

## Helen Mirren is a woman in a man's role in 'The Tempest'

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By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

Helen Mirren says she doesn't think Shakespeare would mind the lead of his *The Tempest* being adapted for a woman. "The purists are long gone."

Helen Mirren has some very definite ideas about Shakespeare.

"I think he would have absolutely loved special effects," she says. Shakespeare is perhaps the most malleable of writers to adapt, according to the Oscar-winning actress.

"A great thing about Shakespeare is that you can constantly reinvent him for your own time," Mirren says. "I think with most Shakespearean scholars, there's absolutely that understanding. The purists are long gone."

So it comes as little surprise that she prompted director Julie Taymor to change the lead role of Prospero in *The Tempest*, which opens Friday, to a woman. The exiled ruler in Shakespeare's 17th-century play

"I met (Taymor) at a (Directors Guild of America) function, and I'd seen the play again a few months earlier and had been thinking a woman could play this role pretty easily. You really wouldn't have to change the dialogue," Mirren says.

Taymor — known for such stage productions as *The Lion King* and the new *Spider-Man* musical as much as for movies, including *Frida* and *Across the Universe*— took the idea and ran with it. "She had directed the play twice with a man, and she said, 'I'd always thought that would be a good idea,'" Mirren says.

Mirren likes to think the Bard would approve.

"I wonder if Shakespeare had had access to actresses if maybe he wouldn't have written it as a woman. All the relationships are issues that women psychologically deal with and become more complicated and interesting if Prospero is a woman. She's had to be tough; she's had to learn survival on that island. She's suffered this terrible brutal attack on her by her own brother. The sexism and arrogance of male society, the notion that a woman can't rule, that all works well."

But even as she suggested the modification, Mirren had a different audience in mind.

"I imagined it as a play, and about a year later, she called and said, 'Are you ready to do *The Tempest*?' and I said 'Yes, which theater?' She said, 'No, we're going to do a film,'" Mirren

says. "Then I really got cold feet. It's hard to do Shakespeare on film. It's an intimidating prospect. You're kind of sticking your neck up above the parapet a little. You have the language and yet you have this very naturalistic medium, and you have to marry those forms with each other. The comedies are easier. This is a much more serious proposition."

The film also stars David Strathairn, Chris Cooper, Alfred Molina and Russell Brand. Prospera lives on a remote island; Mirren spends much of the film, shot largely in Hawaii, looking windblown. "I was dying to put on makeup and look remotely, to my eyes anyway, attractive," she says. "Julie was very strict: No makeup. She was right, it would be ludicrous and stupid. You have to look raw and weather-beaten in those elements."

Mirren knows that audiences expect to see idealized human forms on the big screen. "The film frame is a very beautifying thing, and we want to see beauty within it," she says. "But if you're going to do something like *The Tempest*, you have to let go and go for it."

And go for it she does — in everything she takes on.

"As an actor, you have to push people into seeing you a certain way and do things that maybe are inadvisable for your career, or for your reputation," she says. "But it's always a good thing to shake it up."

And what could be considered inadvisable? "Maybe Prospera," she says. "People might say, 'Oooh, you can't do that. You can't take that on.' I'm sure a lot of male actors are scoffing at the idea. But that's very much a part of it: scaring yourself, putting yourself out on a limb that you know you will be shot at, and shot at with poisoned arrows from people sitting safely below on the ground."

But her equanimity never seems to waver. If anyone can brave the flying arrows, it's Mirren.

"You do that often enough and it kind of accrues," she says. "Although those arrows leave scars."

Rather than scarred, Mirren appears energized and luminous. She does, however, sport a kind of whimsical scar on her wrist — a tattoo signifying balance and opposing forces.

"I got it many years ago, long before it became fashionable to be tattooed," she says. "I got my tattoo when only Hell's Angels and sailors were tattooed. ... Now everybody is covered in tattoos. I'm so cross about it. My tattoo was really out there, a rebellious, sort of shocking thing to do. And now it's like bourgeois. It's annoying."

Her rebellious proclivities are paying off. At 65, the age many others are settling down into retirement, she has a thriving career. This year alone she has been in three movies: *The Tempest*, *RED* and *Love Ranch*, in which she played, respectively, Prospera, a hit woman and a madam. It doesn't get more diverse than that.

"I refuse to be old at 60," she says. "Sooner or later, one is going to be old. And you do understand that 20-year-olds look at you as absolutely ancient. But too bad. They're just twitty 20-year-olds, so who cares?"

But she's doubtless a role model for younger actresses who would love a career that lasts as many decades.



Oscar winner Helen Mirren arrives for the screening of *The Tempest* while her husband, director Taylor Hackford, takes her picture at the award ceremony at the 67th edition of the Venice Film Festival in Italy.

"I'm sure a lot of actresses think, and quite rightly, 'It's doable. I can still be working in my 60s,' " she says. "Things have changed. I remember when I was in my 20s looking at older actresses, most of them worked in the theater then, and thinking I want to keep working until I'm really old — like 50!"

Mirren modestly attributes her particularly thriving career to this shift in thinking, seeing herself as the beneficiary of a new perspective toward age and gender.

"It's not me," she says. "The world has changed. Attitudes toward people are changing. The acceptance of what women can be is changing. I think I'm just lucky that I'm surfing the wave of what's happening."