VAMP, DIVA OR GRANDE DAME? DOES SHE HAVE TO CHOOSE?

Helen Mirren Goes Where Other Actresses Fear to Tread, With Unparalleled Results

IN THE RIGHT NIGHT, THE TOP OF THE TOWER ON THE 26TH FLOOR OF THE BEEKMAN HOTEL IS ONE OF those New York spots that can induce the head-spinning thrill of the opening montage of Woody Allen's "Manhattan." Last spring, on such a night, Helen Mirren, the English actress best known for her portrayal of Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison in the hit PBS series "Prime Suspect," was relaxing at a window table after performing in Turgenev's "A Month in the Country." Drinks had arrived, and after a quick toast—"Cheers, sweetie"—she sat back and gazed out upon the city. Low-lying clouds reflected the brightly lit tops of skyscrapers, the lights of the 59th Street Bridge stretched out over the East River, and a gentle drizzle cooled the air. "You know, I suddenly have this feeling of being incredibly glamorous," she says. "Most of the

By Bruce Schoenfeld

Above, Helen Mirren's portrayal of Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison on PBS' "Prime Suspect" has earned her three British Academy Awards. Left, for her role as Queen Charlotte in "The Madness of King George." Mirren won the best actress award at Cannes. Below, Mirren, far right, on tour with theater director Peter Brook, second from right, in Africa during the '70s.

time, I don't. But suddenly, sitting here, being an actress who's just done a show on Broadway, and in this incredible place with this view, I suddenly feel intensely glamorous."

It seems an odd remark from someone who has been photographed by Richard Avedon for the New Yorker and had just put in the requisite begowned appearance at the Tony awards. But the apparent incongruity of her sudden exclamation captures the shifting career trajectory of an actress who, in her own words, has been "an overnight discovery about six times so far."

Her acting life has been a mass of contradictions. This is a woman who left the Royal Shakespeare Company for a world tour with experimental theater director Peter Brook just as she had begun to establish herself in the early '70s, who wanted only to be a great classical actress yet snorkled in the nude in her first movie role, who has twice been honored by the Cannes Film Festival, yet arguably isn't on the radar screen of mainstream Hollywood. Film enthusiasts are probably more familiar with her work with independent-minded, controversial directors such as Peter Greenaway ("The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover") and Ken Russell ("Savage Messiah") than any of her Hollywood roles.

Mirren acknowledges that she probably made choices that steered her away from stardom. But when you ask her how her career is going, she'll tell you "I *hate* that word. To me it's not your career, it's your work—it's how your work progresses."

And five years ago, that progression brought her to the role of Jane Tennison in the PBS series "Prime Suspect," arguably the most compelling role on television for an actress. At 49, when many actresses despair of finding good roles, she has finally won a popular following, and tonight appears in the first of three new installments of "Prime Suspect." Earlier this year, she was named best actress at the Cannes Film Festival and received an Oscar nomination for the role of Queen Charlotte in "The Madness of King George." And she was nominated for a Tony this

EVEN AS A CHILD, SHE WA

year for the role of Natalya Petrovna in "A Month in the Country," in which she made her Broadway debut.

Mirren's features are too strong and too intelligent to be beautiful by Hollywood standards, yet she evokes a passionate response from both male and female fans, who find her audaciously sexy. With the candlelight playing off her antique amber-drop earrings and gray-green eyes (she calls them the color of "dirty washing-up water"), Mirren is softer in person than in her portrayal of Inspector Tennison. She wasn't anticipating a formal evening and had dressed with the casual flair of someone who has an eye for color and line rather than for labels: a long gray linen dress ("from The Gap"), a jacket picked up at a secondhand clothing store and what she insisted are a pair of "nerdy sandals."

Her voice swoops through the vocal range, especially when she wants to make a point. She can stretch out the word "no" over two syllables as she descends the scale. But the intensity—of her opinions, her personality, her presence—never disappears. "Helen is never unkind, but she'll say what she thinks," says Santa Barbara historical novelist Ciji Ware, a longtime friend. "She's Jane Tennison without the rough edge."

