

# HELEN MIRREN

## An Audience with the *Queen*

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**C**ontroversy is not exactly foreign to Helen Mirren. She is a defender of the unconventional—a seminal risk taker dedicated to the art of her craft, not the outcome of the box office. One has only to glance at some of her now iconic roles: Georgina Spica, in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, the Empress Milonia Caesonia in Gore Vidal's *Caligula*, and perhaps the role she's most recognized for, DCI Jane Tennison in "Prime Suspect." She has been nominated twice for an Oscar (*Gosford Park*, *The Madness of King George*), not to mention a few Golden Globes and a myriad of Baftas (nine to be exact—with four wins).

Now nearly forty years into her variegated career, Mirren once again delves into a character many might consider verboten—the role of a sitting ruler, Elizabeth the Second, aka the current Queen of England. Already the accolades are pouring in; just last month she won the Volpi Cup (Best Actress) for her authentic portrayal of Her Royal Majesty at the Venice Film Festival. This comes on the heels of her Emmy Award-winning performance as Elizabeth the First, the outspoken daughter of Henry the VIII and Anne Boleyn. Stylistically, each character is markedly different—the first sovereign was emotional and prone to tantrums; Elizabeth II is the pinnacle of restraint. Yet Mirren confides, "There is a similarity in the two of them, and that is in their absolute, uncompromising commitment to being a monarch."

Directed by Stephen Frears, *The Queen* is an exquisite portrait of regal upheaval, focusing on one week in the life of Elizabeth II. It begins with the introduction of Tony Blair (Michael Sheen, superb) just days before the death of Princess Diana; Blair, the newly minted Prime Minister, is still very much the wide-eyed innocent, at once awed, yet still quite vigilant when faced with the overwhelming personality of his Queen—whom he soon must defend. After Diana's tragic demise, the Queen is thrust into the precarious position of handling the death of "The People's Princess"—a vibrant, troubled woman who was not exactly on the best of terms with her former mother-in-law. Under pressure, the Queen maintains the formality of her position, choosing to mourn privately the loss of someone who was cherished by so many.

Undoubtedly a rollercoaster period in British history, this was a time when a country was facing a myriad of emotions; the public was hysterical with grief and their monarch was conspicuously absent. During her own reign, Diana brought discord into the House of Windsor, not only with her fresh yet flagrant showcase of emotions (something that just wasn't "done") but with her overwhelming popularity—a fan base more monumental than any Hollywood heartthrob could ever hope for—and something the royal family was clearly not prepared to acknowledge or concede to.

While we can never really know what goes on behind those opulent palace doors, *The Queen* gives us, as Ms. Mirren puts it, "a very educated guess" about the life of a monarch and her family—what they go through, what they feel, and why their lives are not the stuff made of fairy tales. In actuality, theirs is a life of repetitious ritual, fraught with duty and constant scrutiny, rigorously minding matters of state.

A touchy subject, Frears certainly directs a discretionary tale, but in the end, it is really up to Mirren to deliver—and that she does. *The Queen* is an immense personality to contend with, yet Mirren brings to the screen not only her strengths, but many of the intricacies and nuances of a woman—we see her as a wife, a mother, and a grandmother—not just the stalwart ruler of a nation.

It is Mirren's vast well of subtlety that makes this larger-than-life monarch so mesmerizing; it's as if we were watching Elizabeth herself onscreen, mulling diligently over her pomp and circumstance before us. She is the embodiment—the perfect imitation. As Oscar Wilde once put it, "I love acting. It is so much more real than life."

Busy promoting the film which opens this month, Helen Mirren took time out to talk with Venice about portraying the most scrutinized monarch in British history, the final chapter of DCI Jane Tennison, and what success really means after playing the role of a lifetime.

