

HELEN MIRREN: 'A GREAT FILM UNIFIES US'

By Wendy Mitchell



Helen Mirren © David Venni

Growing up in England with a Russian father, Helen Mirren was engaged at an early age with the big issues of the world. "Dinner was a time to throw an idea out there and discuss it. Sometimes it would be, 'Do human beings have a soul?' It was very heavy. It took me time to learn how to have a light conversation!," she recalls now with a laugh.

One such discussion at the family dinner table was "what is the notion of freedom of speech?" That is one reason she was keen to be closely involved as an ambassador of the new International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk.

Mirren says, "I have been involved with the European Film Academy for a long time now so when they came to me saying they want to organise a coalition for filmmakers who are being persecuted around the world, obviously I felt that was an incredibly important initiative that I wanted to be part of."

She continues, "When high-profile directors are imprisoned you can find filmmakers coming together. I've signed petitions for a long time. But there hasn't been a centralized organisation where this kind of support can be encouraged and the information can be dissipated."

She has conflicting feelings about Russia today. "I love Russia in the sense of the history of Russia, the courage of Russia, the vastness of Russia. But I think what's happening in Russia is really terrifying. Russia has always had a czar and it still has a czar; Stalin was a czar, now Putin is a czar. It has such a history of literature and art and poetry and with those things has to come freedom of speech."

Just some of the charities she supports are the UN Refugee Agency, Refuge and Freedom from Torture. And filmmakers' voices in particular are important to protect, she explains. "Film is visceral, it's such an incredible way of learning about other cultures, other countries. Of course the one thing we learn from film is that we are humans together no matter how disparate our culture is. That's the great thing about a great film, it unifies us. That's what maybe terrifies the Iranians, or the Turkish [governments] who imprison artists' voices. Film is going to be with us for generations and generations to come."

Mirren has a long legacy with her own film career. She started acting in 1967 on stage and later in films such as *THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY*, *THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE*, *GOSFORD PARK*, *THE QUEEN*, *THE LAST STATION*, *RED* and *THE GOOD LIAR* and in TV hits including *PRIME SUSPECT* and *CATHERINE THE GREAT*.



Helen Mirren receives the Honorary Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale

She has personally seen how film can divide people. She starred in *SOME MOTHER'S SON* (1996), as the mother of a hunger striker during the Troubles. "It was a very human story, but it was challenged politically. An interviewer asked me, 'Why did you do a film supporting terrorism?' She hadn't seen the film. It does not support terrorism. It humanises the story, we're all human beings together."

After collecting the honorary Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale in February, Mirren has been safe during the pandemic in the US, alongside her director husband Taylor Hackford. Her next film, Roger Michell's *THE DUKE*, is now in post-production. She stars alongside Jim Broadbent, Fionn Whitehead, Matthew Goode and Anna Maxwell Martin in the true story of a taxi driver who stole a Goya from the National Gallery in London.

Mirren has seen Hollywood success of course, but says she is grounded by European films. "European films are my go-to movies. I find the richness and the variety that's available in European film just so exciting. It was European film that first opened my eyes to what filmmaking could be, not pure entertainment, a real reflection of ourselves and the world around us. It's been wonderful to be part of the European Film Academy to see these films that I wouldn't otherwise see."

UK-based Wendy Mitchell is editor of EFA Close-Up, contributing editor at Screen International and a consultant for the San Sebastian, Rotterdam and Zurich film festivals. Her website is filmwendy.com

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