

hopeful that, you know, the next phase would turn out all right."

The inspirational message of *Florence Foster Jenkins* is driven home halfway through, after Florence has been lowered onstage wearing a flowing white gown and angel wings, declared "music is my life" and strangled the coloratura likes of *Bell Song* from *Lakme* and the *Queen of the Night* aria from *The Magic Flute*. "The lady is a lesson in courage," announces one character, "and that's why we love her."

It's a sentiment that may well be applied to Streep, who is as brave as she is gifted and committed. She has said she inherited her gung-ho spirit from her mother, Mary, a commercial artist who instilled confidence in her daughter from an early age. Her father, Harry, who headed up a personnel department at Merck & Co, the pharmaceutical giant, bestowed his smarts ("He was very academic and very bright," she told *The Guardian* in 2006).

Having jettisoned opera lessons for cheer-leading and rock music, Streep went to Vassar, then Yale University to study drama, proving herself an excellent mimic and speedy learner of lines. After graduating, she worked in the theatre — Shakespeare, mainly, then Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Bertolt Brecht-Kurt Weill on Broadway. She also auditioned for films.

One of her first screen tests was for the lead actress role in Dino De Laurentiis's *King Kong*. Unimpressed, the director admonished his son (who'd brought her) in Italian. "This is so ugly," he said. "Why did you bring me this?" Streep understood Italian and came back with: "I'm very sorry I am not as beautiful as I should be but this is what you get." The role went to Jessica Lange, but it's a salutary tale. Nobody puts Mary Louise "Meryl" Streep in a corner.

Robert De Niro saw her doing Chekhov and got her a part playing his girlfriend in 1978's *The Deer Hunter*, which brought her first Oscar nomination. But it was the acclaimed TV miniseries *Holocaust*, and her role as the German wife of a Jewish artist in Nazi Germany, that brought widespread recognition. From then on — with the exception of late 1980s-early 90s comedy duds *Death Becomes Her* and *She-Devil* — Streep has demonstrated, over and over, how damn good she is.

Her first Academy Award came in 1979, for *Kramer vs Kramer*. Her role as the unhappily married Joanna was a tour de force, all the more remarkable because she wrote two of her own scenes, was fighting with Dustin Hoffman off camera and grieving the death of her boyfriend, actor John Cazale. Then came *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and that end-of-pier scene in which, wearing a hooded cape, Streep slowly turns her face and floors Jeremy Irons with a look. Later she'd say she felt a misfit in the role, not being beautiful enough. But watch the scene again on YouTube and Streep's metamorphosis is apparent: to the viewer she's as stunning as Botticelli's *Venus*.

Heavy-hitting roles followed: a Polish mother inside Auschwitz who has to choose which of her two children is to be gassed



(*Sophie's Choice*). Karen Blixen, the aristocratic Danish writer living in Kenya (*Out of Africa*): "I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills," she intones, her accent perfect, in a film that scooped seven Oscars.

And of course, Lindy Chamberlain, the New Zealand-born Australian wrongly convicted in 1982 of murdering her baby daughter, despite claiming a dingo had taken her (*Evil Angels*). If Streep tends to play female characters she feels



The real Florence Foster Jenkins, far left; Streep with Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*, above; as Lindy Chamberlain in *Evil Angels*, left

directed her in *Silkwood*, *Heartburn* and *Postcards From the Edge*, and in the 2004 HBO miniseries *Angels in America* — was probably her favourite. In November 2014, Nichols and Streep were due to start filming *Master Class* (a movie of the Terence McNally play about the classes given by diva Maria Callas at New York's Juilliard School in 1971) when Nichols died unexpectedly, aged 83.

"*Master Class* is such a great piece," she says.

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MERYL STREEP

a need to defend, then Chamberlain — whose trial by media made her a household name around the world — was ripe for defending.

"Yes, I felt that," Streep nods. "So did (director) Fred Schepisi. Now there's a person whose yin and yang are beautifully integrated, although from the outside he's a real bloke. He'd stay up all night with Ian Baker the cinematographer and they'd be like, 'Yeah, mate, we were up til 5am ...'" She sways about, talking Strine, waving an imaginary stubbie.

