

**Hey,**

**Madame**



# Producer

Amanda Thompson is the great-granddaughter of William 'WG' Bean, founder of the world-famous Blackpool Pleasure Beach. She is 35 years old, single, worth a small fortune and could spend her days sifting seashells in the sand. Instead, Ms Thompson produces and directs the shows that put the bold into Blackpool. **Neil Bromage** applauds.

**S**ome would say that Amanda Thompson was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Possibly one with 'kiss me quick' engraved down the side. As a director and shareholder of Blackpool Pleasure Beach, she is a high profile member of Blackpool's royal family and could do what she likes. Yet, her choice of career is precisely, one would guess, what her great-grandfather would have chosen for her. She runs Stageworks World-wide Productions Limited, turning over £8m a year from her own creativity and ideas, and readily points out that "In the theatre business you are only as good as your last job".

What drives a vibrant, wealthy young woman to want to produce what some might say are simply old-fashioned variety shows, maybe even a dying art form? It is precisely the sort of question that causes Ms Thompson to hyperventilate. "I don't do seaside variety shows", she explodes. "I do international productions that travel and tour the world, and they are a creative and artistic product. Those that might perceive seaside shows as old-fashioned variety shows (the sort she doesn't produce you understand!) would obviously perceive Cirque du Soleil to be a circus and Michael Flatley to be an Irish jigger. They obviously go to the theatre blindfolded, or don't go at all! They

should open their eyes and not be so narrow minded. See the production and then form an opinion."

It wasn't so much an invitation as a royal command. How could one resist? I have to say that I came away from Ms Thompson's production of **Hot Ice** suitably impressed with her stunning visual images. She had taken the audience on a highly dramatic, geographical and cultural tour of the world (including a Riverdance/Flatley Irish jig!) And it didn't look old-fashioned. Nor did it look as if it would fade away in some time warp. The magical and mysterious **Mystique** however, her other current show, was less impressive. Perhaps the magician was better than I thought, blindfolding me without my realising.

Her current job is producing and directing the world premier of her new show **Eclipse**, at the Globe, the Pleasure Beach's new 1,000-seater venue. It is said to be a conceptual production based upon inspiration from the elements of fire, water and air. Thompson has shipped in an internationally acclaimed aerial ballet artist direct from Las Vegas to head up the cast. Such are her connections within showbiz.

Thompson's leaning toward the creative seems to be echoed in her past. By the time of her birth Blackpool Pleasure Beach was already a huge success. She was brought up in the world of entertainment making her performance debut at the age of three. But then ▶

'I know how much somebody is worth and I have a fixed idea of what I want to pay. So I'm not very good at negotiating contracts to get it to what they want but I'm very good at getting it to what I want.'



Photo: Peter Anker

boarding school loomed. "I didn't really enjoy school because I wasn't a person who really liked to be regimented and have to obey rules and regulations. I can honestly say that I hated every moment of boarding school".

Her personal drive is also rooted in her past. 'WG' Bean had unparalleled foresight to begin what has become one of the world's premier entertainment venues; his daughter, Amanda's grandmother, now in her 97th year, still plays an active role as Chairman of the company her father founded and still inaugurates virtually all the new rides on the Beach (she was advised against riding the Big One last year by her doctors - amazing that she even wanted to!). Amanda claims that her grandmother and father, Geoffrey Thompson OBE are a 'huge influence' on her life. "Whenever I can I go to speak to both of them about problems."

Heritage is obviously important to her. "Being part of a family with such a successful history is truly an honour and I am very proud of what my great-grandfather achieved when he first started the business. We as a family believe that the heritage that we all share is truly important and that nothing will tear that away from us. As a result, the company will remain a family company."

That family company was recently part of BBC fly-on-the-wall documentary, 'Pleasure Beach', in which, it is alleged, Ms Thompson 'shone'. Very possibly, but the programme also left her with a reputation as a tough cookie. Ask anyone around the Beach and they all have a quote about Ms Thompson, "What's the difference between Amanda Thompson and Saddam Hussein? You can negotiate with Saddam Hussein."

"Look", she says, "I know how much somebody is worth and I have a fixed idea of what I want to pay. So I'm not very good at negotiating contracts to get it to what they want but I'm very good at getting it to what I want."

This was not to be an interview conducted in a clinical or even calm environment. Thompson works, all the time. "I've got a lot of drive and get up and go. I find it difficult to sit around. I can't just do nothing, I have to be doing something all the time." She's half way up the stairs of the stage by this time. "All the time", she throws over her shoulder. And so the set for Eclipse provided the backdrop for our business interview, with its translucent elliptical stage, its rockface and waterfalls, its fountains, its smoke machines, and fiery gas jets. Different, yes, but somehow eminently suitable.

As she stands there, centre stage, arms folded across

**More traditional entertainments that keep holiday-makers amused are the ubiquitous slot machines and the white knuckle delights of the Pepsi Max Big One.**

her body, the body language is crystal clear. Don't mess with me, it says. And to give her due credit, she doesn't really pretend otherwise.

Employing hundreds of people each year calls for strength and she is not afraid of getting her hands dirty, happy to fire as well as hire. "No-one likes firing somebody but if they are not capable of doing the job or of working together as part of a team, then they have to go. I don't object to doing it."

