

film & music

...with a little help from their friends

Kate Mossman on the artists who covered the Beatles

'Men run the studios and live their own fantasies through them'

Meryl Streep skewers Hollywood sexism.
By Tim Teeman



REINA



Why don't Hollywood's men trust women?

'Women's films' make money but, Meryl Streep tells *Tim Teeman*, macho executives can't think female

The hotel suite is so blank — one empty room, the other with a regal chair and a sofa — Meryl Streep briefly considers my suggestion that we conduct the next half hour as a performance art piece. I'll stand in the bathroom, she can sit on the throne while I fire questions at her. We could lie on the floor. She giggles, tries to fix a broken nail.

Streep is not imperious, or as terrifying as the editor she played in *The Devil Wears Prada*. She speaks softly, has a flutery laugh and complains about the publicity-round attire of smart clothes and flawless make-up. Indeed, she reveals, exhausted after making seven films in two years, she is taking a break — “enforced rest” she calls it — though not before a broadside against male Hollywood executives for ignoring the success of woman-focused films.

Streep is the most nominated actor in Oscars history (her tally stands at 15 with two wins, the last for *Sophie's Choice* in 1983), famous for utterly inhabiting her roles, from the steely magazine chief of *Prada* to the mother of the baby snatched by a dingy, Lindy Chamberlain, in *A Cry in the Dark*, to a bitter divorcée in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, to *The French Lieutenant's*

Woman, shawled on Lyme Regis Cobb, to a zealous nun in *Doubt*, and a capricious hippy mother in *Mamma Mia!* In her latest transformation she is Julia Child, the first popular American TV cook, in Nora Ephron's film *Julie & Julia* (see review, page 14).

The film follows the real-life story of a food blogger, Julie Powell, as she attempts to cook all 524 recipes in Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in 365 days, alongside the parallel story of Child in the 1950s as she masters the cordon bleu cookery that was the foundation of the book and her career. The film is great fun: no violence, mostly happy relationships, and lots of but-tery, glorious food. You cannot wait for Streep to be on screen, booming and tootling as Child, alongside Stanley Tucci as her husband Paul. When the action shifts to near present-day New York, you find your attention drifting to your pick 'n' mix.

Streep recalls growing up in New Jersey, coming home from school, “and my mother [Mary] having it [Child's show] on. My mother was not a cook. Her cookbook was Peg Bracken's *I Hate to Cook Book*.” Streep thought mashed potato came from boxes. Later she trained to sing opera, then studied drama at Vassar and Yale, and worried that acting “didn't seem serious or contributing to the betterment of the world”.

She is still trying to lose the weight she gained on *Julie & Julia*, she roars. “The food was divine. I think the best thing we had



Meryl Streep, top, and, above, as the hearty TV cook Julia Child in her latest film, *Julie & Julia*. “The food was divine,” she says

was *navarin d'agneau*. The *boeuf bourguignon* was a close second.” Did it improve Streep's cooking? “The vote at home [husband of more than 30 years, Don Gummer, four children] is yes. I've learnt not to rush. I'm snobby about the equipment. The pan does matter. I got my stove recalibrated to correct the flames. I got my knives sharpened. I had to unlearn onion chopping. One wrong move and I would have lost a knuckle and we like our knuckles.”

Child, Streep says, “was great entertainment. She was funny, but only intermittently. At that time there were dramas and entertainment shows, singing and dancing, the news but there were no instructional shows. She'd always throw in a random thing, produce a dish and say [and here Streep puts on the haughty Child boom]: ‘When you put this in front of your guests you make people happy. And there's nothing like that. *Nothing*.’ It was easy to be in that body because she reminded me of my mother. She was a force of nature. She had great curiosity and enthusiasm. She lit up the room. When I read *Julia*, I knew that person inside because it was Mary.”

Streep was surprised to discover that Child had no children. “But then I found out that her sister Dorothy did have children and I thought to myself, what would that be like?” There is a piercing moment in the film when Julia receives news of her sister's new baby and cries with joy and also

“We all respond to instinct, and their inner boy goes, ‘Yeah, I wanna see another GI Joe’”

sadness for herself. Streep says, “There are big expectations a woman has for her life. All the script said was ‘I'm so happy’. I thought, ‘Let's see how happy she is.’”

Streep does this, endowing her characters with quirks beyond the script. Sometimes you cringe, most of the time the Meryl-isms feel right, stealing scenes, adding a layer, packing a punch. Streep said that the movie was liberating because “the usual things actresses think about — how they look, what they wear, their hair — were jettisoned. To look over and see the man she loved looking at her with adoration, compassion, understanding and respect was great to her.” Streep says that the critics may carp that no husband could be as supportive of his wife's career, “but Paul had had a life before Julia, he had lost a much-loved partner. They met when he was 50 and looking for someone wonderful and real and Julia was who he found.”

