



An interview with HELEN MIRREN
Detective Superintendent Jane Tennison in
***PRIME SUSPECT 6:
THE LAST WITNESS***
on EXXONMOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE
Sundays, April 18 and 25 at 9pm on PBS

Helen Mirren has been delivering uncanny performances since age eighteen, when she played a captivating Cleopatra in a youth production of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Many Shakespeare parts followed with the RSC, along with unforgettable roles in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* with Michael Gambon; *The Madness of King George* (Oscar nomination, Best Supporting Actress; Palm D'Or Award, Cannes Film Festival); *Gosford Park* (Oscar nomination, Best Supporting Actress; New York Film Critics Circle Award, Best Supporting Actress); and dozens of other films. Mirren co-stars with Robert Redford in *The Clearing*, due out in 2004. And she recently created a stir in *Calendar Girls*, as the ringleader of a group of British housewives who pose nude for a charity fundraiser.

Now Mirren returns to the role that first won her an Emmy and made her household name in the United States—that of Jane Tennison in EXXONMOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE's *Prime Suspect* series. Mirren recently talked about the worldwide success of *Prime Suspect*, why she stepped away from the role and why she is still drawn to the gritty and flawed character of Jane Tennison.

Q: *You thought long and hard about returning to the role of Jane Tennison after seven years. Were you concerned about bringing Jane back?*

A: Well before I did any *Prime Suspects*, I never really thought too deeply about the character...I just kind of let the character happen to me in a way. I did the same again this time round but it wasn't until about the third or fourth week of shooting that I started to feel back at home with the character. I think I was in a state of internal conflict with myself at the beginning, and it wasn't until the third week or so that I started to feel more relaxed and actually remembered who the character was. I just worried that I was going backwards and I don't like going backwards. Don't get me wrong, I very much wanted to do this. I thought very deeply about it. It's a great role, a beautifully produced film, with great writing and fellow actors, and the quality is very high so there was no reason not to do it.

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Q: What made you say yes to another series of Prime Suspect?

A: The script. I've always said that if you could come up with a great script of course I would consider it, although not during my first three or four years after finishing. But it was two years ago really that myself and [producer] Granada started talking about it again and I started thinking that maybe it was time that I re-visit the character.

Q: Is something like Prime Suspect still a fairly rare item, even in England?

A: Well, I think good writing is rare. Good—I hate the word “product”—but you know, good dramatic television is rare. And it's rare because it's very difficult to achieve.

We tend to spell things out less in Britain. We do give ourselves the luxury of having a four-hour story. We don't have to tell the story in an hour or even two hours. You know, we're given four hours to tell our story, so we can achieve the kind of complexity that other programs can't because of the requirements of time.

Q: Were you involved in the story line of this script?

A: Not really, although the story lines were presented and I did have input in choosing the story line but I've always believed in writers expressing themselves fully, and that they shouldn't be overwhelmed with too many people's input and notes from a committee: it's not a good idea. So there were small drafts and notes that I put forward, but that was all, I kind of just let it happen.

I am very pleased with the result—it is really exciting and has great potential. For me it has all the factors of a good *Prime Suspect*. It's modern, and that is very important, because there have been so many police dramas made since the last series and it's very difficult to find a new way or a way that creates interest in another police story... I didn't want to go over old ground, it has to go forward—and it does.

Q: How would you define what kind of woman Jane Tennison is?

A: I don't psychoanalyse the character too much. She's obsessed; she's work-driven, not really ambitious... it's quite hard to define, very much like real life in the way that you don't quite know what you want out of life. You only really discover more about yourself when you look back on your past and you suddenly see yourself in perspective and you realize your motives for doing things.

So it's the same with Jane, I've always allowed her to just 'be'. Obviously it's seven years later, so she's clearly older and wiser—or not as the case may be! I just allow as far as I can to let the world and myself around me impinge on the character and allow that to come through—I try not to act too much, quite honestly!

Q: To what do you attribute the success of Prime Suspect?

A: I don't know—it's like lightning in a bottle and you can't define it, you just don't know why...but I guess if we did, then every television drama would be wonderful!

Q: *Prime Suspect also appeals to a wide audience abroad...*

A: I think that the first *Prime Suspect* had a very strong impact—the storyline was very strong. The fact that there was a female lead too...although there had been female leads before, such as *Cagney and Lacey*, they were never from that edgy, dark serious kind of drama. So I think that made an impact and when viewers like something, they want more. They like what's familiar.

It then became like a brand name, instantly recognizable and really valuable, particularly on American television. Some really good television gets made in America and other countries, but it doesn't always grab the audience quickly enough and I think that's the key: to get the attention straight away.

Q: *There are some returning characters in this Prime Suspect, in addition to new ones. How do you feel about this new cast?*

A: Well Mark Strong [DCS Larry Hall] is wonderful, and the miracle of having Mark is that he was in one of the previous *Prime Suspect* series (*Series 3* – 1993), so you get that sense of continuity. He plays the same character as before but he's kind of leapfrogged over me and is now my boss! Ben Miles [DCI Simon Finch] is playing what we call a 'high-flyer' who has had a very good education and gets promoted very quickly. So he is a very new style policeman, and Mark is the old style.

Q: *One of Ben Miles' (DCI Finch) favorite moments is a scene where you and he are dashing from a shop, dive into the car and screech away at high speed...*

A: *(Helen laughs)* Really? Well you know Ben is a great driver—I felt very safe and secure with him. A lot of them aren't, because they rush too much trying to be macho or get over-excited and forget to put the car in gear or to take the hand brake off! But with Ben it was wonderful, and normally for that kind of shot I would've liked to do the driving, but I was very happy for him to do it.

Q: *So has it been fun returning to the role of Tennison?*

A: Yes it has, absolutely. I was rather sad when it finished. I never thought I would actually say those words, but I really was.

Q: *Do you consider Tennison your signature role? And is that a good thing or bad thing? Do you feel proprietary toward it? Are you happy no one in this country has ever tried to play her?*

A: Well, you know, I think many people have done versions of Jane Tennison. She's only a female police officer, after all, and we've had many of those. And each person who does that brings their own characteristics and their own personality to the role, and it becomes whatever it becomes. Jane Tennison just happens to be the one that I did. No, I don't feel proprietary towards it.

One of the reasons I stopped doing it was I felt that I was becoming too identified with it, although I'd always done lots of other work in film and theater and television. But that's the price of success. It was the reason that I stepped away from it for seven years, because I really didn't want to be knocked over by a car and my obituary just talk about *Prime Suspect*.

Q: *Would you do another Prime Suspect?*

A: This one is a hard act to follow. And I only want to follow it if we can find another script that's as strong and relevant as this one.

Prime Suspect 6: The Last Witness is a Granada/WGBH co-production. It was written by Peter Berry. The director is Tom Hooper. The producer is David Boulter. Andy Harries is executive producer for Granada, and Rebecca Eaton is executive producer for WGBH Boston.

EXXONMOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE has been presented on PBS by WGBH for over thirty years. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer. The series is funded by ExxonMobil. Additional support for *Prime Suspect 6* was provided by PBS.

EXXONMOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs, and VCRs. For more information about MASTERPIECE THEATRE, visit the series Web site at pbs.org/masterpiece.

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