

(grand dame) she's shown two faces of royalty in *the queen* and *elizabeth I*, but **helen mirren** plays sensual, bawdy, crumbling, and stoic characters equally well, reminding audiences that there's a bit of each in all of us

by Margot Dougherty
Photograph by Robert Maxwell





The
MOVIE
ISSUE



“WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL,” Helen Mirren told a reporter years ago, “I vowed that when I made it, I wouldn’t be just good, I wouldn’t be just brilliant, I would be the greatest thing there ever was.” Today Dame Helen, who is 61, dismisses the quote as the silly posturing of a child. But given her recent run of standout performances, it’s easy to view the proclamation as prescient, or at the very least as an indication of the slow-burning drive behind a career that’s still heating up. ¶ Mirren got her start as a 20-year-old in Stratford-upon-Avon’s Royal Shakespeare Company. No surprise, she smoldered then, too, earning the sobriquet “the Sex Queen of Stratford.” It was her hard-bitten, decidedly unglamorous role as Detective Jane Tennison, however, the star of Masterpiece Theatre’s *Prime Suspect* series, that brought Mirren fame overseas. With an alchemist’s genius, she injects her characters with precisely concocted tinctures of their opposite, revealing complicated personalities in a slow, riveting striptease. Her capacity for oscillating—convincingly—from the raw sexuality of creatures like Georgina in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, which saw her having sex with a stranger in a bathroom stall, to women of regal and restrained mien is unparalleled. Last year she outdid herself. “It was a pretty amazing year,” she says. In a span of 12 months, Mirren solved her last case—and faced her alcoholism—as Tennison and took on what she calls the role of a lifetime as the tempestuous Virgin Queen in HBO’s *Elizabeth I*. She followed up with a powerful portrayal of Elizabeth II, an anachronistic monarch grappling with Princess Diana’s death, in *The Queen*. ¶ Mirren has lived in L.A. since the mid-’80s, but we spoke with her in London, where she and her husband, director Taylor Hackford, also have a home. She was on a break from filming her new movie *Inkheart*, a fantastical thriller.

Was it exciting or just frightening to have everyone crowding that you’re an Oscar shoo-in for *The Queen* before the nominations were even announced?

It’s wonderful and flattering and exciting, but you can’t afford to get too caught up in these things on an emotional or a professional level. You’re toddling down the road as an actor, whistling on your way to work, and then you see a path that leads off to the left and a big sign that says OSCAR! THIS WAY! You go, “Wow, that looks exciting. I think I’ll go down that path.” And you go walking down it, completely ignoring the sign that says BEWARE! FALLING ROCKS! You have to carry on working and living your life. I’m in Britain, working on another movie. I’ve been shooting in Italy. I’ve got family. As long as you’re not in Hollywood, it helps.

When you were first confronted with the wardrobe for *The Queen*, it brought you to tears. What about the getups was so distressing?

I’m very vain and I love lovely costumes and I’d just played Elizabeth I with the most unbelievable pearls and diamonds and rings and big dresses and big hair and crowns and ruffs and gorgeous, gorgeous things. And there were these tweeds and Barbour jackets and sensible walking shoes all lined up. I thought, “I can’t. I don’t know how I’m going to get my head around someone who chooses to wear only those clothes.” But when I did get my head around it, it became a wonderful place to be, because it’s a place without vanity. When you let go of all of that vanity, it’s so much more comfortable. I absolutely loved being Elizabeth Windsor. I connected with a young girl in

her. When I see pictures of her now, I think, “There’s my girl.” Of course, I obeyed all the requirements for playing a woman of the age she is and the shape she is and the way she walks and talks. But I always connected with the young girl in her.

Would it be fun to be the Queen?

No. Not the way she accepts the role, anyway. She doesn’t accept it as one long party. She accepts it with a deep sense of responsibility and duty.

Were there similarities between the 16th-century and the 21st-century Elizabeths?

Extraordinary similarities. They came to the throne at about the same age and had extremely long reigns. Elizabeth I was in her late sixties when she died. Most people didn’t live past 55. And Elizabeth II will, I think, have the longest reign ever in Britain by the time she goes. But there’s also a similarity in the sense they both put their chins up and walked into their role with complete acceptance of the implications of it, with an utter unneurotic psychological commitment to it. Some monarchs have seen it as an opportunity to be hedonistic and self-indulgent. Others have seen it as something they didn’t really want to do but had to. But those two said, “Okay, I’ve got to do this. I’m going to do it to the very best of my abilities, and I’m





going to commit my whole life to it.” That’s an amazing thing to do at the age of 25. You go into a place beyond ego where there is no choice. The biggest billionaires on this earth, like a Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, don’t come close to that kind of commitment.