If she pushes her casts and her staff, if she has this reputation for not suffering fools, or anyone who gets in her way, gladly, it is because she will only accept the best possible results in her productions. Throughout her eight-month production period Thompson is known to frequent the office at five or six in the morning through till late in the evening in order to achieve what for many others would be almost impossible. On the evening of my visit to Mystique her car (a black Mercedes convertible) was still in the car park at the close of the show.

"I do spend a lot of time on my productions and they are of a certain quality and standard," she says. "I will not do a show unless it is the way I require it to be and my competitors don't produce anything like the same standard."

What becomes apparent with Amanda Thompson is that she has considerable visual imagination, and whilst happy to take on the day-to-day aspects of running her business her strengths lie in re-creating those stunning visual images she dreams about. The fact of that silver spoon plus the considerable fortune that sits comfortably in her background, do not concern her.

"Wealth has nothing to do with a creative mind; no amount of money can determine artistic ability. That is something you are born with and I have a passion to create", she says. "And if I do it by producing something different for a new and innovative world of theatre, and to encourage the talent and audiences of tomorrow, then that's all the better. My passion is for my job within Stageworks but my heart is with my family."

Commitment, then, to the Beach, Stageworks and her family is complete. But Amanda Thompson is a glamorous 35-year-old woman with a fortune and no one to share it with. The question is, is there room even if she had the time? "I'd like to think that one day, yes I would be able to settle down. But not many men can cope with the fact that I have the lifestyle that I have and that when I'm working I'm very dedicated. A lot of men feel that they take the back row seat in my life." She shrugs, "and that's not true, not entirely. If they understood what I did and the dedication I have that would be great, but for the first few months they all seem to think it's just a lot of fun. It is only later that they realise that it's actually hard work". ☞

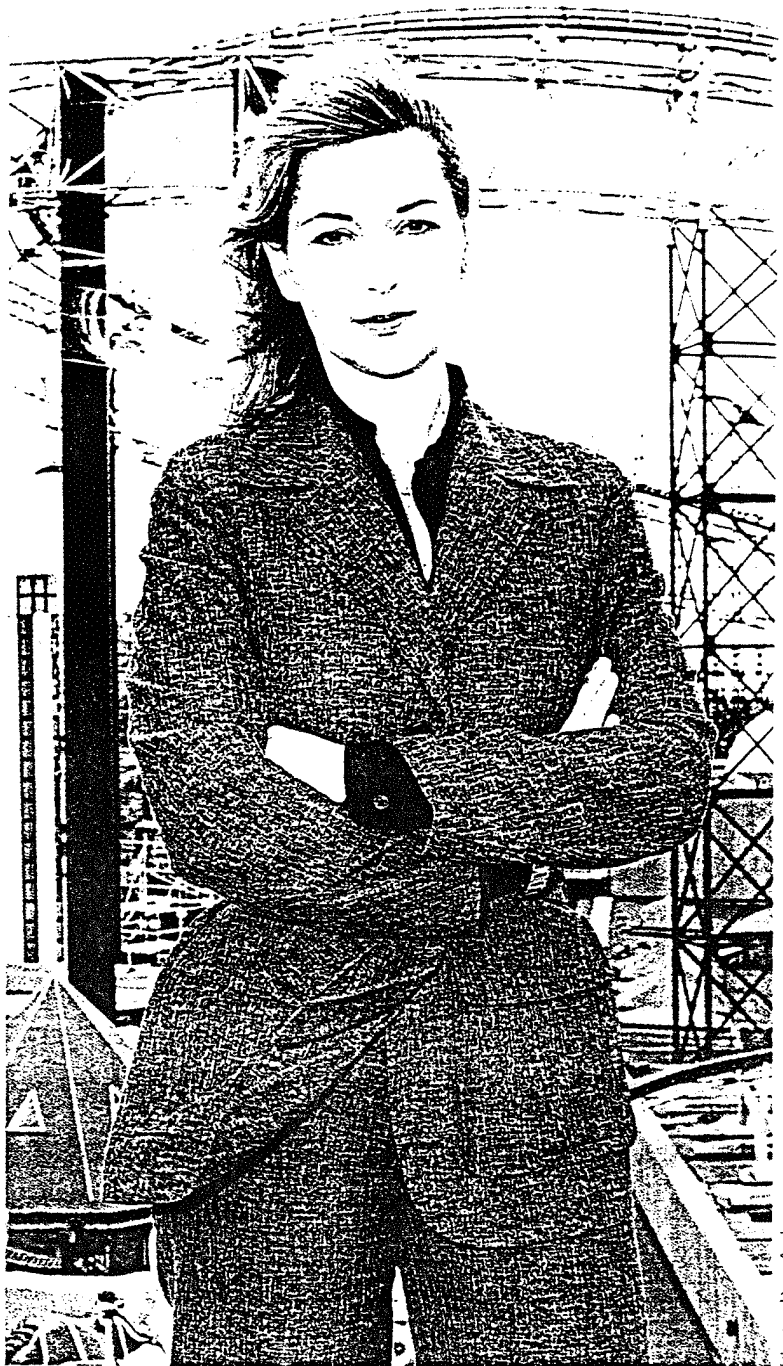


Photo: Ben Anker

## Fact box

**Star Sign:** Virgo

**Education:** Badminton School, Bristol and Doverbrooks College, Oxford.

**Best moment:** Yet to come.

**Worst moment:** When my father was taken ill with a stroke earlier this year.

**Where will she be at the Millennium?:** Probably in bed, away from it all. I don't particularly like New Year celebrations. Or, more than likely, working.