

# HE THAT PLAYS THE KING

*Ian McKellen's meticulous theatricality.*

BY JOHN LAHR

Strolling through Limehouse, in London's East End, you pass streets, like Shoulder of Mutton Alley, that still give off a whiff of Elizabethan hurly-burly, and ancient pubs like the Grapes, which has been serving ale from the same spot since 1583. Soon you come to Sir Ian McKellen's narrow five-story house, which was built in 1733. McKellen had the place renovated in 2000, while he was away in New Zealand being Gandalf the Grey, the hoary-haired wizard in "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring," which grossed nearly a billion dollars worldwide and made McKellen, in his sixties, an international star. At the far end of the house's paintings-crammed ground floor, beyond McKellen's writing desk, is a dormer window, and beyond the window, no more than twenty feet away, the murky Thames rolls by, carrying the dust of ages.

McKellen is also a conduit of history. Since his first professional performance, in the Belgrade Theatre Company's 1961 production of "A Man for All Seasons," in Coventry, he reckons that he has "never been out of work." His adult life has been spent between the rehearsal room, the stage, and the movie set. One of the era's great classical actors, he has played most of Shakespeare's major heroes and villains, including Macbeth, Iago, Richard II, and Richard III (in a stellar modern-dress interpretation that he reprised for the 1995 film, directed by Richard Loncraine). Last January, McKellen began rehearsals for a season in the Royal Shakespeare Company's productions of "King Lear" and Chekhov's "The Seagull." (Both plays, directed by Sir Trevor Nunn, will be at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in September.) This is the third "King Lear" in which Mc-

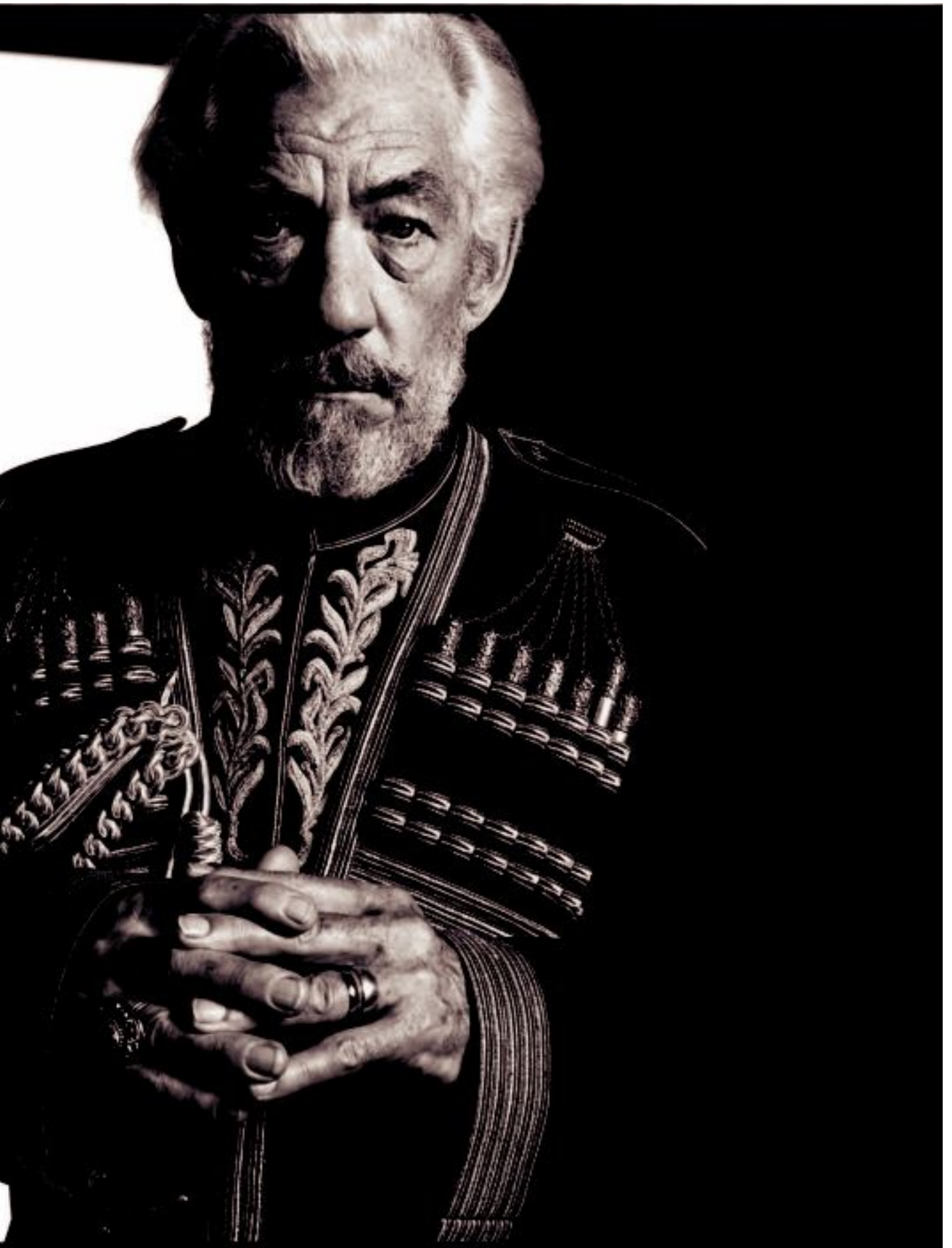
Kellen has featured—he was Edgar in the 1974 Actors' Company production, which also played at BAM, and the Earl of Kent in a 1990 production—but, at sixty-eight, he is attempting the part of Lear for the first time. The R.S.C. tour is a test of McKellen's redoubtable stamina: he performs Lear four times a week and Chekhov's Soren twice. Playing Lear, he told me, is "the most difficult thing I've ever done."