It’s a position of enormous power, but one riddled with enormous restrictions. It’s a golden, golden place, but it’s a cage.

A lot of your characters work within that dichotomy. They’re strong but working against confinements of some sort. It’s the struggles that make characters interesting, isn’t it? Vulnerabilities. I never like the idea of playing “strong women,” because what makes characters interesting is their weakness, their flaws.

Why do you suppose you’ve played so many queens? I haven’t really—I just happen to have played two in one year.

Well, there was Queen Charlotte in *The Madness of King George*, and let’s not forget the animated ones, like *The Snow Queen*. Oh yes, and I played the queen of Egypt [in *Antony and Cleopatra*], that’s true! That was one of my favorite roles. I had such great costumes—and a hot body to go with them. I think if you manage to stay on in my profession, you get to play queens. If you’re a man, you get to play a few kings or presidents.

RANGE ROVER: Mirren’s disparate guises include (from top) Elizabeth II in *The Queen*, Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth I*, Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect*, and Georgina in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*

Are you still an antimonarchist now that you know the Queen so well?

I’ve mellowed over the years. By the time I came to play the Queen, I’d already stopped being so brutally judgmental. I don’t know if you get wiser, but you get easier about things like that. I now see it in the context of history and how horribly wrong countries can go under dictators. I prefer a monarchy to a dictatorship.

In 2003, you were given the title of Dame of the British Empire. What was that ceremony like?

It was incredibly moving. There are hundreds of people being honored. The dames and the knights are the first ones up. Then they have OBEs and CBEs, and medals for bravery for soldiers and policemen. The people who get honored are a fabulous, eclectic group. I got Prince Charles—he gives out the honors as well as the Queen. He spends two or three minutes with each person, making them feel special.

Who did you go with?

I went with my husband, my sister, and my niece. We got all dressed up. Everyone else arrived in chauffeur-driven cars. We hailed a taxi. Normally London cabs are clean, but we got the only one going around the city that obviously had been up all night. It was stinking of cigarettes, filthy inside, awash with fast-food litter at our feet. “Um, could you take us to Buckingham Palace?” We got out as fast as possible, hoping that nobody noticed that we arrived basically in a garbage can.

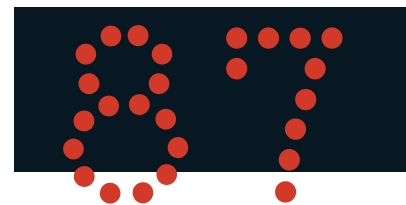
You grew up in a working-class suburb of London. What would your parents have thought of the pageantry of the ceremony?

My parents were vehemently antimonarchist. I can’t make up my mind if they would have been mortified or secretly quite proud.

You also grew up with your grandfather, a Russian aristocrat stranded in London at the start of the Bolshevik Revolution. What would he have thought?

I’m very sorry he didn’t see it. I’m a granddaughter of an asylum seeker, in a way, and on that level I am very proud. My grandfather was sent by the czar’s military to make an arms deal in Britain and was basically cut off by the revolution. When he arrived, he was an honored emissary, and he was living in the Russian embassy, which was incredibly luxurious. Within ten years he was having to work as a taxi driver in London. He experienced an incredible fall in fortune and status. His mother was an aristocrat, a countess. His father was a successful military man.

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Grand Dame

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87] We felt foreign and weird. We lived in a lower-income, working-class neighborhood. It was a very unglamorous environment. We became inward, a little enclave.

You've recently translated his diary.

Yes, I had his memoirs and letters from his sisters, from about 1917 to 1932, translated. They stopped when the Stalin purges kicked in, then started again in the '50s. Reading them was like lifting a curtain up on history.

Was he a prodigious writer?

Yes. I think he was so desperately, desperately homesick and profoundly unhappy, separated from his family, culture, language. To know what had happened in his country was very, very difficult. He suffered emotionally, but nothing like what others suffered in World War II. When you read what his sisters were going through, you think, "Well, you know what? It was just as well you were in Britain."

The deprivation and the difficulties in post-revolutionary Russia were horrendous.

Do you know of any extended family in Russia?

Yes! A British journalist and genealogist has found living relatives—and pictures of me as a child that my grandfather had sent—in Moscow! I've just found out. I was convinced reading these letters from my great-aunt to my grandfather that everyone was gone, swept away by history. The researcher found a relative who had kept my grandfather's letters, so now we have the other side of the correspondence. It's the most amazing thing.

