



Helen Mirren
(in New York City)
says her performance
as Elizabeth II is “a
portrait. It’s an
educated guess, but a
guess nonetheless.”

HER MAJESTY

Helen Mirren rules as Elizabeth II—though it’s not easy being *Queen*

Helen Mirren knows her Elizabeths. In August the British actress, married to *Ray* director Taylor Hackford, won an Emmy for the title role in HBO’s *Elizabeth I*. Now Mirren, 61, has Oscar buzz for her take on Elizabeth II in *The Queen*, which explores how Princess Diana’s death rocked the Palace. Can you play a living monarch and keep your head? PEOPLE’s Oliver Jones found out.

Were you nervous about playing the current Queen?

I was scared s---less. I was very intimidated, more than anything else I’ve ever attempted. But I loved being her.

So tell us why it’s good to be the Queen.

I found there was this calmness within her. She has incredible consistency. Think of the huge, world-changing events she’s gone through. She never, thank God, became a hippie and ran off with the Maharishi in the ’60s.

In the movie, the Queen’s stiff upper lip gets her in trouble—she’s too slow to publicly grieve for her ex-daughter-in-law.

I used to criticize the Queen: “Can’t you just smile and be nice? Isn’t that what you’re *there* for?” Playing her, I realized it’s not about smiling or responding to polls. That’s the

HOW SHE BECAME THE QUEEN

THE FACE

"I used very little makeup," says Mirren. "I slightly thinned my mouth down and slightly thickened my eyebrows. That was it. It's all about how you hold your head"—crowned by a painstakingly styled wig.

THE VOICE

Dialect coach Penny Dyre worked with Mirren for five months. "We homed in on certain vowel qualities," says Dyre. "We tried to keep the voice in a place that was not a caricature. Gradually, we put together the jigsaw."

THE CLOTHES

Costume designer Consolata Boyle created exact replicas of outfits Elizabeth has worn—and padded Mirren's hips. "She's very tiny," says Boyle of Mirren, "so we had to give that feeling of solidity."

THE BODY LANGUAGE

Mirren says she studied footage of the Queen "like a detective looking for clues." For example, Elizabeth "chews the inside of her lip." The two toughest things to replicate? "The walk and the look in her eyes."



"The Queen will never abdicate," says Mirren of Elizabeth II (in 2002). "She's in it no matter what."

Queen's attitude: If you're constant, you will go through storms—but when the storm has blown, you'll still be standing. **Many people are shocked at how much you look like her in the movie. Were you?**

No. When I was younger and happened to wear a dark wig for a part, I looked very much like Princess Margaret. Everyone would say so.

Any feedback from the Windsors?

I had been invited to Buckingham Palace while I was making the film, but

I turned them down because if the film became mortifying to the royal family, I didn't want their mortification to be doubled by me turning up. If they invite me now, I'll go. And if I get a steely stare, then that is what I get.

The Queen made you a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2003. Think she'll take it away now?

I was worried! You never quite know where your damehood comes from. I'm not sure the monarchy has any-

thing to do with it. But they do give it to you, so I imagine they can take it away.

Has this role stayed with you?

It's very weird: When I look at pictures of the Queen [in 1997], I think, "There I am! Oh no, it's not you, Helen, it's the Queen of England!" I will carry with me, to the day I die, a love for her.

Additional reporting by Kathy Ehrich-

Dowd in New York City and **Courtney Rubin** in London