Her peers—especially her fellow actors—speak of her in glowing terms. "She has more charisma in her little finger than most actors have in a lifetime of beguiling performances," says actress Cherry Jones, who got to know Mirren while they were both working on Broadway this spring. John Benjamin Hickey, who appeared last season in the Broadway production of Terrence McNally's "Love! Valour! Compassion!", has called Mirren an actress "without vanity." Ron Rifkin, her co-star in "A Month in the Country," says that Mirren is "totally comfortable in her own skin." The description fans inevitably use is that Mirren is "so real." It is this quality, more than anything, that is so apparent when the camera lingers on Tennison's face. One sees a woman who sleeps too little, drinks too much and eats too many microwave dinners-for-one.

Yet for all of her successes—three British Academy Awards (similar to Emmys) for "Prime Suspect," critical and popular acclaim on the Broadway stage and in films here and abroad—Mirren lives much of each year in Los Angeles, the capital of a film industry that seems all but immune to her charms. "It just hits me when I come back to Los Angeles," she says one day

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soon after her return from New York. "I just feel so out of it here. I feel so strongly that what I have doesn't count here," she says.

In England, what she has clearly does count. She has no trouble getting work. In fact, when "Prime Suspect" was being cast, she was the only actress ever considered for the role.

"PRIME SUSPECT" WAS CONCEIVED IN 1990 WHEN SALLY HEAD, THEN A producer at Granada Television in Britain, was looking for new projects. Writer Lynda La Plante came up with the idea of Jane Tennison after noting that "reality-based" crime shows never showed a woman heading up a homicide investigation.

During her research, she discovered that London police had only four women at the rank of detective chief inspector, a supervisory position. One in particular, DCI Jackie Malton, served as her model for Tennison. The experience of watching her with the 45 "lads" under her command paid off. The dramatic tension of the series is propelled as much by Tennison's continuing efforts to battle her way into the boys' club of police work as it is by her efforts to solve the crime.

Head says that when she began to think about casting, "my very first idea was Helen—she had the voice, authority and presence." Although the choice seems inevitable now, Mirren says that "it was a leap for them to make. I was the Ellen Barkin of England, if you like. I was known for sexuality and stuff like that, and having long blond hair." During their first meeting, La Plante told Mirren that the hair would have to go. Mirren showed up on the first day of shooting with her hair chopped off. "She wasn't quite the Helen Mirren we'd seen for years," says Head. "She was a sort of shorn Helen Mirren who wasn't frightened of exposing herself."

"My reaction was this is a God-given gift. I thought I absolutely had to do this," the actress says. "Prime Suspect" shows what it is to be a smart, dedicated woman confronting a male culture and bureaucracy: How everything from long-standing connections to deeply embedded language conspires to exclude women. "Tennison was a long-overdue character," says Mirren. "There've been women like that out in the work force for the past 20 years, if not longer. But no one had bothered to put that character on the screen."

Tennison, one of the most memorable characters ever created for television, is also part of the growth industry in female fictional detectives in novels and on television. Women detectives are not a new phenomenon, but most have been either genteel meddlers (Jane Marple or Jessica Fletcher) or mavericks who work on their own (Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone or Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski). Feminist literary scholar Carolyn G. Heilbrun, who writes mysteries under the pen name Amanda Cross, says that what sets "Prime Suspect" apart is that "it shows the kind of antagonism a woman runs into in becoming a person of power."

Unlike "Cagney & Lacey," perhaps its closest American counterpart, "Prime Suspect" does not gloss over the price that daily battle costs. "We've tried to test the character," says Paul Marcus, who produced most episodes of the series and directed the third installment of this year's "Prime Suspect." "We're making the cases impinge on her sense of herself and her sense of justice. We do it in a way that the screw is tightened year by year, story by story."

Last season, for example, Tennison faced both personal and professional crises. She finds herself pregnant (and unmarried) which only intensifies her strong feelings about the child prostitution ring she's investigating. And when she discovers that a senior police official is connected to the pedophile ring, she's warned not to nose around any further. Her solution: She cuts a deal and insists on a promotion in exchange for limited silence about the police official, who by that time has committed suicide. "As she makes the decision to terminate the pregnancy and make a deal for the promotion, she's looking in the mirror, saying, 'Is this the sort of person I've become? Do I like myself?' " says Marcus.

Tennison continually compromises her personal life. Her love affairs are invariably troubled, and her relationship with her family is strained because of her dedication to her job. But those compromises also make her more human. "I like that she's a bit of a sellout," says Mirren. "She's not a perfect person."

