A QUESTION, MAESTRO

With two films about conductors creating buzz this summer, the role of the person on the podium is very much in the zeitgeist. But what are they actually doing when they wave that little white stick about? Australia's greatest living conductor, Simone Young, tries to explain.

BY *David Leser*

FIRST, AN admission. I can't read music, nor do I really understand what a conductor does, except keep the beat amid a great flourish of hand gestures, cues and, presumably, a well-aimed baton. That, you'd have to agree, is hardly the ideal place to start from when you've been assigned a story on conducting, generally, and, more specifically, Australia's most famous living maestro, Simone Young.

But it gets worse. So ill-informed am I about conducting that when I stumble upon a conversation that occurred almost 150 years ago, I'm tempted – from a vague desire to validate my own ignorance – to agree with those who dared criticise these commanding, semi-divine figures of the stage.

The conversation was between the Spanish violin virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate and Enrique Granados, the brilliant Catalan composer, and it was Sarasate voicing furious indignation:

"Enrique, do you know what is happening today? I mean these conductors with their little sticks. They don't play, you know. They stand in front of the orchestra waving their little sticks and they get paid for this, get paid well, too. Now suppose, Enrique, suppose there were no orchestra and they stood there alone. Would they pay them just the same, them and their little sticks?"

Who knows the great Granados' response, but it wasn't just Iberian displeasure filling the 19th-century air over this relatively new species of musician.

In 1836, Robert Schumann, the German composer, pianist and music critic, had let fly with a jeremiad against "the vanity and self-importance of conductors who do not want to relinquish the baton, partly because they want to be constantly before the audience, partly to hide the fact that a competent orchestra can take care of itself without their leadership". (Robert Schumann was, by all accounts, a woeful conductor.)

All this suddenly feels highly relevant given that Cate Blanchett's new film, *Tár*, has opened in cinemas around the country this week, with the two-time Oscar winner playing a ground-breaking but unhinged – and totally fictitious – conductor of a major German orchestra; while *Knowing the Score*, a documentary on the very real – and utterly sane by comparison – Simone Young, chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, is due for national cinematic release next month, and will air on the ABC on March 7.

Conducting has somehow entered the zeitgeist (perhaps it never left) and I am caught between my own witlessness on the subject, and the beseechings of both my editor and my 93-year-old classically trained musical mother to turn my gaze on what has been for me, until now, a mystery art form.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL BOUD; PETER BREW-BEVAN

Simone Young (at left), and (above), conducting the Sydney Symphony: "Music is possibly the one art form that gives you the chance to expand your mind freely. In visual art you are dealing with an image. Reading literature is concrete text. Whereas music appeals to one's senses, but it also appeals to one's intellect and imagination."

"Darling," my mother says, "you simply *have* to write this story. The way Simone uses her hands and arms ... it's just extraordinary. Nobody does it like her."

My mother should know. Not only has she seen hundreds, possibly thousands, of operatic and symphony orchestra performances over nearly nine decades, she is also the daughter of a woman, my grandmother, who, at the age of 20, performed Beethoven's Third Concerto at London's Queen's Hall with the famous Englishman Henry Wood conducting.

My mother's grandfather, my great-grandfather, was also a gifted violinist who conducted his own orchestra in Sydney at the age of 17 and often played obbligatos for Australia's acclaimed soprano Dame Nellie Melba when she returned home to perform.

So my mother, as I wrote in this magazine a few years ago, "lives for music", and she knows her music, at least her classical music. She knows her crotchets from her quavers, her allegros (quick and lively) from her adagios (slow and leisurely). She knows her Schumanns and Schuberts from her Chopins and Shostakovichs, and she knows her conductors.

"I heard Otto Klemperer five times play Mahler's Second *Resurrection* Symphony in Sydney at the Town Hall during the 1950s," she tells me. "I saw Yehudi Menuhin when he was on the wane. I saw Riccardo Muti in Salzburg. I saw Daniel Barenboim conduct often, too, but I also heard him in London play a duet after supper one night. He was just 14 years old and he and the solo pianist at the concert that night played Schubert's *Fantasia* for four hands. I've had that *Fantasy* in my heart ever since."

My mother then begins to sing: *"Da Dum Da Deeeee Dum ... Da Dum Da Deee Da Dam Da Dee Da Dum Da Dum Da Dum..."*

Left: Italian conductor Riccardo Muti leads the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 2012. Below: English conductor Henry Wood in 1934.

Above: SSO's then chief conductor Charles Mackerras in 2002. Right: Maestro Leonard Bernstein in 1983; musicians and audiences alike loved his demeanour.

PERHAPS IT'S true to say that wherever – and whenever – musicians have come together to play, there was always someone starting things off, counting the time, taking the lead. As Harold Schonberg, the late music critic for *The New York Times*, wrote in his definitive 1967 book *The Great Conductors*, "[The conductor] is there because somebody has to be the controlling force. Somebody has to set the tempo, maintain the rhythm, see to it that the proper ensemble and balances are kept, try to get out of the score what the composer put into it. From his baton, from the tips of his fingers, from his very psyche, flows some sort of electric surcharge that shocks a hundred-odd prima donnas into bending their individual wills into a collective effort."

Catherine Hewgill, principal cellist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra for the past 33 years, expands on this idea while also acknowledging the challenges involved in defining what a conductor actually does.

"It's such a difficult question," she tells *Good Weekend*, "and you'd think it would be very simple. But the number of people who come to me and say, 'I see this person standing up in front of the orchestras waving their arms around. Do they actually make a difference?'

"It's really hard for a non-musician to understand, unless you've sat in an orchestra under several different conductors.

"So at the most basic level, what they do is they help us play together. They help us with balance between all the instruments: who should be playing louder, who should be playing softer. They help us produce the kind of sound they're looking for. They, of course, choose the tempo that they want the piece to be played in, or different sections of the piece to be played in. That's the housekeeping part of it.

"On top of that is where it becomes difficult to explain, because a conductor has to have an ability to convey what they want expressed in the music without using words. And how do you do that?"

Exactly. How do you do that? It's in the overall architecture of the piece, Hewgill says. It's in the hands and the way sounds are shaped. It's in the rehearsal process. It's in the body of knowledge a conductor brings to a score, and here she references Riccardo Muti, the famous Italian conductor with whom she's worked.

"We gave a young conductor a chance to come and conduct the orchestra for a minute and he [Muti] said, 'You need to know so much more than just how to wave your arms around. You need to read everything you can get your hands on to be able to grow into a fine conductor. You have to have so much knowledge in every area that is more than music.'

"So it's about some kind of ... I don't know ... pulling together of all the big elements in the universe and trying to convey that to us, the musicians, and then getting it to come out the other side."

It is no small feat, as Harold Schonberg wrote, to weld five score musicians "into one singing giant", particularly when some of the musicians might believe they could wield the baton better.

"An orchestra can be a very nasty beast," Hewgill agrees. "If you can imagine standing in front of 100 judgmental people – that's just how artists are – then it can be quite a frightening experience for a conductor. Not for really seasoned conductors, but for younger, less mature conductors.

"So an orchestra can tell basically within the first five minutes what the conductor is like, what strengths they have, whether it's going to be a successful union between the particular conductor and the orchestra."

And how can you tell? "Obviously it's the way they speak to the orchestra. It's the immediate control that they may – or may not have – over the players. It's how they're putting their ideas across, not necessarily [by] speaking about those ideas, but just by what they're doing with their body and their eye contact and what they are showing in their knowledge of the music. We can pick all that up in five minutes."

Does a conductor need to be bossy by nature?

"Yes," Hewgill replies emphatically. "Great conductors have great egos. And they need to have them. They need to be fearless and strong, and they need to have an incredible belief in themselves."

Does Simone Young possess these qualities?

"Oh, I think in spades. I've been working with her for many years and she has matured and grown. She has gathered up all this experience and knowledge over the years. I also think because she's a female, in her earlier years it was difficult for her because there weren't so many female conductors as there are now. And she felt, I think subconsciously, [that she had] to prove herself every time she stood up in front of an orchestra.

"She doesn't have to prove anything now. She's not a male or a female [conductor]. She's a conductor and she's a great conductor."

> "An orchestra can tell within the first five minutes what the conductor is like, what strengths they have."

I MEET Simone Young for the first time in a crowded bar in Sydney shortly after a preview screening of *Knowing the Score*, where the audience is swept along on the trajectory of this gifted musician's life and career. Young and I can barely hear each other above the din, except to acknowledge our interview scheduled for the following week and the fact the producer of the documentary, Margie Bryant, has made her aware of my family's musical background.

In the documentary we learn from Young's mother that her daughter was jerking to the music in her pram when she was nine months old ("I think all babies do that," Young later says airily). She was stretching her hands to the chords of Debussy's *Sunken Cathedral* when she was seven; watching with fascination during her childhood as the Opera House slowly began taking magnificent shape on Bennelong Point; studying composition, piano and conducting at the Sydney Conservatorium; hearing her first-ever symphony at the newly opened Sydney Opera House.

