician whose chief invention revolutionised the use of flash photography in the UK. ☺

The Sasha collection was acquired by the Hulton Library in 1961 and is now part of Hulton Archive, a division of Getty Images. Fine art prints of these unique images, and many others, can be purchased through the Hulton Getty Picture Gallery by calling 020 7367 4525 or e-mailing [hulton.gallery@getty-images.com](mailto:hulton.gallery@getty-images.com). Many other images from the Sasha Collection can be viewed on the Hulton Archive's web site at [www.hultonarchive.com](http://www.hultonarchive.com).

**Below** The Sashelite system. Other inventions included a form of abstract portrait photography using a rotating, pulley-driven kaleidoscope, and a patented air cooling device to stop the cockling of negatives when printing while the negative surface was still wet

