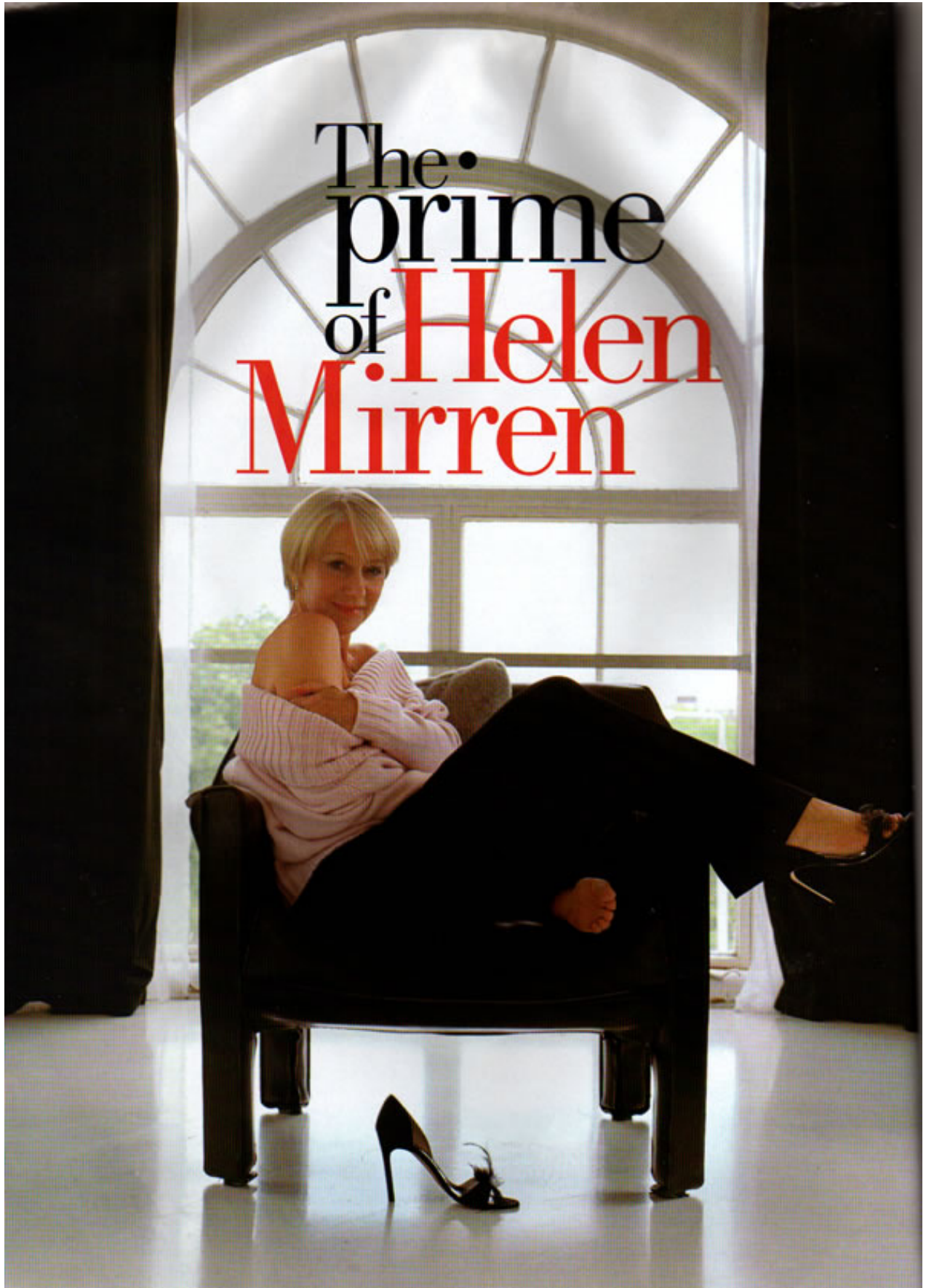


The
prime
of Helen
Mirren



Helen Mirren is that rare thing – a British actress who doesn't buy into Hollywood, yet is as big a star in LA as she is at home. She can't be pigeonholed for her work and she's anything but conventional. Here, she lifts the lid on married life, stripping off on screen and her secret crush

INTERVIEW: TIFFANY ROSE

Helen Mirren is adored by men and women in equal measures – and it's easy to see why. She's an independent woman who married her dream man at 52. A Dame with a tattoo (she has an Indian symbol meaning "equality" between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand). A global sex symbol at one year short of 60. Oh, and she once described herself as being "famous for being cool about not being gorgeous". What's not to like?