Streep was recently described as an economist's dream: every project she has recently been associated with has generated big box office. “It's hilarious,” she says, stroking her chin. “I wish I could figure out a way to capitalise on that. I think it's a series of happy coincidences and also that there are more women in the hierarchy of movie-making and movie-financing and they are more interested and less afraid of making movies that appeal to other women.”

But this is a well-worn trend now. Hasn't Hollywood woken up? “It's always a shock to the studio,” Streep says with real firmness, “because men run the studios and live their own fantasies through them. It's harder for a man to jump inside a woman character's mind and imagine, ‘This could happen to me’ than it is for a woman to imagine herself as a male character.” But surely the profits count? “They see it and they understand that there is a market and it will make them an enormous amount of money, but we all respond to instinct and it's their inner boy that jumps up and goes: ‘Yeah, I wanna see another *GI Joe*.’”

A recent article speculated that Streep may be up for another Oscar nomination this year; a source said that the organisation had noted a dearth of strong female roles. “Parts are rare,” Streep says, “the amount of product is rare. It's a large machine that markets these films, that makes theatre [cinema] owners commit their theatres half a year in advance — that's how it works. Are they gonna buy *GI Joe* or are they gonna buy *Mamma Mia!*?”

Mamma Mia! did great business, I say. “They're still not sure,” Streep counters. “You need a good salesman. Those films have done well, yes, that audience is there, but it doesn't go on the first weekend [which the industry nervously observes].”

There are good roles for women, but the films rarely enter the mainstream, she says. “My actor friends are all lamenting a lack of material. People are very fearful of where to put the money, and that leads to a timidity. For the kids there are cattle-calls; they're rounded up like models, plucked out, put in a movie and they're done by 23.” She laughs ruefully about the possibility of another Oscar nomination. “I keep thinking I should get a good answer for that ques-

tion.” She's the most nominated? “Yes, I've lost it 13 times!”

Next, her voice features as Mrs Fox in Wes Anderson's animated adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Fantastic Mr Fox*, which opens the *Times* BFI London Film Festival next month. “He's very demanding,” Streep says of Anderson. “He hears everything, even a quasi-breath. It's almost like he's tasting, tasting, tasting... ‘Right, that's enough salt’. It was more like working with a composer, like he was hearing music inside his head and you couldn't hear it.” Later in the year she appears in a post-divorce comedy, *It's Complicated*. The Norma Desmond role in the remake of *Sunset Boulevard* is still for the taking. “Ooh, yeeessss. It would be fun. But my friend Glenn [Close] really knocked it out of the park with that on Broadway so I think she'll have first shot.” She smiles. “I think we have to be a little bit generous and spread it around. I've had a lot of work.”

Streep disagrees that her roles have become lighter. “*Prada* wasn't fun to play; it was like I had mercury in my mouth. Before that I did *Mother Courage* on stage, which in your wildest dreams could not be described as comedy. I don't have a production company. I don't have anybody directing my career, it just depends on what scripts come. If I like them I do them.”

So, what next? “Seven movies in two and a half years,” she says quietly. “I've never worked this hard ever.” Is she exhausted? “Yes, I'm feeling like I need a break. This is not the most fun part,” she says indicating the hotel room. “The most fun part is making the movies, the prospect of selling three in a row is... harder. Selling has more to do with wardrobe and shoes and cleaning up and being presentable.”

Has she ever considered giving up acting? “No,” she says, snorting at the idea. “But I do need enforced rest in my career. When each of my children was born I took a year off. It's very nice to have time to live, gather experiences, watch other people.” She once told me that she eavesdropped on conversations in restaurants, listened to accents, let them “marinate”. “Yes, I do it so much, I can barely keep my ears on what Don is saying. He tells me: ‘Don't do that, it's so embarrassing,’” she laughs.

“I like observing behaviour and what catches the eye, what makes us read each other so closely. Ever since movies began we have read each other more closely.” She makes a frame to her face. “The pores. The fashion for photography that goes into Gordon Brown's nostrils and tear ducts... we see so deeply into each other, even as our understanding seems shallower and shallower. To see deeply you have to look deeply and feel where you are. You can't just pass through it quickly. Passing through quickly — the selling part — is less satisfying.”

Was turning 60 this year important? “To everyone else it was,” Streep says, grimacing. “It was a big number, to me it was, ‘Well yeah, that comes after 59, and I don't even want to look it in the eye. The biggest thing that happened was not to do with my age but my youngest [Louisa] graduating from high school and going off to college. I always said when she did I would do theatre, but I'm so kind of exhausted at the moment, the thought of doing a play puts me on a gurney.”

