



GREY PRIDE

Almost a decade and a half after Ian McKellen hung up Gandalf's staff — behind the bar of the pub he co-owns, since you asked — the British actor has no plans to give up the craft that has made him a cultural icon, writes NICK SCOTT.

photography simon emmett fashion direction jo grzeszczuk

Grey knitted cotton and linen cardigan, Brunello Cucinelli; navy cotton long-sleeved T-shirt, Sunspel; blue grey, cotton drawstring trousers, Giorgio Armani; ecru and smoky grey Sartorial Survival cashmere-silk mega-square, exclusive design for The Rake by Turnbull & Asser and Mo Coppoletta; rose gold world time timepiece on chocolate brown alligator leather strap, Patek Philippe.

Indigo cotton denim shirt, Paul Smith at Mr Porter; long sleeve navy T-shirt, Sunspel; textured navy and white cotton jacquard half-lined jacket, blue and white ombre scarf and blue-grey cotton drawstring trousers, all Giorgio Armani.



The tempest raging outside, as *The Rake* settles down for a conversation with Ian McKellen, has not been summoned by any ousted-duke sorcerer, and this is no magical Mediterranean island in renaissance Europe. Rather, we're on the ground floor of the actor's townhouse, and the volumes of water periodically crashing into the window panes are those of the Thames, on whose gravelly banks McKellen has had a domicile since the 1970s, when plans to redevelop and gentrify the then moribund Docklands were in their infancy.

It is an enchanting home: four floors strewn with untidily stacked books, eclectic modern artworks and a sprinkle here and there of sea glass and china, possibly washed up by the winding tides outside. Stepping into a vast kitchen and reception area on the first floor, McKellen's mellifluous voice, a dulcet blend of his native Wigan-slash-Bolton accent and acquired, sonorous Shakespearean modulation, is immediately audible as he regales the photoshoot entourage in an adjacent room: "Well, you see, it was all just to hide my stomach, and yet Anna Wintour came over and told me I was the best-dressed man in the room..."

One's eyes, though, on entering this part of McKellen's home (call him 'Sir Ian' at your peril; he almost turned down his 1991 knighthood because he believes actors earn them too easily) are drawn to a riverside terrace. There, bursts of potted foliage, a stepladder/lantern installation and three primary-coloured, life-size artist's mannequins make for a surreal tableau, back-dropped by a Tupperware sky whose low-hanging belly today is pierced by the faint grey outline of the Shard to the west.

There are plenty of signs of recent revelry around the place, not least a half-finished glass of white wine on the top-floor balcony, which the occupant admits has been there since New Year's Eve. McKellen says, though, that the unrelenting six or so decades since he first trod the boards, as Malvolio in a school production of *Twelfth Night*, have left him craving tranquillity as much as the next septuagenarian. "I like nothing better than being in here," he says, settling into an armchair, the dim light and rain-lash on the windows supplying the room with some weapons-grade hygge. He fingers the top pocket of a loose velvet jacket he can't remember acquiring. "I love going to my computer, wondering what I'm doing that day, and seeing there's nothing in the diary," he says. "I'll happily have people round here — more happily than I'll go out — but I'm not a recluse."

McKellen makes his everyday existence sound surprisingly ordinary — "When *Newsnight* stops over Christmas, I find myself thinking, 'Ohhh, come on!'" — for a major player in two of the biggest movie franchises in cinematic history: *X-Men* and *The Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit* (the Tolkien adaptations took \$5,895,819,745 worldwide, compared to \$7,726,174,542 for *Harry Potter*). Three years after the final instalment of the prequel trilogy *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* came out,

there's no more Middle-earth fiction to be mined. Is he glad? Paraphernalia around his home includes signed mugs bearing an image of a harp-playing Gandalf, and what I think might be a model of Orodruin on one terrace (the wizard's staff is to be found behind the bar in the Limehouse pub McKellen co-owns, The Grapes), but he has said in the past that periods working in isolation on a green-screen set in those films made him wonder whether he should stop acting altogether.