In preparing to play Tennison, Mirren talked to numerous London policemen and policewomen. She says she learned two particularly useful tactics: "You never let them see you cry, and you never fold your arms." While the first point is obvious, the second isn't. "That was a great insight to me. And it was when I'd just been to a wardrobe fitting, and I'd been putting my costume on and standing and trying to look butch and casual at the same time." The reason for avoiding the folded-arms position is that it's basically defensive, she says. "You want to come on like you don't need protecting; you're so tough."

Mirren is telling me all this in Wattles Garden Park, not far from the Hollywood Hills home that she shares with director Taylor Hackford. She had driven up in her 1967 turquoise Mustang convertible, looking as much in place in Los Angeles as she did in New York toting shopping bags onto subways. As she talks about Tennison, Mirren sometimes jumps up to demonstrate a point. When she describes how intently the police size up a suspect, she suddenly turns her gaze in my direction. She shifts her eyes up and down, all the while delivering a commentary: "They've checked out your shoes and how expensive they are. They've looked at your watch and your glasses . . . ." And just as quickly, the policewoman is gone and Mirren is back. "They're checking you like that while they're talking to you. They're incredibly observant; their brains are going all the time."

For her, it's been one of her "six overnight discoveries." Her role as Tennison has done what she had hoped it would do: "Taken me on to my next generation of work [so that] I won't be left back in the sort of by-water of how I used to be."

When "Prime Suspect" begins this week, it will be seen on "Masterpiece Theatre" rather than on "Mystery!", where it was that series' most popular program. Rebecca Eaton, executive producer for both programs, says "Masterpiece Theatre" is moving toward the made-for-TV-movie format instead of the multi-part, continuing series it favored in the past. The audiences for the two programs have similar demographics but share only about a 30% overlap; the change could introduce new viewers to the series, which this year is three independent episodes. Even if it doesn't, "Prime Suspect" is in the planning stages for next year. But it will definitely be the last one. "There's a point at which you have to move on," says Mirren. "And I'm so afraid of it becoming ordinary sort of TV stuff. It's always been extraordinary from the moment it was conceived and first made, and it's maintained that quality. You know it can't go on like that forever."

NTED THE LEAD: 'I'LL BE THE PRINCESS ONE DAY.'

MIRREN GREW UP IN A WORKING-CLASS HOME IN SOUTHEND, WHICH SHE describes as the "Coney Island of London." Her father, the son of a czarist army officer, drove a taxi and changed the family name from Mironoff when Helen was 10. A casting disaster in a primary school dramatization of "Four and Twenty Blackbirds" stoked her early ambitions.

"I remember this so clearly, I think I should have known at that moment I was an actress," she says with a laugh. She desperately wanted to play the role of the princess, but the teacher assigned parts randomly, and Helen ended up in the *corps de* blackbirds. "I remember sitting in that pie, with a big cardboard crust over our heads, all squashed together in our black leotards and black tights, and sort of horrible yellow beaks on our faces. And I remember thinking, 'I'll be the princess one of these days.' "

Within a couple of years, she had graduated to the lead in "Hansel and Gretel," and by the time she was 15, Shakespeare had grabbed her imagination. "Movies just didn't hold a candle to Shakespeare," she says. "The stories seemed to be so mundane and stupid and undramatic."

In her late teens, she joined the National Youth Theater of Britain, a non-professional group for young adults who couldn't afford to go to drama school. Her parents reacted with "horror" to her theatrical aspirations, so she studied for a teaching degree and worked in the theater in her spare time. She made what must have been an extraordinary impression at the age of 18 when she played Cleopatra in Shakespeare's "Anthony and Cleopatra," because she was promptly invited to join the Royal Shakespeare Company by a group of directors that included Trevor Nunn.

She spent more than 10 years with the company, turning down a number of movie roles because she didn't want to leave it. "Shakespeare was all I wanted to do. I was asked to do two or three films. Which I never did, if it meant not playing 'Hamlet' or not playing 'Richard III.' I was very, very concentrated at that time with the idea of becoming a great classical actress."

She did, however, make time for her 1969 screen debut in "Age of Consent," an Australian film that would set the pattern for many movies that followed: She's memorable, the film isn't. As attached as she was to the Bard, when director Michael Powell came calling, it was hard to say no for

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too long. (The late director, in fact, had to work out an arrangement to borrow her from the company.) Of her film debut, Mirren's assessment is succinct: "I was awful." Even though the parts—and her performances—got better, she is perhaps her own toughest critic. "I can't put my hand on my heart," she insists, "and say that any of [my movie] roles were particularly satisfying to me."

