

# Stiletto queen

What does it take to build a shoe empire, be a mother and survive a controversial divorce, all in high heels? *Tamara Mellon* has done it all, and now she's set her sights on relaunching legendary label Halston. Christa D'Souza investigates. Photographs by Julian Broad

One has certain expectations about the sort of place Tamara Mellon might live. The grand, security-gated compound in Holland Park in which she dwells – with its brace of tailed footmen and *Octopussy*-ish foyer – does not disappoint. Nor does the starched, uniformed maid who answers the door to the labyrinthine first-floor apartment and leads the way past the Basquiat, past the exquisitely organised walk-in shoe closet (where another uniformed maid is busily doing up buckles) to the living room: a vast parquet-floored space dominated by a leopard-print rug and two gargantuan raspberry-coloured sofas. Everything is so large-scale that it takes a few seconds to realise that Mellon, a teeny-tiny slip of a thing in skinny jeans and patent flats, is nestled inside one of them. "Hi there," she says, waving a little frantically with one hand and clutching her Blackberry in the other. "Don't look at anything in here – I'm having it all redone!"

As if on cue, there goes the ding-dong doorbell and in walks a tanned, jauntily dressed man called Martyn – her decorator. Martyn has to get on a plane to LA this afternoon (otherwise his other client, Cher, might have a nervous breakdown) but before he leaves, Mellon wants him to show her some of the Polaroids he took for her of some coffee tables, and go over the wallpaper swatches one more time.

"Now this one," he says, a palm earnestly pressed to his breast, "this one is going to give you a whole fresh new take. I think it'll give character, sophistication and warmth; I think it'll fit in with the whole Halston thing and just totally hippify the whole feel of the room..."

"Hmm," murmurs Mellon, one hand clasped around a large cup of coffee, the other

guiding a Marlboro Light into those trademark swollen lips. "The one thing that makes me nervous is that it's going to end up looking like, er, cream tartan or something." Then, in that muffled part-Mockney, part-Beverly Hills accent of hers: "These sofas, they're definitely going to be reupholstered by Friday, right?"

"Oooh yes," says the decorator – and then, to me: "When Tamara wants something, she wants something fast. It'll be like that programme *Changing Rooms*, I swear."

One is used to seeing Mellon on the red carpet, shoulders forward, hips angled to the side, a perfectly pedicured, Jimmy Choo'd toe peeping out beneath some split-to-the-thigh Versace creation. In the flesh the look is less Modern Moll, more Glamorous Waif in baggy black McQueen top and no make-up. Though tanned from a weekend's skiing in St Moritz with Minty, her five-year-old daughter by her ex-husband Matthew Mellon, she looks vaguely drained. This could have something to do with being up at 5.30 this morning – "There I was yelling at Matthew to get his arse over here to take Minty to school, when I suddenly realised I was still on Swiss time!" It could also be what happens when you are a single mother of 38 who finds herself at the helm of one multimillion-dollar company and another with the potential to be so.

It has been just three days since the Harvey Weinstein company announced its acquisition of the iconic Seventies designer label Halston. The designer, one of America's most influential, was arguably fashion's first superstar, dressing figures such as Elizabeth Taylor, Bianca Jagger and Liza Minnelli in his trademark silk halterneck gowns, as well as being a king of nightlife at Studio 54. The legacy of glamour

and decadence offers much to play with.

It was a deal that Mellon (who is on the board and will "oversee the creative vision of the business and help structure management") brought to Weinstein, her great friend, a year ago, after a vintage-clothing shopping trip in LA, during which she realised that "everything I was obsessing over happened to be by Halston".

"The deal kind of started when I was having this casual phone conversation with Harvey," explains Mellon as the three of us make our way down to the gravel courtyard, where her driver is waiting. "He asked me what I thought I might be doing in the next five years. I said, kind of flippantly, I wanted to buy Halston – because here was this great label to revive right in front of everybody's faces and nobody had done it properly – and before I'd even got off the phone he was like, I get that, and within 20 minutes had Goldman Sachs on the line..."

