

# THE IRON LADY

*Peter Anderson*

Why was Meryl Streep chosen for the part? I quote Phyllida Lloyd, the film director who was interviewed during the making of the film:

“You need a superstar to play Margaret Thatcher because MT was a superstar. MT is one provocation, Meryl could possibly be the second.”

Meryl describes MT’s life as “a gigantic, big, full life” which in the film you watch slowly and gradually ‘subside’ as she puts it. “To subside” is what the wind or the sea does when it calms down, “placarsi” or it is what happens to a person when they grow old and weak “lasciarsi andare”. The film is MT’s final years when she lives on her own. Denis her husband has died and she finally comes round to letting go of Denis’ things – of getting rid of his clothes – which she has arranged to do with her daughter. It is a series of flashbacks: she is ambushed by her past life, the juxtaposition (l’accostamento) between her present life - an old woman who induces sadness and melancholy - and the able, brilliant, articulate politician that she was. “Articulate” means “able to express your thoughts, arguments and ideas clearly and effectively” “una persona che sa esprimersi bene, che sa esporre le proprie idee”. This old woman struggling with her memories is very affecting. “Affecting” means ‘touching, moving’, “toccante, commovente”. MT, by the way, did Chemistry at Oxford University before she started her career in politics.

Margaret Thatcher née Margaret Roberts – Roberts was her maiden name. There is a scene in the book where she is seen signing her name in a book - her life history, her biography - and by mistake she signs Margaret Roberts instead of Margaret Thatcher: she rips out the front page.

The film is described as a ‘poem’ by Meryl Streep. In the film MT quotes St Francis of Assisi:

“Where there is discord, may we bring harmony,  
Where there is error, may we bring truth,  
And where there’s despair, may we bring hope.”

This quote is taken from the very operatic scene outside 10 Downing Street – the home of the British Prime Minister – “Operatic” is “esagerato, melodrammatico, teatrale”. Phyllida Lloyd the film director describes MT as a kind of Boadicea /bəʊdətʃiə/, a spiritual leader walking into the temple – something almost “hyperbolic”. “Hyperbole” /haɪpəːbɒli/ - I’ll give you the definition: “a way of emphasizing what you are saying by describing it as far more extreme than it really is”. She decides to run for the leadership of the Conservative Party not because she really think she can win but to “shake up” the party: “per dargli una scossa”.

Here’s a quote from MT in the film when she’s still deciding whether to run as leader but still has doubts: “ For some of my colleagues who imagine me as their leader, it would be like imagining – I don’t know – being led into battle by their chambermaid”.

What was so spectacular about her political career was that MT was an outsider in the Conservative Party just as Meryl is the outsider in Britain. Both women had to work supremely hard because women have to do 10 times as much preparation to survive in a man’s world.

MT really did break ground. Do you know the expression ‘to break new ground’ or ‘to break fresh ground’? It means to be an innovator a pioneer. ‘essere un innovatore, un pioniere’.

She showed a way that a woman could be a leader. She didn't have a problem with how to lead and men didn't have a problem knowing how to follow.

Here is another quotation from the film which emphasizes her resoluteness:

"Yes, the medicine is harsh, but the patient requires it to live! Should we withhold the medicine? No! We are not wrong. We did not seek election and win in order to manage the decline of a great nation!"

The film is unpolitical: it's not really the issue whether you approve of her politics or not. What you do get is a taste of her 'uncompromising ferocity'. 'Uncompromising' is 'intransigente'. In the film you are never asked to judge the policy. "It's a universal story" as Phyllida Lloyd puts it. "It's a mirror of all our lives". "Her life was so epic" she says, "so huge. It's our own lives writ large". 'Writ' is the archaic form of 'written'.

From the grocer's daughter to the head of the conservative party – a remarkable story. "Remarkable" is the word to describe this woman: in Italian it translates: "notevole, eccezionale, fuori dal comune". That's what MT was.

The film is a mix of her public but above all it's about her private life. What went on behind the scenes, behind the mask. As the producer Damien Jones so aptly states: "It is a film that humanizes her and allows us to access a world we didn't know".