We are reminded of her becoming assistant conductor to the only two Australian chief conductors of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, first Charles Mackerras in 1982, then Stuart Challender in 1987. (In 2019 Simone Young became the third Australian appointed to the position.)

We see her as Daniel Barenboim's assistant at the Berlin Opera while in her mid- to late-20s, and then as the first woman invited to conduct the Vienna State Opera in 1993, then again four years later while eight months pregnant with her first daughter.

Journalist: How are you going to juggle a baby and the baton?

"One in each hand," Young replies sardonically. "I [have] had male colleagues who could stand next to me and their stomachs were bigger."

We also learn she would conduct in her sleep, that her husband Greg Condon would occasionally cop the third beat in the middle of his back in the dead of night; and that when she was effectively sacked as Opera Australia's music director in 2002, just over halfway through her first term in office, it took her a long time to get over what *The Sydney Morning Herald* described at the time as a "dramatic coup worthy of Wagner".

Stuart Challender said to her early in her career, "You are a big fish in a small pond. Go to Germany."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF FOCUS FEATURES; *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

So she returned to the country of Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Wagner to take up the dual role of general manager and music director of the Hamburg State Opera and music director of the Philharmonic State Orchestra Hamburg.

It was an extraordinary double billing, normally filled by two people, and she would hold both jobs for nearly a decade, until 2015. She continued to conduct around the world – Lausanne, Paris, Zurich, Berlin, Vienna, New York – then in 2019 was invited to return to her cherished Sydney Opera House as chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, a three-year term that began in 2022.

Her first performance in July last year was, fittingly, Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony, the genius orchestral exploration of life and death, birth and rebirth. It was fitting not just for the acoustically enriched Opera House Concert Hall, which had undergone a $150 million makeover. It was fitting for the musicians who had endured a hellish period of COVID-related disruptions and cancelled performances, and for Young, herself, who had been so unceremoniously discarded by the national opera company two decades earlier. "One stands humbled and a little apprehensive at the start of a Mahler symphony," she says, "because there is a masterpiece in front of you."

Above: Cate Blanchett plays a fictional conductor in the movie Tár. Left: Blanchett and Young at a preview of Knowing the Score, the upcoming documentary about Young.

THE SECOND time I meet Simone Young we are in another raucous bar, this time 32 floors above Sydney Harbour on a glorious late spring afternoon. Young orders the charcuterie and cheese platters and a non-alcoholic cocktail, comprising grapefruit and spiced salts. "If I drink alcohol," she tells me, "I'll go straight to sleep."

It is the day after she's conducted Beethoven's *Fidelio* to a packed house in the white-sailed building below us, and she will do so again the next day, before departing her hotel at 3am for a 6am flight to London, then straight into hospital for surgery on her injured rotator cuff. "I've built up 30 years of damage in the left rotator cuff," she replies after I ask her whether she's injured. (I'd heard the rumours, but also seen the previous week at the People's Choice concert that she seemed to be favouring her left arm.)

"There's some damage in the other [right] one, too," she offers, "[although] far less severe. But quite a lot of damage in the left rotator cuff. And then I had a fall at the end of April [in Paris] and it just ripped apart what was left of any tendons that were holding the top of the joint together."

Are you in pain?

"Yes."

So the Sydney Symphony's chief conductor is in considerable discomfort, pressed for time – she can give *Good Weekend* only an hour – and, to complicate matters further, the rehearsals for *Fidelio* are in turmoil because of the late withdrawal, due to illness, of South African soprano Elza van den Heever, who was due to perform the key role of Leonore.

Thankfully, Australian soprano Eleanor Lyons and New Zealander Madeleine Pierard have stepped in at the 11th hour to share the role, except that in the next few hours Lyons will also fall ill, leaving Pierard with the herculean task of performing the role without having rehearsed with the orchestra.

With some of this in mind I wonder how to strike the right notes, so to speak, for this interview. Perhaps with a question about the mystery, the otherness, of music itself and whether – for Young – there was ever a time before music.

"I don't think there was," she replies, "because music accompanied the things I enjoyed doing. There was music at kindergarten. There was music in my grandparents' house. There was a piano which my grandmother could play. There was music on the radio. I don't remember being aware of a world that didn't contain music of some kind." I mention to Young a quote from Nick Cave in which he describes music as being able to "lift us closer to the sacred" than any other art form.

"I think he's absolutely right because music is possibly the one art form that gives you the chance to expand your mind freely. In visual art you are dealing with an image. Reading literature – and I'm a great reader – is concrete text. Whereas music appeals to one's senses, but it also appeals to one's intellect and imagination. And if there are no visual pictures or words to limit that, or to define that, then music appeals to an infinity of possible imaginings that takes us closer to the divine, perhaps."

What role for silence? "Silence is possibly the least valued commodity that we have today. People are scared of silence. They think of silence as a vacuum. I think of silence as the space between the sounds."

And sounds, according to Young, have weight. They are three-dimensional – and one of her tasks as a conductor is to take that vertical weight of sound and carry it through the horizontal line that is time. "It's amazing once you explain that to people, the mystery of musical notation actually diminishes because ... it is actually very logical."

Prior to this interview I had asked Young – through her publicist – to bring the score of *Fidelio* with her so I could better understand what she was seeing on the page, then endeavouring to transmit to her musicians. The score for this, Beethoven's only opera, is nowhere in sight.

"I couldn't imagine why you would want it," she says.

GW: Well, because part of this story is to understand what conducting is. Because I think it's one ...

Young: "Yes, but you're not going to find that out from the score."

GW: I imagined that perhaps ...

Young: "You're not going to find out what acting is from reading a script, or what direction is from reading a script."

GW: All right, but if you were to show me ...

Young: "I have the score downstairs ... they said you need the score for the interview, but a score is a very personal thing. It's like the family Bible."

GW: What do you mean by that?

Young: "Well, it's my reference. I have things marked in there. It's a guide for me through the work that has a much more personal connection with myself than it would have with any other conductor."

GW: So this is your interpretation of *Fidelio*?

Young: "Yes and my study of it over more than 30 years ... It's another language. It's like a Braille book for someone who is blind. I mean, it's my language, the music and the fact that the text is in German as well, that's an added complication. There is a system to it. As I said, it's a vertical-horizontal system. You read it from left to right, as we read English. The notes for the violins are written above the notes for the violas, above the notes for the celli (cellos), above the notes for the double bassist. So you've got everything arranged."

GW: Well that tells me something I didn't ...

Young: "Everything is arranged according to pitch. Just like in piano music, the right hand is written above the left hand because the pitch of the right hand is higher than the pitch of the left hand."

GW: Okay, but you can see why the general public would not understand that. And I think that's a beautiful insight into ...

Young: "See, we talk about the general public as though reading music is a skill that just a handful of people have. Most schoolchildren can basically read music because they learn the basics of it at school. And we were all schoolchildren once."

CONDUCTORS HAVE been called many things over the centuries. Autocrats. Despots. Didacts. Egotists. Dispensers of wrath. Time beaters. Teachers. Kings of the stage.

For most of history, of course, they were almost always men and many of them deserved these labels. According to Harold Schonberg, Fritz Reiner and Arturo Toscanini were "instrumentalities of fear", with one baleful glare from Reiner enough to turn musicians into "whimpering blobs of protoplasm".

Gustav Mahler proved the ultimate tyrant. In seeking an impossible perfection from his musicians, he would often rage, swear, stamp his feet, insult his singers and go out of his way to pick on weaker players, some of whom he would then humiliate further by requiring

them to play solo. "For this," wrote Schonberg, "an orchestral musician would gladly cut a conductor's throat."

American maestro Leonard Bernstein was the opposite. Musicians and audiences alike loved his demeanour, his humanity, his collaborative instincts, his conducting style and the way he flailed the air and moved his hips, often subjecting his body to such outbursts of passion he would become airborne.

For Bernstein, the baton was "a living thing, charged with a kind of electricity", and yet, as he wrote in *The Joy of Music*, the stick only really began to replace the concertmaster's violin bow in the early 1800s – during Beethoven's time – when orchestras began getting larger. Before that, conductors – more often than not also the composers – used rolls of paper or leather stuffed with calf's hair or, in the case of Jean-Baptiste Lully, bandleader at the court of Louis XIV, the French "Sun King", a staff that he rammed so viciously against his foot during one performance he ended up dying of gangrene.

According to Bernstein, the first real conductor – as we've come to understand the term – was Felix Mendelssohn who, from the age of 12, was conducting his own private chamber orchestra at home. Mendelssohn was all about precision, using his baton of leather-bound whale bone to realise the score faithfully and unerringly.

For Richard Wagner, everything about Mendelssohn's approach was wrong because Mendelssohn failed, as Bernstein later wrote, to "personalise the score" ... to colour it with the conductor's "own emotions and creative impulse".

