



# Welcome to the RENEESSANCE

She had us at 'hello'. From single mother Dorothy Boyd to the murderous Roxie Hart, Renée Zellweger was Hollywood's darling... until she disappeared. Now she's back, second Oscar in hand, and putting herself first.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

**B**orn on 25 April 1969 in Katy, Texas, to Kjellfrid Irene Andreassen, a Norwegian-born former nurse and midwife, and Emil Erich Zellweger, a Swiss-born engineer, Renée grew up wanting to be a writer. In fact, she went to study English at the University of Texas, which is where, instead, she 'fell' into acting. Bit parts in '90s hits *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *Reality Bites* (1994) paved the way for bigger roles in *Love and a .45*, *The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (co-starring fellow Texan and then unknown Matthew McConaughey) and *Empire Records* (1995).

'Rather than continuing with my journalism degree, I finished up quickly with my lit degree so that I could just see where [acting] would go,' she says. 'I figured I could always go back and get a master's, and finally submit something to *The Daily Texan!*'

Then, to everyone's surprise, she was cast as Tom Cruise's love interest in *Jerry Maguire* and overnight Renée was a star.

Next came the franchise that would make her a global name: *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Her casting was met with massive controversy: how could she possibly play Helen Fielding's iconic chain-smoking Brit? She was too pretty, too skinny and too Texan – co-star Hugh Grant called her casting 'a stretch'. But audiences and critics alike loved her portrayal, which earned her an Oscar, a Bafta and a Golden Globe nomination.

For a while, she could do no wrong. As Roxie Hart in *Chicago*, she proved she could sing and dance, and earned a consecutive Oscar nomination. When, at 34, she won her first Oscar for *Cold Mountain*, she was the biggest name in Hollywood. But, as she entered her 40s, she struggled to find roles that showed off her range. After a series of career lows, she decided to take a break from both acting and Hollywood.



In the Netflix series *What/If*, Renée plays a mysterious venture capitalist. **Below:** She won an Oscar for Best Actress for her portrayal of Judy Garland in the 2019 film *Judy*.

“Turning 50 felt like a whole new beginning without the nonsense.”

‘I wasn’t healthy. I wasn’t taking care of myself. I was the last thing on my list of priorities,’ she says. She started seeing a therapist. ‘He recognised that I spent 99% of my life as the public persona and just a microscopic crumb of a fraction in my real life.’

Renée’s hiatus lasted six years. ‘I needed to *not* have something to do all the time, to not know what I was going to be doing for the next two years in advance. I wanted to allow for some accidents. There had to be some quiet for the ideas to slip in.’ She took classes at UCLA in public policy and international law, travelled the world, bought a farm, fell in love, broke up... And came back for the occasional role, like the third Bridget Jones film, *Bridget Jones’s Baby*.

The year 2019 seemed like a turning point. Renée was just

starting to generate some buzz for her first plunge into TV with the Netflix thriller *What/If* when *Judy* came along.

She has called the role of Judy Garland her most challenging ever, admitting that if she could have run away from it she would have. ‘She’s such a legend. But there’s so much to the human being as well. You want her to come across as big as she was, but also show the woman... her intelligence, determination, tenacity, hope. She never gave that up, no matter the circumstances.’

On top of changing her physical appearance with prosthetics, a wig and makeup, Renée spent a year training with vocal coach Eric Vetro before rehearsing for a further four

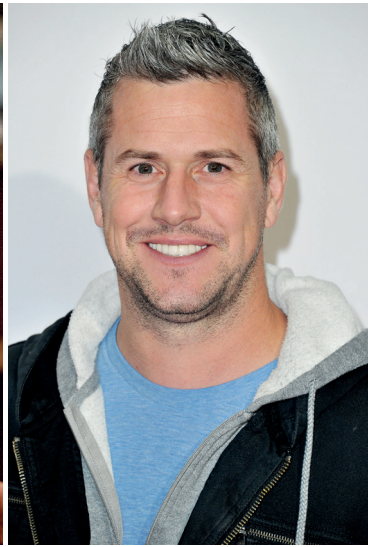
months with musical director Matt Dunkley to master Judy’s vocals. She had to perform each of her six music numbers, including ‘By Myself’, ‘Come Rain or Come Shine’ and ‘Over the Rainbow’, live in front of an audience and on camera – in one take. ‘That was director Rupert Gould’s idea. He decided to do everything live because he wanted to capture the shared experience that a performer has with an audience. I’ll forgive Rupert one day for doing that to me. It wasn’t easy.’

