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In the Frame

My Life in Words and Pictures

Helen Mirren

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Extract

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WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON

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Introduction

I must have started about twenty journals in my life. One, written at the age of fourteen and reproduced in this book, ambitiously calls itself 'Chapter 1 Volume 1'. It lasted for all of three pages. It is unbelievably boring. No natural writer then.

Some journals I started at the beginning of a job, a film or a play, others were inspired by finding myself somewhere foreign and remarkable. But no matter how fascinating the experience, the journals have invariably been abandoned. I have more interest in living the life than recording it.

In spite of being able to memorise reams of dialogue, I have a blissfully forgetful brain. This can be a great advantage in marriage – one of the many things that holds us together is that my husband can tell me the same story many times and each time I listen enthralled and laugh genuinely at the right moments, having forgotten that he has told me before – but such forgetfulness is less of an asset when it comes to journaling.

Working in the theatre, and loving its transitory nature ('carving in ice', as it was once described to me, for a theatre performance survives only in the memory of the audience who saw it), made me want to let go of things. I have never been a hoarder of cherished programmes, photos and stage memorabilia. Luckily my mother – proud, of course – kept mementoes, as did many of my friends who kindly lent material for this book.

When I read an autobiography, I am always drawn to the pictures. To me, it is what lies behind a photograph that makes it interesting. As you read and discover more about the personalities involved, the photos become more telling. The body language, the clothes, the background all take on a far greater meaning, and I find myself returning to the same photo again and again.

As an actor, gestures and body language are tools of the trade. You are always wondering what is behind a smile or a frown, or why someone's hat is worn like that, and what is that hand doing in that pocket? You search for something you can just perceive though it is not fully in the consciousness, in other words, what is on the edge of your vision: a form, a shape, a feeling, a fear, a pleasure … a something.

So here I give you some pictures from my life, and I try to talk around the picture, towards the wonderful parade of people, places, work and experiences that constitute some of my life. I ask those who have shared my life with me in the living of it to forgive me if they remember it differently. Memories are slippery things, and liable to transmute.

I am not interested in psychological excavations, except where acting is concerned. I have always found the world outside myself of more interest than the world within. Perhaps that comes of the way I was brought up. My mother would check 'thank you' letters to make sure the word 'I' only appeared once, and she'd cross out all references to myself. She thought it was boring or tasteless to talk about yourself. Of course, I now will write about myself for many pages.



Part of my job as an actress is to do interviews, but while I find it easy to talk about the work, I tend to frustrate interviewers by avoiding talking about myself. For the same reason I have never been to a shrink.

Actually, I lie; I did go to a shrink once. When I was about twenty-three I was very unhappy and, yes, self-obsessed and insecure. It seems to me that the years between eighteen and twenty-eight are the hardest, psychologically. It's then you realise this is make or break, you no longer have the excuse of youth, and it is time to become an adult – but you are not ready. I just could not believe that anything I desired would happen, and the responsibility of making my own way, economically, artistically and emotionally, was terrifying. So I went to a psychologist.

Now I don't know whether he did this on purpose, realising that all I needed to do was grow up, but after I had poured out my unhappiness to him, the psychologist very, very quietly, in a strong Scottish accent, began to explain to me the root cause and solution to my misery. I could not understand a word. I asked him if he wouldn't mind repeating it. He did, and I still couldn't understand a word. The fourth time of asking I gave up, and realised that an analyst was not going to work for me.

My next stop on this journey of self-discovery was to visit a hand reader. Though I've never been a believer in astrology or the art of reading palms, I was pretty desperate and he came highly recommended. So I made my way to a nondescript house in a back street of Golders Green and went into the dingy, very ordinary living room where he did his readings. He was an Indian man, more like an accountant than a mystic. I liked him. He handed me cheap paper and a pencil, saying, 'I will study your hand and then I will speak very fast. You will not remember what I will say, so write it down as fast as you can.' And that was exactly what happened. He spent about ten minutes intensely studying my hand, I can't remember which one, and then he began to speak. I had to write so fast I could not take stock of what he was saying. After about twenty minutes, I was a fiver poorer and back on the street with my whole future life spelt out in scrawling script on a massive heap of paper. It was quite true, I could not remember any of it. Well, there is one thing I remember. He said, 'You will be successful in life, but you will see your greatest success later, after the age of forty-five.'

Not something you want to hear at the age of twenty-three, but it turned out he was right.

At least it brought to an end my period of desperate introspection and miserable self-obsession. As I looked at those scrawled pages, I realised that I did not want to know what the future held. I wanted my life to be an adventure. Whatever pleasure or pains, successes or failures, disasters or triumphs were waiting for me, I wanted them to come as a surprise.

I took the pages and stuffed them into the first rubbish bin I could find, then stepped out into the rest of my life.