"It's been a little tricky managing the two," she adds, with typical understatement. "So far I've been doing my Jimmy Choo stuff during the day and Halston from 8 to 12 at night. But once I get the right CEO and the right designer who understands that you don't mess with Halston, you just go to the archives and recreate exactly what he did. See, the mistake everyone made with Halston was getting a new designer in who wanted to put their own stamp on it. [In the past, the label had a high turnover of creative directors, including Randolph Duke, Kevan Hall and Bradley Bayou.] You can't do that. It won't work if, say, I hire Narciso Rodriguez for the job; what I'm looking for is an under-designer, or a second designer. >

Tamara Mellon in playful mood in her daughter Minty's bedroom.  
Tamara wears silk halterneck top, £620, Lanvin, at Joseph. Denim shorts, her own. Leather mules, £420, Jimmy Choo. Hair: John Macpherson. Make-up: Lisa Eldridge. Fashion editor: Charlotte Pilcher



She goes on, in her usual uninflected, unfaltering manner, to explain how she plans to get a collection out for spring/summer 2009, and while Harvey makes a movie about Halston ("Don't you think Jude Law would be perfect for the lead role?"), she'll be working towards expanding the brand to include jeans, fragrance and bags, just like Jimmy Choo.

"How much is it going to cost? Oh, I don't know yet, but we're starting from scratch. We're still at the stage where we're ringing every vintage shop in the world, trying to grab every single Halston dress on the market. Once I get the right CEO, that'll be an enormous weight off my shoulders."

Another weight off those toned shoulders was the \$185 million sale of Jimmy Choo to private-equity firm Towerbrook – a sale which saw her say bye-bye to her CEO of six years, Robert Bensoussan, swelled her personal bank account by \$20 million, and provoked all sorts of spurious rumours that she had washed her hands of Jimmy Choo and was now concentrating on building up Halston.

"Oh, that's not true at all!" she trills gaily as the car drops us outside the Jimmy Choo offices and takes Martyn on to Heathrow. "I've reinvested over 70 per cent of the money I cashed out from the deal back into the company. You don't do that unless you believe in the future of the business." She won't say what her parcel of shares is now, but Towerbrook are the majority shareholders. One suspects that she has a bigger slice of Halston.

The story of how Mellon launched the company 11 years ago with £150,000 from her father is now part of business folklore, a model of how, with the right chemistry, little can turn to huge. There was a niche in the market. At the time, fashion editors and Oscar stylists looking for interesting shoes only really had three choices: Manolo Blahnik, Maud Frizon or Stuart Weitzman. Then along came Jimmy Choo. Within a matter of years, thanks to designer Sandra Choi's dogged creative flair, Mellon's dogged PR drive (renting out a suite at the Peninsula during Oscar week; getting the brand namechecked on *Sex and the City*) and the vast rollout of those 40-ish boudoir-style boutiques, Jimmy Choo had become a global

main player: part of the vernacular. Pharrell Williams rapped about Jimmy Choos. The *New York Times* made them a crossword clue. The PR drive continued. When the bag line was launched, Mellon made sure all the right celebrities had their Mahala or their threaded-lace Ramona while snapped by *People* magazine. And thus, within 10 short years, the brand mutated from being about pointy-toed, princess-satin stilettos for Princess Di wannabes into something very much bigger – a fully fledged fashion label featuring patent wellies, flats, platforms, overnight bags and

Partying in St Barths with Russell Simmons and Ron Perelman (who, by the way, has put her on the board at Revlon); stalking round the Oscars with Kid Rock or George Clooney; jetting off to Mustique with porn-film king Joe Francis. She is the living embodiment of the unapologetically glamorous, ultra-postfeminist, very slightly jagged lifestyle she sells. And for the millions of women out there who aren't quite ready to embrace the New Austerity or the rage for Inconspicuous Consumption, it's a lifestyle that's perversely quite safe and appealing.