But the hard work was worth it in the end. On 9 February 2020, Renée





Renée as Pam Hupp in the true-crime miniseries *The Thing About Pam*



English television presenter Ant Anstead and Renée have been in a relationship for two years.

### OUR FAVOURITE RENÉE ZELLWEGER PERFORMANCES

- 1 Judy Garland in *Judy* (2019)
- 2 Dorothy Boyd in *Jerry Maguire* (1996)
- 3 Ruby Thewes in *Cold Mountain* (2003)
- 4 Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)
- 5 Ellen Gulden in *One True Thing* (1998)
- 6 Mae Braddock in *Cinderella Man* (2005)
- 7 Roxie Hart in *Chicago* (2002)
- 8 Allison French in *Appaloosa* (2008)
- 9 Beatrix Potter in *Miss Potter* (2006)
- 10 Betty Sizemore in *Nurse Betty* (2000)

walked half a mile to the Dolby Theatre, Los Angeles, in the rain (in heels) – a ritual she says keeps her grounded. ‘I don’t like getting out and it’s all crazy and people screaming and stuff, so I sneak in.’ She took home the Oscar for Best Actress and celebrated with a private party in her hotel room with friends before heading to an Oscars afterparty to hang out with Snoop Dogg. Who would have thought that just a few days later, the world would be in lockdown? ‘We danced the night away, went home and locked the doors.’

Luckily, she didn’t get too comfortable at home. *Judy* had rekindled her love of acting, and she was itching for her next project – one that would be a massive departure for her. She swapped her

usual glam for an oversized puffer jacket to play a busybody with a penchant for murder.

Adapted from the true-crime podcast of the same name, the miniseries *The Thing About Pam* follows the 2011 murder of Betsy Faria, which resulted in her husband Russ’s conviction, although he insisted he did not kill her. The brutal crime set off a chain of events that would expose a deeply diabolical scheme involving Betsy’s friend, Pam Hupp.

Like the rest of us, Renée was obsessed with the Dateline podcast. ‘We failed to buy the rights because they’d already been sold, but then a couple of months later we met the buyers [the producers of *Get Out*] and agreed to collaborate.’

To become Pam, Renée spent four hours a day in the hair and makeup chair while an artist applied handmade silicone gel applications to her face and fitted her in a padded suit. ‘Pam really intrigued me as a character,’ she says. ‘How she presents herself is so completely removed from the truth of who she is. It was like playing a role within a role. She still feels so fresh to me, and at the moment one of my favourite characters I’ve played.’

Renée is also an executive producer on the series. As the first project for her own production company, Big Picture Company,

she’s fully embraced the new role. ‘I love being part of the creative decisions: the casting, the music, the writing and all sorts of post-production decisions. My partners and I, we are perfectionists! For me it’s a more comprehensive experience to take projects from the ground up.’

Next, she will executive-produce and star in the TV series *Avenger Field*, a drama about an all-female US Air Force team during World War II, as well as the comedy *The Back Nine*, in which she plays a mother who dusts off her golf clubs after 25 years of marriage.

For many actresses, ageing can be scary, but, at 53 Renée is the happiest she’s ever been. She has settled with charming English television presenter Ant Anstead, whom she met on an episode of Ant’s show *Celebrity IOU: Joyride* in 2021.

She says that turning 50 ‘felt like a whole new beginning without the nonsense, the point where you can stop listening to those voices in your head and all those expectations and projections people have of you and become more authentically yourself. All those ads telling us we don’t need to look our real age if we just buy all their creams and their fixes? What, you’re saying I’m not valuable any more because I’m 53? There is a big difference between being your best, most vibrant self and wanting to be what you’re not.’

‘Who’s getting to 50 or 60 without having to say, “Hey, look at me with my clothes off and I still look almost as good as I did?” I don’t want to be “almost as good”. I want to be a thousand times better!’ ❖

*Stream Judy and The Thing About Pam on Showmax.*

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