Thankfully he did nothing of the sort, and now feels fairly enamoured of the enigmatic wizard with whom he'll always be associated. "I'm very at ease with having been Gandalf, and even with being known only as him by some people, because that's the nature of the beast," he says. "Audiences worldwide aren't going to have seen me do other stuff I'm proud of, but that's life. It'd be awful to be most famous for something you didn't really think was very good, but those films were excellent, and it's nice that they're still being discovered by young people years after we made them. And it's work I did a long time ago — it's not like I have to turn up to a TV studio each week and churn it out."

At one point, before the prequel trilogy, McKellen nearly announced that he'd never don the crumpled conical hat again — "Always with a job, I find, there are pros and cons, and I actually write them down, and it was rather evenly matched with returning to Gandalf," he says — while these days, when it comes to reprising the role, it comes down to how good the cause is: he's agreed, since our interview, to "do a bit of Gandalf" as part of a series of one-man greatest hits shows to raise money for a small north London theatre; however, asked about having turned down £1.14m to officiate in character at Napster billionaire Sean Parker's wedding, McKellen affects that familiar, wizened frown and voice: "Gandalf doesn't do that sort of thing."

Christian values

Days before the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Denis Murray and Margery Lois McKellen moved, with their four-month-old son and five-year-old daughter, from Burnley to Wigan. There, the infant McKellen slept under a bomb-proof iron table in the dining room. "You took the conflict, and that you were in potential danger, as a fact of life," he says. "I think the biggest effect the war had on me was constantly thinking, after it, 'What have we done to deserve the life we're having?' Which in this country is one of the best you can possibly have in terms of personal freedoms, and so on. So I've always been alert to the responsibilities that freedom gives you — never take it for granted."

McKellen's father was a civil engineer and a lay preacher, and both of his grandfathers were men of the cloth; Christian values ran strongly through the family. "Straight away after the war, the first visitor who came to our house was a German PoW who had been living in a nearby camp," McKellen says. "My

"I've always been alert to the responsibilities that freedom gives you — never take it for granted."

parents' attitude was that they must live their lives according to their faiths. It wasn't just something you did on a Sunday, and so to be reconciled with an erstwhile enemy was very much what they thought was the right thing to do.

"We also had a black man staying with us — unremarkable, you'd think, but at that time in Wigan people had never seen a black face in the street, and young Henry was a Christian student staying with us from central Africa. He was like the Pied Piper — when he walked out of our house to the shops there'd be a trail of kids following him, fascinated. So although it was a very contained life, there was also a world elsewhere you were aware of, but we were living very comfortably away from it all. Well, the bad thing about that is you're not really in the world, you're looking out at it. That's why I first wanted to come to London — there was more going on in every way. Also, it's easier to be anonymous here — I've never been attracted to living in a small society where you're a big fish in a small pond."

His first leap into a bigger pond came when he took a scholarship place at the University of Cambridge. While there, a glowing review of his performance in *Henry IV*

Part II from Bernard Levin (a man later described by *The Times* as "the most famous journalist of his day") proved to be a catalyst. "I played an old man called Justice Shallow," says McKellen. "I was only 18 or something. Derek Jacobi was in the cast as well. We were all undergraduates, but thanks to the director, John Barton, who later left Cambridge as a don to help run the Royal Shakespeare Company and became the great director and expert in speaking in verse and so on, I got a rave review in a now defunct newspaper called the *News Chronicle*."

Glowing words in a nationally distributed publication compounded McKellen's ambition. "I thought, 'Well, maybe I could make it a career' — it hadn't occurred to me until then. I was met at the stage door of the Arts Theatre in Cambridge, and to this day I could take you to the very flagstone I was standing on, and a friend said, 'Well, I suppose you'll be getting an agent now?' And it was that casual remark that made me think, 'Oh, I see, yes, I will — that's what I'll do...'" Until then I'd thought that by the end of Cambridge, reading English, I'd be a teacher or something."

Two years later, McKellen left Cambridge and began cherry-picking roles strictly with a view to honing his craft. "I knew I couldn't go around playing old men like in *Henry IV*, so I started picking parts that I didn't find necessarily very comfortable but that would help me get a bit more relaxed as myself. I didn't go to drama school, I just went straight into it, as you did in those days. Most cities in this country had local professional theatres with a company that stayed together for a year, and I joined one of these in Coventry — the Belgrade Theatre. If I hadn't gone to university, and met a lot of people who were crazy about the theatre, like I was, and received that particularly helpful pat on the back, as it were, I don't know what might have happened. It's all happened as it should."

