

Helen Mirren reigns again

'Catherine the Great' on HBO

By Sachi Kameishi
TV Media

In a scene from the first trailer released for HBO's upcoming miniseries "Catherine the Great," Dame Helen Mirren ("Collateral Beauty," 2016) stands as the eponymous Russian empress, her fist raised firmly. "Do you know what I hold in my hand?" she asks decidedly. She lets her words hang for a beat before pointedly answering her own question: "Absolute power."

Premiering Monday, Oct. 21, on HBO, the four-part "Catherine the Great" period drama co-produced by Sky Atlantic explores the public and private lives of Catherine the Great in her later years. Russia's last and longest-ruling female leader, Catherine revitalized the country during her strict reign. Russia grew larger and more unified than ever, cementing the nation as one of Europe's greatest powers during the 18th century. The new HBO series tells her glorious, politically victorious story as such, while also outlining the controversy and eroticism that challenged her luxurious, golden court.

As per Sky Atlantic's news release, the series shines a spotlight on Catherine's place historically and in today's context as a woman who was "strong-minded, independent, brilliantly intelligent and sexually liberated ... the definition of the modern woman."

Many of the production's interior scenes were filmed in Catherine the Great's actual palace, a detail that will be a treat for audiences as much as it was for the cast. Speaking to the Evening Standard about shooting in the decadent Moscow residence, Mirren said, "I was looking out of the same windows onto the exact same grounds [as she was]. It was an extraordinary feeling being that close to her."

The depiction of a woman in power who isn't defined by the men around her hasn't been the norm in modern media. Anticipation for this kind of



Helen Mirren stars in "Catherine the Great"

female-focused storytelling is only heightened when you add the abilities of an actress of Mirren's caliber. Not only the lead of the series, Mirren also serves as executive producer for the project. In fact, she reportedly took the idea to fellow producer David M. Thompson, who claimed, "It's a part she's always wanted to play."

A lesson in inspired casting, Mirren's turn as Catherine the Great marks her return to the royal tale. Mirren has explored the significance of womanhood in monarchy her entire career. Her roles as Elizabeth I in the mini-series "Elizabeth I" (2005) and Queen Charlotte in "The Madness of King George" (1994) debuted to great acclaim, and her portrayal of Elizabeth II in "The Queen" (2006) earned her

an Academy Award. Empress Catherine already feels like an excellent addition to Mirren's collection of regal roles, because it's the kind of royal story Mirren has not told before: the story of an openly erotic and deeply romantic monarch. HBO has clearly stated that Catherine's sexuality and passionate demeanor are to be spotlighted as one of the most fulfilling aspects of her life, supposedly in an attempt to destigmatize her as the lust-obsessed vixen many historians remember and shame her for, and instead consider her sexuality as part of her legacy as a complex woman.

Given the romantic heart of HBO's "Catherine the Great," it's crucial to mention Mirren's right-hand man in the series: Jason Clarke ("Zero Dark Thirty," 2012). Clarke stars as the most

passionate of all of Catherine's lovers, Russian statesman Grigory Potemkin. Rounding out the cast for the Catherinian court are Richard Roxburgh ("Angel of Mine," 2019) as Grigory Orlov, another noble favorite of Catherine the Great, who is rumored to have fathered her son and essentially co-ruled with her until his death. Rory Kinnear ("Spectre," 2015) portrays Catherine's mentor, Nikita Ivanovich Panin, Gina McKee ("The Borgias") plays the empress's lady-in-waiting and confidant, Praskovya Bruce, and Andrew Rothney ("Mary Queen of Scots," 2018) appears as Alexander Mamonov, one of the empress's youngest lovers in her court.

A cast like this, with Mirren leading the charge, can be expected to deliver a great final

product, but the behind-the-camera team and production crew involved with the project only add to the show's already sky-high pedigree. The series was written by novelist Nigel Williams, who won an Emmy for his work on the series "Elizabeth I," which established his relationship with Mirren and his expertise with the period drama genre. The director helming all four episodes is Philip Martin, whose credits include several episodes of "The Crown" and "Prime Suspect," the latter of which also starred Mirren, giving them a decades-long connection.

As for the program's setting and set pieces, HBO and Sky Atlantic spared no expense filming the series on location in Russia, Latvia and Lithuania. The HBO series features a lavish rendition

of The Transvestite Ball, one of Catherine's favorite events of the year, where men dressed as women and women dressed as men. It was filmed in the real palace's ballroom.

Catherine the Great's last years in power were riddled with immense conflict and violent adversaries, all situations she had to control while her private life inspired scandals and constant shaming. Yet somehow, despite this, her gender and her affairs, she made her mark. To quote Mirren: "Catherine is a survivor in this dangerous role, and succeeds in becoming the most powerful woman in Russia ... she outmaneuvered them all." Witness Mirren bring Catherine's royal resilience to life in "Catherine the Great," premiering Monday, Oct. 21, on HBO.