McKellen has grown up and grown old with the British public, which accounts for some of the intensity of his relationship with his audience. He sees the enterprise of acting as a kind of service industry, and the fact that a large portion of the stories through which he has won renown are Shakespeare's gives the task, for him, a certain moral purpose. "I'm not just doing it to satisfy myself," he said. "I'm doing it because I know that, if the audience only gets this story and the way that it is written, their lives are going to be changed. That's the preacher in me." He added, "I'm very sentimental about Stratford. I die as King Lear a hundred yards from where Shakespeare died, a hundred yards from where he's buried. It's very moving that he was an actor. It all happened because, like me, he'd seen actors at work when he was a kid. He's one of us. So there's a sort of responsibility to do your very best by him."

Over the years, McKellen has reached out as happily to the hoi polloi as to the highbrows. In 2006, playing the leering Widow Twankey in a pantomime version of "Aladdin" at London's Old Vic, he tapped into his music-hall roots and discovered his inner Dame, a lewd, garish old tart who, according to his Cambridge contemporary the director Stephen Frears, echoed "all the Northern comics he would have seen—Norman

*Though his role as Gandalf in "The Lord of the Rings" made him an international star, McKellen remains at heart a man of the stage. Photograph by Steve Pyke.*





Evans, Frank Randle, and Les Dawson." McKellen's democratic appetite for performance has also extended to guest appearances on the venerable North Country soap opera "Coronation Street," "Extras," "The Simpsons," and "Saturday Night Live," which he hosted in 2002, as well as appearances in the movie "The Da Vinci Code" and the "X-Men" and "Lord of the Rings" trilogies. In 1994, McKellen, who calls himself a "front man" for gay activism in Britain, took the pitcher's mound at Yankee Stadium before a crowd of fifty thousand to close the Gay Games. "Good evening, I'm Sir Ian McKellen," he said. "But you can call me Serena."