The film is a biopic /baɪəpɪk/. Do you know what a biopic is? It's an informal word to describe a film based on the events in someone's life. A biographical picture – un film biografico. Abi Morgan wrote the script from today's perspective. She explores the notion of power and age. Phyllida Lloyd the director states that she found the biopic was "tricky" to "pull off". Tricky here means 'complex, difficult, insidioso' and "to pull off" means "portare a compimento, mettere a segno, farcela, riuscire a concludere". So it was difficult to make it into a film and not just a catalogue of facts. The difficulty was to give a just view, a true perspective of her entire life.

The beauty of the film is also in the attention to detail. As Phyllida puts it: "Davis, Meryl and myself all shared the passion for the tiny things".

As for Abi Morgan she states that the film was MT's POV - point of view. Getting into her head and trying to be true to the character was her real challenge. As she declares: "There is something fascinating looking at what it means to be that one person who takes that global decision that could affect the world". The quote that follows give you an idea of this: "The Falkland Islands belong to Britain! And I want them back!"

Phyllida Lloyd describes Margaret Thatcher as (I quote) "the most significant female leader this country has had since Elizabeth I." Meryl Streep was immediately interested in the role. As she states there aren't many woman leaders and there aren't many filmmakers who are interested in investigating what it meant to be a woman leader. There is a momentous scene shot in the Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich which depicts this perfectly.

How do you pronounce Greenwich, by the way? Do you know? There are four ways of pronouncing it in British English (let alone American English!) /ɡrɛntʃ/ /ɡrɪntʃ/ /ɡrɛnɪdʒ/ /ɡrɪnɪdʒ/ - Maddening!

The baroque architecture of the Old Royal Naval College and the marvellous Painted Hall were designed by Christopher Wren and nearby is the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Observatory.

So what happens in the Painted Hall – this beautiful room in the palace? She is seen dressed in a beautiful costume and with a stunning hairstyle. The grandeur /grændʒə/ of an ancient Queen - a hint of Elizabeth I – the great queen of England of times gone by.

Abi Morgan did a lot of scouring and scavenging to find out all sorts of details of MT's personal life. The relation between MT's daughter and herself. You sense the tension between the two. There is a scene where she is expecting her son Mark to visit her and she uses the tone she used as PM. Her daughter reminds her that Mark lives in SA and that she is no longer the PM.

Her relationship with her husband Denis is central to the whole film. Denis is the heart and soul of the film with his catching humour. "Catching" is 'contagioso'. There are elements of tender humanity in their relationship. But like all relations, there are both comfort and annoyance, a gin and a joke. There are some gruffnesses at times – 'gruffness: asprezza, rudezza, scortesia, sgarbataggine' However, when she got home in the evening he was always there to welcome her. At the very end he tries to persuade her to resign as he sees her sufferance and says: "Throw in the towel, Margaret!" "Getta la spugna!"

Their love story is described as "quirky" by Phyllida. Quirky means 'strambo, originale'. Tell me what **you** think and whether **you** think it's quirky. The two young actors who impersonate Denis and Margaret give us a flavour of what their older selves will be like. Harry Lloyd has a warmth to him as young Denis and Alexandra Roach as young Margaret has the right level of "earnestness": "serietà, convinzione, sollecitudine, scrupolo". She acts out Margaret's 'passion, drive and truthfulness'. "Drive" in the sense of "determinazione, volontà or even aspirazione" – drive for perfection or improvement or change – or all these things together are in Margaret.

Anthony Head plays a very convincing Geoffrey Howe. He is the most supportive in her cabinet but is also the man that contributes to her downfall. His description of Meryl Streep's acting is: "Her interpretation is 'masterclass'".

I hope you enjoy the film as much as I did! I had to watch to make this introduction and it reminded me of those years in Britain. I was in London in the early 80s during the miners' strike a period of recession and high unemployment: as MT said the medicine is harsh but the patient requires it to live! And that's exactly what she did!