It's been five years since we last saw each other properly. At the time Tamara was one year into her marriage to Matthew Mellon, scion of the American banking and oil dynasty, and seven months pregnant with their daughter Araminta (or Minty, as they had already decided her nickname should be). Her beloved father, Tommy Yeardye, was still alive, and a deal had just been struck by luxury-goods wizard Robert Bensoussan to buy out the man who actually made the shoes, Jimmy Choo, for \$25 million. Tamara, as I remember it, was wearing a Gucci mink coat, had a figure like a greyhound with a beergut and was already planning their next child – hopefully a boy. Everything, on the surface of it, looked just tickety-boo.

Half a decade on and oh, how the Jacqueline Susann-like saga has taken a turn. The fairytale marriage, following Matthew's cocaine-addiction relapse, has ended in divorce; Tamara's father Tommy, the former chairman of Jimmy Choo, is dead; and she and

the fiery Bensoussan, after a rollercoaster Christmas in which Mellon found herself very nearly Tipp-Exed out of the Towerbrook deal, have, to put it politely, parted company. Last but not least there is her mother, ex-Chanel model Anne Davis, who left for Beverly Hills with her youngest son Daniel soon after her husband died, and from whom Tamara has been estranged for the last two years, more (much more) of which later. *Pheew*, in other words – when does the rollercoaster ride end?

"It's been a pretty turbulent few months," says Mellon carefully. "But it's a new chapter now. I feel totally re-energised. Towerbrook were amazing. I mean, really. Amazing. We're

Tamara at home  
in Holland Park



fur throws for aspirant sexy sophisticated women all over the world.

As Mellon herself said when she made the cover of *Newsweek* in 2005, voted one of the world's 15 most powerful women, the secret to her success is pretty simple. She relates to the Jimmy Choo customer. That's because she is the Jimmy Choo customer. As even her snifliest detractors would have to agree (and there are plenty out there, rubbing their hands together, wondering if she will be able to continue the upward spiral of the company's fortunes with neither her father nor Bensoussan around), nobody, but nobody could be a better figurehead for the brand.

launching sunglasses, we're launching fragrance and in five years' time hopefully we'll be a billion-dollar business. That sounds a lot, but if you think about it Chanel, Gucci, have 200 stores worldwide and we only have 70, so even if we double the amount of stores, there's still room for growth."

She adds that during the nightmare over Christmas (when the £200 million counterbid she came in with to counter Towerbrook's fell through, right in the middle of a holiday in St Barths, and it was only by rushing back to renegotiate with co-CEO Ramez Sousou and get him to see how lost he'd be without her that she is where she is now), she lost so much weight that she was worried people would think she had an eating disorder.

"I call it my Private Equity Diet," she shrugs with rare irony. "But see, it's amazing, the strength you can find within yourself if you practise. And I practise that a lot.

"It's funny, I always get so embarrassed when people ask what I'm reading because it's always on self-help. Ever heard of Pia Melody, the addictions specialist? She's my favourite author; I listen to all her tapes when I'm in the car. Then there's the one I'm reading now, *Working with Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman; it's actually compulsory reading for an MBA at Harvard. I've got 10 extra copies to hand out to friends."

It's the following day and Mellon and I are sitting in Harry's Bar, one of her favourite restaurants. After a good night's sleep she is wearing full make-up and is dressed for battle in teetering heels and a tightly belted Fendi tunic. The look, she promises, is surprisingly low-maintenance, thanks to the hiring of her ex-boss at *Vogue*, Charlotte Pilcher, as her personal stylist – "I hate shopping for clothes, because I've never got enough time and always end up buying the wrong thing." The other indispensable woman in her life is Elika Gibbs, a longtime friend with a business called Practical Princess, who colour-codes her wardrobe, Polaroids outfits, has her sweaters template-folded, and sometimes even packs for her when she goes away.