In person, there is nothing camp or frivolous about McKellen. On the overcast May morning when we first met, his ease and accessibility were reflected in his dress—a blue T-shirt, jeans, and low-top green sneakers. McKellen has a large head, made even larger these days by the unruly mass of white hair and beard he has grown for the role of Lear. His face is a craggy terrain, and the bags under his heavy-lid-

ded eyes have deepened and drooped. But, if McKellen's face carries the striations of time, his body doesn't. He is tall and supple, with a dancer's form that he enjoys showing off. (He has stripped onstage for "Coriolanus" and stepped out of a shower in a TV documentary; in the storm scene of "King Lear," he stands truly naked against the elements.) When he talks, he has a tendency to act out his anecdotes. Leaning on the black marble counter of his mauve kitchen, he said, "Every night when I lift Cordelia—she stands on a chair and I lift her in the wings—I think, Ow! Ian, you should have gone and done some more exercises." He suddenly tottered toward me with the imaginary princess in his arms. "The role isn't as tiring as I thought," he added. "Perhaps because it's often played by men who are older. At the end of 'Hamlet' you've got a fight. At the end of 'Macbeth' you've got a fight. At the beginning of 'Coriolanus' you have a fight. You're forever running here, there, and everywhere. Lear doesn't run. He's a talker. Where it's wearing on you is emotionally and mentally. I do feel I've had that sort of workout by the end of the evening."

McKellen walked out onto his patio overlooking the Thames. Greenwich was upriver to the left, and just visible on the right were the peaked roofs of Tower Bridge. To mark the beginning of the new millennium, McKellen threw a sit-down dinner for forty on New Year's Eve, 1999. "One of the entertainments for the evening was going to be watching the Queen going upriver to the Millennium Dome," he recalled. "A really unattractive boat came chugging up the river. She was on City Cruises! If she hadn't been wearing lime green, one wouldn't have noticed. We wanted proper people rowing her up. . . . I wanted her to do the job superbly."

As a master of theatrical ceremony, McKellen has given a lot of thought to the notion of royal ritual and performance. "Your kingship is created entirely by the way other people react to you," he said. His Lear enters the stage to a show of worship that contains a warning: nobody is to approach. Still, because his authority is absolute, he speaks softly at first; he doesn't need to raise his voice. "He holds all the cards," McKellen said. He added, "Having seen power people at close quarters, functioning, is essential if you are going to be convincing." (At a dance at Buckingham Palace recently, McKellen and his friend Dame Judi Dench—they were Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the towering 1976 Trevor Nunn production at the R.S.C.—went behind the bandstand and "had a little sit on the throne.") In his study of royals, McKellen claimed to have uncovered "a few tricks." One is slowness: his Lear progresses at a snail's pace among his prostrate subjects. "They go very slowly, to imprint on your memory that moment," McKellen said. "You don't know anybody in the world who goes that slowly." He recalled rushing out of the R.S.C.'s Aldwych Theatre to watch the Queen's Silver Jubilee parade, in 1977: "No cars parked, no buses, no traffic. You're suddenly aware that the whole place is a set. You hear birds. Around the bend comes this car, unlike any other car I've ever seen. It's got glass all around. This car's going at ten miles an hour. Everything is unusual. Inside it, these two dolls clearly made up. I found myself waving. And what was I waving at? The two richest people in the coun-



*"Although it's nothing serious, let's keep an eye on it to make sure it doesn't turn into a major lawsuit."*

try, actually. That's why it won't do when she comes up the Thames on City Cruises. Far too democratic."

At the age of three, McKellen was taken to see his first play, "Peter Pan," in Manchester, ten miles from the mining town of Wigan, where he grew up. "It was an exciting thing," he said. "We had to leave early to catch the train. I never found out how the story ended. I said to myself, 'I'll be back.' It was uncompleted business."

His father, Denis McKellen, who was a borough civil engineer, played the piano. His mother, Margery, dabbled in amateur dramatics. Both preferred theatregoing to movies. Once a week, they took in a play and frequently brought their son. By twelve, McKellen was attending plays on his own. "I fell in love with the theatre entirely as an audience," he said. Performances of any kind delighted him. The circus came to town twice a year, with its panoply of side-shows. McKellen loved to watch the roustabouts put up the tents. "They were the first men I was attracted to: long hair, tight trousers, dirty hands. Anyone would have fallen for them."