How do you think living with your grandfather affected your outlook?

As a young kid I was the most romantically involved in hearing him talk about Russia and his estates and his house and his family.

Maybe knowing of the nobility in your background helped fuel your ambition.

I don't know. I'm not very good at thinking about that sort of thing. I wanted to be an actress at quite a young age—not expecting I would achieve it, but I wanted it. I actually think my acting comes naturally from my mother, not from my father. She was a huge drama queen.

But she wasn't too keen on your becoming an actress.



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No, quite rightfully, and that's one thing I'm so grateful to both my parents for. They vehemently taught us to be economically independent. It didn't matter if you were a boy or a girl. For my sister and I there was never any suggestion of "Don't worry, darling, you'll find a rich man and marry him." Ever. It was always "Make your own money, and no one can mess with you." To be financially independent and not be in debt was very important. It still is.

You married for the first time when you were 52. Are you still an advocate for late marriage?

There are no rules. People who get married at 17 could be just as happy as people who get married at 50. But I do think people get married for really bad reasons. I think it's so unnecessary to put everyone through that agony. Why not hold off until you know each other? I believe in marriage. I don't believe in divorce. I know, famous last words. But I didn't want to get married if I thought there was any possibility that this relationship would founder.

How do you divide your time between Los Angeles and London?

If my husband's in L.A. and I'm not working, I'm always in L.A. I'm really where he is when I'm not working. But I don't work a lot in L.A. Even when movies are made out of L.A., they're not made in L.A.

When you're away, what do you miss about Los Angeles?

The physical beauty. The gardens. I remember thinking when I first came, "Why don't they do anything with their gardens?" Now when you drive down streets like Fuller or Hauser, they're just ordinary people's gardens, but they're gorgeous. In spring I love the smell of eucalyptus and pittosporum.

What about the city are you happy to leave behind?

Spending so much time in the car. I love streets full of people, and you so rarely get that in L.A. On the other hand, there's nothing better than driving, being able to park, and getting your nails done for \$11. Manicures are so cheap there!

Do you have lots of Hollywood friends?

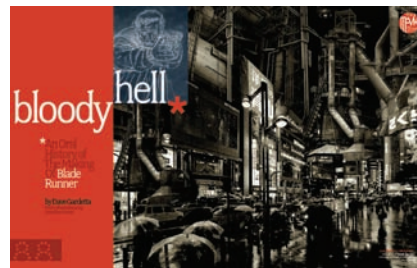
Movie-star-type friends? I don't think we do. We occasionally get invited to very starry-type parties where, every corner you look, there's some unbelievably famous person. What people forget is that movie stars in their hearts are unemployed actors, because once in their lives they've—we've—all been the one that nobody wants, who gets turned down for the job and lives in a one-bedroom apartment in wherever.

Hollywood, you once said, is hard for actresses between the ages of 44 and 58, but then there's a reprieve.

Did I say that? I don't know that it's true. It's all so bloody random. The most amazing things can come out of nowhere and take you by surprise. And the word *Hollywood* is such a miasma of different things. Are you specifically talking about American studio films or the movie industry, including independent movies, as a whole? Are we talking about network television? It's so broad: Hollywood. Hollywood doesn't really exist.

You've been nominated for an Oscar twice before. What would winning mean to you?

Oh, don't ask that. That's a terrible thing to ask. The reason I hate the question is, I don't have a cool answer. When I come up with a cool answer, I'll ring you. ■



Bloody Hell

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 93]

DEELEY: Without Lear we were left with a fucking boxing promoter who'd made a bit of money and an idiot as our financiers. They did a very foolish thing, which they did out of greed—taking on a completion guarantee and bonding the picture. I'd dealt with the devil before, but there was no time at that point.

CHAPTER SIX

Yes Guv'nor, My Ass

» **Catty remarks in a British newspaper lead to a nasty T-shirt and a production rebellion on the set**

SCOTT: Because of unionization in Hollywood, I couldn't bring in my own people. So I had to interview crews. I was a designer who wanted to be a filmmaker, so I needed the best because I was going to beat them up and say, "I want more." They were going to have to withstand that.

SNYDER: I thought I was in the presence of genius. But some people were, I'd say, legitimately terrified of Ridley. When Larry Paull and I finally set up all our drawings in the art department, he turned to Michael and said—as if Larry and I were not even in the room—"It's never what you want." I figured then that to give Ridley 90 percent of what you had, you had to give him 180 percent, and then he might be satisfied.