The cult of the conductor began with Wagner, not just because of the way his writings and technical ideas influenced all the baton wielders to follow, but because he would brook no challenge to what he believed was the flawlessness of his own taste, knowledge and passion. He shaped a generation of conductors and composers – and Simone Young is an inheritor of this shaping, heir to centuries of experimentation and development in music, as well as a warring-of-sorts for the soul of music and how it should be played.

Not bad for a girl raised in the Sydney seaside suburb of Manly with the ability to look at notes and hear them perfectly in her head (as in "absolute pitch") and also capable, through the perceptual phenomenon known as synesthesia, to see a colour for every note and key. (In the case of D, for example, it's always yellow.)

In her early years she learnt to play piano, organ, guitar, flute and clarinet and, in her adulthood, she became fluent in German, French and Italian, while also proficient at reading Russian and Czech. (How else to understand a composer's intention if you can't understand his or her language?)

Then she became the first woman to smash the glass ceiling and walls of one of the most male-dominated professions in the world, a staggering accomplishment she regards as about as interesting as an old boot.

GW: Am I right in saying you were the first woman to conduct in Berlin?

Young: "Yes."

GW: And in Vienna?

Young: "Yes. And in Paris and in Dresden and in Munich and god knows where else."

GW: In Bergen?

Young: "Oh, probably, I have no idea."

GW: And the Australian Opera?

Young: "No."

GW: So Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna?

Young: "I really don't care ... what's much more interesting is the fact that after nearly 30 years, they love me so much in Vienna [that] they've made me an honorary member of the company [Vienna State Opera], an honour that has been reserved for conductors like [Herbert von] Karajan and [Karl] Böhm."

Don't ask her about whether there is a power play between a conductor and orchestra because she doesn't much like that question, either.

Above: Sydney Symphony principal cellist Catherine Hewgill: "If you can imagine standing in front of 100 judgmental people – that's just how artists are – then it can be quite a frightening experience for a conductor."

"It's got NOTHING to do with power," she says, clearly exasperated. "See, this bothers me about the perceptions of my profession, that it has to do with power. It has as much to do with power as a musician playing a piano has to do with power. The orchestra is my instrument. I'm the pianist. The orchestra is the piano."

I ask whether she thinks Cate Blanchett is a good conductor, given that she's seen the film *Tár*. [Blanchett reportedly put in enormous hours with Australian-born, London-based conducting coach Natalie Murray Beale to inhabit the role of Lydia Tár, as well as take piano lessons and memorise great sections of Mahler's Fifth and Elgar's Cello Concerto.)

Young: "If she was acting a brain surgeon, would you ask, 'Is she a good brain surgeon?'"

GW: Well, no, I wouldn't [laughing].

Young: "No, so there you go [not laughing]. She's an excellent actor who's extremely good at playing a conductor. How about that?"

Time is running out and I still haven't asked Young whether there are basic tenets to conducting ... *Of course there are, you imbecile* ... and to my eternal relief and delight, Young begins explaining bars of music, accents, upstrokes, downstrokes and time signatures, drawing arrows and numbers on my notepad, waving her arms around like, well, like a conductor, and then completely throwing me with a question any schoolchild could apparently answer.

> "The orchestra is my instrument. I'm the pianist. The orchestra is the piano."

GW: Four four time?

Young: "You've got a downbeat."

GW: Yes.

Young: "That's the one. The upbeat is going to be ... do the maths."

GW: The upbeat is going to be the second ...

Young: "No ... in a bar of two, the downbeat was on one, the upbeat was on two. In a bar of three, the downbeat is on one, the upbeat is on three. In a bar of four, the downbeat is on one, the upbeat is on ... ?"

GW: Four.

Young: "Exactly."

GW: Okay ... so it's really a piece of cake?

Young: "It really is. So that's the when ... that shows the musicians the when. To show them the how ... What's that character?" (Young looks at me sternly.)

GW: Stern?

Young: "Stern. Martial. Strong. Tough."

(Young now looks at me with something approaching serenity.)

GW: Smooth?

Young: "Exactly ... again it's not rocket science ... but then it gets interesting. There's the bars, but the phrases move in different ways. All really interesting music goes across meter. If it sticks squarely to the meter, it's either techno or it's really boring. So you get things like ... let me see, what's well known? Beethoven Five. Opening. You have a two-bar phrase. *Ba ba ba bam* ... two bars ... the next one is a three-bar phrase because it's a bit longer. *Ba Ba Ba Bammm*. The next one, four-bar phrase ... *ba ba ba bamm di di da dam di di da damm* ... four bars ... same the next one ... *ba ba ba ta ta ti ta tum ta ti ta tum* ... four-bar phrase ... now *pa ta ta ta ti ta ta tam ti ti ta tam pam pam pam* ... seven-bar phrase.

"Now you could break the seven-bar phrase into four and three, and it would sound: *bapa ta ta ta ta ta* ... or you take it in the direction of the phrase *pa ta ta ta ta ta ta tam ta tam*. You're deliberately going across the meter. That's what the conductor does. The conductor shows the musicians where the phrases go."

So here we are, high above the shimmering white curves of the Sydney Opera House, and the chief conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is singing Beethoven's Fifth to me, tapping the table and waving her arms around as the ruckus in the bar grows louder and the barman is jiggling his cocktail shakers like a maracas player on a Caribbean cruise.

THE NEXT night I am in the front circle of the Sydney Opera House concert hall watching Simone Young conduct *Fidelio* with a torn left rotator cuff, one that will require – I am reliably told – a shoulder replacement and nine weeks of convalescence in her home in Sussex, England. (This has forced her to cancel concerts in Vienna, Zurich and Stockholm.)

She is mesmerising as she coaxes and commands notes from the orchestra, jigging and jutting her body, scooping and caressing the air with her hands or, alternatively, waving her baton like a sword or magic wand, or both.

"She looks possessed ... in a good way," my singer-songwriter daughter Jordan writes in my notebook. "Almost shamanic, like someone casting spells on a headland as a storm rolls in."

"Is there something a little Kate Bush about her movements?" I reply, passing my notebook back to her in the dark.

"Yes, actually it's very *Wuthering Heights*," she says. "It's like watching a dancer."

Or, as Louise Herron, chief executive of the Sydney Opera House, tells me, watching a painter pick up her brushes and colours, or a great conductor expressing herself with "swan-like arms".

And yet every time Young raises her left arm I almost wince knowing the pain that she's in, and wondering how she keeps going. What I don't know is that between the time we did our interview the previous evening and this performance now, she has also fallen ill.

"She was very sick [that night]," Catherine Hewgill, the principal cellist, tells me a few days later. "She literally couldn't speak, she was feeling so terrible, and when she was taking her bows, at one point she had to really hold on to the rail on the podium. She was obviously feeling like she was about to faint.

"She was [also] having to deal with not just one soprano [becoming] sick, but then the replacement soprano [following suit] and dealing with all these things. But would she ever crumble? She would be the last person to crumble."

And that might not technically be part of a conductor's job brief – refusing to crumble – but it might just be part of what makes Simone Young a true maestro. ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER PEARCE

He's chronicled his country's rise and fall for more than five decades, in songs that define a people and a place. So what does Bruce Springsteen do ahead of one of the most consequential US presidential elections in history? Return to the recording studio, of course.

NEARLY 12 years ago, Bruce Springsteen stood before an estimated 400,000 people on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., acoustic guitar slung over his shoulder, to sing *The Rising*, his achingly sad, faith-filled anthem to the firefighters who gave their lives during the September 11, 2001 attacks. Framed by the Doric columns of the Lincoln Memorial and a gospel choir, this great chronicler of American life was performing the musical opening for president-elect Barack Obama's inauguration. *The Rising* seemed to capture perfectly the calamity of 9/11, but also, perhaps, the "audacity of hope" and spiritual renewal the first African-American president in US history promised.

Your burnin' wind fills my arms tonight
Sky of longing and emptiness (a dream of life)
Sky of fullness, sky of blessed life (a dream of life)
Come on up for the rising.

During that 2008 election campaign – almost quaint in its civility by today's standards – Springsteen made it abundantly clear why Obama was his preferred choice for president over Republican candidate John McCain. Obama, he said, spoke "to the America I've envisioned in my music for the past 35 years, a generous nation with a citizenry willing to tackle nuanced and complex problems, a country that's interested in its collective destiny and in the potential of its gathered spirit".

The admiration between the Hawaiian-born former senator from Illinois and the working-class boy from New Jersey was clearly mutual, and would only deepen in the coming years. In 2009, President Obama would pay tribute to Springsteen at a White House reception acknowledging recipients of the Kennedy Centre Honours for their lifetime contribution to American culture. In 2016, at the end of his second term in office, he would deliver a masterful summation of Springsteen's career before presenting him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"He was sprung from a cage out on Highway 9," Obama told the star-studded gathering. "Quiet kid from Jersey just trying to make sense of the temples of dreams and the mystery that dotted his home town – pool halls, bars, girls and cars, altars and assembly lines. And for decades, Bruce Springsteen has brought us all along on a journey consumed with the bargains between ambition and injustice, and pleasure and pain, the simple glories and the scattered heartbreak of everyday life in America…

"He didn't stop there. Once he told us about himself, he told us about everybody else: The steelworker in *Youngstown*, the Vietnam vet in *Born in the USA*, the sick and the marginalised on the *Streets of Philadelphia*, the firefighter carrying the weight of a reeling but resilient nation on *The Rising*, the young soldier reckoning with *Devils & Dust* in Iraq, the communities knocked down by recklessness and greed in the *Wrecking Ball*.