Around the age of six, McKellen made his debut on a platform stage, playing his mother's son in an amateur church production about a group of American Quakers whose meeting-house was invaded by Indians. He wore a Puritan collar made out of a Kellogg's Corn Flakes box. "I remember being quite comfortable in the bright lighting," he said. "One warrior was putting on his body paint and he told me not to be frightened of him for real—he was only acting, he said. I remember thinking, Of course you are! What an idiot to think I confused theatre with life!" Margery, according to McKellen, "loved going to the theatre, loved actors, loved acting." He added, "One of the few things I know my mother said about my acting—she said it to my aunt—'If Ian does become an actor, it's a wonderful job because it brings pleasure to a lot of people.' I was comforted by that. I needed my parents' approval, and in death I had it from her."

McKellen's mother died of breast cancer when he was twelve. His father moved Ian and his older sister, Jean, to Bolton around that time, and remarried



*"If you don't want the real-estate section, can I take a look at it?"*

when Ian was fourteen. For about two years, as a teen-ager, McKellen went every week to Bolton's Grand Theatre, a somewhat down-at-the-heels variety theatre owned by a friend of his father, who allowed the stagestruck lad to watch acts from backstage. "I got to see these professionals in the wings, stepping into the light and transforming," he said. "I'd been let in on their secret." In McKellen's mind, theatre was increasingly an alternate family to his own problematic one. "The significance of the Grand was not just the crucial introduction to professional performers on the job but also having some independence from home and school, meeting people my family and friends didn't know," he said.

The McKellens, who were progressive, were staunch about small things—no tea, no coffee, no alcohol—and about large ones. "We were do-gooders," he said. "You were here on this earth to leave the world a better place than you found it." The family took in evacuees, a German prisoner of war, and, according to McKellen, "the first black man to appear in Wigan." "I can remember

walking out with him in Wigan," McKellen said of their African guest. "By the time we'd got to the town center, there'd be a crowd of kids following us. They'd never seen a black man. None of us had. It's entirely typical of our family to have welcomed a stranger in. What I didn't realize at the time was that I was a stranger myself in the midst of this."

McKellen's family may have been freethinking, but he never discussed his homosexuality at home. "You didn't lie in our house," he said. "That was hard for me because, in not talking about myself, I was lying. Is it any wonder that under that sort of pressure, day in day out, eventually you give in, and say, 'All right, yes, I'm queer'? It's quite a small step from saying 'I am unusual' to saying 'I shouldn't be the way I am.' You invent your own homophobia. You hate yourself. And, oh, it hurts. I am still hurt by it." Inevitably, McKellen's dissimulation imposed a distance between him and his parents. "I didn't talk to them about anything important," he said. "It was dreadful. We never got a proper relationship going." His father died in a car accident in 1964,

when McKellen was twenty-five. “We were amicable,” McKellen said. “We weren’t friends.”

“Theatre embraces you. Within that, there’s love—love of all sorts,” McKellen told me. When he was confused about the direction of his life, the theatre gave him plots; when he couldn’t parse his feelings, it gave him words; when he was bewildered about his private identity, it gave him a persuasive public one. “I knew John Gielgud was queer,” he said. “Noël Coward. Oscar Wilde had been. There was no gay life that I’d perceived at home in Lancashire. That wasn’t the only reason. But it was a big bonus.” At St. Catharine’s College, Cambridge, where he studied English under F. R. Leavis, the astonishing thing, McKellen said, “was to meet other boys as dotty about theatre as I was. I wasn’t the odd one out.”

In fact, Cambridge, when McKellen arrived there, in 1959, was a theatrical powerhouse. He met and worked with numerous people who went on to become significant players in British culture: the performers Peter Cook, Derek Jacobi, Corin Redgrave, and David Frost, and the directors John Tydeman, later the influential head of BBC radio drama; John Barton, the Shakespearean director and *éminence grise*; Richard Cottrell, a director at the Bristol Old Vic and the Prospect Theatre, which gave McKellen his big break, as Richard II, in 1968; and, especially, Trevor Nunn, who became, at twenty-eight, the head of the R.S.C. “I’d heard that there were many remarkable people around Cambridge, but really the genius actor was a guy called Ian McKellen,” Nunn said, recalling his first sighting of his fellow-student. “I had imagined somebody who looked like a young Charles Laughton. I was imagining extraordinariness. The figure in the duffel coat seemed to be an affable, perfectly ordinary Cambridge student. I said to the person who pointed him out to me, ‘Are you sure that’s the guy with the big reputation?’”

