



Prime Mirren

Last year *Prime Suspect*, a British-made police detective series, captured the attention of public television audiences throughout the country. What made this gritty and suspenseful hunt for a serial killer one of the major television events of the year was its central character, Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison, played by Helen Mirren. As *Entertainment Weekly* put it in the magazine's year-end issue, Mirren's realistic portrayal of a woman struggling to survive in a man's world, "did more for the Year of the Woman than all the campaign slogans of 1992 put together."

Striving to hold her own in a male-dominated work place, Chief Inspector Tennison not only solves the crime, she also thwarts the forces of sexism to hang onto her job. Mirren gave a performance of strength and subtlety rarely seen on television, let alone in a police thriller. This month, she is back as DCI Tennison in a new series, *Prime Suspect II*, which airs on KPBS February 11, at 8 p.m.

Born Ilynea Lydia Mironoff of English-Russian parentage, Helen Mirren began her career as a stage actress. Despite her training with the Royal Shakespeare Company, her career has straddled the thin line between serious art and steamy exploitation. One of her first films was a Royal Shakespeare Company version of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* in 1968. But a year later she bedeviled James Mason as a teenage temptress in *Age of Consent*, appearing in the first of her many nude scenes. Over the years she has become known for the strong sensuality and passion that she projects both on stage and on screen. In the *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* she took on a role few actresses of her stature would accept, not only committing adultery in a meat locker (under rather unflattering light), but also serving up one of film's least appetizing meals when she roasts one of the title characters.

Controversial in real life as well, Mirren has sometimes surprised interviewers with her outspoken manner and unusual honesty about her love life. The British tabloid press still refers to her as a sex symbol, but as we discovered in a recent phone conversation, the label doesn't come close to describing the versatile, 46-year-old actress. Mirren, who currently splits her time between London and Los Angeles (where she lives with her partner, the film director Taylor Hackford), readily admits to doing the cooking, washing and

gardening at home. But not unlike the policewoman she plays, she also can be brisk and business-like and is quick to challenge anything with which she disagrees. Don't try to second-guess her, you're liable to guess wrong.

After the phenomenal success of the original *Prime Suspect*, we wondered if Mirren had her doubts about repeating the role. "Obviously, when you are up there, there is nowhere to go but down," she says wryly, not that she was about to let someone else take over the role she'd made famous. "It is a great big leading role which I would have been an idiot not to do," she adds.

What impressed Mirren most about Jane Tennison is that she's not an idealized portrait, she has flaws and also makes mistakes. "I want the audience to recognize her as a human being," Mirren declares. Usually, she adds, all television viewers see on the screen are neurotic or hysterical women, or women as victims.

Mirren drew on her classical training to create the multifaceted character of Tennison. "Doing Shakespeare teaches you character development and the need for complexity of character in drama," she says. A critic recently compared her *Prime Suspect* character to Lady Macbeth, another role Mirren has played (a British reviewer called her "the only Lady Macbeth who can turn you on"), but Mirren disagrees—violently.

"I think that's an unfortunate comparison," she says. "I think in terms of being single-minded and ambitious, yes. But then there are many other single-minded ambitious characters that we can call on. Jane Tennison is certainly not destructive and mad in the way Lady Macbeth is. She's very much in control. Lady Macbeth is very much out of control."

Sexism was the dominant theme of the first series, both because of the way the female victims were murdered and the obstacles DCI Tennison had to overcome in order to succeed in the Metropolitan Police force. In *Prime Suspect I*, Tennison is handed the case through a fluke, and spends the rest of the series trying to prove she's tough enough to be considered one

She's been the best thing that happened to many a so-so movie, from *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* to *Pascali's Island*. Now, with the premiere of *Prime Suspect II*, she's adding some feminine charm to Chief Inspector Jane Tennison's steely resolve. Could this be Helen Mirren's greatest performance?

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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All television
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neurotic or
hysterical
women, or
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victims.
—Helen Mirren

of the boys.

In *Prime Suspect II*, we see a softer side to DCI Tennison, perhaps a more feminine side. Mirren, however, bristles at the suggestion.

"Well, I don't find those words synonymous," she says. "I think you can be feminine and not be particularly soft, and be masculine and be extremely soft." As for the changes in her appearance and behavior that take place between *I* and *II*—Tennison quits smoking, softens her hairstyle and adopts more colorful clothes—Mirren chalks it up to confidence. "She has won certain battles," Mirren says, "and is a lot more relaxed with her position."

There's no denying, however, that there's a sexual aspect of Tennison in *Prime Suspect II* that was not evident in the first series. At the very beginning of the story she has a quick fling with a colleague during a conference. He is a junior Afro-Caribbean police officer, played by Colin Salmon. "It's just one of those fairly innocent things that people do when they are at conferences, a kind of one-night stand situation which is then revealed to be in reality a mistake," says Mirren. But she argues that the reason Tennison's sexuality was never manifest in the first series was because the character was too involved in her work. In *Prime Suspect I*, Tennison lost her live-in boyfriend because she was too busy for him.

Tennison's sexual dalliance reverberates through the four hours of *Prime Suspect II*, exposing further the tensions caused by race in the story (this time, the murder takes place in London's Afro-Caribbean community). The affair seriously jeopardizes Tennison's career as well. As Mirren points out, the Chief Inspector still has to cope with sexism, though now on a more insidious and subtle level—within the old-boy network of the police hierarchy. "It would have been unofficially accepted if a man had involved himself with someone of a lower

rank," Mirren charges, "but being a woman it very much becomes a weapon which can be used against her."

Mirren moved to the U.S. about eight years ago, attracted by the multi-ethnic American culture, which she felt was far removed from her own class-ridden society in England. She admires the work of American filmmakers such as John Sayles, Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese and Spike Lee, who, she says, make films about America. Although she lives here in the States, she works more often in Europe. She hastens to add that this is not by choice. Hollywood has called, but, recently at least, the roles she's been offered haven't presented an adequate challenge.

It is no accident that *Prime Suspect* originated in Britain and not in this country. And it's no surprise that an actress whose work defies labels and categories would find it difficult to get cast in America. Plans are currently underway for a theatrical film version of *Prime Suspect*, to be made by Universal Pictures. Mirren would love to be involved, but despite her success with the role, there is no guarantee she will get the part.

In the meantime, she has just completed a movie in England in which she plays against type. In the new film, *The Hawk*, Mirren portrays a woman who suspects her husband is a murderer. "It's a film about paranoia," Mirren says, "about a woman who is very vulnerable and not in control of her life."

It's the sort of challenge Mirren relishes. But there is a lot of Jane Tennison in the real Helen Mirren. In fact, listening to her describe her television character, you wonder if she's not also talking about herself and her own eclectic career: "She is an individualist and she is not a coward. She is not the kind of person to back away from anything just because she is frightened. If she wants something, she goes for it."

Prime Suspect II begins Thursday, February 11, at 8 p.m. on KPBS TV.