



'I'm still an  
*Essex girl*  
at heart'

She has russian blood, won an Oscar playing the Queen of England and is going all Gallic in her latest film. Yet HELEN MIRREN is rarely happier than when shopping for food and undies in M&S >

INTERVIEW *Elaine Lipworth*  
PHOTOGRAPHS *Matthieu Brookes*

**A**S A TEENAGER growing up in Southend-on-Sea, Helen Mirren fantasised about being a French film star. 'I loved Jeanne Moreau, Isabelle Huppert, many of the great French actresses. I became obsessed with everything French,' says Helen. So it makes sense that when Steven Spielberg and Oprah Winfrey asked her to play the owner of a Michelin-starred French restaurant in their new film *The Hundred-Foot Journey* she signed on for the project in a heartbeat.

'I thought, this is my opportunity to be the French actress that I had failed to become. I loved the idea of shooting a movie in France and I loved the script; it's lovely and light.' The mouthwatering comedy is set in a bucolic French village and was filmed in Saint-Antoine-Noble-Vil near Toulouse. 'My God, it was beautiful. I thought I was in heaven,' smiles Helen. 'My character Małame Mallory is very French - in the sense of how the English think of the French, believing everything that is French is the best and their cuisine is the best in the world. It's a country which takes food incredibly seriously.'

Małame is incensed when an Indian family moves into the neighbourhood and has the audacity to open a rival establishment, Maison Mumbai, across the road from her own restaurant Le Saule Pleureur. 'It is somewhat galling for her,' laughs Helen. 'And then on top of that, they serve Indian food and play loud music; it's an offence to Małame's sense of propriety and taste.'

There is no love lost between Małame Mallory and her neighbour (Om Puri) or his son Hassan (Manish Dayal), a talented chef who falls for the beautiful sous chef working in her own restaurant (played by Charlotte Le Bon). 'It's a feud that becomes a no-holds-barred war,' says Helen.

Based on the best-seller by Richard C Morais and directed by Lasse Hallström (*Chocolat*), *The Hundred-Foot Journey* was produced by British filmmaker Juliet Blake. Enamoured with Morais's book, she took the idea to Steven Spielberg, then Oprah (her producing partners). Juliet grew up in the seaside town of Lytham St Annes and still can't quite believe the A-list names she is working with on her first major Hollywood project.

'Helen and I had a laugh on set,' says Juliet. 'At the beginning of the film, her hair colour wasn't quite right; we both agreed it was a bit Bet Lynch. No one else on set got our *Coronation Street* reference. It was a bonding moment.'

Born in Chiswick and raised in Southend, Helen is descended from butchers on her London mother Kathleen's side, and is the granddaughter of a Russian nobleman on her father Vasily's

side. Her film roles have ranged from *The Long Good Friday* (1980) to *The Madness of King George* (1994), for which she received the first of her four Oscar nominations. But it wasn't until her uncannily accurate performance in *The Queen* (2006) that Helen became a bona-fide Hollywood star. With blockbusters such as *Red* (2010) and last year's *Red 2* with Bruce Willis, she is constantly in demand at an age when many actresses find it hard to get work. 'It's kind of weird and a combination of things - the material I was offered and then said yes to, and the way in which I conduct myself when I work, which is to be on time and not to make a fuss.'

Helen makes regular stage appearances too and won an Olivier Award last year, playing Her Majesty again in Peter Morgan's play *The Audience*. She met Prince William in February when he presented her with the Rafta Academy Fellowship, joking he should probably call her 'granny'. 'He was a really nice bloke,' she says, 'a bloke, bloke, very easy.'

She [The Duchess of Cambridge] was lovely, too.' British men have always gone into raptures over Helen, but she became a global sex symbol when she was papped on holiday in Puglia, Italy, looking fantastic in a red bikini. The 2008 image went viral. Endearingly, she puts the flattering shot down to luck. 'I looked at that photo and thought: "I wish I looked like that!" Here is Helen on her love affair with France, Marks & Spencer, dressing gowns... and with her husband, film director Taylor Hackford.