"All of us, with our faults and our failings, every colour and class and creed, bound together by one defiant, restless train rolling toward *The Land of Hope and Dreams*. These are all anthems of our America, the reality of who we are and the reverie of who we want to be…[For decades] Bruce Springsteen has been carrying the rest of us on his journey, asking us all, 'What is the work for us to do in our short time here?'"

THIS AMERICAN LIFE

BY *David Leser*

Bruce Springsteen at Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration, a leader who spoke to the America he pictured in his music.

GETTY IMAGES

Above: Bruce Springsteen campaigning for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Below: receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama the same year.

It seems like an eternity since we heard such flourishes of language and love emanating from the White House. But now, on the eve of this heart-thumping American presidential election, Springsteen is asking his countrymen and women that same question again, only with more urgency:

What is the work for us to do in our short time here?

"Vote [out Donald Trump]", he told listeners to his Sirius XM radio show *From My Home to Yours* earlier this year. "God help us all. Vote before it's too late."

Springsteen never thought he'd have to utter those words back in 2016, prior to Donald Trump defeating Hillary Clinton to become the 45th US President. Like almost everyone, he was convinced the business mogul turned reality-television huckster stood no chance of winning. "[Trump] has a feeling he's going to lose now," he told Britain's *Channel 4 News*, one month before the November 2016 polls. "Of course, he is going to lose."

Channel 4 News: You're confident?

Springsteen: "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He's going to lose and he knows that. He knows he's going to lose. And he's such a flagrant, toxic narcissist that he wants to take down the entire democratic system with him if he goes."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN is no political pundit, but through his lyrics and prose we see the impulses of a poet and truth-seeker, a man determined to understand, not just who he is, but who we are; and in the case of his own country, what it means to be American, and how one measures one's responsibilities against one's personal freedoms.

He once said he'd spent most of his life as a musician "measuring the distance between the American Dream and American reality", and by that yardstick – only days before this presidential election – the distance between the two appears nothing short of terrifying.

With hundreds of thousands dead and millions infected from the coronavirus pandemic; with an economic tsunami that has wiped out tens of millions of jobs; with race riots roiling the nation, and a series of extreme weather events having devastated great swathes of the country, far from The Rising, America appears to be in the midst of The Great Unravelling. What path, then, amid all this, for one of the most indestructible artists of our times, a man who exploded on to the national and international stage in 1975, shortly after president Richard Nixon resigned from office in disgrace?

> "If Trump is re-elected – which he will not be ... but if by some happenstance he should be, I'll see you on the next plane."

Back into the studio – that's where – to record over four days and nights, together with the men and women of his beloved E Street Band, his 20th studio album in 47 years, *Letter to You*, as well as a companion documentary of the same name. Released just over a week ago, the album and documentary (streaming on Apple TV+) form an undying love letter to both his fellow musicians and his fans.

"I'm in the middle of a 45-year conversation with these men and women I'm surrounded by," he says of his band at the beginning of the film. "And with some of you. I started playing the guitar because I was looking for someone to speak to and correspond with. [And] after all this time I still feel that burning need to communicate ... It's there when I wake every morning. It walks alongside of me throughout the day. And it's there when I go to sleep each night.

"Over the past 50 years it's never once ceased, owing to what, I don't really know. Is it loneliness, hunger, ego, ambition, desire, a need to be felt and heard, recognised, or all of the above? All I know is that it is one of the most consistent impulses in my life; as reliable as the rhythmic beating of my own heart is my need to talk to you."

Just over two years ago, Springsteen stood at the bedside of George Theiss, his old New Jersey band mate from The Castiles, as Theiss struggled through the last stages of lung cancer. The Castiles were Springsteen's first "real band" and with Theiss's death in July 2018, Springsteen realised he'd become "the last living member" of the band he'd joined as a teenager, one that had taken the New Jersey music scene by storm in 1965.

Over the next 55 years, Springsteen would go on to sell 150 million albums worldwide; fill stadiums around the world; win 20 Grammy Awards, two Golden Globes, an Academy Award and a Tony Award. He'd be inducted into America's Songwriters Hall of Fame and Rock & Roll Hall of Fame; he'd grace the covers of both *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines in the same week; be the subject of numerous documentaries and films; and receive that Presidential Medal of Freedom from Obama.

But the death of George Theiss – indeed the death of so many loved ones over the years, including E Street Band keyboardist Danny Federici and legendary saxophonist Clarence Clemons – would plunge Springsteen into the deepest of meditations on what it means to live and love well, and the nature of death. "Where do we go when we die?" he asks us now, in the 72nd year of his life. "Maybe we go nowhere. Or maybe everywhere. Maybe our soul resides in the ether, in the starless part of the sky that resonates outward like a stone dropped into a still lake [that] circles with the lives of people we've touched over the course of our lives. No one knows where, or how far, their soul may sound, may travel."

Wherever we go, Springsteen muses, those whom we've cherished are never completely lost to us. They exist, beyond words, in the talismans left behind, in the shadowlands of our memories, in our thoughts and in our dreams.

I'll see you in my dreams
Up around the riverbend
For death is not the end.

OPENING PAGES AND THESE PAGES: GETTY IMAGES

SEVEN YEARS ago, some of Bruce Springsteen's fans helped make a film – *Springsteen and I* – testifying to their adoration for the man known universally as "The Boss". One British factory worker recalled saving up for 20 years to cross the Atlantic with his wife to see his rock idol perform over two nights at Madison Square Garden. On the first night, their tickets had them walking up into the rafters, to the very back row, until one of Springsteen's employees stopped them and asked to see their tickets. "I think we can do better than that," he told the couple, clipping orange bands to their wrists and handing them new tickets. They were then guided downstairs, through to the centre of the front row, into the best seats in the house.

One woman told of being invited on stage by Springsteen to dance with him during a performance of his 1984 classic, *Dancing in the Dark*. (He'd done that many times, even with his – at the time – 87-year-old mother, Adele.) A truck driver named Kitty explained how every significant moment in her life had been born aloft by a Springsteen song; that even though her work was gruelling and unsung, his songs gave her the feeling she was part of America's backbone.

I am not that kind of fan. I came to Springsteen relatively late in life, after seeing him perform solo his *The Ghost of Tom Joad* album in 1996 at Sydney's Capitol Theatre. I'd been spellbound by the title track, for the way it transported me immediately into John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*; and I added this to earlier ballads of Springsteen's that had left their mark: the harmonica-fuelled sense of hopelessness in *The River*, the sexual tension of *I'm on Fire*, the spiritual allegiance to a dying hometown in *My Hometown*, the seductive undertow of *Secret Garden* and, of course, the boundless despair in *Streets of Philadelphia*, for which he'd won an Academy Award in 1994. (It is now, 26 years later, the theme song for a powerful new advertisement for Democrat presidential nominee Joe Biden in the swing state of Pennsylvania.)

I'd loved all those songs, but still didn't quite get the superlatives, the hype, the mass adulation that Springsteen elicited. That was because I'd never seen him perform live with the E Street Band.

That all changed in 2014 when I travelled with a group of friends to the Hunter Valley for the *High Hopes* album tour. Then the truth of the Springsteen phenomenon hit me – right in the heart, the throat, the solar plexus. Along with 10,000 others I stood before possibly the fittest, most intense, joyous, passionate, inspirational, ludicrously attractive 64-year-old man I'd ever seen. He was singing, roaring, soothing and seducing us in song; playing guitar, harmonica and piano; jumping, leaping, dancing – and keeping this up, no breaks, for over three hours.

And behind him – as Springsteen would say – the "heart-stoppin', pants-droppin', hard-rockin', booty-shakin', love-makin', earth-quakin', Viagra-takin', justifyin', death-defyin', legendary E Street Band". As a unit, this was about as masterful and joyful a congress of musicians as you could possibly witness, with Springsteen, their curator, their visionary, their jubilant, demonic presence, out front.

David Remnick summed it up perfectly in *The New Yorker* in 2012 when he described Springsteen's style as being "as close as a white man of Social Security age can get to James Brown circa 1962, without risking a herniated disc or a shattered pelvis…

"The display of energy," he wrote, "and its depletion is part of what is expected of him [and] in return, the crowd participates in a display of communal adoration. Like pilgrims at a gigantic outdoor Mass – think John Paul II at Gdansk – they know their role: when to raise their hands, when to sway, when to sing, when to scream his name, when to bear his body, hand over hand, from the rear of the orchestra to the stage."