**Venice: When you first read the script for *The Queen*, what was your initial gut reaction? Did you consider it a risky proposition?**

**Helen Mirren:** It originally came to me as

an idea by Andy Harries, (the producer of the film) who said, "I want to do a film about the Queen, I want you to act in it, I want Stephen Frears to direct it, and I want Peter Morgan to write it." So it came to me without the script. I knew that Peter Morgan and Stephen Frears were very substantial and serious artists within the film world, so I knew that it was going to be a classy project; they would bring that to it. But even so, I said, 'I can't possibly commit to this, until I've read the script. I don't know the tone of it, and unless it's right, as far as I'm concerned, I won't do it.' So I waited until the script was finished, and I thought it was a wonderful script; it was funny, it was sensitive, critical—a really beautiful script. So with great trepidation, I agreed.

**It seems to be a rather unusual turn of events that an actor would have the opportunity to play two queens—undoubtedly two of the most powerful women in the history of the British Empire: Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II. How does it feel to play the two most recognized women in the history of Britain?**

Well, as the penny dropped, it wasn't quite clear—I knew that I was offered to do both of them and I wasn't quite sure how the schedule would work out, but as the penny dropped that I would not only be playing both in the same year, but one after the year, that was a pretty amazing moment. I thought, wow, that must be a first for any actress. Though I have to say that although they are both iconic, and extraordinary characters, the one has power and the other has no power at all.

**Your depiction of the Virgin Queen (Elizabeth I) was surprising; she was very lustful and sassy. When you compare the two roles side by side, she makes her successor look really uptight. Can you discuss similarities between the two?**

Well, Elizabeth the First was a very tempestuous character—I wouldn't exactly call her sassy. She was very emotional; she was perfectly capable of bursting into tears and throwing shoes at people; she could also be very angry. And she would fall in love and had an extraordinary personality. The present Queen of England is a very different character. I wouldn't call her uptight, but I would call her restrained and self-dis-

ciplined in a way that Elizabeth the First wasn't. Of course, she has to be, because she lives in a very different climate, and a very different world. She's much more exposed than Elizabeth the First ever was. But there was a similarity in the two of them, and that was in their absolute, uncompromising commitment to being a

by the activities of the Royal Family. It's not that (we're) confused, but (we're) very schizophrenic in England about the Royal Family. We love them, and we feel we know them, and yet we don't know them at all. We love them and at the same time we despise them. So it's a very strange relationship the British people have with their monarchy.

world—the Warren Buffets and the Bill Gates—they can construct their own world around them. The monarchy can't. The monarchy, any monarchy—the Japanese monarchy, the Nepalese monarchy—they are trapped in the tradition and the culture of their country and they have to obey certain rules. And none of us can really remotely

## **[The Royal Family] live in a completely alien world and none of us can ever know what that must be like. The tragedy of Princess Diana was that she couldn't live in that world, she couldn't accept it and deal with it.**

monarch. To taking on board that role and performing it as best as they possibly could. And I think they both share an absolute mental and physical commitment to that role, and not a lot of monarchs have done that.

**Your husband Taylor Hackford directed *Ray*, about the life of Ray Charles. When you got this role, did you ask him for any advice, since he, too, had worked in a similar situation with a real person, not a fictitious character?**

That's very, very true. And I had this extraordinary performance by Jamie (Fox) in front of me, with obviously a deep knowledge of the kind of work that Jamie had done on *Ray*. Much harder, for Jamie, because he had to play the piano, he had to sing, he had to act blind—he didn't just close his eyes, you know, he had his eyes glued shut so he couldn't see. But a very similar requirement, because like the Queen, *Ray* is a very familiar person to all of us, we all know what he moved like, what he sounded like. But at the same time, it's knowing, and thinking that we know *Ray Charles*, when actually none of us really did know him, and we didn't know (the extent of) his inner demons. So there are a lot of similarities in the work.