"But hidden inside Fred is this very sensitive, thoughtful, feeling female perception of the world. He's understood visually so much of how I understood perceptions of Lindy. The way the shape of her eyebrows made her face seem inexpressive, because they went like this." She points two fingers down her face in a V-shape. "The way her case marked the first time the news was scored with music. Scary music. Eee-eee-eee." A sigh. "It's all about pushing you in an emotional direction."

But of all Streep's directors, the German-born American auteur Mike Nichols — who

"We'd pushed back Florence to accommodate this because we were trying for 20 years to get the rights and then we finally got them. And Mike died." She looks at the floor. "He died on the Thursday and we were going to have our first production meeting on the Friday."

Her voice shaking, she pauses, swallowing, getting a handle on her emotions. "So my heart was broken and I didn't want to do it after that. I think I'm too old now anyway; Callas was so young (48) when she gave those classes. Terence was there. And do you know who else was there?" It feels like she's giving me a gift. Who? I say. Who? "Kevin Kline! He was a student at Juilliard and he sneaked in the back. So did Christine Baranski!"

I wonder how matey she is with her old co-stars (Kline was in *Sophie's Choice* and *Ricki and the Flash*; Baranski in *Mamma Mia*); last year she told *Time Out* that one of her biggest regrets was "that my friendships suffered from lack of attention, in favour of the time taken up by my family, my career and civic concerns".

Civic concerns first: Streep is a woman who

has lent her name and given her money to a wealth of causes, from Mothers and Others (a consumer advocacy group she co-founded in 1989) and the human rights organisation Equality Now to recently funding a screenwriting lab for female writers over 40 and part-financing the yet-to-open National Women's History Museum in Washington.

"I gave them my [\$US1m] salary for *Iron Lady*. But it's an ongoing struggle because it's a public thing so it has to go through congress, and the obstructionist strategy of the opposition party means there's peristalsis, stalling. But that's OK because the march of progress is going on. People are becoming more and more aware of these issues."

As they are about global warming: "Australia is suffering more than most," she says. "It was the canary in the mine on fluorocarbons and once the hole on the ozone layer was discovered we stopped using them and it actually got fixed. How you can deny this stuff is beyond me. Why not put measures in place, even if you don't believe the signs?"

Streep lives a relatively modest life in New York with her sculptor husband Don Gummer, shopping mindfully, driving an ecologically sound car, occasionally riding the subway. "She doesn't closet herself away," her daughter Mamie Gummer, 33, an actress, has said. "She ensures her place in the theatre of the world."

Mamie was her co-star in *Ricki and the Flash*. Her other daughters, Grace, 30, and Louisa, 24, are an actress and a model; her 37-year-old son is respected musician and singer-songwriter Henry Wolfe. What with her own work and her husband's creations — Gummer's freestanding aluminium and stainless steel sculptures were exhibited outside New York subway stations last May — Streep is surrounded, most of the time, by creativity, music and art.

"My husband's art is very musical, the way it speaks to you," she says, then catches herself and stops. "I'm actually not allowed to talk about it. But to me it has rhythm. The compositions are really structured and fluid."

We talk instead about the healing power of music, including the way Jenkins wanted to give Manhattan some wartime respite: "Yes, the transport. That's why art exists, to lift us out. There is plenty of evidence for how horrible life is, and how despairing we should be; we should be completely opening our wrists. But then there's Yo-Yo Ma and there's Renee Fleming." And, arguably, there is the wonder that was Jenkins, whose mission to spread happiness was matched by her low threshold for embarrassment. So what gets Streep — this great, courageous, committed actress — blushing? Has she ever come out of a public loo, say, with her skirt tucked into the back of her underpants?

"My what? Ha ha! Nah. Age is a great leveller for all those anxieties. You don't really give a shit and you know what?"

What? I say.

She twinkles again. "It's a really nice feeling."

Florence Foster Jenkins opens nationally on Thursday.

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