

Theatre ROYAL

Once would probably be enough for most actresses to take on the role of the Queen – but not Helen Mirren. *Christa D'Souza* meets a very regal rebel. Portraits by *Boo George*

What is the correct way to describe how Dame Helen Mirren enters a room? With a sweep and a bustle is how it seems when she arrives for our interview. But there's a hint of regality to the bustle, and one cannot help feeling a sense of, well, awe almost, in her presence.

"Ah, but that's all kudos to the Queen, not to me," says Mirren, with a tilt of her silver-haired head. "I'm just borrowing the inbuilt respect. And anyway, do you think people treat me like the Queen? I don't think they do. I certainly hope they don't."

They do. And the reason they do is the Oscar she won for playing her in Peter Morgan's 2006 film. This year sees her reprise the role (sadly minus that passel of naughty corgis) in *The Audience*, a stage play, also written by Morgan, and directed by Stephen Daldry. It pivots around imagined audiences between the Queen and each of her 12 prime ministers – from Churchill (played by Robert Hardy) to Cameron (Rufus Wright). "Imagined" because those hour-long weekly conversations that take place during a prime minister's tenure are never recorded and never discussed, even with family members.

When Morgan wrote it he had Mirren in mind for the part, but no assurance she would say yes. "In fact, I was fully prepared for her *not* to do it," he says. "I just thought it would be bad manners not to give her first refusal. I was very much the bringer of bad news."

"When Peter emailed to say he'd written this play, my response was: 'You bastard!'" Mirren cheerfully confirms. "Of course I wasn't going to turn it down, it's a lovely role to inhabit. But at the same time, I wasn't sure I wanted to go back there. It was hard enough wriggling out of being Jane Tennison. I do sometimes think, if I die in a plane crash tomorrow, will people always think of me as The Actress Most Famous for Playing the Queen?" > 334

"Do you think people treat me like the Queen?" asks Mirren, with a tilt of her silver-haired head. "I don't think they do. I certainly hope they don't." Brocade coat with studded collar, £3,690, Michael Kors. Silk tunic dress, £560, Osman, at Matches. Leather shoes, £375, Jimmy Choo. Hair: Tina Outen. Make-up: Lotten Holmqvist. Digital artwork: Kasia Kret at Studio Invisible. Fashion editor: Verity Parker



Clockwise from top left: the “witty and marvellous actress from the RSC”, photographed by Richard Imrie, *Vogue*, 1970; with her pet rabbit in “Latest London”, a 1976 shoot by Snowdon; at the London premiere of *Hitchcock* last year; “a strong and charming face”, captured by Snowdon, 1976; Anders Overgaard photographs Helen pre-Oscars, 2002 – they were “like going on a ride in Disneyland. You get off saying, ‘Wow, can I go on it again?’”



They will not. Well, not all of them. For if you are of a certain generation – ie mine – you do not think of Mirren as the Queen, or even Jane (*Prime Suspect*) Tennison, but as the edgiest, sexiest actress ever to come out of this country, bar perhaps Charlotte Rampling. Mirren was the poster girl for post-feminism before post-feminism even existed. Check out her 1967 filmic debut on Youtube, an experimental version of *Herostratus*, or, indeed, the nude staircase scene she does in Ken Russell’s X-rated *Savage Messiah* (also on Youtube; though you may give up searching, with all the warning boxes you’ll have to tick first). Check her out, too, in her legendary 1975 interview with Michael Parkinson, in which he is seemingly unable to fathom the idea that an actress can take her clothes off for the camera *and* be a member of the RSC. Despite graciously agreeing to be interviewed by him again, nearly a quarter of a century later, Mirren never quite forgave him, and it was painful to watch him trying, and failing, to make amends.

“Weeell, he always denied he fucked up, but he did,” says Mirren, in her glottal, very slight Estuary accent. “It’s funny. My memory of it is that I was *petrified*. Trembling with fear. When I saw it again, I was amazed to see how cool and clever I came off. That was probably the first talk show I ever did; I’m more practised on them now.”

A little hoarse from spending all yesterday on the set of her latest film, *Reds Two* – a sequel to the action-comedy blockbuster she made with Bruce Willis and John Malkovich two years ago – Mirren looks understated today, dressed in head-to-toe black in labels she genuinely cannot recall. The only burst of colour is her bright tapestry bag, a gift from Dolce & Gabbana. On her feet are rolled-down flesh-coloured pop socks and some boots she saw in a shop window in Islington the other day; Spice, she thinks it was called. “Everything just looks so much more appealing and interesting if it’s not in your manor. And Islington isn’t my manor; Wapping is, when I am in London. It’s kind of like the food on someone else’s plate in that way.”