“My acting at the time was all about disguise,” McKellen said. “Makeup was very important. Wigs. Funny walks.” His “thunderclap” moment, as he calls

## THE FEVER

The coral reefs are changing color,  
the black and crimson bleached away:  
the ocean’s rising fever,

in every drop the seas over,  
damages the membrane of symbiotic algae  
and coral reefs change their color.

True, it’s less sensational than acts of terror.  
True, we can slather sunblock, then sunbathe,  
despite the ocean’s rising fever.

After all, the planet isn’t broiling over;  
algae is not an inflamed country.  
It’s just coral reefs, changing color.

I wonder if it’s, yet again, the ozone layer  
ruined by my aunt’s persistent use of hairspray—  
this ocean’s rising fever?

I already own my share of vivid jewelry  
from Mother’s childhood village on Maui.  
Still, the living are losing color  
in my ocean’s escalating fever.

—*Kimiko Hahn*

it, came in his first year, when the prestigious Marlowe Society was putting on both parts of “Henry IV.” In true amateur spirit, the Marlowe Society refused to list the names of the players in its program. Still, McKellen’s Justice Shallow was singled out by Alan Dent in his review in the *News Chronicle*, a national paper:

Infinitely the best performance, though, is that of Justice Shallow who is genuinely ancient, wheezy, full of sudden changes and chortles and sadnesses. . . . The young actor not only plays the mad old gentleman quite brilliantly—he also shows himself to be a master of make-up, which is the rarest thing in amateurs. . . . One would like to know the name of this Shallow because it might obviously become a name to remember.

“It was like being told you were beautiful when you’d always thought you had big ears,” McKellen said in a 1976 interview. At the theatre on the day of the review, he spotted Richard Cottrell, who stammered, “Got an agent yet?” “I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He said, ‘Well, after that review. . . .’ I thought if Richard Cottrell and Alan Dent think

I’m a good actor, why *shouldn’t* I become a professional actor? From then on, I stopped playing old men and played juveniles, because I knew that’s what I’d have to do. They’re the difficult parts, because you can’t disguise. You’re coming on as yourself. I started training myself to be fit to be a professional,” he told me.

Looking back on his Cambridge career, McKellen now regrets his haphazard studies (“I did no work”) and the exclusivity of his sexual orientation (“That I didn’t have an affair with a woman seems to me ridiculous. It’s probably not going to happen now,” he said). Nonetheless, for him, gay life at the university had a special importance. “It was something I knew about but other people didn’t,” he said. “That’s the odd thing, people will tell you—in the days when the closet was the norm, it was quite fun, working out whether somebody was gay or not.” In his first job in repertory, McKellen had photographs made up that he autographed and handed out to the girls who waited at

the backstage door. "I don't know that it ever occurred to me that I would be famous," he said.

When he's in Stratford, McKellen lives just across the street from the Avon, in a house that is strategically equidistant from the R.S.C.'s Courtyard Theatre, its main stage, and the Dirty Duck pub: a whole world that measures about a hundred yards. He had invited me over for lunch before a Friday-evening performance of "The Seagull." A light rain was falling when I approached the house. As I rang the bell, I noticed a small note, on McKellen's embossed pink letterhead, stuck inside the knocker:

John L.—Please come to the stage door of the Courtyard Theatre now. . . . I am having to work but Trevor Nunn is happy for you to watch.

