

Magnificent Meryl

ON A GLITTERING night in Los Angeles seven years ago, the good and the great of Hollywood gathered to honour the finest actress of our generation.

Before walking on to the stage to accept the American Film Institute's Life Achievement award, Meryl Streep had sat with her husband and children, blushing but resplendent, as she absorbed the accolades of her peers, many of them giants of the screen themselves.

"You transcend talented," Jack Nicholson observed, beaming towards his two-time co-star (*Heartburn* and *Ironweed*). "Impassive, passive, gorgeous, committed. To me you are perfect and I love you very much."

Shirley MacLaine, who, 14 years earlier, had played opposite Meryl Streep's self-hating, drug-addled character, Suzanne Vale, in *Postcards From The Edge* said, "The mystery of your talent is extraordinary. It is so other-worldly that it makes me understand there is more in all of us than meets the eye."

Diane Keaton described her friend as "my generation's genius". Robert De Niro called her "the real thing".

And then Jim Carrey took to the stage and bellowed in mock horror, "There is no bad film in this woman. There are no flaws. Nothing. WHERE ARE THE FLAWS? WHAT ARE YOU, MAN? SHAPE-SHIFTER? BODY-SNATCHER?"

The uproar was only matched by the unanimous agreement – that, yes, here in this star-studded room of vaulting talent was "the real thing".

And that was seven years ago, well before Meryl Streep shape-shifted into the hellcat fashion magazine editor, Miranda Priestley, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, for which she would receive her 14th Oscar nomination. Or before she bled into the ideologically hardened mother superior in *Doubt*, a role that would earn her 15th Oscar nomination. Or before she would transform into the hulking, but utterly beguiling, figure of legendary chef Julia Child in *Julie & Julia*, for which she would receive her 16th Oscar nomination, more than any other actor, male or female, in the history of cinema.

Yes, this was all before that, before she would dance and sing her way to a Golden Globes and Grammy nomination for her role in *Mama Mia!*, the musical comedy that would gross nearly \$600 million, her highest earning film to date; or before her performance in *It's Complicated*, ▶

She has been nominated for an Oscar 16 times, won two and her latest incarnation as Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher is tipped to earn her a hat-trick.

David Leser meets the extraordinary Meryl Streep and discovers a woman of sublime grace and exuberance.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

The greatest leading lady of our times: Meryl Streep has been nominated for more Oscars than any other actor in history.

for which she would reveal her madcap underbelly, and for which she would garner the 24th of her 25 Golden Globes nominations for Best Performance by an Actress.

On that fated night in Hollywood seven years ago, all these defining roles were still to come, even though Meryl Streep, herself, seemed to doubt it. “I am so proud and grateful,” she said, bathing in the adulation. “I hope it’s not the end.”

The End? Try the New Beginning. Beyond these inspired performances, Meryl Streep was also going to pull off – has just pulled off – arguably the most sublime performance of her illustrious career, as former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Think about that: the greatest leading lady of our times incarnating as the greatest (love her or loathe her) female Western leader of our times, the grocer’s daughter who reshaped British society in her own image.

We will come to this latest *tour de force* soon, just as we will meet the “real thing” in person, but before we do, it’s worth noting that when the New Jersey-born Mary Louise Streep auditioned for one of her first films back in the mid-1970s – it was for *King Kong* – the Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis reportedly commented to his son in Italian, “She’s ugly. Why did you bring me this thing?”

Meryl understood every word he’d said, and replied in Italian that she was sorry he felt this way.

De Laurentiis was alone in his thinking. To those who’d seen Meryl Streep act, even in her early days, she was nothing short of brilliant. And beautiful. “She looks like she’s swallowed a lightbulb,” director Mike Nichols would soon observe. “There’s something that’s completely transparent about her, a glowing quality that’s quite striking and delicate.”