After this life-altering experience, I was hooked. I read his 500-page 2016 memoir *Born to Run*, and then, the following year, saw him again – twice – the first time after driving through a hailstorm to get to the Hunter Valley once more, then, a few weeks later, at Sydney's Qudos Arena. By this point I was dancing along to his songs as if I'd been singing *Thunder Road* all my life.

Springsteen featured on two different magazine covers in the same week in 1975.

In 2018 I happily paid a small fortune to see his one-man, Tony Award-winning show on Broadway. By now I was almost convinced that American entertainer Jon Stewart had been right in 2009 when he'd joked that Bruce Springsteen could only have come from miraculous beginnings. "I believe that Bob Dylan and James Brown had a baby," Stewart said. "And they abandoned this child… on the side of the road, between the exit interchanges of 8A and 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike. That child is Bruce Springsteen."

Springsteen possessed the moves of Elvis Presley, his childhood hero; the raw-attack guitar abilities of Pete Townsend; and, at his best, the songwriting abilities of Bob Dylan, the man whom Springsteen has described as the "father" of his country, his "mentor" and the "brother" he never had.

Springsteen had the ability to characterise America in ways that only Dylan could realise. He summoned characters and melodies from the ether – his self-declared "magic trick" – and transported you not only across his nation, but right down into its very depths, where all the struggles, heartbreaks and losses resided. And he could do this because he'd spent a good part of his own life honing his craft, while wrestling with the seeds of a depression that had been planted in his soul as a child growing up on the shores of New Jersey.

Despite the love and unfailing support he'd always received from his mother Adele and her Italian side of the family, it was the afflictions of the Irish, on his father Douglas's side, that caused him to suffer from "a black melancholy". His father, broken on the wheel of his own misfortune, was a cynic and misanthrope. "Nobody's any good," he'd say, "and so what if they are."

As a young boy, Springsteen regularly encountered the whiplash of his father's drunken rages, sullen silences and paralysing depression, and it produced in Springsteen a crippling sense of emotional abandonment that he would tap into for his songwriting. Springsteen's songs became a way of talking to his father, of using music and lyrics to try to repair old wounds – *his wounds*, but also the wounds of millions of Americans, working-class and otherwise.

Since that night in New York in 2018, I have watched *Springsteen on Broadway* four more times on Netflix, and each time, as it draws to a close and he's remembering sitting outside his old house in Freehold, I find myself almost in tears. He is paying homage to his "childhood friend", a towering copper beech tree that once stood 50 metres from his family home. As a boy, he lived under its branches, deployed its roots as a fort for his toy soldiers, and climbed into its upper reaches to make way for all "the dreaming room" he needed.

That tree is gone now, replaced by a parking lot, and Springsteen's heart sinks and roars at the senselessness of that tree's erasure from this earth. History matters and this tree had witnessed too much to have been done away with so easily. "When we live amongst ghosts," he says, "always trying to reach us from that shadow world, they are with us every step of the way. My dead father is still with me every day and I miss him, and if I had a wish, I wish he could have been here to see this.

"But I visit with him every night. It's a grace-filled thing [because] the soul is a stubborn thing. Souls remain. They remain here in the air, in empty space, dusty roots and sidewalks. And in the songs that we sing. That is why we sing. We sing for our blood and for our people because that is all we have at the end of the day. Each other."

IF IT isn't obvious by now, let me say loud and clear that of all the people on this precious, overpopulated planet that I would most like to interview, Bruce Springsteen stands alone. Such is my shameless, late-life devotion, that I would probably walk naked through the CBD if I thought this would help secure an audience with him.

Imagine my excitement, then, when, a few weeks ago, the *Good Weekend* editor informed me that we'd been offered a one-on-one interview via Zoom with "The Boss". Imagine the thrill of thinking that for an hour I'd be able to talk to the man who's owned America's heart and soul for half a century, about everything, including the national crisis gripping his country.

Imagine again, then, my disappointment when, a few days later, I was told by the publicist that, sorry, the one-on-one interview was now impossible. Complications had arisen. There were new guidelines from Sony Music Entertainment in New York stipulating that 16 other journalists from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan would be joining me on the virtual hook-up

With the E Street Band: "I'm in the middle of a 45-year conversation with these men and women," Springsteen says.

with Springsteen. And, no, I would not be allowed to discuss politics in general, nor the presidential elections in particular, and I'd have to submit my (non-political) questions beforehand for vetting.

What does any self-respecting journalist do in a case like this? He walks away, right? He says – with all the professional integrity and self-righteous indignation he can marshall – that he will not be dictated to by a publicist or corporate juggernaut. Not now, and certainly not at such a hinge point in US history as this, not with such a fiercely made-in-America man as Bruce Springsteen.

But that's not what I do. As a supplicant fan, what I do is reluctantly accept these crumbs in the hopes of transforming them into freshly baked loaves for the masses. I submit five questions (leaving a politically flavoured one for the end because, *yes, there is a limit to my capitulation*) and then, on the appointed morning, I sit before my computer and await the moment that Bruce Springsteen appears on my screen.

Five minutes later, here he is.

"Hello everybody," he says.

"Hello Bruce," we chorus.

"Hello Bruce, how are you?" says Australian author, musician and singer-songwriter Sean Sennett, who has known Springsteen for years and who – I realise now – is facilitating this virtual press conference.

"I'm very good," says Springsteen, speaking from his home recording studio on his farm in New Jersey. I can see at least 12 guitars lining one wall. I can see he's wearing a dark duffle jacket and T-shirt; that his face looks thinner, his receding hairline greyer, but that he's tanned and chiselled and those brooding hazel eyes, jutting jaw and perfect Roman nose of his still produce an impossibly handsome visage for any age, let alone a septuagenarian.

I know from Springsteen's record company that one of my questions has been chosen overnight as the last question for this "press conference" and, much to my surprise, it is the political one. I wait for my appointed moment. In the meantime, other journalists' questions come.

"I understand the entire album you wrote was [composed using] a guitar given to you by a fan?" one says. "What kind of magic powers did this guitar have?"

"It had something going for it," Springsteen replies, "because I was coming out of my [Broadway] play and there was a young man on the sidewalk holding a guitar, so I figured he was wanting me to sign it. But he said, 'No, no, no, I want to give it to you,' and I looked at it and could tell right away that it was beautifully made.

Above: with Patti Scialfa, his wife of 29 years, in the new documentary, Letter to You.

"It dawns on you rather quickly: there's only so much time left, only so many star-filled nights, rainy midsummer days."

"So I brought it home and ... it played beautifully, it sounded gorgeous ... it was a real piece of craftsmanship. I left it in my living room and when I started to feel the urge to write, I just picked it up because it was such an easy play. And most of the songs came pouring out of it, so I owe a debt to whoever that young man is, wherever he is."

Another journalist asks Springsteen about the songwriting process and whether it's more satisfying now than, perhaps, when he was younger.

"Songwriting is generally a terrifying and incredibly fulfilling experience," one of the most prolific songwriters in the world replies. "It's terrifying because you never know if you're ever going to do it again. How it happens I don't know. I've done it for 50 years. I don't know how a song takes place and I don't know anyone who's ever been able to explain it.

"Because you pull something from nothing and you create something physical from it. It's just in the air, it's in your emotions, it's in your mind, your soul, your spirit, your heart, your intellect ... and you just pull something out of the air and create something.

"So there's an element of it that's quite frightening in a sense, and then there's another element that, when it does happen and something is good, it is one of the most wonderful feelings in my life. It's like, '*Yes*, there's *another one*!' It's still an incredible experience, the act of writing a song."

Another question, this time from a Japanese journalist, although it's less a question, more a declaration of love. He tells Springsteen he first became hooked on rock music because of him.

"*Arigato*," says The Boss. He closes his eyes like a Zen monk sitting atop Mount Fuji. He blinks. He closes his eyes once more. His face turns sombre. His face turns beatific. He laughs. He chuckles. He cackles. He closes his eyes once more. And, then, after 45 minutes, my time finally arrives.

"David Leser is here from the *Good Weekend*," Sean Sennett says. "David has a question for you."

Springsteen: "Hi."

Me: "Hi Bruce, thanks for having me and congratulations on a beautiful album and film."

Springsteen: "Thank you."

Me: "We are speaking today 19 days before, arguably, the most consequential US presidential election in all of our lifetimes."

Springsteen: "Right."

Me: "How much trepidation are you feeling and would you consider relocating to Australia ..."

Springsteen: [*Laughs*]

Me: ... "If the current incumbent is returned?"

Springsteen: "I would consider that [*cackles*]. I love Australia [*chuckles*]. Every time ... we have nothing but good times down there, man. Whoa. It's always a treat to come. Love the people. Love the geography. Great place for motorcycle trips. You know it's close to our hearts. And if Trump is re-elected – which he will not be, I'm predicting right now he's going to lose – but if by some happenstance he should be [re-elected], I'll see you on the next plane."

MANY YEARS ago, in the fading light of a small town in Texas, Bruce Springsteen had a breakdown, one of the worst moments of anxiety he'd ever experienced. He had no idea what overcame him that evening, only that the despair was so deep there was no alternative but for him to nosedive into its dark centre.