That afternoon, the understudies for "The Seagull" were having their only run-through of the play in front of an invited audience, but McKellen's own understudy had fallen ill. So, with another performance to deliver in just five hours, McKellen was standing in for his stand-in. Most stars, it goes without saying, don't do this. McKellen, however, who co-founded the Actors' Company (1972-74) and headed a company at the Royal National Theatre, is a passionate believer in the ensemble principle. "The friendship, the interdependence, the shared everything," he said as he took me backstage to his dressing room between scenes. "The company becomes your family."

A helium balloon was tied to the spigot of McKellen's dressing-room sink, in honor of his birthday, the previous day. Four bare light bulbs surrounded his mirror. In the top left corner of the mirror was a card that said "O Romeo, Romeo! Where the Fuck Art Thou, Romeo?" A dog-eared copy of the "King Lear" script lay beside McKellen's laptop; on the first page he had scrawled "Omnipotent, Dictator, God." McKellen, noticing my eyes drift over to the script, said, "I've only begun to get a grip on it after thirty performances. Every speech, every word can be mined. It's so rich, so fraught; it makes such sense." As he talked about finding his way to the character of Lear, his conversation became a kind of play-

by-play of his investigative method. "Initially, in rehearsal, I was going, 'Is he a warrior king? Is he a priest king? He's eighty—do I have to be old?'" he said. "Do I have to walk old? Do I have to sound old? Is he ill? He's got this heart condition, has he? Then I sort of let all that go and said, 'Let's just concentrate on what he's actually saying.' It's his mind that's declining but being woken, and there are explosions happening. There's a storm in his mind."

McKellen's obsessive focus makes him a dangerous actor. "He likes the smell of napalm in the morning," the director Sir Richard Eyre said. He has a habit of inventing virtuoso challenges for his characters. While playing Richard III, for instance, with a withered arm, he stripped off his uniform to present himself bare-chested to Lady Anne. "In the soliloquy afterward, one-handed he had to dress himself, do all his buttons up, plus a clasp, take a cigarette out of his case and light it, and appear the perfect military man by the end," Eyre, who directed the 1990 Royal National Theatre production, said. "It was the apotheosis of technical virtuosity married to character." In Martin Sherman's

"Bent" (1979), a play about the treatment of homosexuals in Nazi Germany, McKellen's character was forced by S.S. guards to beat his boyfriend to death and have sex with a dead girl to "prove" that he wasn't homosexual. "He did something that was phenomenal," Sherman said of McKellen's interpretation. "He was sitting there, and he defecated. It was very subtle—but you saw in his body the spasm, which is what a person does in a period of such shock. It was one of the most stunning things I've ever seen." Sherman continued, "After a month, he didn't do it any longer, because he was on to something else in the scene that he thought made it even more honest."

Of the great modern classical actors with whom he is often associated—Gielgud, Paul Scofield, Sir Laurence Olivier—McKellen is the preëminent figure to emerge from the universities. The others studied at acting schools; McKellen taught himself. "The thing I'm most proud of as an actor is having learned how to get a laugh," he said. "I'm not a naturally funny person. I'm not a good raconteur." His approach to a part is forensic. "Ian loves the smell of



*"Are you going to trust your father's selective memory over mine?"*

the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd, but he's absolutely at his happiest when he can bring to bear his academic side," Nunn said. "He loves disagreeing with scholars' notes." In his pursuit of meaning, McKellen is ruthless with himself and, according to Eyre, sometimes with others. "Meaning is everything to him," Eyre said. "He's fantastically intolerant of other actors if they just come on and generalize. I've seen him actually shake an actor to try and get the actor to be specific. I can think of one production in which he was so irritated by the inadequacies of an actor that he would physically move him across the stage. I thought, There could be an incident. . . . Sometimes he'll drive you absolutely crazy because he'll interrogate a comma; he'll interrogate an 'and.' The hardest thing for him to curb is his instinct to draw all the energy of the event to himself."