The dean of the Drama School at Yale University (where she’d earned a Masters degree after studying at Vassar College) said “she was destined for greatness”. Joseph Papp welcomed her to his New York Shakespeare Festival in late 1975, describing her as one of the few “true actors” he’d ever met. (As a child she’d pretended to be her grandmother by

drawing age lines on her face, and wearing old cardigans.)

Shortly afterwards, Robert De Niro saw her playing a maid in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. Within a few months, she was cast opposite him in *The Deer Hunter*, the first of three films with De Niro, and the first film for which she would receive an Oscar nomination.

Meryl only took the part in *The Deer Hunter* so she could spend precious time with her then fiancé John Cazale who, despite having been diagnosed with bone cancer, had been cast – and wanted to appear – in this epoch-defining film on the Vietnam war.

The couple had fallen hopelessly in love a year earlier while playing opposite each other in Shakespeare In The Park’s production of *Measure for Measure*. As Pacino would later recall, “I remember John telling me, ‘Oh man, I’ve met the greatest actress in the history of the world’. I thought, ‘Well, he’s a guy who’s in love, so how good can she be? She can’t be what he’s saying’, [but] sure enough it’s Meryl Streep”.

John Cazale never lived to see his or Meryl’s performance in *The Deer Hunter*. He died in March 1978, with Meryl taking leave from acting to nurse him to the very end.

“He was lucky enough to have, as the last vision of his life, Meryl’s lovely face,” actor James Woods said. “The most amazing thing to see was Meryl during all this,” added Pacino. “The way she was with him by his side, right through the whole thing. When I saw that girl there with him like that – there is nothing like that – as great as she is in all her work, that is what I think of when I think of her.”

And with all that pain still raw, Meryl then auditioned for the role of the haunted Joanna Kramer, in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, starring opposite Dustin Hoffman. “She came in [for the audition],” said Hoffman, “and after she left, there was some controversy because a producer said, ‘First of all, what is her name? Murel? She never opened her mouth, she didn’t say a word, she just sat there.’ She was literally still in a state

of mourning. [But] not only did I know she was a brilliant actress, it was a moment in her life when emotionally [she could draw on her pain].”

Meryl ended up re-writing her lines for the courtroom scene in the film and then went on to win her first Oscar as Best Supporting Actress, saying as she accepted the award “Holy Mackerel!”. (She then went and left her Oscar on top of the toilet at the end of the ceremony!) This was 1980, the true beginning.

Two years later she would be nominated again for Best Actress in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. A year later she would win her second Oscar for her miraculous performance in *Sophie’s Choice*, where her Polish character Sophie Zawistowska (and yes, she learnt to speak Polish for the role) is forced to make the most unspeakable choice of all – which child to hand over to the Nazis? Meryl had literally gone down on bended knees to beg director Alan Pakula for the part.

“There is hardly an emotion that Meryl doesn’t touch in this movie,” said Roger Ebert, the Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic, at the time. “This is one of the most astonishing and yet unaffected and natural performances I can imagine.”

The films and Oscar nominations kept coming, and in each film what we saw was not just a capacity for playing characters of remarkable depth, but a capacity for accents – English, Polish, mid-Western, Danish, New Zealand-Australian (as in Lindy Chamberlain) Italian-American, Bronx, you name it, she could do it.

And through all this, she was also able to defy the Hollywood curse by finding happiness as a wife – to sculptor Don Gummer whom she’d met a few months after John Cazale’s death, a marriage James Woods was to describe as the “Great Love Affair of the the 20th Century”. (The couple has four children – musician Henry, actresses Mamie and Grace, and student Louisa.)

“I am wired for family,” Meryl once said. She was also wired for investigating the human psyche like no other actress of our time. ►

“SHE WAS DESTINED FOR GREATNESS.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE



Meryl Streep was transformed into formidable former British PM, Margaret Thatcher for her role in *The Iron Lady*.