The light this morning is unforgiving but, even so, Mirren’s un-made-up skin (if you don’t count the fake eyelashes she was given yesterday on set) is staggeringly good. If this is what 68 looks like, I tell her, we should *all* want to be 68, a compliment which she deflects in true British, hand-flapping style. “Don’t look at me like that! I’m so self-conscious!” But still. A *Prime Suspect* nutter of a friend is convinced some sort of “facial enhancement” must have taken place between series five and six –

that is, some time after 1996 and before 2003. *Has she had any work done? And if she has, might I have that person's name?*

"Ha, ha," she giggles, before moving deftly on: "Well, you know what? I am going to go back and have a look. I mean, I know this is a such a dodgy answer, but it could be the different lighting. In *Reds Two*, for example, I'm going to look *fabulous* because of the amazing cinematographer."

Fair enough. Mirren is too much of a theatrical Titan to push it. We should be thankful enough she isn't one of those actresses who looks the same in her sixties as she did in her thirties, in that ghoulishly, cipher-like, Hollywood way. I, for one, am fascinated to see how she will "age" from 23 to 85, as she will on stage in *The Audience*.

"We had the choice of making her mumsy, but we decided no," says Daldry. "And that, I think, was great fun – almost a challenge for her – when revisiting the role, to play the whole span of her extraordinary reign as opposed to one part of it."

Although there are different wigs and clothes sizes, Daldry adds, the part needed someone who had the assurance to pull it off. "Helen is not intimidated by playing the Queen," he says. "Concerned, but not intimidated." But then, as Mirren once politely told an Australian interviewer who asked if she'd do an impression for him, it's not quite like putting on a hat.

She describes the "interior beat" she felt making *The Queen*, how so much of the monarch's tension had to be played out in her ring finger. "Helen had to contain herself because the Queen is not allowed to express her opinions," explains Peter Morgan. "In that respect, she has no power at all, but that does not mean she has no influence. She conveys very clearly what her opinion is by developing an entire subtextual language. But, then, Helen knows all about not transgressing boundaries, she is such a pro in matters like that."

The daughter of a "shop girl" from Ilford and a sophisticated Russian émigré turned London cabbie, Mirren was brought up with her two siblings in Southend. She was bitten by the acting bug after watching a "pretty rubbish" amateur production of *Hamlet* at the age of 13, recruited by the National Youth Theatre and then – having spent a short time, at her parents' request, training to be a teacher – joined the RSC. At 21, she won her first major film role

opposite James Mason in *Age of Consent*. Blonde, new and British, she caused a huge fuss, but she insists she was never considered a beauty like, say, Julie Christie. "Basically, I was too broad to be considered beautiful. In those days you were meant to look like Twiggy, as did my great friend Sandy [Sandy Campbell, a tall redhead who has been Mirren's PA for 17 years and is here today]. I wasn't fashionable because I was too fat."

Mirren jokes about her "footballer legs" and how life is "one big long diet". But, as we all know from that paparazzi shot of her in a red bikini not four years ago, she isn't just in shape for her age, she's in shape for someone 20 years younger. One cannot help associating this with the fact that she has never had children. She never wanted them, after being shown a film about childbirth at school. "It was not my destiny," she says simply. "I kept thinking it would be, waiting for it to happen, but I never did, and I didn't care what people thought. Women never gave me a hard time, anyway, it was only boring old men. And whenever they went 'What? No children? Well, you'd better get on with it, old girl,' I'd say 'No! Fuck off!'"

One can imagine her doing so. Just as one can imagine her telling a journalist how she once loved taking cocaine at parties. There's a feistiness, a minxiness, about those green Slavic eyes. "Helen is very smart and very funny," says *The Audience's* co-producer Andy Harries, whom Mirren has known since *Prime Suspect* days, "and that great sense of humour quickly emerges with a couple of vodka gimlets."

Morgan describes her as "a genuine good egg. Helen carried a huge responsibility promoting *The Queen*, answering one moronic question after another and being shuttled from this place to that. She did about 60 of these things and each time she said something slightly different because she *knew* Stephen Daldry and I would be listening and didn't want to bore *us*. She was just unfailingly brilliant throughout."