Weightiness of his craft

Performing one of the many hilarious celebrity cameos that occur in Ricky Gervais's and Stephen Merchant's sitcom *Extras*, Ian McKellen played a supercilious parody of Ian McKellen. Referring to himself as 'Sir Ian' throughout, he asks the rhetorical question, "How do I act so well?", before answering it himself with overblown assumptions about the weightiness of his craft ("I imagined what it would be like to be a wizard, and then I pretended and acted in that way on the day...").

What, though — if pressed, like now — is his genuine answer to that question? Not for the first or last time, McKellen pauses, those distinctive blue eyes squinting straight ahead, for at least 20 seconds. "The *Extras* script was so brilliant that I realised that whenever I talk about acting I sound like this ridiculous, self-satisfied egotist that they'd turned me into," he says. "I have to be very careful not to sound as pompous as that now. So the question

'how do I act so well?' — well, if someone's talking to you about how they make chairs well, they don't sound pompous, do they? But when an actor starts doing that he's inevitably talking about himself — you're

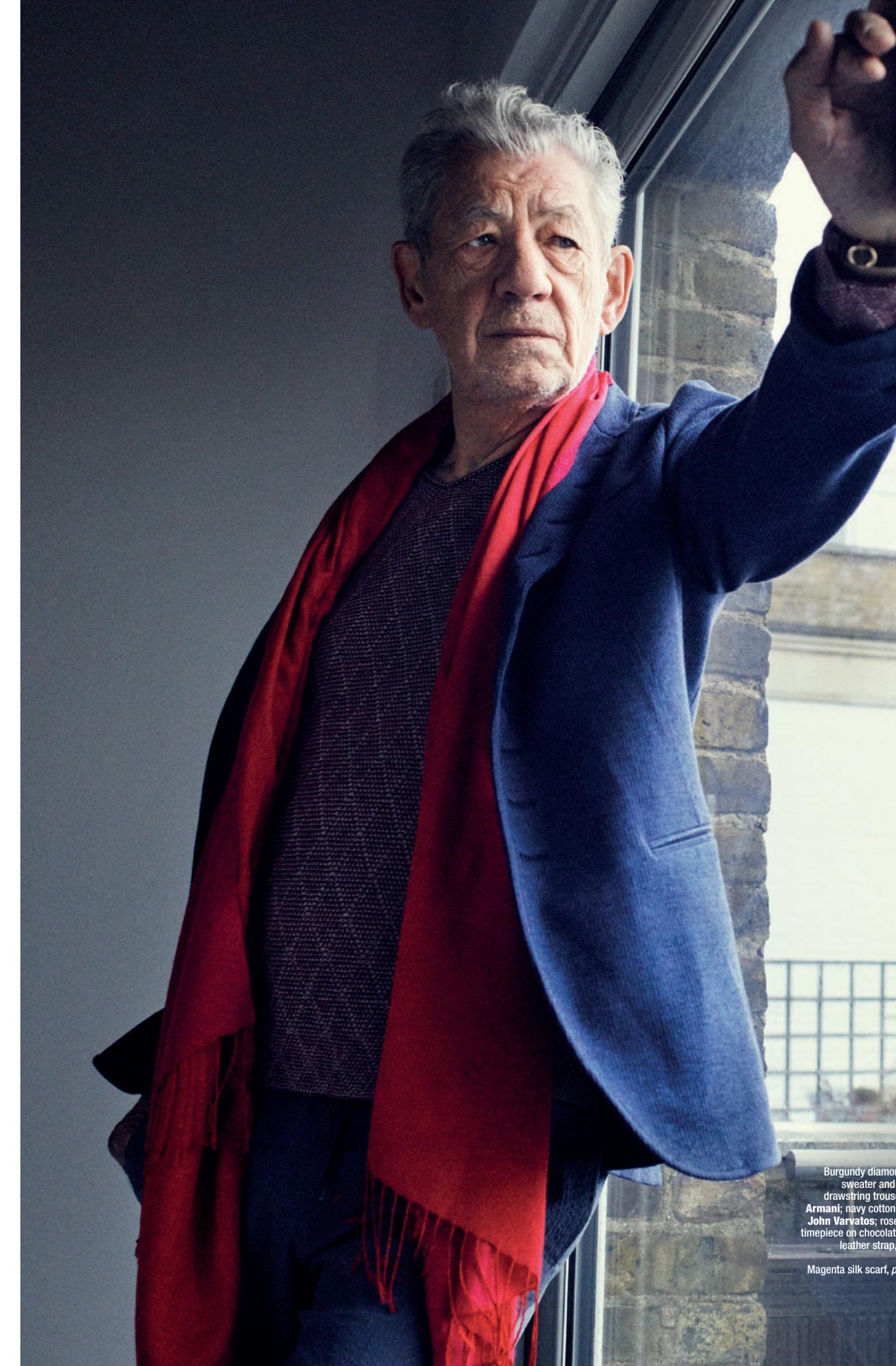
the raw material. It's a very self-absorbed activity, so when you start talking about it, it sounds as if you spend your whole life presenting yourself, and on the whole I think I don't do that."