**When I was 14 or 15 I got myself a French boyfriend.** His name was Jean-Louis and I am still in touch with him. These French boys would arrive for their summer holidays to learn English and they landed up in Southend-on-Sea. I think they imagined Southend was sort of Cannes or St Tropez, but close to London. I speak pretty good French but it is a bit rusty now because we have a house in Italy and I've needed to brush up on my very poor Italian. I wanted to do a lot of my role [in *The Hundred-Foot Journey*] in French and I worked with a French coach, but we had to speak English in the film, sadly.

**Manish Dayal [Hassan] is fantastic in this movie and he is going to be a huge star, a much bigger star than I am.** It might happen in six months' time. It happens like that. The younger

and less experienced actors are, the more I find them inspirational. There's a freshness of attitude and a freedom that I always find encouraging.

**Oprah is incredibly inspiring.** She only visited the set once and the French were so excited. She came in like the queen that she is. She's got this incredible natural warmth about her.

**I don't cook for myself. I am a savage when I'm on my own.** I do cook at home with my husband, though. I am quite good at making soup when I put my mind to it. On location I have to stay in a house that has a kitchen; I can't stand having to eat restaurant food all the time. Thank God for Marks & Spencer's prepared food when I am in England. It is fantastic. I was in M&S this afternoon, funny enough - I had to replenish my underwear drawer because it was in such an appalling state. I do like M&S underwear. It's also great for classic basics, a really good skirt or pair of trousers, a T-shirt that works.

**Life is a permanent diet!** God, we're all on permanent diets really, aren't we? I love food but I'm not a foodie. I wouldn't travel to a certain area in France just so I could have foie gras. Once in a while, I love a very grand meal but, honestly, I am much more comfortable in little funky restaurants. I like peasant food. My husband and I very rarely go to what I think of as a posh restaurant, you know, with tablecloths. We go to little holes in the wall. In Los Angeles it would be Mexican food, in New York it's Ukrainian food. When I'm on location I love street food, like a frankfurter in Hamburg. Very often it's sausages, actually.

**I am not gorgeous and I never was.** I was always OK-looking, so I never had any pressure: in a way it was liberating because I could just be who I was. That shot [in Puglia] was pure luck. I was posing for my husband who was taking a photograph of me at the time, so I was holding my tummy in. A long lens is always flattering! Just a few weeks after that was taken, there were some much more realistic shots taken of me on a beach in Hawaii. I became (for a brief period of time, thank God!) paparazzi fodder any time I went near a beach.

**I still can't get my head around the Dame thing.** I don't think I get treated differently, not that I notice anyway, but maybe a lot of it goes over my head. The people who really treat me nicely are the British Airways aircrews. A bit of the royalty has rubbed off as far as they are concerned. They're always incredibly sweet to me. ▶



Helen with her husband, director Taylor Hackford





Helen stars with actor Manish Dayal in new film *The Hundred-Foot Journey*

just watching them. But they're just so funny, aren't they? The expressions on their faces are fantastic. I don't have that thing which I saw happen to my husband and my sister when they saw their first grandchild and fell head over heels in love, because I've never had my own grandchild in that way. But I've experienced new members of our family coming into this world and it's a wonderful thing.

**There are not enough nice dressing gowns in the world.** It is very hard to find a good one, so I make them myself. I should have a dressing gown line: it would be especially good for the

theatre, because you live in your dressing gown in the theatre. You have to go and get a cup of tea in it and it's got to look OK, but it's got to be a dressing gown. You put it on before you put on your make-up. I do dressmaking. I have still got my mother's old treadle sewing machine, which I love. It still works. I make horrible things, although I did make my sister a good skirt. I wanted to make a dress for the red carpet, but my husband stopped me. He said:

**'I am saving you from yourself'**, but I am still going to do it one of these days. I am going to make a red-carpet dress out of bin bags. It will be gorgeous: bin bags and duct tape.