Self-aggrandizement seems to have been at issue between McKellen and Helen Mirren when they teamed up on Broadway, in 2001, to play the warring husband and wife in Strindberg's "Dance of Death." "That was tricky," Sean Mathias, who directed the production, and who lived with McKellen from 1978 to 1987, said. "Mirren doesn't like to do too much working it out—it sort of kills it for her. She didn't enjoy the method. I think she found him self-serving." Some actresses have complained that McKellen can retreat behind technique, so that the focus of a scene becomes more about his performance than about the relationship between the characters—the characterization is theatrical but curiously un-lived. These days, when McKellen looks back on his early performances, he says, "It's Ian McKellen running alongside the character, commenting as they go arm in arm. 'Get this!' 'Got it?' Being the messenger. Now I'm the message. The character I now start with is me. The one quality I've got now—I suppose I've been working toward it all my life—is confidence. No greater gift to be given to an actor."

McKellen's tendency to illustrate his characters rather than live them was, he said, "why people came to see me and thought, That man can never work in front of a camera." In the 1982 film "Walter," directed by Stephen Frears,

which inaugurated Britain's Channel 4 Television and is available on DVD as "Loving Walter," McKellen, playing a dim, discombobulated, and abandoned soul struggling with a mental handicap he can barely understand, delivered an extraordinary characterization. Nonetheless, he was frustrated by his inability to build a sustained screen career. After playing the philandering John Profumo in "Scandal" (1989), he seemed to relinquish his dream of film success. "It's slightly a mystery as to why bigger film roles haven't come my way," he told a reporter that year. "But now I've been left behind." He decided to make his own luck by producing and co-writing the film version of "Richard III," which was released in 1995. The challenge paid off. McKellen proved that he could carry a film; more important, he was increasingly able to relax in front of the camera. What McKellen couldn't ignore before this point, he said, "was that behind the camera was not only the director and cameraman but everybody else looking at you." While working on Bill Condon's "Gods and Monsters" (1998)—McKellen played the cult gay horror director James Whale, a performance that earned him the first of two Academy Award nominations (the second was for the first "Lord of the Rings" release)—he said, "I felt very happy with the character and it was easy for me to do. I suddenly realized that all those people round there, they're not critics, they're not the audience. There's only one audience, and that's the camera."

While McKellen was onstage, I noticed Lear's curse on Cordelia, typed out and tucked into the far corner of the mirror in his dressing room. It ended, "Here I disclaim my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood, and as a stranger to my heart and me hold them from this forever." When he returned, I asked him why he'd put up that particular quotation. "I'm sure it's to do with



having this dreadful unexpressed secret," he said. "Dodging around the central fact, not totally committing."

