

Helen Mirren and the Theatre

by Fiona Thurn

While Dame Helen Mirren's international acclaim is largely due to her portrayal of Jane Tennison in the *Prime Suspect* series, Helen's roots are firmly planted in the English theatre. Mirren began in the theatre and has consistently returned to it, portraying a wide variety of the great women characters, particularly those of the Renaissance stage.

Her performances have met with many different responses from the critics, from perfunctory and dismissive to almost lasciviously adoring – and often you can forget the "almost".



"Few actors and actresses now feel they can ignore what might be called the sexual politics of the Macbeths' dark and sinister marriage. That was largely Mirren's achievement." – Benedict Nightengale

Helen Mirren began her career at an interesting time in history; a time which seems to have been tailor-made for her extraordinary talents. Helen's participation in the transformation of attitudes to women was an important factor in the polarised attitudes critics took to her early performances.

Helen Mirren began her career in 1965 as Cleopatra for the National Youth Theatre; a performance that resulted in her discovery. Joining the Royal Shakespeare Company she went on to challenge and transform women's roles that had traditions reaching back to the very inception of English drama. As Lady Macbeth in Trevor Nunn's 1974 production

of *Macbeth*, the particular magic Helen Mirren could weave was made most apparent by Harold Hobson:

“An increase to our delight is the civilised, controlled, intelligent, and irresistible sexuality of Helen Mirren's Lady Macbeth. It would be mere male chauvinism to deny that Miss Mirren plays everyone else off the stage. When the stage was occupied only by Macbeth himself, Macduff and so on, I was wishing the author would get rid of them and let us see what was happening to this marvelous actress. I really do regret that Shakespeare never knew Miss Mirren. We would then have had a different play.”

In 1969 Frank Cox described Helen's Cressida as "intelligently sensual in manner, vulnerable in her attractiveness". John Elsom describes Mirren as "too intelligent to be easily typecast as a temptress". Intelligent sexuality was the factor that threw the conservative audience. Either the critics, like Hobson, reveled in it, or they were threatened by it. The sexual revolution was underway, and Helen Mirren, rather than be swept along, flooded the theatre with it.



In many ways the sexual revolution that accompanied Helen Mirren's burgeoning career echoed the revolution in attitudes to women that occurred while Shakespeare was writing his plays. In the pre-Shakespearean theatre, a woman was either a saint or a sinner, and a saint who was "tarnished" (always meant in a sexual sense, and even when through no fault of her own), was doomed to either accept sinner status or take her own life.

In his tragi-comedies like *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare problematised this simplistic view and opened the way for characters like the Duchess of Malfi who could be both good and sexually powerful. How appropriate then that Helen Mirren should redefine the playing of those very characters in a new sexual revolution.

"It would also be nice if a contemporary playwright would rise to the challenge of writing a role large and intense enough for her very special talents." –Benedict Nightengale

From her classic beginnings, Helen Mirren branched out into experimental theatre in 1972, when she joined Peter Brook's International Centre of Theatre Research. The group toured North Africa creating *The Conference of Birds* along the way. The rockstars had gone to India to be with their gurus, but these actors and supporting retinue went out to desert villages performing for and exchanging stories with far-flung tribes. It seems that Helen Mirren was interested in all the possibilities performance presented, and was not merely seeking personal acclaim. She appeared willing to open herself to new experiences and has displayed a genuine humanistic interest in acting and how it can expose the contradictions present in all individuals.

One of the defining qualities of her work is the extraordinary vulnerability of the characters she creates. Even her strongest, most power-hungry portrayals are made more real by the underlying fragility of their humanity.

Through the 1970's, Mirren continued to work in the theatre, but ventured further into film, and occasionally even into television for unconventional pieces like Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills*. It was the early 1980's that saw Helen return again to perform Cleopatra, the role that had launched her career. For this she gained a nomination for best actress.



The failure of the establishment at that time to fully recognise Helen's achievement was a contributing factor to her move away from the English theatre. Though she never fully turned her back on the theatre, the recognition for her performance in *Cal*, (a Best Ac-

tress award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1984), must have been an added encouragement to move to the greener pastures of motion pictures and television.

Helen Mirren's greatest theatrical triumph of the 1990's was her portrayal of Natalya



Petrovna in Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, at the Albery in London.

This huge success led to her Broadway debut in 1995. The English Theatre was given another chance later in 1998, when Helen reprised Cleopatra, this time for the National Theatre.

The significance of this role for Helen is obvious. The complexity of the character, every human contradiction rolled into the most passionate, the most complete of Shakespeare's hero-

ines, would draw any actor to it. The opportunity for an audience to experience a performance honed over thirty years is one few would want to miss.