So, it's with a sense of anticipation that I await her arrival at an LA hotel. Will this universally revered woman be as wonderful in the flesh? Suddenly, Helen breezes into the suite with an air of let's-get-to-it-ness. Dressed in a pale pink and grey skirt with matching blouse, her blonde hair cut short to frame her face, she's the kind of person you can actually feel enter a room. She possesses an intense, almost intimidating quality – and it's difficult to disassociate her from DCI Jane Tennison, her character in the BAFTA award-winning *Prime Suspect* series. But after chatting for a few minutes, she is less stern than you first think.

Helen is here today to talk about her latest movie, *The Clearing*, a psychological thriller in which she plays the wife of Robert Redford, who's kidnapped by one of his former employees (Willem Dafoe). In a sudden girlie moment, Helen confesses to having a crush on Redford (or "Bob", as she affectionately calls him). "I never had a crush on any movie star, with the mild exception of Mel Gibson in his *Mad Max* days, because those blue eyes were pretty amazing. But he sort of brings his Robert Redfordness to the screen," she says. "I have a lot of admiration for him and what he's achieved. Last year I was made a Dame, and if Bob was British he would be Lord Robert Redford, without a doubt!"

And what of the legion of male admirers who have a crush on her? "I don't think about being a sex symbol," she says, with evident surprise. "Quite honestly, I don't think it's true. I just get on with my work, do my thing, and do it as best I can. Maybe men find me appealing because I don't try that hard. I'm just not uptight about it. Of course it's flattering – but it's dangerous. If they begin with that label, they might one day say, 'Oh, she used to be a sex symbol, but she isn't any more.'"

On the question of resorting to the surgeon's knife, however, Helen won't be drawn. "I hate talking about

plastic surgery," she says firmly. "I find it offensive actually." What she will talk about, though, is an actor's right to portray themselves in the best light in order to secure a part. "In our job, people have to like to look at us," says Helen. "We have to present a physique that is watchable, so we do all kinds of things. We eat the right foods, some of us spend hours in the gym – not me, mind you – some of us have plastic surgery. There are always going to be actors and actresses who have invested in being beautiful, and if their job relies on it, of course they're going to say they're 28 and not 34. Why not lie? Get the job, you know? Pay off the mortgage. Why are we all so strict on this?"

That said, youth and beauty are obviously no substitute for pure, can't-take-your-eyes-off-them acting talent. "Of course, I like to see young, beautiful people on the screen," admits Helen. "I don't want to see people like me up there, but I don't mind seeing me if I'm a good actress, if you know what I mean. Then fine, I can appreciate a great bit of acting."

Naked ambition

Born Ilyena Lydia Mironoff (she's of Russian extraction on her father's side), Helen grew up in a working-class family in Essex. "They were a bit bohemian," she says of her parents. "We were the first people in our street to eat yogurt." Although brought up in the Russian Orthodox faith, she attended a Catholic girls' school in Southend-on-Sea. "We had no money, but my childhood memories are certainly happy," says Helen. "I was lucky I didn't grow up in today's society of advertising, where 'You gotta have this' and 'You gotta have that'. We had no TV, radio or record player and, apart from my school uniform, I had one pair of shoes and one dress. Life was much simpler back then."

From the age of 6, Helen desperately wanted to be an actress but, unable to afford the fees for stage school, her parents encouraged her to train as a secondary school teacher. This she duly did, until a stunning performance as Cleopatra at the National Youth Theatre (where she had been acting in the school holidays) sealed her fate. By the age of 20, she had joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, where she quickly established herself as a major talent, thanks to roles such as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, playing opposite Dame Judi Dench. It was only a matter of time before she made the transition from stage to screen. In 1984, she collected the Best Actress award at Cannes for her portrayal of an Irish widow in *Cal*; she received Oscar nominations for her parts in *The Madness of King George* (1994) and *Gosford Park* (2001); and last year, she starred in the hit comedy *Calendar Girls*, in which she appeared naked save for a few strategically placed props.

It's not the first time Helen has stripped off in the name of her art (see the explicit historical drama >



Helen says she doesn't see herself as a sex symbol but, now almost 60, she's looking better than ever

Caligula and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, in which she memorably makes love wearing only stockings and a pair of stilettos). "There's a level of pure embarrassment that goes into being the only person without your clothes on among a set of 60 people," admits Helen. "But let's face it, I'm in that moment where I am most honest about myself."

And she's refreshingly candid about revealing all as an older woman. "When you're very young, it's only natural to be hyper-critical of your body. That's the society we live in. In fact, that's the point of *Calendar Girls*. It's about letting go of these silly notions and realising what's truly important. The weird thing is, it gets easier as you get older. You let go of the fact that you want to be beautiful. You become less of a sexual object, which is very liberating. You just don't give a damn any more. Okay, I give a little bit of a damn!" It's this attitude that Helen used to rally her co-stars – a stellar cast of women of a certain age, including Celia Imrie, Annette Crosbie and Julie Walters – into dropping their inhibitions along with their clothes. "I told them, 'Don't bother with flesh-coloured G-strings or putting things over your nipples. Just go for it.' We also shared a glass of champagne. Well, maybe five or six."