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AND NOW SHE is sitting in front of me on the seventh floor of Robert De Niro's Greenwich Hotel in Tribeca, at 62 years of age, still a picture of studied elegance and etheral beauty in black pants, black boots and a purple gabadine jacket designed – she tells me – by the Malaysian-born American, Yeohlee Teng.

Just back from London where she unveiled a poster of herself as Margaret Thatcher, Meryl admits now to being unashamedly fascinated by the character she has just played.

“She [Thatcher] was and remains in many quarters very hated for what she did with her policies in England. She's also revered in other quarters for who she was and how she stood up for what she believed.

“So it was the discrepancy that attracted me. Who is this person who was willing to – and could withstand – that level of venom? What kind of woman can stand up as a human being through years and years of hatred, and still maintain her convictions? It's just interesting to look deeply into a life and find out where the human being is in there.”

When it was first announced Meryl Streep was going to play the former British prime minister, you could almost hear the bells of indignation ringing out across the kingdom. How could an American, even a master of accents like Meryl Streep, capture the modulations and delineations of English speech? How could an actor with an instinctive liberal bent do justice to an instinctive conservative like Margaret Thatcher?

And what would the family think given that Baroness Thatcher was now 86 years old and in the grip of dementia?

Would Meryl Streep be able to honour this woman who had overcome enormous obstacles of gender and class to lead her party to three general election victories in a row? Would she be able to show the grit and defiance of a woman who fought and won a war across the other side of the world – in the Falkland Islands – in the face of fierce criticism, both at home and abroad? Would she render accurately the steel and bloody-mindedness of a leader who had literally torn up the economic consensus upon which Britain had been built since World War II?

The answer is yes, yes and yes again. Not only has Meryl Streep ended up sounding and looking exactly like Margaret Thatcher did in her 40s, 50s and 60s, capturing all the poise, regal bearing and high certitude that were her hallmarks. She – and here's the uncanny bit – has also managed to achieve something else: a depiction, not only of the loneliness of power, but of the loneliness and desolation of old age. It is such a remarkable feat of empathy that I ask the iconic figure next to me whether she felt the need to defend Margaret Thatcher in much the same way, perhaps, she needed to defend the actions of the mother who abandoned her son in *Kramer vs. Kramer*?

“Joanna Kramer needed defending,” she says now after a considerable pause.

“With Thatcher, I didn't think about defending her. She owns her place in history, fairly written in granite. But I did think about wanting to know what the toll was. I'm interested in older people because I feel myself getting older and I've always been interested in older people. I loved my grandmothers very much, and my mother, and I [was] interested in stories that lay in the layers

“WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO A WOMAN?”

behind that old lady's [Thatcher's] face.

“What are the costs to a woman of being in this position? What is the cost

of that kind of life lived so ambitiously? Are there any regrets in it? Are there memories of glory that you can still take pleasure in? What's it like to lose the power of concentration when you were somebody who could remember absolutely everything? How do we take leave of this life and how do people who have a big contentious life behind them, how do they reconcile to the simplicity at the end of life?”

As Meryl is talking – every sentence glimmering with sparks of her own deep humanity – I am struck by how many characters I see before me now: the Danish plantation owner in *Out Of Africa* (with Robert Redford); the Italian mid-western wife in *The Bridges Of Madison County* (with Clint Eastwood); the author in *Adaptation* (with Nicolas Cage); the monstrous magazine boss in *The Devil Wears Prada*; the action heroine in *The River Wild* (with Kevin Bacon); the concentration camp survivor in ▶

ONE WOMAN, MANY ROLES:



The Deer Hunter in 1978 was one of her first films.



Meryl won an Oscar for *Kramer vs. Kramer*.



As Lindy Chamberlain in the 1988 film, *Evil Angels*.



In *Julie & Julia*, Meryl played chef Julia Child.



Mama Mia! is Meryl's highest grossing film to date.



"I am wired for family," says Meryl Streep, here with three of her children, (from left) daughters Louisa, 20, Grace, 25, and Mamie, 28.