Helen does give awfully good red carpet, more so, it seems, with every passing year; at

the *Hitchcock* premiere in Los Angeles last November, in a tight black-and-gold Dolce sheath, she more than held her own next to co-stars Scarlett Johansson and Jessica Biel. But Mirren's friends will tell you that, actually, she is not that much of a "fashion person". One acquaintance lets slip, for example, that the lovely things she is given to wear at events often end up at charity shops the next day. Meanwhile, the jacket she wore at her wedding to director Taylor Hackford in 1997 was acquired from a 70 per cent markdown rail in some Los Angeles department store. But Mirren has always had her own, quite specific, style. She was a huge influence in her day, with that seductive fringe and those strawberry-blonde curls, the velvet chokers and a peacock feather she used to hold whenever, so she claimed, she was nervous. "It's always been the costume aspect of it all," she says. "Like, if you ask me who my fashion icon is now, it would probably be Helena Bonham Carter. Often I had to make my own things because I could never actually find what I wanted in the shops. Although there was this one apple-green suede jacket Ossie Clark made for me, with this little peplum and these little shoulders... Gosh, I wonder where that is, it would be so fashionable now."

One can just see her in the jacket, back then, in the commune-y cottage she virtually lived in as an impoverished actress, cobbling together roasts for the multitudes, listening to "the Floyd", as she calls them, dropping LSD and all those things trendy young sorts did in the early Seventies. Another vestige of that era is the "X" tattoo she has between her thumb and forefinger, acquired while working with the theatrical director Peter Brook in Chinon in France. "Yes," she says, looking at it fondly, "we were in this beautiful abbey that had been turned into a prison. Some of the prisoners had these beautiful tattoos in the shape of tears and the like, and I remember being drunk and thinking: 'Ooh, I'd like one of those.'"

In those days, Mirren admits she rather sought notoriety and had strong ideals about being an artist. "I had these incredibly strong trailblazers in Glenda Jackson and Vanessa Redgrave," she shrugs, "especially Glenda Jackson. I'll always remember this story about her on the set of *Women in Love*. Apparently, she took off her dressing gown, cleared her throat and went, 'OK, everybody. This is what it looks like from the front... And this is what it looks like from behind. Now, let's just get on with it.' I thought that was *great*. Which didn't mean as a young woman it wasn't painfully difficult for me taking my clothes off for the camera. In those days a 'closed set' was very > 396

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This page: linen tuxedo jacket, £455, Joseph. Crêpe dress, £1,100, Roksanda Ilincic, at Selfridges. Suede sandals, £470, Alexander McQueen. *Opposite:* wool tuxedo jacket, £1,195, Stella McCartney, at Matches. Silk blouse, £225, Equipment, at Harvey Nichols. *For stockists, all pages, see Vogue Information*





different, boiling over with testosterone, all those thick-necked male grips staring at you. I wanted to die that day I had to come down that staircase in *Savage Messiah*, but it was sort of mind over matter.”

Would Mirren consider stripping for the camera now? “It would have to be for a very, very good reason,” she says. “On the other hand, although I almost don’t want to talk about this because I can just see the headline, ‘Dame Helen Mirren Is a Nudist’, is nudity *that* bad? It’s a great leveller, you know, in its place, on the beach, where everybody else is naked. The sex thing is completely wiped out and there’s this wonderful innocence and sweetness about doing it. I mean, there are these Korean baths where I go in LA, where you aren’t even *allowed* to wear a swimming costume. If you do, one of the ladies will come up and say ‘Take that thing off!’”

Mirren once said one of the more challenging stages of a woman’s life is that in-between period when she’s past being an attractive older woman and not quite an old lady. “Did I say that? Well yes, it is weird when everything starts heading south, but it is *not* a sad thing. One *has* to find a different way of being,” she adds. “Sometimes I see women of 60 or 70 who haven’t managed to step out of that way of being and, though not consciously, are using their physicality and girlishness with people the way they used to when they were younger. Sometimes I find myself doing it and think: *fuck*, this is so... grotesque is too harsh... so *unnecessary*. There are certain things you have to come to terms with just because that is the way it is.”

This supremely sensible way of thinking may be helped by the fact her husband Taylor Hackford (who directed her in the 1985 film *White Nights*, and with whom she has been living ever since) is “the most profoundly unsexist person” she has ever come across. “I mean, without thinking about it, with no political stance, he looks at women and men with utter equality,” she shrugs. “Course, that doesn’t mean he can put the fucking dishes in the fucking dishwasher. He actually said to me the other day, ‘Oh, that’s your job.’ But he said it in an utterly non-sexist way.”

