

## Edinburgh Fringe 2010

### What Would Helen Mirren Do?

Genre: Storytelling



Venue: Hill Street Theatre

### Low Down

Susan has worked at the supermarket in Oldham most of her life. Busy with her job, her kids and her elderly mother she's never given much thought to role-models until she's training for promotion and is forced to adopt one. But her life changes dramatically when she starts to ask herself, 'What would Helen Mirren do?'

### Review

Susan's life has been much the same these past 30 years. With a part-time job at the local supermarket check-out in Oldham, her aspirations have never drifted far from bringing up her two children and looking out for her cantankerous mother. But children grow up and, like birds, fly the nest. And so Susan finds herself with rather less to do in the way of nurturing others and rather more time on her hands than she expected at her age.

Part-time work becomes full time and, when slimy Steve, her boss, is looking for someone to promote into a supervisory role, it's Susan who is shoved forward, exposing her, through a team building training course, to a world of business gobbledygook that only those working in Human Resources can understand.

Not content with having to come up with an animal that represents her personality, she is pressured into revealing her ideal role model to the training group. Cringing with embarrassment, she can think of no-one until, in a flash of inspiration, she conjures the image of Helen Mirren playing the Queen in a film she saw recently.

That doyenne of the acting profession, that heart throb of gentlemen *d'un certain age*, Helen Mirren was actually born Ilyena Vasilievna Mironov, arguably a name to conjure up more mystique than that which she subsequently adopted. At least that's what Susan thinks as she takes inspiration from Dame Helen, juxtaposing her into the various travails in which she finds herself during the rest of the training course, back at the store and then dealing with the rapid changes it and she are about to be subjected to.

Directed by her husband Peter Ellis (he of Chief Superintendent Brownlow fame in 'The Bill'), this one woman show from Anita Parry explores the life of what to many will seem like a typical northern housewife, stuck in the drudgery of a dead end job and a lacklustre social existence.

But in Parry's capable hands, Susan slowly comes to life, emerging from her chrysalis to ultimately fly away and explore the new world opening up before her. And whilst Susan is the central character, Parry's vocal dexterity allows her to convey the charmless mother, the flighty daughter, the wonderful "Big Jean" (who is instantly implanted in my memory as a 6 foot strapping northern lass, despite Parry possessing none of these physical characteristics) and slimy Steve, her lascivious boss.

Hill Street Theatre offers only limited opportunities for stage movement and the placing of artefacts to enhance the performance but optimal use was made on both counts. Subtle lighting changes also enabled Parry to switch characters without disrupting what was a funny and, at times, very poignant tale.

You couldn't help but admire the element of selflessness in Susan, yet there was an element of co-dependency that caused you to feel concern for her. Would she ever break out of the mould she has created for herself? Why does she need Dame Helen more and more as a prop? And, for a woman who thinks a trip to Wigan is exotic, why is she learning Spanish?

But life has a habit of throwing up surprises from unlikely sources and so it proves here. Selfless Susan becomes sun-seeking Susan, showing that sense of cunning that runs deep inside most of us when we see something that we aspire to. And you can be sure that Helen Mirren would have approved of the ultimate outcome.

Reviewed by Tim Wilcock 5 August 2010