It's fair to say his credentials as an actor are met with something like reverential awe within the industry. "Ian's great strength, and it's a strength I've envied for many years, even before I knew him, is his fearlessness as a performer," his good friend Patrick Stewart tells *The Rake*. "He was incredibly brave when he was a young actor, and that continues today. He'll try anything. His enormous courage is coupled with high intelligence and a superb technique. He's always in control of his medium and of himself, and of the situation around him, and I have the greatest respect for that."

Billy Crudup, who in 2013 supported McKellen and Stewart in repertory Broadway performances of Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, agrees. "I haven't seen a more impressive mind in the theatre, and I've certainly seen some very impressive minds," Crudup tells *The Rake*. "Paired with the instrument he has — that he has cultivated, in his career — it's an extraordinary thing for an actor to bear witness to. The marriage of that kind of intellect with the force of that instrument is singular, really. To see it up close was a one-of-the-kind experience."

Might he ever throw modesty to the wind and concur with his peers? "Perhaps more than most actors I'll take a risk," he says. "Some actors, some I'd call the 'stars', are often the same character. I'm the one who tends to turn up and people ask, 'Hang on, is that Ian McKellen?', and I quite like that, really. That's the sort of actor I think I am. I do think I can act now, but when I started out I wouldn't have said that with any confidence. I've learned on the job."

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Burgundy diamond pattern cotton sweater and blue-grey cotton drawstring trousers, both Giorgio Armani; navy cotton and linen jacket, John Varvatos; rose gold world time timepiece on chocolate brown alligator leather strap, Patek Philippe.

Magenta silk scarf, property of Sir Ian McKellen.



Navy cotton unstructured blazer, blue-grey cotton drawstring trousers and navy and white virgin wool and silk sweater, all Giorgio Armani; rose gold world time timepiece on chocolate brown alligator leather strap, Patek Philippe.

Cobalt blue silk scarf,
property of Sir Ian McKellen.





This page:
Ian McKellen alongside Judi Dench in *Macbeth*, 1976; as Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*, 1989; channelling D.H. Lawrence in *Priest of Love*, 1981; as Tsar Nicholas II in *Rasputin: Dark Servant of Destiny*, 1996; as Gandalf in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, 2014; as Richard III in Shakespeare's play of the same name, 1995; with Joanne Whalley in *Scandal*, 1989; alongside his old friend Patrick Stewart in *Waiting for Godot*, 2009.

Opposite page:
As Sir Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006; as Magneto in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, 2014; as Sherlock in *Mr. Holmes*, 2015.

ALAMY; REX FEATURES



I'm a slogger. So if I had to answer that *Extras* question seriously, I'd have to say simply, 'Because I've done a lot of it'."

One reason he's done a lot of it is the fact that he started so young. McKellen has described acting as a "way to fulfil a need" for his younger self. When did that need surface? "Once I started doing a bit of acting in school, it became an activity my parents approved of — my dad was a bit nervous about me becoming a professional, but thought it worth giving it a go — so to be doing something as a kid that your parents approved of, and that other people sort of recognise — 'Ian's an actor, not an academic or a sportsman, that's what he's best at' — and particularly for a boy growing up gay, in a world in which you couldn't talk about that, that side of your personality was not discussed or considered, I think that may have been why theatre helped to give me an individuality. Otherwise, I'd have been difficult to define. I couldn't talk to anyone about being gay, and I think there's a connection there. You could escape into the part you were playing, and live through his emotional situation, all on display, in a way that I wasn't allowed to do in my private life. So, again, it's a sort of compensation."