**While playing Queen Elizabeth the Second, did you get a sense of the immense power this woman has over a nation?**

Well, she doesn't really have any political power at all. She has an emotional power over people, and it's a conflicted power. I think people's emotions are very conflicted about the Queen. We make fun of our Royal Family all the time, some of us, while at the same time other people are overly, you know, excessively respectful as far as the royal family are concerned. The class system of Great Britain depends on the existence of the Royal Family to a certain extent and that is an intrinsic part of our culture, still today. So a lot of people hate the monarchy for that very reason. At the same time, we're always amused and entertained

**The intercutting of actual footage of Princess Diana running from the paparazzi and her subsequent funeral makes the film seem even more realistic. Though this is based on actual events, do you think this stylistic choice will influence people to believe what they're seeing is 100% true?**

I don't think so, because people are sensible enough to realize what the Duke of Edinburgh says to the Queen before they go to bed. Having said that, everything in the film comes from a very educated guess, so everyone's done a lot of research and then we make a guess. We don't know how close to the reality it is, but I suspect it's pretty close to the reality.

**The film has already been released in England. Have you heard about any reactions from the people or the monarchy? I read yesterday that you said you didn't think you'd be sitting down with the Queen anytime soon.**

No, I don't know if I'll ever sit down with the Queen. What I do know is that the Royal Family is very generous and accepting of the freedom of speech that we have in England. And, also, we have a very robust tradition of political satire, and the Royal Family have been victims of that for many years; and they've accepted that with extremely good grace. They accept it as a part of our culture in Britain. I don't think they're going to be angry and resentful and punishing because of this film.

**No, the film is very fair, I would say.**

Yes, we tried to be, and honest, and have as much integrity as possible.

**What do you think is the public's fascination with royalty? Is it that it perpetuates the ideal of the fairy tale? With Princess Diana it really brought on a whole new meaning.**

No, I don't think it was ever a fairy tale existence, but the fascination with the monarchy is that none of us have any concept of what that must be like. I was thinking today that even the wealthiest people in the

comprehend what that's like, and that's why I think there's incredible fascination. Because they are one of us, and utterly not like us at all. They live in a completely alien world and none of us can never ever know what that must be like. The tragedy of Princess Diana was that she couldn't live in that world, she couldn't accept it and deal with it.

**Do you think Princess Diana's death was a wake-up call for the monarchy to modernize their way of thinking?**

No, I don't. I think they dealt with what they dealt with in the movie there and then and they did what they had to do. I don't think they need a wake-up call—wake up from what? Yes, the culture is changing; the world is changing, without a doubt, but they see their strength, and in many ways, they're right. Their strength is in their consistency, and the fact they are not roaming around by what's in and what's out. They believe in tradition and consistency and a role in history. And when you're looking at your role in five hundred years of history, what happens in a week is important, but not that important.

**Let's talk about your recent Emmy speech. You mentioned the fact that we women make up over 60% of the world's population, and that it's important to continue writing for us. Why did you feel it was important to say that in that moment?**

Because I wanted to celebrate the performances of the other women that were nominated with me, and I was thinking about it at that moment and how to do that, and then I thought the reason we were all nominated was because someone wrote us great roles. It's great to see all of these women doing what they do so well, but they can only do it with good writing.

**What do you think about the fact that Hollywood still has a rather idealized notion of the female character? You say "strong woman" and people have a tendency to think Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*.**

There's always going to be a space in our film culture for the Spiderman's and the Superman's. Basically, I think as we get women in greater positions of power in the world, we see it reflected on the screen. Probably ten years ago, it would have been inconceivable to have a female President and here we've seen Geena Davis playing that role on television (ABC's "Commander In Chief"). But now with Madeleine Albright, with Condoleeza Rice, we're seeing women in positions of great, great power, we've started seeing these roles in film and television. I've always said don't worry about the roles in movies or on television, look for the great roles in life.

**For you, what would you say is the ultimate definition of success? Is it recognition by your peers, the public, or is it more internal?**

I think the definition of success is that you get another job. Clearly that's what it's all about, that someone wants to offer you another job, isn't it?

**One last thing—I've always been a big fan of Prime Suspect...**

Oh yes! You know the last one's coming in November.

**Jane Tennison is an iconic career woman, but she's not been all that successful in her personal life. Will that all come together in "Prime Suspect 7," or do you think her career is her only real love?**

Oh my darling, my lips are sealed! *[laughs]* You're going to have to wait and see. ▼

