



STREEP'S AHEAD

Meryl Streep has had a long and illustrious career; her latest success *Doubt* sees her star alongside Philip Seymour Hoffman as an accusatory nun. She talks to *Kasha Van Sant* about Oscars, dragon ladies and discipline

Meryl Streep's thirty year career has seen her achieve a record 14 Oscar nominations, the record previously held by Katharine Hepburn with 12. The 59 year old chooses her roles carefully, from lonely housewife Francesca Johnson in *The Bridges of Madison County*, to her portrayal of the author Karen Blixen in *Out of Africa*, as well as troubled Sophie Zawistowski, the survivor of the Nazi war camps in *Sophie's Choice* or now as John Patrick Shanley's finger-pointing nun, Sister Aloysius who puts Father Flynn's (Philip Seymour Hoffman) fate in the balance in *Doubt*.

Did you enjoy playing a nun?

I loved the nun's outfit. No bad hair days!

Your character sees the world in a very black-and-white way don't you think?

She *deals* with the world in a very black-and-white way. I'm not sure that she sees it that way. But she has found that it's most effective to keep the strictures of the church, to keep to the dictates of her faith, to keep children in line, to keep the school running to tow a very hard line, and to make it right, clear, exactly what is expected.

Did you like her?

I liked her, yes! I think she wouldn't mind being characterised as a dragon, but she sees herself as protecting these flowers, these children. She's at the gate. She sees herself as either... you open the door this much. I think she's seen this evil before.

Have you ever been characterised as a dragon?

Huh? In *The Devil Wears Prada*, yeah!

Did you ever get taught at school by such a strict disciplinarian?

Yes, I did. I did have one very harsh teacher. I'm sure everybody did. It was algebra. A man. Very strict. Italian. Hard-nosed. And people were scared in that class, but people paid attention, and people learned algebra. People really learned in that class. I had other favourite teachers that everybody loved. I remember nothing. So I mean there is something to focusing the mind, there is something to having discipline in a class.

How did you prepare for role of Sister Aloysius?

I just met some of the retired nuns, the remaining Sisters of Charity. There aren't very many. They're in their seventies, eighties, nineties. I went to two different retirement homes, had a couple of meals there, spoke with the nuns. Then I spoke with Sister Peggy. She was the model for Sister James. She was John Patrick Shanley's teacher, in the first grade, when he was six years old. She was around. She's in her seventies. She's an inspiring character.

Does religion play a role in your life?

I follow no doctrine. I don't belong to a church or a temple or a synagogue or an ashram.

You said before age is humbling. What did you mean by that?

Well, aren't we all grateful to be alive? I've lost a lot of people in my life and I'm very grateful to be here. That's what I mean.

Do you feel that actors can retire?

Sure. People talk about it. People always think about retiring. I don't really. In our business, you're not kicked out necessarily.

There's been a lot of Oscar talk around *Doubt*. Do you still get excited at getting nominated?

Yes. I get excited. I get intimidated. Hollywood to me is what it is to you. It's something other than what I am. I sit outside it.

Where do you keep your Oscars?

Up on a high shelf. One of them is a really terrifying colour now!

How do you stay so grounded?

I don't have a production company, I don't have a staff. I have one assistant and she doesn't read any scripts. I read the few things that I think will interest me, and I pick from them. My agent sends me the things he thinks are



well written, because I get mad when he sends me crap! But he also sends me some funny, offbeat things.

What do you think about roles that are offered to you now?

I think the parts for women my age are wilder, more extreme. The protagonists of a romantic comedy – something very conventional – are written for younger women. I've always thought of myself as a character actor, anyway, a theatre or repertory actor – someone who does a lot of different things, and I've always liked to. Even when I was younger, I took on some things that were odd – like Lindy Chamberlain [from 1988's *A Cry in the Dark*]. One review said 'The wilful destruction of her beauty.' I'm interested in people's lives and I like to investigate the truculent ones, the difficult ones.

Do you always find it easy to get into a role?

It's more difficult to start because I doubt myself. I always go through a period, after

I've taken a job... I think about it for a while, then get ready and prepare. And then I stop thinking about it and then the time comes to start. I then just fall apart – I think 'I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have a character. I don't know why I'm here. Why did they hire me? Why did they want me to do this? I don't know how to do this?' It's really weird. I've done it for enough years that my husband has pointed out the pattern and said to me: 'You always do this.' I say 'No, I have never felt like this! It's this project!' He just goes on the golf course to get away!

What keeps you sane?

I've saved my money and I'm alright. When I was younger, it was more terrifying but not really. I don't think I ever had a good sense of how on the edge of the abyss I was. You have optimism when you're younger and I wasn't afraid. Also, I live simply. I don't buy a lot of fashion!

How do you manage your career and your personal life?

That's a day-to-day question! Everything is a balancing act in life, and everybody has to have a sense of humour about what it takes. Really, being an actress in film, if you have a certain amount of success – even if it's moderate success – you have a life that's friendlier to your family because for large parts of it you're unemployed. So you're home. I'm home more than most working mothers. It's the equivalent of flexi-time... except I'm employed and I think I'll never work again. And then I get another job and I work for four months, and then I stop. ■