If she did take on a role, she says, it would have to be a fresh character, “so as not to have someone say, ‘Well, she wasn't as good as Dame somebody’.” She laughs merrily, but her handlers are hovering, tapping watches. The “selling” must go on.

Julie & Julia is released today

PHOTOSHOT



Hugo Chávez bathes in adulation on the Venice red carpet

Venice isn't sinking shock!

The Venice Film Festival is alive, well and still throwing up acts of happy lunacy, reports *Wendy Ide*

What a turnaround. While last year's Venice film festival rumbled with discontent about

everything from the lamentable standard of the competition films to the lack of star power to the price of a sandwich, the mood this year has been buoyant.

What's changed? The festival organisers have worked hard to address as many of the concerns as possible, but key to the tide of goodwill on the Lido are the rich pickings in the festival programme, both in and out of competition. Crowd-pleasers include the hugely enjoyable *The Men Who Stare at Goats*, starring Ewan McGregor and George Clooney, and Michael Moore's barnstorming attack on Wall Street's culture of greed, *Capitalism: A Love Story*.

Other highlights include Claire Denis's *White Material*, a tense study of a French family clinging to their coffee plantation in an unnamed African country while a violent civil war rages around them. Also widely admired was the harrowing post-apocalyptic road movie *The Road* and *Lebanon*, which provided a tank crew's-eye view of the first day of the Israeli invasion of that country in 1982. The strongest contender for the top prize however is Jessica Hausner's brilliant *Lourdes*.

But, as ever, the movies have been but a part of the entertainment, the highlights of which include:

Worst journalistic faux pas

Two members of the press share this award. The first is the American reporter who assumed that *Lourdes*, a beautifully observed film set on a Catholic pilgrimage, was about Madonna's daughter. The other is the Australian television journalist who acquired Tilda Swinton's festival accreditation pass and wore it for several hours until somebody pointed out the mistake.

Best use of reptiles

Werner Herzog's *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* is a shambolic mess of a movie but it has a couple of moments of mad genius. The most memorable of these is when Nic Cage, playing the eponymous rogue cop, starts to hallucinate as cocaine psychosis kicks in. “What are those iguanas doing on my coffee table?” he barks. Despite being reassured that there are no lizards in the room, Cage's eye keeps drifting to the table where the iguanas squat, implacable and prehistoric. Herzog was generous in his praise for the reptiles, describing them as his favourite thing in the whole film.

Best red carpet appearance by a controversial head of state

The Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was in town to support Oliver Stone's documentary *South of the Border*, of which Chávez is the main subject. The liberal Venice Film Festival audience embraced the film enthusiastically and its star was greeted on the Lido by supporters waving huge banners sporting a message of welcome. However, a few dissenting voices suggested that Chávez's presence on the red carpet might have been an indication that Stone's questions weren't tough enough.

Best comeback by a disgraced former children's entertainer

Remember Paul Reubens? Better known as the creepy man-child Pee-wee Herman, Reubens was cast into the outer darkness in the early Nineties after being caught masturbating in a pornography cinema in Florida. His career rehabilitation gets a serious boost from his appearance in *Life During Wartime*, Todd Solondz's widely admired quasi-sequel to his 1998 hit, *Happiness*. Reubens is spot on as the ghost of the unhinged former boyfriend of Joy, played by Shirley Henderson.

Best-received film

Lourdes has met with universal support and deservedly so — the film is exquisite, blending a sardonic humour with compassionate humanism. Sylvie Testud is outstanding as the wheelchair-bound MS sufferer who regains the use of her limbs after a pilgrimage.

Worst audience stamina

Every festival screening loses a few audience members to boredom, hunger or a desperate need to get to the nearest bar, but Nicolas Winding Refn's bloody Viking saga *Valhalla Rising* set a new record. The film had been rolling for fewer than five minutes when two women stood up and hastily made for the exit. Could it have had something to do with Mads Mikkelsen, playing a one-eyed psychopath, having just spat out the chunk of flesh he had just chewed from the face of an opponent in battle? Those who made it through the gore were treated to an intriguing, savagely beautiful film.

Worst behaviour by an actor

Vincent Gallo, promoting the Swedish animation *Metropia*, apparently gave a warning that he would terminate interviews in which the words “but”, “however” or “only” were used. He also requested prior approval of journalists so that he could veto those he didn't like the look of.

“Jessica Hausner's *Lourdes* is exquisite, blending sardonic humour with compassion”