In his memoir *Born to Run*, he recalls that moment and the instructions he chose to take from it: "All I know is as we age the weight of our unsorted baggage becomes heavier ... much heavier. With each passing year, the price of our refusal to do that sorting rises higher and higher."

Springsteen has done more sorting than most men, and you can see the passing years in the worry lines and creases of happiness that map his striking face. You can also hear, through his words, the clarity and perspective that age brings, and all its accompanying intimations of mortality.

"It dawns on you rather quickly," he says in his documentary, "there's only so much time left, only so many star-filled nights, snowfalls, brisk fall afternoons, rainy midsummer days. So how you conduct yourself and do your work matters. How you treat your friends, your family, your lover.

"On good days, a blessing falls over you. It wraps its arms around you and you're free and deeply in – and of – this world. That's your reward. Being here. That's what gets you up the next morning – a new chance to receive that benediction while you're buttering your toast, getting dressed or driving home from work.

"And you realise how lucky you are. Lucky to be alive. Lucky to be breathing in this world of beauty, horror and hope. Because this is what there is: a chance, a world where it's lucky to love, to be loved."

For half a century, Bruce Springsteen has been confirming his destiny as one of the greatest artists America has produced. By his own confession he has tried, through his songs, to understand where to place his own mind and heart, and where to help us place our own.

When he's with his E Street Band, it helps him to dream big about who we might be. And when he dwells in that sanctuary, in what he calls his "House of a Thousand Dreams", he tries to speak in the voice of his better angels.

"We have been given," he says, "the tools and the property of the soul to be attended to and accountable for. And that takes work, work that we might build on the principles of love, liberty, fraternity; ancient ideas that still form the basis for a good life and a humane society. What happens in this house matters. So, brothers and sisters, wherever you are, let's light up this house."

This is the America I love and pray for. Never more so than today. ■

COURTESY OF APPLE TV+

ROCK CHIC

Carla Bruni

Former model-turned-musician Carla Bruni has garnered strong reactions as France's First Lady – some positive, some negative. **David Leser** looks beyond the headlines at the most powerful woman in France.

IT'S HARD TO KNOW where to start with the First Lady of France. With the full-length nude photograph of her published (and later auctioned for $93,000) just prior to her dining on *noisette d'agneau* with the Queen of England? With her views on the rather quaint concept of monogamy? ("I'm monogamous from time to time, but I prefer polygamy and polyandry"). Or perhaps with her latest album, released last month, just prior to Bastille Day, where she sings huskily about Afghan heroin, Columbian cocaine and the 30 lovers she had before marrying the president of France? *I am a child despite my 40 years, despite my 30 lovers, a child.*

Okay, why beat around the bush? Let's start with the lovers. It's not often (actually make that *never* in history) that you'd find the former bedmate of rock stars (Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton to name but two), as well as lawyers, actors, philosophers, businessmen (well, alright, she denies Donald Trump) and former prime ministers, enthroned, as it were, in the Élysée Palace.

Never mind her label as the "new Diana" or the 21st century Jackie Kennedy, Carla Bruni, the Italian-born heiress-turned-supermodel-turned pop singer-turned First Lady of France, is like something straight out of the pages of an 18th century courtesan's tale – beautiful, highly intelligent – she used to hide her Dostoyevsky novels under her *Elle* and *Vogue* magazines in between fashion shoots – fluent in three languages and, yes, equally assured in the art of love.

"Love lasts a long time, but burning desire – two to three weeks," she has said.

When she was a 21-year-old supermodel sharing the catwalk with Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer, Carla met the legendary guitarist, Eric Clapton, who believed he'd just found the love of his life … until he made the dreadful mistake of taking her to a Rolling Stones concert. "Please, Mick, not this one," he begged his friend after introducing them. "I think I'm in love."

Days later, Mick Jagger and Carla started their affair, one which was to ultimately help steer Mick's relationship with Texan supermodel Jerry Hall onto the rocks. Carla stayed with Mick long enough to tour with the Rolling Stones, but other "burning desires" eventually took over, including ones for American actor Kevin Costner, French actor Vincent Perez, former French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius (now considered a practice run for the presidency), and former French Education Minister Luc Ferry, who was to say famously, "I was between Laurent Fabius and Mick Jagger".

Perhaps the relationship which was to cause the greatest collective raised eyebrow was in 2000, when she began living with the French publisher, Jean-Paul Enthoven, only to fall in love with Jean-Paul's married philosopher son, Raphael, 10 years her junior. The couple went on to have a son, Aurélien, who is now seven years old.

Raphael's infuriated wife, Justine Levy, the daughter of French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy, responded by »»

CLAUDE GASSIAN/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES.

Supermodel, rock singer and now France's controversial First Lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, 40.

"SO WHAT IF SHE HAD A LOT OF LOVERS? WE DON'T CARE ABOUT HER PRIVATE LIFE. IF SHE WAS A MAN, THERE WOULD BE NO PROBLEM."

Above: Carla on the catwalk in 1994. Top, left: Carla and her husband Nicolas Sarkozy. Right: The First Lady greeting the Qatar emir's wife on Bastille Day.

writing a best-selling novel – *Rien de grave* (*Nothing Serious*) – in which she described a woman remarkably similar to Carla as a "praying mantis" with a "Terminator smile".

Carla remained unfazed. "Everyone knows husbands are rarely stolen," she retorted. "You either know how to keep them, or you don't." And just for good measure, she recorded a song which talked about how madly in love she was and how the sex just sizzled. The song was called *Raphael*.

"That's the thing about Carla Bruni," one French businesswoman told The Weekly. "She's slept with half the planet, but doesn't give a shit about it. It's nice for a change – that a woman can be like that."

Needless to say, if an American, British or Australian First – or would-be First – Lady boasted this kind of sexual history, her husband's career would almost certainly be finished.

Yet this is *La France*, more particularly Paris, a city charged with sensuality, horrified by prudery and seemingly unshockable in the ways of love. "So what if she had a lot of lovers?" an Italian-born French fashion designer told The Weekly. "We don't care about her private life. If she was a man, there would be no problem."

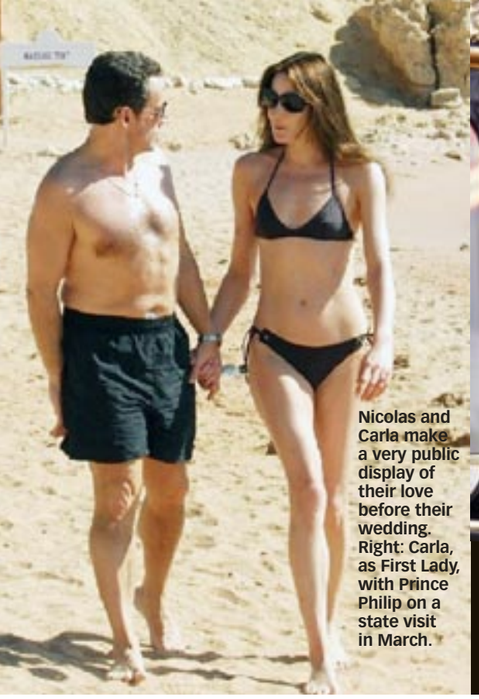
Too true, except many people here, including the president's traditional supporters on the Right, have been more than a little taken aback by the speed with which the Carla-Nicolas romance blossomed and the manner in which the president has flaunted his private life in public. (They compare it to the rather gallant days of old, when former Socialist President François Mitterand lived a double life for 20 years, keeping a second family and siring an illegitimate daughter.)

Elected to the presidency in May 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy, child of a Hungarian immigrant father and a mother of Jewish descent, was soon on the lookout for a new partner, having obtained a divorce from his second wife, Cecilia Ciganer-Albeniz, in October of that year.

CECILIA AND NICOLAS had married in 1996, after it was discovered by the first Mrs Sarkozy, Marie Dominique Culioli, that her husband, then the mayor of the Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, had been conducting an eight-year affair with Cecilia, who, at the time, was Marie Dominique's best friend. (Nicolas had actually fallen in love with the heavily pregnant Cecilia while performing her marriage ceremony as mayor.)

Cecilia, a former model herself, was never cut out to be the First Lady of France and, in 2005, while Nicolas was making his pitch for the presidency, escaped to >>>

GETTY IMAGES, CORBIS.



Nicolas and Carla make a very public display of their love before their wedding. Right: Carla, as First Lady, with Prince Philip on a state visit in March.

"MY FIRST IMPRESSION OF NICOLAS ... WAS OF A VERY MAGNETIC MAN ... IT WAS PRETTY MUCH LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT."

New York with her lover, the international communications consultant, Richard Attias. (She is now married to him.) A few months later, she was back by her husband's side and, for a while, the rapprochement appeared permanent.

Writing in his autobiography, *Testimony*, last year, Nicolas said, "C is Cecilia. Cecilia is my wife. She is part of me … We were made for each other [and] today Cecilia and I have gotten back together for real, and surely forever."

