



Words: **Nev Pierce**

***THE DEER HUNTER.
KRAMER VS. KRAMER.
SOPHIE'S CHOICE.
SILKWOOD.
OUT OF AFRICA.
A CRY IN THE DARK.
ADAPTATION.
THE DEVIL WEARS
PRADA.
MAMMA MIA!***

***16 OSCAR NOMINATIONS.
ALMOST \$3 BILLION IN BOX OFFICE.
AN INDUSTRY'S UNDYING RESPECT.***

THE GREATEST LIVING ACTRESS.

***And now she's gone one better.
MERYL STREEP.
MARGARET THATCHER.
THE IRON LADY.***

The performance of a career... »



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HYLLIDA CALLED ME AND SAID SHE had a script about Margaret Thatcher and I said, 'Yes!' She said, 'Don't you want to read it?'"

Meryl Streep is still enthusiastic. Energetic. Fuelled by curiosity. Leaning forward on a couch in a Soho hotel, she kindles and conveys the excitement she felt at the time. The chance to play a political legend — an icon feared, fêted, scorned and adored. Bring it on.

The Iron Lady is about a sharply intelligent woman who always felt she had something to prove. It's also about Margaret Thatcher. The thing that surprises with Meryl Streep, though, is that she's not even slightly imperious. She may be The Greatest Actress Of All Time™ — she's certainly the most Oscar-nominated (see below) — but once you're in the room, you don't feel this reputation. It brings to mind that probably her first challenge when working with less praised performers is helping them get past the fact that she's, well, Meryl Streep.

"It's hard for me to imagine not being myself," she says, with a smile. "So I don't know what it's like... But, yes, I do feel that thing when a young actor comes in. I feel an obstruction. It's an invisible thing that pulsates in the room. You have to puncture it and get rid of it before

you can start working. Usually the first time I forget my lines, which happens a lot lately, everybody relaxes... Everybody goes, 'Oh, she's not so great!'"

She kind of is, of course, probably now more than ever. Except the weight of being great — which seemed to follow her from film to film for a while, making the movies seem grim prospects, even when they were good — has lifted. She seems to be having fun. Adaptation saw her infuse her inherent respectability with a certain playfulness and Mamma Mia! felt like a holiday — for her and many of the millions who made it one of the most successful movies of all time.

That said, there were plenty of us who felt like it was an island we'd pay considerable cash to get off — to whom her return to Serious Drama feels most welcome. She's working again with that film's director, Phyllida Lloyd, but the material couldn't be further removed, both in theory and execution.

The Iron Lady is a kaleidoscopic biopic, more in tune with All That Jazz than it is The Queen. And Streep is spectacular. Playing Maggie from middle age to infirmity, as she looks back from her retirement to her days in power, she infuses an icon with humanity. There's no doubting some will be incensed by being made to feel about Lady Thatcher — the most divisive political figure in British post-War history, with the possible exception of Tony Blair — but feel they must. The film makes the political personal: it's about love, grief and letting go.

see the movie! It's about the politics and all that stuff, but it's also about the cost. What we ask. How we need these images. Like Spitting Image, we need these papier-mâché devils and heroes and dragons. We need them. But really, there's a human being there. What's the cost for someone who makes the big decisions, the cost to their own humanity? It's an interesting question."

The images we have of people in the public eye — politicians, athletes, actors — are intriguing, for what they are and what they're not. For all her awards, there have been those who regard Streep as a technician, almost mercilessly brilliant, like a fiendish equation. Streep says she doesn't read her press anymore. "When I was younger I did, until they all talked about my nose endlessly. So I stopped. It hurts your feelings. Sometimes when they say nice things it's nice! Someone will ring me up, tell me. But the hardest thing as an actor, and as time goes by, is to lose your self-consciousness. It's a funny dance we do in publicising these things: making ourselves available — but not really — in an interview. I think I make myself available in the work I do. I make myself very naked. I may be dressed up as Margaret Thatcher or Karen Silkwood or somebody else... I had a great friend, who was a playwright, who died a few years ago, Wendy Wasserstein (*the Tony and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of The Heidi Chronicles, who died of cancer in 2006*).