Her part in "Age of Consent" required Mirren to snorkel in the nude along the Great Barrier Reef. Asked if she is bothered about her reputation for playing nude scenes, she replies with typical directness: "It wasn't a reputation, it was more of a reality." Her tendency to appear nude reached a memorable peak in Ken Russell's 1972 "Savage Messiah," the story of a French sculptor living in London at the beginning of this century, in which she descends a staircase unabashedly nude. Still, she says, "It was never a big deal in Europe," noting that actresses such as Glenda Jackson and Vanessa Redgrave regularly took off their clothes in the movies and then returned to "serious" theatrical work.

Her movie career took off with "The Long Good Friday," (1981) in which she played a gangster's girlfriend opposite Bob Hoskins. "I had to struggle making the role work, and I learned on that film that sometimes you have to fight very hard." Fighting to make the role better doesn't mean making it more prominent. "She has no personal agenda to protect," says Nicholas Hytner, who directed her in "The Madness of King George." "She doesn't seem to be out for protecting herself at all."

If Mirren has turned in a series of fine film performances, they have not brought her the kind of high-profile movie career to match her stature in the theater. The reason is that she has often played big roles in smallish films, like her part in the 1984 film "Cal," based on Bernard MacLaverty's novel. She won a best actress award at Cannes for the beautifully understated performance as a Belfast librarian who unwittingly becomes involved with the driver of the getaway car the night her policeman husband was killed by the IRA.

She was a radiant Morgan le Fay in John Boorman's sword-and-sorcery epic "Excalibur" (1981) and momentarily took the spotlight from Mikhail Baryshnikov for her portrayal of the head of a Russian ballet company in "White Nights," which was directed by Hackford. Of this last performance, film critic Pauline Kael wrote that "probably no other actress can let you know as fast and economically as she can that she's playing a distinguished and important woman."

Mirren demonstrated the same kind of mastery when she appeared in "The Mosquito Coast," playing Harrison Ford's wife. She not only displayed a credible American accent but she also considers the movie critical to her development as a film actress because she learned so much about freedom in front of the camera.

In Peter Greenaway's controversial "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover," she played another gangster's moll, in her most graphically gruesome film. Surprisingly, she says of her role, "I had more fun doing that than any other film I've done." Asked how her portrayal of a brutally treated woman squares with her feminist politics, she insists there's no conflict. "If I'd been doing a realistic psychological drama about a profoundly abused woman, that would have been a different film," she says. " 'Cook' was a surreal fantasy. I just wanted to make sure my hat was on straight, as that was about all I was wearing for most of the film," she says with a laugh.

She did like her part in the 1991 "Where Angels Fear to Tread." In that, she was a proper, turn-of-the-century Englishwoman who impulsively weds a younger Italian man. As fine as the performance was, her fans can only regret that her character died less than an hour into the film. "Before I died, it was a satisfying role. I liked that character," she says.

Between her movie roles and a series of well-publicized love affairs (including a four-year live-in relationship with Liam Neeson, whom she met on the set of "Excalibur"), Mirren has often been portrayed in the media as a sort of English Carmen. She's also frequently styled as some variant of "the thinking man's sex symbol"; Elle magazine referred to her allure as "The Incredible Sexiness of Helen Mirren."

"I'm glad it doesn't say, 'The Incredible Unsexiness of Helen Mirren,' " she says. "It's such a hard thing for me to talk about. If I say, 'Oh, God, I don't think I'm sexy,' I'll sound so repulsively modest. And if I say, 'Yeah, man, I'm really sexy,' I can't win. So I prefer not to say anything at all. The truth is, an awful lot of people who meet me in the supermarket see me walking along, looking like an old bag with generic toilet tissue in my trolley, and they think, 'She doesn't look sexy

at all—she must have a very good publicity agent.' "

What all of the focus on her sexual aura has obscured is that Mirren is known for the intense concentration she gives her roles. She claims that she's lazy, but according to Hytner, she "has such extreme intelligence and such fantastic instincts" that what Mirren refers to as laziness is actually an ability to move "quickly and with great emotional directness in a role."

Whether playing Ophelia or a Janis Joplin-esque rock singer in David Hare's play "Teeth 'n' Smiles" (never much of a drinker, she set out and got drunk on a park bench), the process is fundamentally the same.