A few months after those words were penned, the couple was obtaining a hurried divorce and the president of France was sending feelers out for a new partner. "Do you know a good girl for me?" he reportedly asked Jacques Séguéla, the famous French public relations spin doctor.

Jacques did. Carla Bruni. She happened to live in his old house, a two-storey retreat nestled behind olive and palm trees in the 16th arrondissement, and yes, of course, it would be possible to arrange a discreet evening.

Was this what Carla had been seeking? Had she really confided to a friend not long before meeting Nicolas, "I want a man with nuclear power"? (France has 350 nuclear warheads in its stockpile). No, Carla replies today. "I never said that. I didn't even know he had nuclear power, *poverino* [poor man]. I found out afterwards. How sad to have nuclear power; it means you might use it."

The dinner was a roaring success – seven of them in a house outside Paris, with Carla sitting on the president's right. "My first impression of Nicolas," she said, "and I still have that impression, was of a very magnetic man, with very rare intelligence and energy. I'm pretty bewitched by him, plus I've always liked to talk with my friends or the few men I've loved and, with him, it's a conversation without end. It was pretty much love at first sight."

SO MUCH SO THAT, according to one reliable source, the couple went home in the presidential car to Carla's house at about 1am. Nothing happened. "Carla called Séguéla," the source said, "to complain that the president had not tried to make love to her. 'Calm down, calm down,' Séguéla told Carla. 'Maybe tomorrow.' "

He was right. In the days that followed, the French president would woo Carla with text messages, flowers and gifts. Within two weeks, they were being photographed at Disneyland, before spending the night at a nearby hotel.

By Christmas they were on holiday in Egypt and Jordan, and then, on February 2, in a private ceremony at the Élysée Palace, Carla Bruni was saying *oui* to becoming the third Mrs Sarkozy, in many people's eyes the most powerful woman in France.

Carla Bruni is no stranger to high culture, wealth and power. Born in Turin, Italy, on December 23, 1967, she is the daughter of Italian concert pianist, Marysa Borini, and step-daughter of Alberto Bruni Tedeschi, the rich Turinese tyre maker, art collector and classical composer.

Among the guests they would often welcome to their castle in the Po Valley were singer Maria Callas, pianist Arthur Rubinstein and conductor Herbert von Karajan.

They lived in Versailles-like splendour, but at the age of seven, Carla was forced to move with her family to France in order to escape the wave of kidnapping and assassination attempts being orchestrated by the terrorist group, the Red Brigades.

Carla went to boarding school in Switzerland, returned to Paris to study art and architecture, then decided on a modelling career at the age of 19.

By the mid-1990s, she was among the highest paid supermodels in the world, working for fashion houses and designers such as Dior, Christian Lacroix, Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Versace and Yves Saint Laurent.

She was beautiful, in a cool, sculptured way, and supremely confident – at least on the surface. At a deeper level, she showed signs of being troubled. "She has always been very, very neurotic about men," says a fellow Paris-based Italian, who has known Carla since her modelling days and followed her career keenly. "I think that's because she has a big »»»

SNAPPER MEDIA, GETTY IMAGES.

problem with fathers, with men, because it has been a big disaster for her, always changing men."

Last year, Carla admitted she had discovered her biological father was not Alberto Bruni Tedeschi, the man she had grown up with, but rather an Italian businessman, Maurizio Remmert, with whom her mother had had a six-year affair. Carla discovered the truth of her origins in 1996, but insisted it was not a traumatic revelation.

"For me it was a relief, a gift," she said. "I felt relieved, the way you feel when someone explains something to you. In any case, the man who brought me up is still very present in my life. What did trouble me was that it all came out when I got married and when it's written up by other people, it's always a bit ugly. But this is a beautiful story."

In 1997, the year after she discovered the truth of her origins, Carla turned her back on modelling to take up a career in music. She'd been playing the guitar from the age of eight and, as she got older, increasingly turning her preoccupations with love and intimacy into song – breathy ballads influenced by the likes of The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and Billie Holiday.

In 2002, she released her debut album, *Quelqu'un m'a dit* (*Someone Told Me*), produced by ex-lover French guitarist Louis Bertignac. Despite snickering from the local press, the album became a cult hit throughout Europe, selling two million copies. One British critic described it as "deliciously languorous".

Awarded the equivalent of the French Grammy two years later for best female artist, Carla then released a second album last year called *No Promises* in which she set the poems of Yeats, Auden and Emily Dickinson to music. She attributed her love of English poetry to the instructions she took from her friend, the English singer Marianne Faithfull, also a former lover of Mick Jagger's.

Now, barely five months after becoming the third Mrs Sarkozy, having turned an Élysée Palace salon into a music room, the Italian-born chanteuse has released her third album, *Comme si de rien n'était* (*As If Nothing Had Happened*) named in honour of her half-brother, Virginio, who died of cancer in 2006. (The title is also a commentary on the way Carla has attempted to continue her musical career despite becoming First Lady of France.)

Stage-managed by Pierre Charon, a special envoy to the president, the album – the proceeds of which will go to a French charity – has been getting the kind of media attention normally reserved for European summits and not necessarily all favourable.

"Quite possibly the best album ever made by the wife of a head of state," remarked the London *Times* sarcastically.

The song *Tu es ma came* (*You are my dope*), where she compares obsessional love (presumably with the president) to addiction "*more lethal than Columbian white*", drew an official complaint from the Columbian foreign minister.

In another song, the flute-filled *Ta Tienne* (*Yours*) Madame Bruni-Sarkozy sings (again presumably about the president), "*You are my Lord, you're my darling, you're my orgy ... my charming Prince, I am yours ... I who always sought fire, am burning for you like a pagan woman.*"

It was enough to cause one commentator near apoplexy. "I would prefer that someone pour molten steel in my ears than have to listen to this modern-day Marie Antoinette," he remarked, echoing recent unfavourable comparisons to the wife of King Louis XVI beheaded during the French Revolution.

Under the headline "Enough is enough", the weekly political journal *Marianne* declared the country was getting sick and tired of the 40-year-old First Lady's "continual preening and showing off for the world's media".

"The president himself seems to be saying at every opportunity, 'Isn't she beautiful, isn't she clever, doesn't she sing well?' And the public are getting tired of it. They are always pawing each other in public, which might be normal for newlyweds, but he is the president and she is the First Lady, and they are not exactly young. The endless photos of Carla cosying up to [the 53-year-old] Nicolas have become nothing more than a vulgar charade. She is not so much perfume, but a very strong freshener that we use to cover up unpleasant smells in public places."

It is true that Carla Bruni is everywhere – at Windsor Castle in her Dior outfit buttering up the queen and Duke of Edinburgh; in Tel Aviv in her Prada dress and gladiator sandals, causing the Israeli president to blush and the Middle East peace process to temporarily stall; at the Élysée Palace in a glittering black cocktail dress to welcome George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, on their last official visit to Paris ("She's a really smart, capable woman," said the American president, "and I can see why you married her."); at the funeral of her old friend Yves Saint Laurent; at the side of French-Columbian hostage Ingrid Betancourt as she returned to a rapturous nation after more than six years in captivity; at the Bastille Day celebrations with more than 40 world leaders.

And why not? Given her husband's historically low ratings in the polls – some put his popularity at around 30 per cent – Carla has become his single greatest asset (they call it the "Carla Effect"), putting an end, mercifully, to the flashy "President Bling Bling" image and his propensity for Ray-Ban sunglasses and Rolex watches.

"Carla has brought the president grace, elegance, international culture; she makes his trips more presidential," says Jacques Séguéla, the man who brought them together.

The question, of course, is: will it last? Many people have their doubts, including one international publishing executive, who told The Weekly, "She will stay with him while he is president and then it's hard to imagine it continuing. I don't think anyone really thinks they'll grow old together."

In the days following her new album's release, Madame Bruni-Sarkozy was doing everything to persuade the French public otherwise. In various interviews, she praised the president for his paternal, feminine side, extolled the virtues of family life and talked about how she wanted to have a child with her husband (he has three sons from his two previous marriages).

"I needed to live 40 years," she said, "and to find the right person, before maturity gave me access to a kind of love that I would say is more complete. That's why I got married." ■

"SHE WILL STAY WITH HIM WHILE HE IS PRESIDENT AND THEN IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE IT CONTINUING. I DON'T THINK ANYONE REALLY THINKS THEY'LL GROW OLD TOGETHER."

Truth SEEKER

Miranda Otto's star just keeps rising in Hollywood. She talks to David Leser about re-imagining Ibsen, family, and the power of secrets.

Photography **Trevor King**

All right, I admit it. I've long had a thing for Miranda Otto. Nothing like a creepy crush, though, more a mature, long-distance "girl, you can act" kind of admiration.

True, Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman and Naomi Watts have been the ones most showered in Hollywood gold dust, but for me, Miranda Otto, in all her porcelain beauty and subtle layers, has been Australia's not yet fully realised real deal.