"MARGARET THATCHER, HER ENERGY REALLY PUTS US ALL IN THE DUST."

"I don't know if it's sympathy for the devil or empathy for the ship we're all in," says Streep. "We're all in that ship. Just because you're not in it now doesn't mean in 20 years you won't be: trying to wring meaning about being alive. I understand that. You can't really talk about that in an interview, nobody would want to

Somebody has just written a book about her (*Wendy And The Lost Boys, by Julia Salamon*) and it spends all this time talking to people who knew her, knew her life, all the sources for her pain and her comedy. You probably don't know this playwright, but she's wonderful. And the one thing this woman didn't do was read the



Human cost: Streep was just as interested in Maggie's personal story as in the political.

GOLDEN GIRL

Those 16 Oscar noms in full...



THE DEER HUNTER (1978), Best Supporting Actress
Desired by De Niro and dating Walken, her character comes to represent home.

WINNER! KRAMER VS. KRAMER (1979), Best Supporting Actress
Typically fearless as a woman

who walks out on her husband and their son, only to fight for his custody in court...

From the speech: "Holy mackerell I'd like to thank Dustin Hoffman and Robert Benton, to whom I owe this. Stanley Jaffe, for giving me the chance to play Joanna, and Jane Alexander and Justin (*Henry*) for the love and support during this very, very delightful experience."

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN (1981), Best Actress
A dual role, as the titular romantic and the actress portraying her:

brilliantly modulated, in an odd, metatextual movie.

WINNER! SOPHIE'S CHOICE (1982), Best Actress
A Holocaust survivor in a tempestuous relationship with Kevin Kline — hiding a dark secret.
From the speech: "Oh, boy! No matter how much you try to imagine what this is like, it's just so incredibly thrilling right down to your toes. I have a lot of people to thank and I'm going to be one of those people that tries to mention a lot of names because I know, just two seconds ago, my



mother and father went completely berserk and I'd like to give some other mothers and fathers that opportunity..."

SILKWOOD (1983), Best Actress
Playing a real — ie complicated — person: nuclear whistleblower

Karen Silkwood. "Streep and her co-actors," noted Roger Ebert, "build characters so convincing that we become witnesses instead of moviegoers."

OUT OF AFRICA (1985), Best Actress
Danish landowner romanced by Redford against the backdrop of the savannah. Precise, bright, accented; perhaps her most Streepy, though not best, role.

IRONWEED (1987), Best Actress
Beaten down and heartbreaking as a sometime singer brought low — opposite Jack Nicholson — in Depression-era America.

A CRY IN THE DARK (1988), Best Actress
Arguably the best nominated performance. True story of a mother accused of killing her baby, snatched by a dingo.

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE (1990), Best Actress
Playing Carrie Fisher, effectively, in the Star Wars actress' adaptation of her own novel.

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY (1995), Best Actress
A lonely housewife who falls for the drifting Clint Eastwood in this tender, twilight romance.

ONE TRUE THING (1998), Best Actress
Suffering from cancer, cared for by Renée Zellweger, in Carl Franklin's well-meaning tear-yanker.

MUSIC OF THE HEART (1999), Best Actress
Teaches violin to Harlem kids. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted: "Music Of The Heart may be based on a true story, but Streep is the one true thing."

ADAPTATION (2002), Best Supporting Actress
Giggly, warm and very funny as a wild version of real author Susan Orlean, in Charlie Kaufman's

somewhat unconventional adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*.

THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA (2006), Best Actress

A proto-Maggie, as ruthless magazine editor Miranda Priestly. The blend of cruelty and camp won a new generation of fans.

DOUBT (2008), Best Actress
Nun more severe, as the Sister who suspects Philip Seymour Hoffman of abusing his pupils.

JULIE & JULIA (2009), Best Actress
Annoying — but accurately so — as American TV cook Julia Child.

MERYL
STREEP

wasn't sitting around with her pollsters. 'How do I come off here?' 'Do I seem too tough here?' She just went right through them. What we want in a leader often has to do with being willing to be hated.'