It's not common knowledge, but while Helen was in Yorkshire filming *Calendar Girls*, her younger brother, Peter, died of cancer (she also has an older sister, Kate).

It's not a subject she wishes to discuss at length, but her grief is palpable. "I was doing a comedy, so I had to repress my emotions while I was going through the whole thing with my brother," says Helen quietly. "Then I went straight into *The Clearing* and I still hadn't had time to absorb the pain. My character needed to be very withdrawn during this film, and I told Pieter [Jan Brugge, the director] that I didn't think I could cry. I was intellectualising. When he shouted, "Action!", this complete kind of emotional breakdown just came out of me! It wasn't acting, it was me actually responding to my brother's death, and I didn't want the camera to see it. It was a very private moment."

"It's great having a husband. I love saying 'my husband' – I didn't think I would, but I do!"

Professionally and personally, Helen has never been short of male admirers. Liam Neeson is an old flame, and she was once – unknowingly – wooed by Hollywood playboy Warren Beatty. After seeing her in an RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida* in London in 1968, Beatty apparently left notes at the stage door and phoned her. Thinking her friends were playing a practical joke, Helen ignored his advances. For the past six and a half years, she has been married to Taylor Hackford, 60, an American film director whose CV includes *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *The Devil's Advocate*. They first met 20 years ago, when Hackford asked her to read for a role in one of his movies. It wasn't the most auspicious of meetings – he remembers a furious Helen rebuking him for being 25 minutes ▶

celebrity interview



late for their appointment. Taylor recalls, "When Helen left after performing fabulously, I thought, 'Wow, she's a handful.'" As for Helen, she says, "I actually wasn't very attracted to him at first. He was so forceful, and I like to enjoy things, take it easy and go for slow walks. He's not like that."

There was obviously a spark, however, because a year later, in 1986, Helen upped sticks to live with Taylor in LA, a city she describes as "brutal and unforgiving" (Taylor's two grown-up sons from his two previous marriages live there). They finally married in Scotland on New Year's Eve 1997. "Taylor wanted to get married there," she says. "He has Scottish blood, and he possesses that clichéd Scottish characteristic – he's famous for being careful with money! In America they call it cheap. You know, always looking for a bargain. And he was dying to wear his kilt. He just couldn't wait."

Helen admits she's never had a huge maternal instinct. "Not having children isn't the end of the world," she says, matter of factly. "That was just the way it went for me, which was my own decision. I've been in relationships where the men desperately wanted children, but it was never what I really wanted at the time. I only wanted to be pregnant once, when I had a brief fling with a very extraordinary man who was much younger than I was. He was a Native American, a Pueblo Indian from New Mexico, and he had such a wonderful spirit that I very much wanted to have a baby

with him. I was very much a hippy then, and I thought that would be a cool mix of our two ethnicities. But I didn't get pregnant, which is probably just as well."

So has marriage changed anything for her after cohabiting for so many years? "It's great having a husband," says Helen, her mouth lingering over the word. "I love saying 'my husband'. I just love it. I never thought I would, but I do. And being married provides a fabulous excuse if you want to wriggle out of something. You just say, 'I'd love to do it, but I'm afraid my husband won't be able to.'"

Living the high life

Since being with Taylor, Helen has divided her time between London and LA. "I'm working so much that my home is seat 3A on United," she laughs. "I've even decorated it myself. I've put up little curtains! No, seriously, I think my spiritual home is probably London, but I spend a lot of time in LA. I don't have a dog because I don't have a home in that sense. I'd love to have a dog, but it would be irresponsible of me."

Judging by her hectic work schedule, all thoughts of canine companionship are going to have to wait for quite some time. Nudging 60 she might be, but the movie roles are in no danger of drying up. And rightly so, reckons Helen. "Women need to relate to women of the same age on the screen," she says. "I don't know why Hollywood can't get it. As women of a certain age, we're a prime audience. We grew up going to movies, and we want to keep going to the movies with our girlfriends. We want to see our own life experiences up there."

Last year, Helen's contribution to acting was honoured when she was made a Dame in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. But how does the irrepressible Ms Mirren take to being viewed as a national treasure? Having always considered herself "a bit of an outsider", she admits she initially felt ambivalent about her title. "I was a little wary, because actors should be anti-establishment in a way," says Helen. "But on the other hand, I'm the daughter of an immigrant, and that makes me very proud." On possibly being the first Dame with a tattoo, she quips, "Well, I got my tattoo when only sailors and Hell's Angels were getting them. I'm appalled that it's become a kind of middle-class thing to do. I'm actually disgusted with Hollywood, you know!" ■
Catch The Clearing at cinemas from 3 September.

**CLOCKWISE FROM
BOTTOM LEFT:**
Helen in new film
The Clearing; being
invested as a DBE
in December 2003;
with husband
Taylor Hackford



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