McKellen came out in 1988 live on the radio, and has been a gay rights activist since. Even he was astounded at the extent to which it enhanced his life and career. "Pretending to be someone else is always an escape, but the interesting thing is, when I eventually came out, long after I'd become a professional actor, there was an instant change — my acting became less about disguise and hiding and more about revelation and being myself generally," he says. "So my acting improved overnight, as the rest of my life did, too. Before, there had been a connection between growing up gay in an alien world and being able to escape from it in a public way, applied by acting. So that need I had... I know it sounds like cheap psychology, but I think it's true."

Admittedly, I feel like a bit of an armchair shrink when I ask him if there was any significance in the fact his first major acting role after coming out was playing the inveterate womaniser John Profumo in the 1989 film *Scandal*. "That was a deliberate choice," he says. "Some people assumed that once I'd come out I'd become a 'queer artist', like the film director Derek Jarman, whose whole life had been publicly gay — a pioneer, really — and he and others thought that now I was openly gay, everything I did professionally would be about my sexuality. I didn't get that at all, because I thought, 'I'm an actor, I'm interested in discovering other people's

lives, not banging a drum or making a case in point and an attitude'."

By the time the Profumo role came about, McKellen, at this point just shy of 50, had done most of his acting without a camera lens in the vicinity, despite peers from his youth, such as Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay and Peter O'Toole, having made the transition from stage to screen in the early sixties. The first film in which he played the lead, the 1981 D.H. Lawrence biopic *Priest of Love*, remains relatively little known, and at one point he began taking minor roles in big movies to cut his screen-acting teeth: in 1985's *Plenty*, opposite Meryl Streep, and 1993's *Last Action Hero*, opposite Arnold Schwarzenegger. "I think what I'm most proud of is that I had to learn how to do it as I went along," he says of his transition from stage to screen. "Some actors seem to be born able to be relaxed and do it — I'm not one of them. I'm not sure there even is a school where you go to learn film acting."

The Lord of the Rings, and probably the *X-Men* films, too, would never have fit in his schedule had he not turned down the part opposite Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible II* subsequently taken by Sir Anthony Hopkins, due to their refusal to show him an advanced script. Even without his two most famous parts to date, though, his screen C.V. would be pretty impressive. His turn as Tsar Nicholas II in the 1996 television biopic *Rasputin: Dark Servant of Destiny* deserves to be more talked about than it is, and won him a Golden Globe for best supporting actor. (Incidentally, his list of accolades also includes six Laurence Olivier awards, a Tony award, a Screen Actors Guild award, a BIF award, two Saturn awards, four Drama Desk awards, two Critics' Choice awards, two Oscar nominations, four BAFTA nominations, and five Emmy award nominations.) His last film role, before Disney's recent live-action retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, saw him play a cantankerous, mentally deteriorating 93-year-old Sherlock in *Mr. Holmes*, and is perhaps his most nuanced on-screen outing to date. He's also done Shakespeare (the 1995 movie adaptation of *Richard III*), Dickens (the 1999 *David Copperfield* mini-series) ... and Dan Brown (he delivered a much-needed soupçon of gravitas to the banality of 2006's *The Da Vinci Code*, playing the main antagonist Sir Leigh Teabing). All of which barely scratches the surface.

But for many he will always be a 'classical actor', for want of a less fusty phrase. McKellen is the first to admit that his association with The Bard will always keep him in the inner suburbs of



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intellectual respectability — “Knighthoods and things are really just decorations on the tree, which is called Shakespeare,” he says — yet his enthusiasm for a wordsmith he once referred to as “a hydra-headed brand” remains undiminished. What did he mean by that phrase? “Did I say that?” he says with a laugh. “That’s rather good. I think what I was probably talking about is, Shakespeare for me is a playwright and a source of income, but he’s a brand as well, a national symbol, an international symbol. He’s on stamps. He’s a definition of what it is to be English or British. He’s not just his plays, he’s something in the air; something that people refer to, a standard of excellence. If you see a Shakespeare play well done, you’re going to come out of the performance knowing more about yourself and the world you live in than when you went in, and you can see them again and again because each group of people who performs them discovers something else in them.”