**I will never retire.** Even if I did I would never declare it. I might just quietly disappear. Look at Diana Rigg who said: 'I am retiring. I am not going to work again,' and then this really fun gig came up in *Game of Thrones* [Lady Olenna Tyrell] and there she is, having a ball. A fun role or something you feel like doing might just come up.

**My ethnicity was a secret for quite a long time in my family - the Russian side.** My father [Vasily] changed our name [from Mironoff]. He didn't want to be a foreigner. As a socialist, he believed in races being intermingled and he had that 'we're all in it together' kind of attitude. He was anti-nationalist. It was something that we didn't really talk about. But I have always felt the Russian side of my personality. It's very complicated, all those amazing threads that knit up your own character and psychology. To knit up those threads is very difficult. But so much of what I am is actually a British girl growing up in England and being influenced by that. I am still very much an Essex girl.

■ *The Hundred-Foot Journey is in cinemas now*

**“I have always felt my Russian side, but I am still very much an Essex girl”**

◀ When Mrs Thatcher was elected, my mother said: 'I would never have believed a woman could be elected Prime Minister.' She said: 'I absolutely would have said that I'll walk on the moon before that happens.' And it happened in her lifetime, so each generation there is progress for women. Things have changed massively but I am not too sure we're there yet. It's fascinating that it's taken this long, with feminism and women rising through the workplace. My profession is not an easy one for women. It's obviously massively competitive. I've seen great actresses' careers slow down and sometimes disappear. You're constantly facing unemployment. But it's hard for men too.

**It's hard to live with someone who isn't you, with all their fables and their annoying habits.** I never wanted to be married, but now I like it. For all the struggles - 'Why don't you ever take the rubbish out or put the dishes in the dishwasher?' - the fact is now there are two of you, so it's a team. Marriage is work, but it's work that's worth doing. And the great thing about my husband is that he's totally supportive of me and my work, and I'm the same for him. I think a lot of people get married when they probably shouldn't have done and haven't really thought it through. Then, I think a lot of other people maybe give up too soon.

**My husband is very, very excited about being a grandfather.** I have a step-grandson and I have nephews and they have children. It's fantastic getting them all together. When they're babies, there's not much to do with them, you're

### What's in a Dame?

**DEFINE YOUR STYLE:** Eclectic and accidental. I love the artian nature of clothes, the craftsmanship.

#### WHO IS YOUR STYLE ICON?

Helena Bonham Carter (below left). I love her individuality and her personality. She has been totally consistent in her eccentricity and creativity in terms of clothing, and I think that's the right way to approach dressing. I'm not saying Helena doesn't



look beautiful; she does. But looking beautiful is not the be-all and end-all of the whole process with her - being interesting, looking fun and comfortable are more important.

#### WHAT'S ON YOUR BEDSIDE TABLE?

Vicks, because I've just had a very bad cold. My books are on my Kindle. Sadly I've gone digital. I've just read *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga about India, which I really enjoyed.



**WHO MAKES YOU LAUGH?** Rik Mayall definitely made me laugh in *The Young Ones*. Jo Brand (left) and Eddie Izzard do so too, as does Gavin & Stacey. I love having a laugh, and the biggest laugh you'll

ever have is backstage with a whole load of actors because they are so funny and so brilliant. All of my boyfriends have made me laugh as well. And my husband does; it is essential.

**WHAT IS YOUR MOTTO?** Just keep on going. You die young or you get old and that's it. I don't want to die young. I mean, there's no chance of that now, because I'm past that point [laughs]. But life is just too bloody interesting to step away from it.

**WHAT DO YOU MISS ABOUT ENGLAND WHEN YOU'RE IN LA?**

I miss the muddy old Thames with all her rubbish floating on her, which is so appalling. I wish they could clean it up. I live right next to the river [in London]. I do love the Thames. It's a part of me.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALEXANDER BERGHE



**“I wanted to make a dress for the red carpet, but my husband stopped me. He said: 'I am saving you from yourself'”**