

Interview: Mirette director Helen O'Hanlon

The short film director answers questions from Nouse on her film about a young girl

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Image: Silver Linings Productions/No.9 Ltd Productions

Helen O'Hanlon is the writer and director of the short film *Mirette*. Telling the story of a young girl and a wire-walker she befriends, its cast includes bigger-name stars Miriam Margolyes and Tom Conti. *Nouse* had the chance to ask O'Hanlon some questions about her film, her inspiration, and the art of the short film.

Nouse: *What was it about the book Mirette on the High Wire that made you want to adapt it into a film?*

HOH: I thought the book was hugely cinematic! It had to be 'live action' as wire walking is so compelling to watch, and the story so charming and timeless: a story of how a seemingly invisible girl can suddenly lift everyone up to the stars!

Nouse: *What was the experience like having to train the actors to wire walk? Or if they knew, how did they get into wire walking?*

HOH: We trained both our lead actors to wire walk, neither had done it before. We worked with an amazing trainer, James McCambridge who started them both on a slackline. It took 8 months for them to be ready for filming. You can see footage of their progress here: www.mirette-film.com/blog/first-steps-on-the-wire/

Nouse: *Philippe Petit is perhaps the most famous wire walker of all time, in part due to the Oscar-winning documentary Man on Wire. Did his story or this film influence you at all?*

HOH: Philippe Petit is a great hero of mine and has had a tremendous influence on me! It was *Man on Wire* that forged my love of wire walking and the first thing I ever shot was a wirewalker in a studio in London. Because of this I came across a copy of *Mirette on the High Wire*. I was thrilled to welcome Philippe to our NY premiere of *Mirette* and hope to work with him in the future.

Nouse: *In this film you acted as director, writer and producer so you saw the project through from the very beginning to the very end; what was your favourite part of the process and what was your least*

favourite?

HOH: I love directing. I love taking something from my imagination, working with a brilliant array of talents to get it on screen to become even better than I dared dream. There is nothing so satisfying to me than that. But in making a film this ambitious there are a lot of obstacles, difficult days highs and lows – at times you wonder if you will ever finish. That’s tough. But the wins along the way are electrifying.

Nouse: *The whole film feels like watching a fairy tale, what made you decide to make it more fantastical in style?*

HOH: I love magical realism. My favourite films are *Mary Poppins*, *The Fisher King*, *Big Fish*, Baz Lurhman’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the work of James Whale. This is the sort of cinema I understand, it kinda lives in my imagination. When I adapted *Mirette* I could only really see it working in this realm...as a director, magical realism is the style of film I want to continue to make.

Nouse: *In this film you were working with fantastic young actress Dixie Egerickx as well as more experienced actors in the wonderful Tom Conti and Miriam Margolyes; was there any difference in how you would direct actors with different experience levels?*

HOH: Well Dixie Egerickx is a phenomenal talent. So attentive and professional she really blew us all away, so there wasn’t real difference other than I felt very protective of her given the physical demands of the role requiring her to wire walk on set. But she’s a pro and took it all in her stride. I think it’s the role of a director to give the actors room to bring their characters to life. To set the conditions for them to give the best possible performance and enable spontaneity wherever possible. Tom and Miriam brought so much to the set, to the script, to the film – it was a pleasure to watch them work. And Tom’s performance in the finale scene gets me every single time I watch it...

Nouse: *The setting of the film was absolutely beautiful; where did you shoot it and what made you choose that location?*

HOH: The exterior setting is its own character in the film. We shot in Périgueux, Dordogne. As soon as we (literally) stumbled onto it we knew it’s beauty and atmosphere was perfect for us as it had all the elements we needed. The finale high wire scene in the square was incredibly complex to shoot but the people of the town were hugely supportive with 35 of the locals feature in the film as extras!

Nouse: *With the phenomenal success of *The Greatest Showman*, what is it about tales surrounding the Circus and similar performers that continue to fascinate audiences?*

HOH: Circus worlds are extraordinary – it’s a faded grandeur – it’s simplicity. Just the colour palate is intoxicating. And the skills...timeless and pure. I think it carries that perfect blend of fantasy and reality that captures our imagination – its appeal is multigenerational.

Nouse: *What do you think the role of short films is in the film industry? Are they just a pathway to features, or are they an important art form in their own right?*

HOH: We made *Mirette* as a pilot, to follow animated book adaptations that have been hugely successful (*Room on the Broom*, *Gruffalo*). There is a huge audience from the book that we are connecting with so we are aiming to establish *Mirette* in the commercial arena and hope to make more children’s book adaptations. I believe this format can be an important and credible format in its own right.

Nouse: *Do you have any advice on people who want to make their own films?*

HOH: Find a story you believe in passionately – something that sets your imagination on fire. Find an amazing producer, who believes in the project, and who believes in you, then go for it.

Nouse: *What are you working on next? Can you tell us a bit about it?*

HOH: We have another live action children’s book adaptation of a NY Bestseller in development, and the remarkable response we’ve had to Mirette has propelled us forward to develop a feature version. It will be slightly darker but still magical realism...and more EPIC.



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