

## IAN McKELLEN

### **How does one of Britain's greatest actors feel about finding fame as a staff-wagging wizard?**

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A suite at the Savoy sounds like an eminently suitable place to meet Sir Ian McKellen. Its opulence is of the kind that ought to be enjoyed by an international film star; its location – surrounded by theatres, and a short carriage-drive from Buckingham Palace – makes it a perfect green room for one of our few actor knights. But Sir Ian is anxious to point out that he doesn't actually *live* at the Savoy: he has simply come up river from Limehouse for the day; and as he fidgets in his Regency striped armchair – constantly rearranging himself, like one of those rubber toys that you scrumple up and watch gradually regain their original shape – he certainly seems far from at home.

But perhaps this is equally appropriate. He is, after all, a knight who challenges ever preconception: gay, vegetarian, and with a North Country undertow to his splendidly resonant voice. And though he has long since been embraced by the great and the good, he claims that he is still an outsider at heart: 'As someone in the theatre, I have a healthy scepticism about the Establishment. It's my job to portray it, but not necessarily be part of it.'

One of the theatre's great attractions is clearly the comradeship it offers him. His ambition when he started out in the early Sixties was not, he says, to become rich and famous, but 'to make friends and work hard at being an actor. It was all tied up with being gay: it wasn't something you could talk about to anyone, and it was difficult to find other gay people, particularly if you were of a rather shy temperament, as I am. It was miserable, really.'

Acting, he argues, is ‘basically about getting on with like-minded people who have a story to tell.’

The film that brought him global stardom was, of course, all about fellowship – the Fellowship of the Ring. This December sees the release of the final part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Return of the King*, and Sir Ian speaks warmly of his time on location in New Zealand: ‘We all got on very well – the hobbits in particular have remained good friends. I think that everyone felt this was an important job, and we ended up making a film that people really enjoyed seeing, and making a mark on the history of the cinema.’

Fair enough; but is there not part of him that, after 40 years of building a reputation as a classical actor of genius, resents finally achieving iconic status as a white-bearded, staff-wagging wizard? ‘Not at all. I think Gandalf’s a wonderful part – one of the best I’ve ever played, with a script by one of the great writers of the twentieth century. It’s the nature of film that it’s a world-wide event, and if a lot of people only know me as the actor who plays Gandalf, I suppose that’s better than them not knowing me at all. But I hope that they might visit my website and perhaps have a look at the film of *Richard III* as a result.’

Does he not at least wish – having turned 64 – that this recognition had come earlier? Again, he says no. ‘I’m of a generation that was taught that there was going to be a prime of life, and that you wouldn’t necessarily get everything you wanted straight away – so I was always in it for the long haul. If I’d gone off into films earlier...well, suppose I’d never played Macbeth? The trouble with film is that not all scripts are that rewarding. I’m not a snob, but the real Everests are Shakespeare, Ibsen – the big writers.’

And, of course, there was the consolation of his knighthood, conferred on him in 1991 for services to the performing arts. He sees its significance as twofold.

‘First, it puts me nominally in the company of people I’ve admired all my life – such as Sir Laurence [Olivier] and Sir John [Gielgud] and Sir Alec [Guinness] and Sir Michael Redgrave. It’s only a notion, of course, and it’s only other people’s point of view, but it does give an actor a warm feeling.’

Secondly, it came three years after he had publicly announced that he was gay – ‘And in those days it wasn’t that usual for an openly gay man to be knighted: I think I was only the second ever, after Angus Wilson.’ Ironically, his name was put forward by Mrs Thatcher’s government, which was widely perceived to be homophobic. Worried that he might be accused of collaborating with the enemy, he rang his friend Michael Cashman – now a Euro MP – to ask whether he should accept the honour: ‘And Michael’s assessment, and mine, was that whether or not Mrs Thatcher knew what she was doing, there was a symbolic point to the Establishment accepting that some people were gay. I thought that it was society inching forward.’

‘But in an ideal world I’d be on the side of those who say, “Who needs knighthoods, and who needs titles?” It separates some people out from others rather unfairly, and I don’t think it would be good for anyone having a knighthood to say, “I am now superior”. But I’ve nothing against civil medals, and most democracies have a system of pats on the back; it’s just the titles that are a little bit annoying.’

Is it really unfair that Sir Ian McKellen has been set apart? The answer has to be no. He is one of the very few actors of his generation whose greatest roles are preserved not on celluloid but in the memories of those who saw them in the theatre, as long as 30 years ago: his Richard II and Edward II, played on alternate nights at the Edinburgh Festival in 1969; his Macbeth

opposite Judi Dench at Stratford's Other Place in 1976; his Coriolanus at the National Theatre in 1984. And yet he seems genuinely dismissive of his achievements: 'It's all luck,' he says at one point. 'One can't take it too seriously, success. It's just happened to me – and who's to say that I would have been unhappy if my career had been quite different?'

Having accepted his knighthood on behalf of the gay community, he takes the role of spokesman seriously. He is a founder of the pressure group Stonewall, and the list of honours and appointments on his impressive website includes – besides 'Board of the National Theatre' – 'Patron, Manchester Lesbian and Gay Switchboard'. Activism has always been part of his life: in the Seventies he helped start the egalitarian Actors' Company, in which roles and pay were shared equally – though it should be added that he left because he was tired of playing small parts.

He sees this aspect of his life as part of a family tradition. His mother and father (a civil engineer) were active Christians – 'low-church Nonconformists who felt that their religion was not just an act of faith, but a guide to their everyday lives. It was important to have principles and live by them – and to speak up for them on occasion. I think my father and grandfather, who was a lay preacher, would both have been very sympathetic and approving of those times I've done that.'

These charitable inclinations made the McKellens' house in Wigan an interesting place to grow up. During the war the family took in both evacuees and (at weekends) a German PoW; they also welcomed the first black man to be seen in the town: 'His name was Henry, and I can see him now, walking down the street followed by crowds of children who couldn't believe their luck in seeing such an exotic person.' All this made the young Ian aware that there was a world beyond Wigan: 'I always knew that I was not going to stay there – and once I went to university, I knew I wouldn't be going back.'

He has written that an actor's life is full of crossroads. One was his decision not to go to drama school after leaving Cambridge, but to learn his trade in repertory theatre; another was leaving Lawrence Olivier's National Theatre at the end of the Sixties. 'There was too much competition there,' he says: 'Michael Gambon, Ronald Pickup, Michael York, Albert Finney, Tony Hopkins, Edward Petherbridge, Frank Finlay – we were all of an age, fighting for the same sort of parts. I realised that there was more light ahead of me elsewhere.' The result was his double triumph at the Edinburgh Festival, which established him for many as Olivier's heir.

Does he still get the same buzz from acting? Not quite, he admits, because he now feels so much in control that the element of fear has gone. (Once, when he lost his voice in the middle of a one-man show, he simply lay down in front of the audience and did vocal exercises until it came back.) He also finds stage work more tiring than he used to, and feels that his future may lie more in film: 'I'm beginning to think that theatre is a young man's game. Filming is easier – you might be working longer hours, but you're looked after well. I enjoy less and less working in dirty, badly designed dressing rooms: I've stayed in so many good hotels.'

Perhaps he will make his home at the Savoy yet.