



THE CHAMELEON SINGS

Meryl Streep extends her repertoire by playing someone so unlike herself — a woman lacking talent, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Meryl Streep has a lovely singing voice: strong, clear, often note perfect. “I guess it’s pretty OK,” says the world’s greatest living actress, twinkling modestly from behind designer specs in a luxury suite at Claridge’s in Mayfair, central London.

“I studied opera for four years when I was in my teens,” she continues in her calm and gracious way. “I had this deft, high little soprano. I probably could have been much better but I didn’t like practising. I wanted to see the Rolling Stones, be a cheerleader.” She smiles generously. “You know, do all the bad things.”

Given her Oscar-winning portrayals of, variously, a miserable divorcee (*Kramer vs Kramer*), a Polish Holocaust survivor (*Sophie’s Choice*) and a British prime minister (*Iron Lady*), along with her 20 times Oscar-nominated takes on everything from lovelorn heroines and go-getting suffragettes to bored Italian immigrant wives and formidable fashion editors-in-chief, it’s easy to forget that Streep, 66, also has a mean set of pipes.

There she is, singing unaccompanied in the final scenes of *Silkwood*. There, dressed as a bag lady and warbling poignantly for Jack Nicholson in *Ironweed*; and there, covering Ray Charles’s *You Don’t Know Me* in *Postcards From the Edge*. Across the past decade she has belted out ABBA hits in *Mamma Mia*, been a rafter-reaching witch in the big-screen treatment of Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* and an electric guitar-wielding rock queen with a deep, badass voice in Jonathan Demme’s *Ricki and the Flash*, which came out last year.

How much fun was that? She brightens. “So much fun! I was living the rock dream, and don’t



Meryl Streep as the deluded opera singer in *Florence Foster Jenkins*, above; with her onscreen husband played by Hugh Grant, left

we all have that?” She runs a hand through her unfussy honey-blond locks, shifts about on the upholstered velvet. While simply dressed in a pair of black trousers and a tailored cream jacket, her loafers, I notice, are a rocking combination of leopard-print and sparkly silver glitter.

“I was croaking out these songs by Tom Petty, Pink, Bruce Springsteen,” she says. “On movie sets you have to sing something 20 times in a row. I went straight from that to this movie” — the movie we’re here to discuss — “so I really had to take care of my voice.”

Streep is a famously chameleonic actress, absorbing herself into her characters, putting on their skin so convincingly that her co-stars all seem to step up as they react to her as that person. Extravagantly garlanded (there’s her 29 Golden Globe nominations and truckload of other accolades), with theatre, television, environmental and humanist causes and a cameo in *The Simpsons* in her armoury of achievements, there is nothing, it seems, this New York-based mother-of-four can’t do.

Even so, *Florence Foster Jenkins*, a comedic

biopic from Oscar-nominated English director Stephen Frears (*The Queen*, *High Fidelity*) challenged Streep in a way no film has before. It demanded that she do something unnatural, even painful: be terrible. The film tells the story of Jenkins, a nutty heiress who bankrolled much of the arts scene in pre and wartime Manhattan and believed herself a soprano to be reckoned with. Famously she sucked.

Still, in this instance you have to sing well to sing badly. Streep pulls off the part with gusto, shrieking, trilling and massacring operettas between lumbering fragrantly about in various chiffontastic get-ups and, in an intimate scene towards the end, gives a lesson in moist vulnerability. It’s a big-hearted performance in an audience-pleasing film, throughout which Streep’s fondness for Florence is palpable.

“Stephen called and said, ‘I have a part for you; it’s the worst opera singer in the world,’” she says, laughing. “I said yes before I read the script because I’ve always wanted to work with Stephen. He has a reputation among actors as someone you really want to work with.” The

feeling was mutual. “Meryl is a finely tuned instrument,” Frears will tell me later. “She can become the characters very comprehensively. It’s all to do with metamorphosis; I remember Helen Mirren walking into a room dressed as the Queen and that was it. That’s what they do, these great actors, and I’m grateful.”

Unlike the recent French art flick *Marguerite* — which is only loosely based on Jenkins’s story — Frears has plumped for feel-good over philosophical, froth over depth. “A coincidence, that one [*Marguerite*],” says Streep. “I haven’t seen it; people say they extrapolated the idea of Florence. We’re not interested in that.”

“This story has so much real emotion to it. Florence was a person who kept something we have when we are children, when you hurl yourself into the imagining of something and take delight in the doing.”

Florence’s common-law husband and manager, St Clair Bayfield (Hugh Grant, stepping up), is a failed British Shakespearean actor who wraps his beloved “Bunny” in psychic cotton wool: selecting audiences for her annual recitals at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, buying acclaim from critics. It’s only when Florence insists on playing Carnegie Hall (“My favourite place in the whole world,” she sighs dreamily), accompanied by her baffled young pianist, Cosme McMoon (Simon Helberg from TV’s *The Big Bang Theory*) that Bayfield can’t stop the bad reviews and crowd from, well, baying.

“One of the weirdest mass jokes New York has ever seen,” gossip columnist Earl Wilson wrote in the *New York Post*, summing up.

Is it wrong to relish something so bad it’s good if audience and performer are enjoying themselves? Is it even crueller to damn it? Or is the gleeful irony with which Jenkins was regarded (her fans included high-camp aesthetes such as Noel Coward, Cole Porter and, latterly, David Bowie) an early taster of the vitriol that is often thrown at older outlandish divas such as Madonna and Mariah?

Streep has a think. “Certainly women in the public eye are held to different standards than men, there is no doubt about that,” she says. “But Florence was oblivious. She dressed and presented herself according to her tastes and what made her happy. I don’t think she was aware of the haters. She was always