

# HELEN MIRREN at 70

*“I’m very grateful to all the men I’ve loved”*

In a candid interview, Helen Mirren talks to **Juliet Rieden** about the secret to a lasting marriage, refusing to be airbrushed at the age of 70, why women shouldn't waste money on Prada handbags and the thrill of playing Hollywood's most feared gossip columnist.

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**H**ELEN MIRREN DOESN'T believe in astrology, soothsayers or things that go bump in the night. She was schooled in a convent by nuns in folded wimples and full black robes, whom she fervently admired, but was unconvinced by the mystery and power of religion. She was raised with a keen social conscience and is really jolly sensible, independent and grounded. And yet, as a vulnerable, rebellious and trepidatious 23-year-old, Helen went to a palm reader, hoping to find direction.

“I hasten to add that’s the one and only palm reader I’ve ever been to in my life,” Helen pleads, “but yes, it’s true.”

The 70-year-old Dame of the British Empire is at her Los Angeles home speaking exclusively to *The Weekly* in advance of two star-turns in upcoming movies – *Trumbo* and *Eye In The Sky* – and is in a reflective mood.

“I’m not into astrology or palm reading or any of that stuff, it really doesn’t interest me, but I was going through a tough time. I think the early 20s are a very difficult time, a time of insecurity and not knowing what is going to happen and fear of the future; having no idea whether you’d ever make a living. As the realities of adult life start to descend on you in your 20s, it’s quite terrifying. It was for me. I was very, very insecure, so I thought I’d go to a palm reader to be reassured that everything was going to be all right,” she explains, bursting into laughter.

“He was this funky Indian guy living in a very downmarket flat in North London. Someone had given me his address, I can’t remember whom, and so off I went. It was a really ordinary front room – very lower middle-class, not at all fancy. And there was something very sweet and gentle about him. He gave me paper and a pencil, and said, ‘When I start, I’ll talk really quickly and you won’t remember everything I say, so I suggest you write it down because once I start I won’t be able to stop. Write it all down.’

“He took my palm and started talking, and I did start rapidly writing. He talked very quickly and I was scrawling it all down. Then, at the end, he said, ‘That’s 10 quid.’ I walked out in a slight daze

and looked at this sheaf of papers that I now had, which represented my future. I couldn’t remember anything that was in there except this one thing – ‘you’ll be successful, but you won’t really hit your big success until after 40’.

“Of course, when you’re 23, you don’t want to hear that. So I thought, ‘I don’t want these. I want my life to be an adventure and a surprise.’ And I literally walked to the next rubbish bin and threw it all away without even looking at it. It kind of relieved me at that point.

“But he was absolutely correct, which of course I only found out after I’d hit 40. I had been successful before then, but I think in terms of being really known worldwide, that happened to me only after my 40s with *Prime Suspect*.”

Helen Mirren is now 70 and with two impressive movies to promote, her very first Tony Award (for her second portrayal of Queen Elizabeth II in Broadway’s *The Audience*), and a starring role as the UK face of cosmetics giant L’Oréal, it’s safe to say the success that hit post-40 is still very much on a roll.

The British actress has often spoken out about the lack of good roles for women past a certain age and while that may still hold true for others, Helen’s own career continues to soar. In fact, she’s part of an elite group of global actresses – Meryl Streep, Dames Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Susan Sarandon – who still dominate the industry despite their advancing years. Some of these stars have also received the call from the skincare industry and Helen is fully aware that between them they are making history.

“It is only recently they have asked women like me to do cosmetic ads,” she says with a sense of exasperation that it has taken quite so long for the men at the top to understand their customers. “From the age of 35 onwards, wasn’t it enraging to be shown pictures of not 25-year-olds, but 15-year-olds, to advertise a face cream? You think, ‘Do you know, from 35 on, I’m never going to look like a 15-year-old? Don’t do this to me, this is ridiculous!’

“Obviously, ultimately it’s about finance and economics. They’ve finally realised that women in this day and age, ▶

women from 35 to 60, 75, even 85, have been out in the workplace making money and they've got money to spend. I think they realise that was a market they were not respecting."

