

Helen Mirren offers sneak peek of 'Winchester'

By Jeffrey M. Anderson
Special to S.F. Examiner

Helen Mirren didn't see any ghosts during her time at San Jose's Winchester Mystery House, but she did find her visit to it inspiring, moving and fascinating.

"I don't believe in the supernatural, but I do believe in the power of belief, the power of the imagination. Humans are driven by their imaginations, and the power of that is endless," said the acclaimed actress, recently in the South Bay to film the supernatural thriller "Winchester," set for a February 2018 release.

Mirren plays the real-life Sarah Winchester, the rifle company heiress famous for building the purportedly haunted mansion (some employees claim to have heard, seen and even photographed apparitions); creating its wild architectural puzzles; and for being an technological innovator (using telephones and hot showers at the turn of the 20th century).

"Winchester" directors (and twin brothers) Peter and Michael Spierig ("Daybreakers," "Predestination") recreated the famous mansion, circa 1906, in their home country, Australia, and shot most of the 36-day schedule there.

As they completed the final bit of shooting at the real site in the Bay Area last week, they invited reporters to tour the set.

Jason Clarke, who plays a member of the Winchester board, in charge of assessing Mrs. Winchester's mental state, also was on hand.

The Spierigs said they wanted to



COURTESY JEFFREY M. ANDERSON

Helen Mirren, pictured as Sarah Winchester, came to San Jose's Winchester Mystery House to film the upcoming thriller "Winchester."



COURTESY PHOTO

photograph some of the real rooms, notably the beautiful ballroom, to get a sense of the authentic. They also used drones to film aerial footage of the rooftops.

Filming the entire movie in the house would have proven difficult: "Getting gear upstairs is so tricky," Michael said.

It's also confusing: "I've been in this house so many times and I still

get lost," said Peter. "It's funny bringing a film crew in here because every department needs a guide. It's like, 'everybody stick with your guide!'"

The legendary switchback staircase, with its seven hairpin turns, was re-created so that it pulled apart in various ways to give cameras easy access.

Despite a few movie magic tricks, the directors insisted that the archi-

tecture in the movie is as close to scale as possible.

Mirren compared the role of Sarah Winchester to that of her Oscar-winning part in "The Queen."

"There's so much known about her, and yet at the center of all that knowledge is this utter mystery," she said. "As an actress, you're allowed to have your own understanding of who this person is."