Sophie's Choice (with Kevin Kline); the accused murderess in *Evil Angels*; the whistleblower in *Silkwood* (with Kurt Russell); the master chef in *Julie & Julia*; the dancing queen in *Mama Mia!*; and now Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady herself. They are all here – a kaleidoscope of facial expressions and hand movements that find wondrous form in one woman.

When asked what the hardest thing about playing Margaret Thatcher was, the actress actually stands up and hunches into a stooped position of ageing befuddlement, her face and frame suddenly turning ancient, as she slumps around the floor. "The hardest thing is standing like this for three months – because all I wanted to do was stand like this [assuming a ramrod straight back]."

And then there was getting the voice right. "She [Thatcher] had capacious breath. I'm a trained actress. I have gone to drama school and attempted [Christopher] Marlowe's 'mighty line' and understood that the best way to read a sonnet aloud is to start at the beginning and don't take a breath because the breath is the thought that will carry on to the end of the line.

"But I couldn't find where she [Thatcher] took a breath. I'm like this

[gasping for breath]. I can't do this. I don't know how she does it."

In playing Thatcher, Meryl Streep was surprised, make that awe-struck, by the former British leader's stamina, by the fact she cooked for herself and her husband every night, by the fact she slept only four to five hours a night and never dealt properly with health problems like her teeth, .

"I'm in awe of her. How, for 11 and a half years, to exist on that amount of sleep and make that many decisions?

I'm not that way. I need to go away, 'leave me alone, I need to sleep. I need to listen to music. I need to read some poetry. I need to be by myself."

There is a deeply poignant moment in the film where Thatcher as an old woman is looking at a DVD of her twins, Mark and Carol, playing as young children on the beach. The former prime minister wonders aloud if it was all worth it, if she might not have spent more time with her children. Her husband replies, "You can rewind it, but you can't change it."

Are there things then that she, Meryl Streep, would liked to have done differently? "Oh many things," she replies coyly.

Like what? "Never mind," she replies, laughing like a squeaky schoolgirl.

"But yes, everything is a choice. It comes down to that, the choices. You don't even know if the choices you made were the right ones and the jury is out until your children have children. So it's an ongoing anxiety.

"But no, to me the reason to make the film was to look at the life of a big public person and then to morph it at some point into a story about you and me and all of us. How do we take leave of things? How do we reconcile ourselves to the cost of the choices we made in our life?"

And so now, finally, after 16 Oscar nominations (she hasn't won since *Sophie's Choice* in 1983), 25 Golden Globes nominations (seven wins); a slew of British Academy (BAFTA) Awards, Film Critics awards, Screen Actors Guild awards, People's Choice awards, honorary degrees, the Order of Arts and Letters from the French government, a Meryl Streep Day named in her honour in New York – after all this, does she care for another award, perhaps her third Oscar?

"I am very greedy [for more]," she says, laughing not for the first time, but more than laughing – cackling, giggling, guffawing, squealing, carolling, chuckling, gurgling all in one.

To this somewhat captivated outsider, there appears such absence of vanity in the woman, such grace and exuberance, it's no wonder that director Mike Nichols

once said to Meryl's *Silkwood* co-star Kurt Russell that "anyone who gets to know Meryl has to fall in love with her".

"What if they don't?"

Russell replied. Nichols said, "If they don't, then there's something wrong with them."

There was nothing wrong with Kurt Russell, just as there was nothing wrong with Jim Carrey on that Hollywood night seven years ago when he finished his uproarious tribute to the actress who rules the screen with these measured, holy words:

"I just really want to say 'God bless you [Meryl] as you have blessed us, as He has blessed us through you."

The Iron Lady will be released across Australia on December 26.

"HOW DO WE TAKE LEAVE OF THINGS?"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE. GREGORIO BINIUYA/ABACAUSA.COM/SCOPE.