In the photos of the cosmetic ads, Helen wears a studded leather bikie jacket, her hair has sexy waves of luscious platinum blond, her eyes bat knowingly and her skin really does glow. There are lines on her face, of course there are – she is 70 – and these were lines the actress fought hard to keep in.

"I said, 'What's the point in having someone like me and then retouching everything out that makes me look like me,'" she argues. "I don't look like a 30-year-old, that's the point." No, she doesn't, but she does look extremely hot.

"Of course, you do have the advantage of being incredibly beautifully photographed, in amazingly good lighting by a brilliant photographer with an amazing make-up artist. You do have all those advantages, which I must admit is quite a help," she says, modestly.

These photographs, one suspects, reflect Helen Mirren's natural look, for on the screen and in the theatre she's a true chameleon. In *Trumbo*, for which she's garnering multiple nominations as best supporting actress, she plays the indefatigable and sartorially flamboyant Hedda Hopper, Hollywood's most vicious gossip columnist and a driven anti-communist. The film tells the true story of *Roman Holiday* screenwriter Dalton Trumbo – played impeccably by *Breaking Bad*'s Bryan Cranston (also award-nominated), whom Helen describes as "one of the top 10 living American actors".

Trumbo was Tinseltown's most prolific and sought-after writer, but his career came crashing down when he was blacklisted and hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. His refusal to answer the committee's questions landed him in prison and sparked a lifelong feud with redneck Hopper, who was determined to destroy him.

"Hedda was not wishy-washy," says Helen. "And those ultimately are the

kind of roles you want. In this case, she's very much the villainess of the piece, as I think she was in real life. She called herself 'the house that fear built', so I think she was very conscious of her role as a hard-hearted Hannah."

Hedda Hopper's power was astonishing – 36 million people read her column every week. Consequently, she wielded extraordinary influence.

"No one has that power today because they don't have the circulation. The biggest TV shows – the Oscars, the SuperBowl – maybe get 30 million, but Hedda got that every week," notes Helen.

Hopper was known as much for her crazy hats and over-the-top fashion as she was for her politics and in the movie we see Helen Mirren in a wardrobe of stunning creations.

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"My personal taste is a little bit out there, but it's not quite so exaggerated as Hedda's," says Helen. "The interesting thing about Hedda is that she wore her clothes like a costume, it was like a character that she was playing. The Hedda Hopper that she was in Hollywood was in a way the character that she performed, as a lot of people who are in the eye of the public do – they have a persona."

With the benefit of hindsight, the paranoid anti-Communism in the US at that time seems at best comical and at worst shameful in its execution, but as a left-wing Brit living half the year in the US, Helen says she still senses an underlying fear of socialism in America.

"I was amazed when I came to America as a good European socialist. At home, I had learnt the value of socialism because it gave me an

education and it gave my parents health care, and I thought socialism was a good thing. I came to America and discovered that socialism was an absolute. 'He's a socialist,' they would say, as if saying, 'He's a child murderer' or something absolutely appalling."

Helen was raised with a keen social conscience by her parents. Despite a faintly establishment ancestry – her grandfather was a former colonel in the Russian army and became stranded in the UK when the October Revolution sparked, working as a diplomat – Helen's father was devotedly on the side of the workers, while her mother hailed from the East End's working-classes. The Mironov family, later changed to Mirren to sound less "foreign", set up home in Leigh-on-Sea, which makes Helen an Essex girl and her Thames Estuary open vowels sneak out when she's excited. The family didn't have a TV and spent their time together debating life's big issues.

Her parents were "sensibly opposed" when Helen declared her yen to become an actress, but soon joined the fan club when she was accepted into the Royal Shakespeare Company. In Basil (formerly Vasily) and Kitty, Helen had a role model of a dream marriage, of two people who "found each other interesting and funny" and early on she vowed that she would never marry if there was the remotest possibility of divorce. Is this why she finally married Hollywood director Taylor Hackford after they had lived together for 15 years?