A strong engagement in the world came into McKellen’s consciousness long before Shakespeare did, he says, by osmosis: his parents, always with adherence to their Christian faith the main priority, followed politics keenly (“I don’t actually know what they voted; probably liberal,” he says), and his

political interest has grown as the years have passed. “I think of the decades of my life as being packed with improvements,” he says. “I’ve watched our world get better in terms of free education for everybody quite early on in my life, establishment of a national health service, eventually the success of our campaigning to help gay people change the laws that had been in place. I’m not nostalgic for a world that’s gone, but I’m alert to the fact that you have to know what’s going on and keep constantly checking: any new measure, new law, new attitude, new invention — in what sense are our lives going to be different because of it? Is it going to make us more constrained, less private, more endangered? Is the state getting too strong or too weak? I think I’m concerned about all these things because the upheaval of the war, and all those deaths and all that hatred... Some good has to have come out of it all. So I am an optimist.”

Even now, in these turbulent times? “Yes. I’m not one of those pessimists who think that society’s falling apart, and that [because of Brexit] we’re now a foreigner-hating society — I don’t think that’s true. And if economically the north and north-east had been better prepared for the changes that I suppose were inevitable some decades ago, then we wouldn’t have this problem now. If you’re having difficulty scraping a living, if the social services in your area aren’t so hot, if you then see people you perceive to be strangers muscling in, I can see why people blame the incomers for the situation, but [those incomers] didn’t cause it, they were a response to it. We just have to be more grown up about it all.”

One of the traits he admires in other people, he says, is ambivalence when it comes to life’s knottier issues. “I’m

suspicious of people who have very, very strong, unmovable, unshakeable opinions — everything is much more nuanced than, ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’, or vice versa. You can’t see the solution to a problem unless you’re looking at every side of whatever the subject is. In that sense I’m a sociable person.” Although staunchly atheist, the faith that defined his parents’ outlook did underpin his early sense of fairness and decency. “I enjoyed Christianity because of the fabulous stories about right and wrong and being decent to each other and love and all those positive things,” he says. “They were very real for my parents, but, for me, the minute I was in my teens and on my own and allowed to be independent... although I enjoyed the friendship and camaraderie of my parents and their friends, I didn’t feel like I needed to share their faith to enjoy the sort of society that they wanted, and that’s remained the case. And I think organised religion has to be very careful about why they’re

organised — if they’re saying, ‘We are right and you are wrong’, that’s very unhelpful and probably alien to the faith they’re professing.”

McKellen packs a vitality that he puts, in part, down to doing Pilates once or twice a week. Although an

acute sense of his own mortality has long since set in (“At my age, with people younger than yourself dying of old age or disease, you think, ‘Well, the inevitable is maybe around the corner’”), it serves to enhance his joie de vivre. Following another lengthy period of silent reflection, enjoying a freshly lit Marlboro Light, he slowly recites a line from a ditty by the Italian-American jazz and swing artist Louis Prima: “*Enjoy yourself, enjoy yourself, while you’re still in the pink; enjoy yourself, enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think.*”

For McKellen, who tried to limit his workload to half the calendar a few years ago before getting a little restless, adherence to the lyric means soldiering on with what he does best. “I feel like if I say I’m going to take a year off, I might fall, trip, break both knees and not be able to work ever again,” he says. “I rather feel at the moment that I’ve still got all my faculties, I can still remember lines, I’m still mobile, and there will be a time when none of that’s true, and I might regret things and think, ‘I could have done that film, I could have been in that play, I could have tried that out and now it’s too late’. I’m not bored of acting, and I still think there’s a lot more to learn. I enjoy my job, and I enjoy entertaining people. Part of what I enjoy is, I’m still getting better at it. So to stop...? No, I’d have to be stopped by something or other.”

And with that, Ian McKellen pricks up his ears at the tempest raging outside, gets up, bids me farewell, and strolls over to the desktop computer in a small office section of his lower-ground floor, no doubt to check what awaits him next on this storm-battered February afternoon. ▀

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