

coverstory

BY JAY BOBBIN

Jason Clarke and
Helen Mirren

Helen Mirren rules again in HBO's 'Catherine the Great'

Though she says she likes to “mix things up,” Helen Mirren isn’t surprised that royal roles continue to come her way.

The winner of both an Oscar (for “The Queen”) and a Tony Award (for “The Audience”) as Queen Elizabeth II, plus an Emmy (one of her three to date) for “Elizabeth I,” the esteemed actress and British Dame signed up as an executive producer as well as the star of HBO’s four-part series “Catherine the Great,” premiering Monday, Oct. 21. The saga traces the 19th-century Russian empress’ lusty romance with Grigory Potemkin (Jason Clarke) and their efforts to modernize their country as Catherine’s long reign nears its end.

“The filming was absolutely remarkable,” the pleasant Mirren says. “I was in Lithuania for most of the shoot, then we had the incredible chance to travel into Russia and shoot in Catherine’s palace. To be on the location where this history took place was pretty extraordinary. These people led such intense lives, you can’t imagine how they got through it day to day.”

Mirren had worked with “Catherine the Great’s” writer, Nigel Williams, on “Elizabeth I” earlier. She deems him “very knowledgeable and very good at research. At the same time, research alone doesn’t do it for these sorts of pieces; you have to find the human story. I’d also worked before with the director, Philip Martin (who won

an Emmy for the Mirren-starring ‘Prime Suspect: The Final Act’) – so I had great confidence in them to create something entertaining, true to history, watchable and revelatory.”

Having access to some of the many letters written by Catherine also benefited Mirren, who found her “a very natural writer. It wasn’t formal, even if she was writing to ambassadors about official business. She wrote with a great ease, and you could really sense her personality. That was a wonderful resource.”

“Catherine the Great” isn’t this fall’s only project for Mirren. The wife of director Taylor Hackford (“An Officer and a Gentleman”), she also stars with Ian McKellen in next month’s theatrical movie “The Good Liar,” a twist-and-turn-filled con-artist tale. Such a project underscores Mirren’s taste for variety, also marked by such departures as her work in the “Fast and Furious” and “Red” action franchises.

“For a long time, I was a policewoman on ‘Prime Suspect,’ ” she notes, “and after that, I was very keen to show that I didn’t just play that (profession). And after ‘The Queen,’ I was keen to show that I didn’t just play monarchs. The reality, though, is that monarchs often are very good roles. Their lives are momentous and full of drama, but I’ve really tried to get away from being someone who just plays queens.”

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