



In the Frame: My Life in Words and Pictures

By Helen Mirren

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Helen Mirren has been an internationally ac-claimed actress -- and the recipient of many awards, transferring between stage, cinema and television -- for over 40 years.

Known in her youth for a forthright style, a liberated attitude and a bohemian outlook, she has never ceased to be out of the public eye, with legions of admiring fans all over the world. This illustrated memoir is an account of an extraordinary talent, and a life well lived.

Helen's aristocratic Russian grandfather, Pyotr Vasilievich Mironov, a military man, was sent to London by the Czar and found himself stranded and penniless by the Bolshevik revolution, cut off from the family estate near Smolensk. He brought with him a trunk of papers and photographs. This delightful memoir starts with the contents of the trunk, with evocative pictures of Helen's Russian antecedents. She has kept a rich seam of photo-graphs and memorabilia from her life, and her parents, family life, childhood, teenage and early years as an actress living in insalubrious flats are vividly documented.

Helen's many distinguished roles in theatre, cinema and television and the illustrious men and women she has encountered are commemorated, as well as her forays into Hollywood and her sub-sequent life in the United States with her husband, film director Taylor Hackford. Golden Globe and Oscar ceremonies make their appearance, as do many stunning images of Helen by the world's leading photographers.

In the Frame: My Life in Words and Pictures is a book to savour, created and written by one of the great personalities of our age.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Helen Mirren, born Helen Mironov of Russian-English parentage, is one of the best-known and most-respected actresses in Britain and America. In a career that spans stage, screen and television, she has become renowned for tackling challenging roles and has won many awards for her powerful and versatile performances.

She began her career with the National Youth Theatre in 1965 in a performance that resulted in her discovery. Two years later she was invited to join the Royal Shakespeare Company and starred in a number of highly regarded productions. In 1972 she joined renowned director Peter Brook's Theatre Company and toured the world.

Her film career began in the late 1960s with Michael Powell's *Age of Consent*, but her breakthrough role was in John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday*. Her performance saw critics hailing a major new screen star. She earned her first Academy Award nomination for her performance in *The Madness of King George* and her second for her role in *Gosford Park*. She was nominated for a Golden Globe for *Calendar Girls*. Her most recent and celebrated role was as Elizabeth II in *The Queen*, for which she won a Golden Globe, a BAFTA and an Academy Award as Best Actress.

In the early 1990s, Helen starred in the Emmy and BAFTA award-winning television series *Prime Suspect*, in which she starred as Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison. The final *Prime Suspect* was released in 2006, bringing this iconic role to its conclusion, and she was nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Actress. Her television roles have won her a string of awards, most recently in 2006, for her performance as Elizabeth I, for which she won a Golden

Globe and an Emmy for Best Actress.

Helen Mirren is married to the American film director Taylor Hackford. She became a Dame of the British Empire in 2003.

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Introduction

I must have started about twenty journals in my life. One, written at the age of fourteen and reproduced in this book, ambitiously calls itself 'Chapter 1 Volume 1'. It lasted for all of three pages. It is unbelievably boring. No natural writer then.

Some journals I started at the beginning of a job, a film or a play, others were inspired by finding myself somewhere foreign and remarkable. But no matter how fascinating the experience, the journals have invariably been abandoned. I have more interest in living the life than recording it.

In spite of being able to memorise reams of dialogue, I have a blissfully forgetful brain. This can be a great advantage in marriage - one of the many things that holds us together is that my husband can tell me the same story many times and each time I listen enthralled and laugh genuinely at the right moments, having forgotten that he has told me before - but such forgetfulness is less of an asset when it comes to journaling.

Working in the theatre, and loving its transitory nature ('carving in ice', as it was once described to me, for a theatre performance survives only in the memory of the audience who saw it), made me want to let go of things. I have never been a hoarder of cherished programmes, photos and stage memorabilia. Luckily my mother - proud, of course - kept mementoes, as did many of my friends who kindly lent material for this book.

When I read an autobiography, I am always drawn to the pictures. To me, it is what lies behind a photograph that makes it interesting. As you read and discover more about the personalities involved, the photos become more telling. The body language, the clothes, the background all take on a far greater meaning, and I find myself returning to the same photo again and again.

As an actor, gestures and body language are tools of the trade. You are always wondering what is behind a smile or a frown, or why someone's hat is worn like that, and what is that hand doing in that pocket? You search for something you can just perceive though it is not fully in the consciousness, in other words, what is on the edge of your vision: a form, a shape, a feeling, a fear, a pleasure...a something.

So here I give you some pictures from my life, and I try to talk around the picture, towards the wonderful parade of people, places, work and experiences that constitute some of my life.

I ask those who have shared my life with me in the living of it to forgive me if they remember it differently. Memories are slippery things, and liable to transmute. I am not interested in psychological excavations, except where acting is concerned. I have always found the world outside myself of more interest than the world within. Perhaps that comes of the way I was brought up. My mother would check 'thank you' letters to make sure the word 'I' only appeared once, and she'd cross out all references to myself. She thought it was boring or tasteless to talk about yourself. Of course, I now will write about myself for many pages.

Part of my job as an actress is to do interviews, but while I find it easy to talk about the work, I tend to frustrate interviewers by avoiding talking about myself. For the same reason I have never been to a shrink.