Proving claims from her best friend, *Tatler* editor-at-large Vassi Chamberlain, that she eats "like an American teenager", and her theory that weights rather than cardio are what fires one's metabolism up, she plumps for the roast veal, mashed potato... And a large Diet Coke. (Ever since she went into rehab over 14 years ago, Diet Coke, coffee and cigarettes are the only "addictions" she allows herself.) Tomorrow she is off to Tokyo to celebrate the first anniversary of the Jimmy

Choo boutique there and is still in two minds as to whether she should come home via New York in order to make Elton John's birthday party on Saturday night. (She has just been made a patron of the Elton John Aids Foundation.) "David [Furnish] really wants me to be there," she explains, "and I know the New York office would love it if I could be there, but that means I don't get to see Minty until Wednesday. It's so hard, because something has always got to give, hasn't it? The last time I went away and came back she had this complete meltdown, kicking and screaming and crying, 'Why do you have to go to work, mummy, why, when none of the other mummies at school go to work?'"

Mellon's calm, artless manner has confused many before me. There's an almost teenage quality to the way she gabbles her words and so easily summons that nervous, slightly wild laugh; a submissiveness to those who, from where everybody else is sitting, Have Done Her Wrong. And yet there's something about those unwavering, wee-bit-feral eyes

## Mellan is the Jimmy Choo customer. She is the embodiment of the unapologetically glamorous, ultra-postfeminist, slightly jagged lifestyle she sells

which suggests she can be as tough as can be if she wants to.

"I remember when Tamara agreed to share the risk of our launch back in June 2000," says her friend and ex-colleague at *Tatler* Natalie Massenet, founder of Net-a-porter.com, "she gave us 200 pairs of shoes up front, which of course sold out overnight. So when we came back next season to order the new collection she said, 'So. Now you know the shoes will sell, now you pay.' I was so green and there she was, unblinkingly negotiating in three seconds. I remember coming back to our office and saying, 'OK. Now I understand why Jimmy Choo is so successful.'"

"She's got balls," says Will Turner, group CEO of Paul Allen's Hospital Group and, along with his wife Emily Oppenheimer Turner, part of Mellon's intimate circle. "She's able to take a punt. She's also got that ability to be both creative and know her way round a balance

sheet at the same time, but somehow smuggling in the latter, which sometimes takes people unawares. That's a rare quality which you don't see in many people. She's also good at surrounding herself with this cabal of heavy-hitters from whom she can absorb all this stuff like a sponge. It's almost like she's got Harvard Business School at her disposal without ever having to leave the office. And, by the way, she's an immensely loyal friend."

"There's no mystery," says Diane von Furstenberg. "There's no shortcuts. She's good, she's bright and she works very hard. In many ways she reminds me of myself."

"What she's done, which is very hard to do," says Elizabeth Saltzman Walker, another of Mellon's gang, "is capture the masses and the coolies at the same time. Like using Brett Ratner [Hollywood's box-office boy wonder, director of *X-Men 3*, *Rush Hour* and *Red Dragon*] to photograph her campaign – that's asupercoolthingtodo, which mostmegabrands would never have the creativity to implement. God, but I find that coolness and calmness and good-naturedness of hers shocking sometimes. There've been so many situations, literally, where I've wanted to rip someone's head off for her. She's very Zen-like in that way."

"Oh, I know," says Mellon, scrabbling in her bag for another credit card because she had forgotten that she'd stopped the one she's just given the waiter, "Elizabeth is always telling me I need to be a bit more of a diva; it's true I accept things which would be unacceptable to others. But you have to let go of the revenge, especially where children are concerned. It's not about you, it's about them."

"Matthew [who, under the advice of his divorce lawyer at the time, claimed a substantial portion of the Jimmy Choo fortune, arguing that the business was built on the Mellon name] and I have to do what's best for Minty, and you know what? Matthew and I are great friends now, and she needs her dad.

"To a child, a parent is God," she goes on earnestly. "Everything a parent says to a child it believes and that can be so overwhelming. God, especially when they shout. It's just so frightening for their poor little ears."