"You do it a little bit like a detective," she says. "A character is basically a mystery. You have to crack the code. I always try and find as well my own separate story I want to tell. I mean a secret story, in the sense of a secret message you're trying to give the audience through the character or through the story. It's the thing that often holds me to the character and holds my need to play the character. Because you have to have a *need* to play it, otherwise you just feel like you're rattling around."

MIRREN'S LONG-AWAITED Broadway debut was a major event of last year's theatrical season. "Prime Suspect" had boosted her name recognition phenomenally in the States but she wanted the chance to work with American actors. When she arrived in New York earlier this year, Mirren helped start a Thursday night actors' table at Cafe Un Deux Trois, a 44th Street restaurant in the theater district. "I've always loved American acting," she says. "There's a courage and an immediacy about it."

Acquaintances suggested getting together once a week after the theaters let out, and Mirren dropped off handwritten notes at theaters inviting actors to come. What started out as a small group grew to more than 100 by the time Mirren left New York several weeks later.

"People talk about community, but you don't really have any sense of it," says Jon Robin Baitz, the author of such plays as "The Substance of Fire" and "Three Hotels." "Helen took the All-About-Eve-ishness out of Gotham for a bit." A number of actors believe that the weekly gathering also helped defuse some of the pre-Tony tension that can set in before the awards ceremony. They all enjoyed having her among them. Cherry Jones, who won the Tony for best leading actress in a play for her role in "The Heiress," keeps a photo of Mirren in her dressing room.

As in command as Mirren is now, it is a mastery that she struggled to attain. A turning point—maybe *the* turning point, she says—was her decision in the early 1970s to put her career on hold and join Peter Brook's experimental International Centre of Theatre Research and tour Africa and the United States. "Everybody thought I shouldn't go—my agent, my fellow actors, my parents. No one thought it was a good idea—except me," she says. "On the surface of things, it was incredibly self-destructive career-wise." That word again. "But I just had a feeling that I wasn't getting where I wanted to go in terms of acting."

What did she hope to find? "Freedom. I wanted to be freer as an actress. It had mostly to do with freedom and liberty, I think. I've always admired American actors for that reason. I think the perfect [acting method] is an amalgam of the two, freedom and discipline. I was good at the discipline bit, but I wasn't very good at the freedom bit. So I was searching for freedom. And I think I was also searching for a freedom within my life. I've always been sort of a good girl who wants to be a bad girl but is really basically a good girl."

Brook's troupe toured the world for about a year, performing pieces without words—using music, gesture, chants to express themselves. To this day, Mirren says that she wasn't ready for Brook's teaching. "I went basically for an ego-driven reason, and that was exactly the

opposite of what Peter Brook was about." Yet, she insists that going "was one of the best moves of my life." It was a beginning of finding the freedom that she sought.

By pursuing freedom, did she miss out on the chance to attain traditional stardom? "Sometimes I regret the whole thing," she laughs. "But mostly I don't regret any of it. That's not to say that I didn't make mistakes. I did make big mistakes, but there isn't enough time in life to regret mistakes."

Especially if one is running off to the next project. She has recently started filming in Ireland for "Some Mother's Son," a movie based on the story of the Irish political activist Bobby Sands. A Showtime made-for-TV drama, in which Beau Bridges co-stars and Kevin Bacon makes his directorial debut, will air next year.

Sometimes, though, the stresses of the entertainment business can be too much, particularly when she's back in Los Angeles. In Wattles Garden Park, she admits to feeling "a bit down in the dumps."

"You know, it's difficult living here, the world of people reinventing themselves and image-making. I've always been very uncomfortable with it," she says.

When she is frustrated, Mirren sometimes thinks of the Italian actress Anna Magnani, "my true great inspiration." Magnani (who died in 1973) is best known for her performances in Roberto Rossellini's "Open City" (released in the States in 1945) and "The Rose Tattoo" (1955) with Burt Lancaster, for which she won an Oscar.

It is her naturalness that draws Mirren. "There's a sense with Magnani that she'd literally just thought of the thing she was doing. Talk about being in the moment," Mirren says. "There's no one like that, no one has been, no one before or no one since."

"I was just looking at a photo of her yesterday," Mirren continues, looking off toward Wattles mansion. "And it just reminded me that it's fine, just being who you are. You just stick with what you are." ▬