Actually, I lie; I did go to a shrink once. When I was about twenty-three I was very unhappy and, yes, self-obsessed and insecure. It seems to me that the years between eighteen and twenty-eight are the hardest, psychologically. It's then you realize this is make or break, you no longer have the excuse of youth, and it is time to become an adult - but you are not ready. I just could not believe that anything I desired would happen, and the responsibility of making my own way, economically, artistically and emotionally, was terrifying. So I went to a psychologist.

Now I don't know whether he did this on purpose, realising that all I needed to do was grow up, but after I had poured out my unhappiness to him, the psychologist very, very quietly, in a strong Scottish accent, began to explain to me the root cause and solution to my misery. I could not understand a word. I asked him if he wouldn't mind repeating it. He did, and I still couldn't understand a word. The fourth time of asking I gave up, and realised that an analyst was not going to work for me.

My next stop on this journey of self-discovery was to visit a hand reader. Though I've never been a believer in astrology or the art of reading palms, I was pretty desperate and he came highly recommended. So I made my way to a nondescript house in a back street of Golders Green and went into the dingy, very ordinary living room where he did his readings. He was an Indian man, more like an accountant than a mystic. I liked him. He handed me cheap paper and a pencil, saying, 'I will study your hand and then I will speak very fast. You will not remember what I will say, so write it down as fast as you can.' And that was exactly what happened. He spent about ten minutes intensely studying my hand, I can't remember which one, and then he began to speak. I had to write so fast I could not take stock of what he was saying. After about twenty minutes, I was a fiver poorer and back on the street with my whole future life spelt out in scrawling script on a massive heap of paper. It was quite true, I could not remember any of it. Well, there is one thing I remember. He said, 'You will be successful in life, but you will see your greatest success later, after the age of forty-five.'

Not something you want to hear at the age of twenty-three, but it turned out he was right.

At least it brought to an end my period of desperate introspection and miserable self obsession.

As I looked at those scrawled pages, I realised that I did not want to know what the future held. I wanted my life to be an adventure. Whatever pleasure or pains, successes or failures, disasters or triumphs were waiting for me, I wanted them to come as a surprise.

I took the pages and stuffed them into the first rubbish bin I could find, then stepped out into the rest of my life.

Russia

In the house where I grew up in Leigh-on-Sea there was an old wooden trunk in the basement that had belonged to my grandfather. It was full of tools and paint pots sat on top of it. Scarred with age and dribbles of paint, it was just possible to make out some Cyrillic writing on the side. When my mother died and the house came to be sold, I took the trunk, emptied out the tools and filled its cedar interior with Grandpa's papers, a yellowing collection of letters written in a tiny, spidery Russian hand, and pages typed on the Cyrillic typewriter Grandpa had brought from Russia, with mysterious diagrams and maps. Somehow these papers had survived my mother's periodic clear-outs. After shoving them in the trunk, I forgot about them for another ten years.

My grandfather, Pyotr Vassili Mironov, was a proud and loyal member of the Czarist army. In Russia the military class was a whole social structure of its own. Grandpa was a proud and loyal member of that class, coming from military families on both sides. His mother, Countess Kamensky, had married outside the

aristocracy, to Vassili Pyotr Mironov (the first-born son of each generation was always given the same two forenames, with the order changing from one generation to the next), a very successful military man. As the beloved (and undoubtedly very spoilt) only son in a family of seven, it was inevitable that Grandfather would join the army. He served in that brutal Russo-Japanese War of 1904, where the Russians were underarmed and suffered horrible losses. In 1916, having risen rapidly in rank, he was selected to join a small delegation sent to buy military supplies from the British. To begin with, Pyotr and his family were honoured guests of the British government, living in luxurious quarters within the Russian embassy and enjoying comfort befitting representatives of the Czar; my father attended private school in London. But then came the Bolshevik Revolution, which contrary to Grandpa's strongly held belief that the people loved the Czar too much for revolution ever to take hold, was not about to go away.

Pyotr's pride in nation had prevented him bringing anything from Russia except his typewriter, pictures of the Czar and Czarina, a few pre-revolutionary roubles and his wooden military trunk, made for him on the family estate. As a result, post Revolution, the family were left with no means of support. The only way my grandfather, with his halting, heavily accented English, could earn money was in the time-honoured way of immigrants: as a taxi driver. So the proud, nationalistic, loyal Pyotr Vassili Mironov, descendant of the noble Kamenskys, instead of inheriting the family's Kuryanovo estates in Russia, became a London cabbie in order to support his wife and children. My father had no choice but to finish his education early and make his own way in the world.

In those post-revolutionary years Grandpa's mother and sisters wrote to him. Their letters are painful in their careful and stoic descriptions of the deprivations of the Russian people. Then, at the height of the Stalinist purges, it obviously became too dangerous to write, and the letters stopped coming. From 1931 to the 1950s there were no letters, and then a flood.

These were the elegantly handwritten letters that came to reside, along with Pyotr's memoirs, in the trunk I inherited. Their revelations remained hidden for many years.

It was a question of finding a translator...

Then, as these things happen, a flurry of activity. Simon and Olga Geoghan did amazing work on those magical letters and Roger Silverman beautifully translated the memoirs. At last my sister and I were launched on a voyage of discovery that is not over yet.

The latest chapter has been the incredible discovery, thanks to the work of a researcher called Will Stewart, of a cache of letters from my grandfather, together with pictures of myself and my family, that had been hidden away in the Moscow apartment of a distant relative.

Excerpts from the Russian letters

1917

The w...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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