"It was in my mind," Helen confesses. "I realised that for all the faults and flaws in our relationship, somehow we would get through them and it would be okay. And, certainly, the fact that we'd been together 15 years obviously had an impact on me. You never know, of course, and I'm very wary of ever making pronouncements like this because life has a way of coming and biting you in the bum, but I thought it [divorce] was unlikely."

Helen had many happy relationships before Taylor – including with Liam Neeson – but this was a feeling that >



Above, left to right: Helen Mirren in 1972; a snapshot from her childhood; playing Gretel in a school production of *Hansel and Gretel*. Left and far right: Helen in the 1960s, when she was part of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Right and bottom right: Helen plays the formidable Hedda Hopper in *Trumbo*, which also stars Bryan Cranston. Below: Helen is one of a small group of actresses of a certain age who are still winning good roles on stage and screen.



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**Above, left: Helen with her sister and best friend Kate. Above: With her husband Taylor Hackford and his two sons from a previous marriage, Rio (left) and Alex.**

she says was entirely new. “Certainly, with all my other relationships, as much as I loved the men I was with – and I adored them all, they all brought something positive to my life, every one, and I’m very grateful to all the men I’ve had relationships with – but I knew that it was something that was just for now. It wasn’t the thing that was going to carry me through my life.”

Looking back at her love life, Helen says the secret to finding “the one” is not mistaking lust for love and finding a friend and partner.

“I don’t think there’s such a thing as the love of your life. I think there’s the friend of your life, rather than the love of your life,” she says.

“True friendship is probably more valuable ultimately than love is. I think what is very difficult is to unpick the love from lust. And when you get through the lust thing, you settle into something that is probably more akin to friendship.”

Is this what she has with Taylor?

“I don’t think I do, but what we have is a partnership. There’s love and lust, then there’s friendship and then there’s partnership. Partnership is different from either of those other two and that’s to do with working together on a common cause which is your relationship or your family or your family place in the world.”

For Helen, her family consists of her sister, Kate, who is also her best friend, her niece and nephew, great-nephews

and stepsons – Taylor’s two boys, Alex and Rio. Yet above finding your ultimate partner, Helen has sage advice for young women wishing to follow in her footsteps and become strong, independent and happy.

“I think, really, the most important thing to me is financial independence. Don’t spend your money on handbags, put it into a savings account. I know it’s sensible. But if you want a new handbag, go to H&M, don’t go online to Net-a-Porter. Don’t feel you have to have a Prada handbag. Prada will hate me for saying this, but you know what I mean. When you’re young, you can’t afford it. If, later on, you can afford it, then great. But just try and get as far as you possibly can to be financially independent. And never imagine that it’s all going to be all right because in the end you’ll find a man and he’ll pay for everything.”

It’s a lesson she learnt from her late parents, whom she misses every day,

but who would no doubt be proud of their daughter’s success, in her career, her finance – and in love.

“I don’t know what they would have thought of me becoming a Dame of the British Empire,” she says, with a chuckle. “They were very, very anti-monarchist. But I hope that they would recognise that it’s actually nothing to do with the royal family. Becoming a Dame is nothing to do with titles in the sense of aristocratic titles,

it’s a recognition by your country, of saying, ‘Jolly well done’, you know, ‘Good work’. So I think, ultimately, maybe they would have been very, very proud of that.

“But what I think they would have been most proud of is my financial independence. I think the fact that I’ve earned my own living my whole life. I’ve bought my own house – it’s my house, it’s nobody else’s house – and I’ve earned enough money to help my family if they need it. Also the fact that my sister and I are still extremely close. We see each other a lot and we’re each other’s best friends, I would say, and I think they would be immensely proud of that relationship, which they created.”

The fearful girl who went to a palm reader is certainly living the adventure she longed for and, thankfully, her world did move on.

“You’re always the same little girl inside, but obviously life and everything that happens – the loss of your parents, getting married, for me, not having children, I didn’t go through that, but watching the children around you grow up and realising that you are a part of this amazing, wonderful sweep of life does change you. Of course, it does.

“You’re not the same as a 70-year-old as you were as a 17-year-old, thank God. I think around the 30s is just the most fabulous time in one’s life, physically and mentally. It’s a great era. And then you get to realise 60 and 70 in a different way.” ■

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