Streep clearly admires this: the confidence, the bravery, the desire to challenge others and herself — all that was necessary to become the first female Prime Minister in the Western world. The actress would no doubt blush at any comparison in terms of importance — sending people to war is somewhat different to sending yourself up in front of a camera — but there's a meeting of minds here that makes the movie.

"I did feel a big responsibility," says Streep, "to get the truth as far as we could pack it in. There isn't room in this film for everything that made her so controversial a figure. We tried to jam as much as we could in and to adhere to the facts as much as we could know them. So that meant reading opinion across the spectrum of contemporary writing, writing after the fact, how she is assessed now, her adversaries, the proponents of her policies. All that is the vividness of the lived life, so we wanted to get that right. Combing through all the archival footage to get exactly the stuff that really captures that time... Then the imagined life: you feel a responsibility to get that right, too. Even though it's not based in anything anybody knows, anybody is privy to. We had access to friends, colleagues, people who knew her quite well. To make it feel as truthful as possible. To make it believable."

"THERE ISN'T ROOM IN THIS FILM FOR EVERYTHING THAT MADE HER SO CONTROVERSIAL A FIGURE."

Streep was much more involved in the development of the film than she normally is. "Usually I get a script, I say yes, we start shooting... For example, I didn't have anything to do with how Mamma Mia! evolved, whereas I did on this." The evolution of the screenplay went on for about a year-and-a-half, between her and Lloyd and screenwriter Abi Morgan (Shame). "I felt valued in that part of the process, which is unusual. There was sort of a coven of girls making this!"

Streep says she is "very, very proud" of the result. "It has a different kind of ambition than most films do: to reach in and understand something. I want to make people want to go! But who knows how to do that anymore?" One person who is unlikely, certainly, to see The Iron Lady is the title character (though an invitation will be extended). "I don't expect that she will," says Streep. "Phyllida told me there have been a couple of pictures about her. Lindsay Duncan did one (*Manservant*). Andrea Riseborough, I think (*The Long Walk To Finchley*). When she was told about it Lady Thatcher said, 'Oh, another



The lady's good for a turn: (Here) The Iron Lady; (Below from left) Mamma Mia! Sophie's Choice; The Devil Wears Prada.

programme...'. So I don't think she will. If she did see it I hope that she would see the seriousness with which we attempted to react to her life and what it might be like to be inside it. Because it's not done lightly. We took care."

Streep's passion — combined with her dedication and what Lloyd describes as "more physical and mental energy than all the rest of us put together" — makes you wonder why, in her 34 years in film, she has never directed a feature.

"Some directors may feel I already have, or attempted to!" she says, with a sly smile. "No, I like the idea of... it's like being a grandmother: you go home at the end of the night, I used to think I'd like to direct, but you know what? Honestly, if you have a big commitment at home, you can't really do it. I have four children. While they were growing up it was really impossible. Directing is a big, big, big job. Acting, if you prepare, you can leave it on set and come back the next day. You can't do that with directing. It's a 24-hour job. It's two years. I like acting. I like that. And I like directors that are interested in my input — even if it's outside my department. That's

a pain in the ass for a lot of people I'm sure. But Phyllida welcomed it, so it was really, really gratifying to work on this in every phase of it."

It will surely be more gratifying, still, when she receives an inevitable — but no less deserved — Oscar nomination. It will be, what, her 47th? She laughs. "I know what you mean... When I was nominated last year (*for Julie & Julia*) I thought, 'I'm so old and they're still doing this! This is amazing.' I think the Academy sort of parrots things out: 'You've had enough!' And I get that sense from the aggregate fellowship of my colleagues. You know, 'Sit down!'" Still, aged 62, with what could well be regarded as the performance of a lifetime, in a film from the producers of *The Queen*, being distributed in America by the Weinstein brothers, is she not bothering to prepare a speech? "Oh, I sit there every year with a speech! I've got 14 speeches I've never given. They're all really good!" She laughs again. "One day, I'll put them in a book."

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The Iron Lady is out on January 6 and is reviewed on page 48.