Over the years I've watched her on stage (*A Doll's House*), in television miniseries (*The Way We Live Now*), and in a host of films like *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, *Love Serenade* and *Doing Time for Patsy Cline*. I've marvelled at the depth and range of her characters: troubled teenager, vapid wife, lonely young woman, country singer, Scandinavian warrior woman…

It always seemed – at least from my dilettante's chair – that she could pretty much do it all. One minute ethereal, perishable even; the next protective, redoubtable, rock solid. She could move from fearful and desolate to uproariously funny with this delicacy that often seemed to elude many other actors.

"A director knows Miranda will find the truth of the moment," Robyn Nevin has said. "She is one of Australia's great stage actresses. There are only a couple at her level."

Imagine my delight, then, when my favourite television series, *Homeland*, returned last year for its fifth season and suddenly, out of the gunmetal skies of Germany, came Otto, playing bloodless Berlin station chief and double agent Allison Carr.

Who would have thought that she could play a sociopath so effortlessly? "I surprised myself how much I enjoyed it," the 48-year-old says, laughing gaily down the phone line from Los Angeles.

"I guess I've played a lot of vulnerable people … so it was really interesting to play a woman and a professional rather than being defined as a mother and a wife. I really enjoyed playing someone who was a protagonist in her own right."

As much as I am happy to talk about Otto's fast-track immersion into *Homeland*'s world of espionage and Islamic terrorism, we have other things on our mind, namely the nature of truth and the way dark secrets can tear families apart.

A day earlier I'd been to see Otto's latest film, *The Daughter*, a harrowing re-imagining of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. In it, the deeply unhappy Christian (played by award-winning American actor and filmmaker Paul Schneider) returns home after many years away to unearth a long-buried family secret.

Otto plays Charlotte, the happily married wife of Oliver (Ewan Leslie) and mother of teenage daughter Hedvig. Charlotte's enviable contentment is imperilled by Christian's idealistic (reckless?) pursuit of the "truth".

Written and directed by Australian actor and director Simon Stone, the film also features Geoffrey Rush, Sam Neill, Anna Torv and new teenage sensation Odessa Young, whose only two films to date, *Looking for Grace* and *The Daughter*, both appeared at last year's Venice and Toronto film festivals.

The film is a distressing – and all too credible – look at how one slip-up can bring the temple of joy down around us. "You see this happen to people all the time," Otto says. "They make one devastating mistake and it absolutely changes the course of their life."

THREE FACTS ABOUT *MIRANDA OTTO*

She is named after Prospero's daughter in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

She spent a year living in Hong Kong with her mother and stepfather, jockey Alan Gollogly, as a child.

She married Peter O'Brien in 2003, a year after playing opposite him in the Robyn Nevin-directed production of *A Doll's House*.

And it's not just the initial mistake. It's the decision to conceal that mistake that can create a dirty, dark secret at the heart of ordinary family life.

"I think these things happen where you let something slide because you don't know where things are going," Otto says. "My favourite line in the film is 'Everyone has a story like this, it's as old as the hills.' You can think your experience is so particular and so incredibly important and then, when you look at it, it's actually a very small speck. These things are happening all the time and families do have secrets. Families hold incredible secrets."

In *The Daughter* the love between Hedvig and her parents is fierce and powerful and yet – in another testament to Otto's acting – the father-daughter relationship takes centre stage.

"Miranda felt confident to play the relationship with her daughter in a very understated way and to allow the father to have a much more overt closeness with their daughter," says the film's co-producer, Jan Chapman. "Miranda didn't feel at all that she would suffer by doing that because she is very at ease in her life and her work and so she's very relaxed as a performer."

Says Otto, "The father relationship is so important for girls in how they see themselves. It informs what sort of behaviour they expect, how they expect to be treated. A lot of that comes from fathers."

Styling by Annabelle Harro. Hair by Bobby Eliot. Make-up by Natasha Severino. This page: Miranda wears dress by Chloe, necklace by BaubleBar

"I NEVER KNOW IN *MY LIFE* WHAT IS *AROUND THE CORNER.*"

Otto's own treasured experience of a strong father-daughter relationship might have facilitated her approach. "I absolutely love my dad," she says of her celebrated and widely adored actor father, Barry Otto. "He's always been fantastic. He's always been so supportive of me [and siblings Gracie and Edward] and everything we do. He's our biggest fan. He talks about his kids all the time."

Did he inform what you came to expect or demand from a man? "Yes, I think he did, in that he was always such a gentle and beautiful person. There was no way in my life that I'd ever accept anybody who was abusive … because that is not the model that I had.

"To me, that behaviour is absolutely outrageous and I wouldn't stand for it. It's harder for girls to grow up in families where certain behaviours are accepted. That sense of self-respect you get from having a dad who is really in your corner, and carries themselves in a particular way, is hugely important."

How does her 10-year-old daughter Darcey get on with her father, and Otto's husband, Australian actor and writer Peter O'Brien?

"They have a great relationship," says Otto. "There's a lot of laughs between those two. They're like partners in crime [whereas] I'm the more serious one in the family."

And with that Otto releases a contagious, unconstrained laugh that one might consider bottling as a remedy for cynicism, melancholy or both.

Miranda Otto has been in the collective consciousness since she appeared as a 19-year-old in her first feature film, *Emma's War,* in 1986.

Three decades on, she seems to have the world at her feet. Last year, while still working in Berlin on *Homeland*, she went to Venice for the screening of *The Daughter*. When she stepped onto the red carpet, the press and the young film-going crowd could be heard yelling "Miranda, Miranda."

After her success with *Homeland*, Otto was chosen to play the female lead in Fox's *24: Legacy*, a reboot of the acclaimed US television series, *24*. As a result, she is now on the "hot list" for the 2016 pilot season in America. Returning to her "soul home" in Sydney is on hold while her star burns bright.

"You never know exactly how things are going to turn out," she says. "I never know in my life what's around the corner. Five days before I was cast in *Homeland*, I had no idea that I would be grabbing the family together and that we would be cancelling our trip back to Australia and going to Berlin instead."

It's a modern, globe-trotting existence, but Otto's performance in Stone's re-interpretation of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* shows how relevant 19th-century masterpieces are to contemporary life. *The Daughter* is a troubling and gripping film that examines the whole mess and paradox of what it means to be human.

"The classics deal with issues that humanity will grapple with forever," Otto says. "The idea of truth and how much truth do you need; and is the full truth the best course?

"I believe in the truth in how you express yourself. But there are different layers of truth in this story … so I'm more inclined to say that sometimes secrets are best left secrets." •

The Daughter opens in cinemas on March 17.

Opposite: Miranda wears dress by Juliette Hogan. This page: Miranda wears dress by Tom Ford

Magnificent *Meryl*

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.

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-worldy 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*, ➤

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 feted 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."

"SHE WAS DESTINED FOR GREATNESS."

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. ➤

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE.

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

ALEX BAILEY COURTESY OF PATHE PRODUCTIONS LTD. MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES. COLUMBIA PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES. WARNER BROTHERS/GETTY IMAGES. © 2008 UNIVERSAL STUDIOS/ALL RIGHTS RESERVED/HEADPRESS.

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 ethereal 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?

"WHAT ARE THE COSTS TO A WOMAN?"

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 say 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 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:

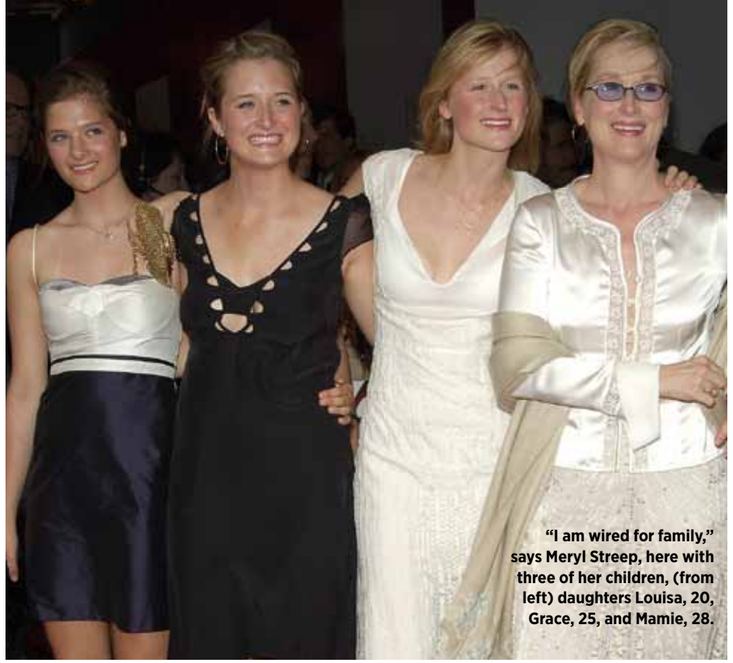
The Deer Hunter **in 1978 was one of her first films.**

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".

"HOW DO WE TAKE LEAVE OF THINGS?"

"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.*

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