There have been other fabulous men in her life, among them the actors Kenneth Cranham and Liam Neeson (whom she met, and taught how to eat prawns, on the set of John Boorman’s film *Excalibur* in 1981, when he was still in his twenties). But it is not true, she corrects, that she once sent Warren Beatty packing. “But I can understand how lethal he must have been,” she nicely allows, “because he was so interesting and so bright and he did that very simple thing of listening. He made you feel interesting and important.”

She and the Ewok-ish Hackford sound as if they live a pretty charmed life, with their villa in Puglia which they have been renovating for the past six years. Yes, they are somewhat ships in the night, with her filming or on stage and him based in LA. And though she enjoys being married, the institution slightly baffles her. It was 15 years, and partly for tax reasons, before they tied the knot.

Her pipe dream is that she and Hackford will retire to the villa, drink wine from their cellar, cook lentil soup and “Robert Carrier-type” stews, and “permanently till the land”. But, of course, that is a pipe dream, for after two or three months of not working she always feels slightly unhinged. “I’m basically very lazy. My default button is to sleep until midday and watch daytime TV. Like any wage slave I need boundaries and schedules to exist.”

Although she admits to having lost some of the idealistic commitment she had in her twenties and thirties, theatre, she says, is something she keeps going back to in order to prove that she still can. “Each time I forget I can do it,” she says, “and each time I go back with so much fear.” Fearful? Dame Helen Mirren? Really, she need not be at all. ■

“*The Audience*” is at the Gielgud Theatre from February 15 to June 15

that, as he was leaving, he turned to Lucie and said: “You’ve got a star up there.” And that star was me. I’d almost given up as a model; I’d spent a year trying to get work and hadn’t had any luck. I wouldn’t have had a career without Parkinson. On my first job, he took me to Paris to do a collection story. I was rather plump at the time, so two weeks before going he put me on a starvation diet. He was a Svengali: he liked to mould and shape models – if you made decisions and tried to think for him he would tell you to “stop acting like a model”. He always wanted me to look completely natural. I worked with him for about 18 months, almost exclusively. He hated his models working with other photographers; I did a shoot with Terence Donovan and he was furious. Not that I especially enjoyed modelling. I remember going to Blackpool to do a shoot on the beach. I was self-conscious about my legs and he made me wear a swimming costume and parade up and down the pier in front of lots of old pensioners. I felt like a right prat. But I adored him.

NICOLA ROBERTS, *director of an upcoming Arena programme about the photographer*

Parkinson’s background reminds me of an Ealing comedy, especially *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. He said he grew up in a semi-detached in Putney but he went to Westminster with his brother, and described them making their way to school with people throwing tomatoes at their top hats. Their school fees, I think, were paid by two wealthy aunts. I think at the heart of Parkinson was that he wasn’t one of the rich boys at school, and one of the ways of circumventing not being one of the rich boys, when you’re taking pictures of debutantes and that sort of thing, is to have the sports car, the talk, the interesting clothes and to be slightly *louche*.

He also talked about his town and country origins: about his father’s side being something to do with farming, and on his maternal side he was keen to emphasise his forebears, one of whom was a very famous Italian opera singer, Luigi Lablache, who gave Queen Victoria singing lessons. Parkinson always claimed to be comfortable in town or country – in an Italian palazzo or a field – and I think those two strands are themes in his photography: the exotic backdrops and the muddy wellingtons.

ANNA HARVEY, *vice president and senior editor of brand development at Condé Nast International and former stylist*

He gave me the best piece of advice of my career. I was at *Bazaar* before I went to *Brides*, and I asked his advice about the move. “It’s Condé Nast,” he told me. “Toe in the door. Get it in there!” And so I took the *Brides* job, had seven gloriously happy years with him and never looked back. On a shoot, he was a gentleman – everything was very ordered and everyone behaved immaculately. We all rather stood on ceremony. There was no question he was the boss. We all trailed along in his wake and he was marvellous like that. He had a marvellous manner with everybody, almost colonial, I suppose.

For me, he was all about the trip – with a capital T! – the simplicity, the silhouette and the landscape, just positioned, just perfectly, just so. Incredible. Think of that incredible image of the girl with the birds in the Foale & Tuffin dress. Can you imagine how long they had to stand there before those birds started to move? Just amazing. I always think of his pictures as coffee-table book images – he was a master at that. An absolute master. ■

“*Lifework: Norman Parkinson’s Century of Style*” is at the National Theatre from March 1 to May 12. As part of *Bath in Fashion 2013*, a show of his work, “*Mouvements de Femmes: Norman Parkinson by Roland Mouret*”, will be held at the city’s Octagon between April 13 and May 12