The daughter of Tommy Yeardye, Diana Dors's ex-bodyguard and co-creator of the Vidal Sassoon product empire, Mellon was born in 1967 in Berkshire and raised in Beverly Hills and Belgravia, with stints at Heathfield and the Swiss finishing school La Videmanette. Though ferociously close to her father, she was far less so to her mother, whom one family acquaintance remembers as a "cool, rather distant figure wafting about in a kaftan, like > 188

something out of *Valley of the Dolls*"; and another as being "quite jealous of her daughter's close friendship with her husband".

Despite their differences, though, the relationship between mother and daughter had always been reasonably civil. Until, that was, the sudden death of Tommy in 2004. Soon after he died, Mrs Yeardye and Daniel moved back out to Beverly Hills and the three of them have not seen each other since. It is well known that Tamara's mother is claiming half of Tamara's shares in the business.

Mellon, not surprisingly, is keeping a dignified silence on the subject. But, according to Vassi Chamberlain, the fact that neither Tamara's father nor her mother will be there for Minty's fifth birthday party causes her "enormous pain". An attempt at reconciliation has been effected by Matthew, who is still in contact with his former mother-in-law and who has arranged for the whole family to meet up at The Meadows in Arizona for a week to talk things over, but as yet, the court case between Tamara and her mother is still set to go ahead.

"The biggest tragedy of my life was when my father died," says Mellon, gazing off into the distance with those watery-blue eyes and exhaling a thin plume of smoke from her nostrils, "and I still miss him desperately. The funny thing is I still feel his presence. The other day Matthew went to see a medium in Belgrave Square who came out with the name of a document that only myself, my dad and the lawyers ever knew about. Then Minty... She's been talking about her grandfather a lot lately. It sounds weird but I think children do have far more psychic energy than we do..." Her voice trails off. "Yeah, I do."

A week later and I'm back at the house. As promised, the sofas are now chocolate-brown and the wallpaper, not looking tartan at all, is up. With its red disc chandelier and sleek new coffee table, it does indeed look less Holland Park, more Halston. No-one is in here, though; everyone is packed into the Bratz-filled, plasma-equipped playroom for Minty's party. As per the bossy instructions of the two entertainers, an obedient circle has been formed by children in princess and prince outfits, as well as nannies and the odd mother; Claudia Schiffer included. On the periphery are waiters bearing orchid-decorated trays of hors d'oeuvres: rare roast beef wrapped round tiny bundles of matchstick chips, miniature prawn samosas with soy and coriander sauce. In the corner is a towering pink birthday cake which Minty, a blonde, prettily mannered little girl, keeps skipping over to look at.

Ah, and here is Minty's daddy, Matthew, a handsome, somewhat waxen-skinned man with an unusually black, luxuriant head of hair, in silver trainers. If truth be told, he seems a tiny bit the worse for wear since we last met five years ago, but he later assures me that the last time he had an alcoholic drink was at Christmas, and the "dark space" he told me about last week is about nothing other than a court case in which he has been charged with a single offence – which he denies – of "conspiracy to cause unauthorised modification of computer material". By his side is his modellly fiancée Noelle, in a cream-and-black suit and high, high heels, wondering aloud if "anybody around here has got a Diet Coke". And then there is Tamara, jetlagged no doubt (she only got in from New York yesterday) and baffled slightly by the proceedings – "It's terrible," she whispers nervously as the cake is passed around, "I'm not entirely sure who is a nanny and who is a mummy here." She looks absolutely beautiful nonetheless, with that high Nefertiti-like forehead and a radiant smile on Minty's special day. Minty, in turn, looks ecstatic at being able to show off her mummy to all her friends.

In two days' time Mellon, Minty and Veruschka, Minty's beautiful Brazilian nanny of two years, are off to St Barths with Bea and Hugh Warrender. Mellon has told me how much she is looking forward to this holiday, being able to spend some proper quality time with her beloved daughter. As I leave I find myself fervently hoping, even though I don't know her very well, that they both get plenty of it. ■

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