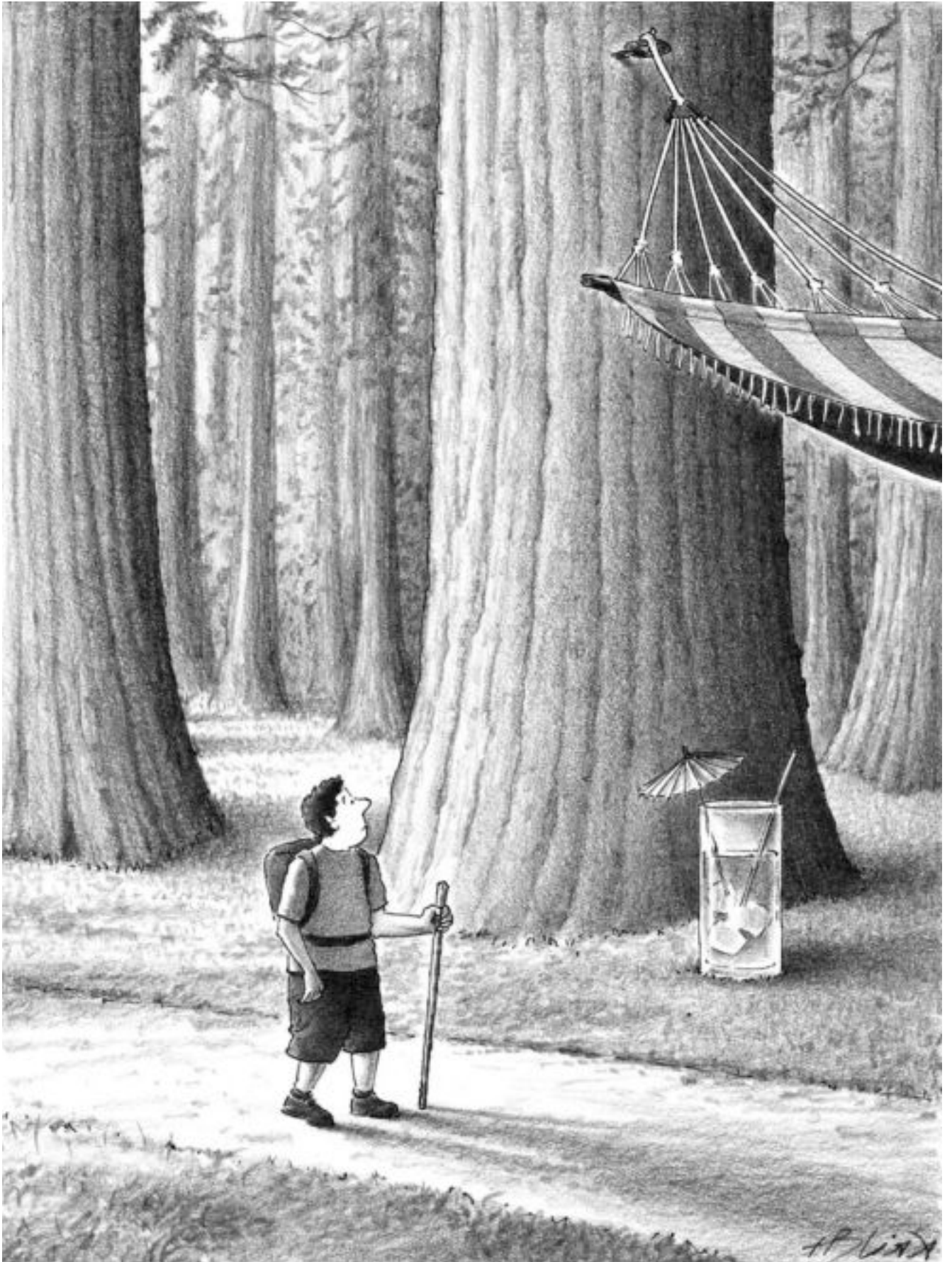
McKellen was a kind of stranger to his own heart until he went public with his sexual orientation, in 1988. The year before, he had toured in the United States. One night in San Francisco, he met up with his close friend Armistead Maupin, the popular American chronicler of gay life, whom McKellen calls "my godfather," and his then partner, Terry Anderson, who pointed out, McKellen later said, that there were almost no famous actors in the United States or Britain who were out. "Do you think I should come out?" McKellen asked. "I can see them now, looking at each other and thinking, Whoa!" he said.

At the time, McKellen's anxiety was about his career. A few years before, at the instigation of Harold Pinter, he had met with the producer Sam Spiegel, at Spiegel's house, to discuss the possibility of his starring in the film version of Pinter's "Betrayal," an examination of heterosexual infidelity. "We chatted," McKellen said. "I was shortly going off to do 'Amadeus.' He said, 'You're going to America?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Will you be taking your wife?' I don't know why I said, 'Well, I'm not married. I'm gay.' 'Oh,' he said. 'Look at the time. Lovely to meet you.' I was out of the house like that." McKellen snapped his fingers. "I had never come out to somebody before."

When he did come out publicly, he did so dramatically. In January, 1988, on a BBC radio show about the infamous Clause 28—legislation that aimed to prohibit local authorities from publishing material condoning homosexuality or from referring to it in state schools as an acceptable life style—McKellen took part in a discussion with the right-wing columnist Peregrine Worsthorne, who kept referring to gays as "them." "Let's not talk in the abstract," McKellen said finally. "Let's not talk about *them*. Let's talk about *me*."

On the cover of *Gay Times*, three months later, he beamed and brandished his right fist under the headline "MAKING A STAND: IAN MCKELLEN—OUT OF THE CLOSET AND FIGHTING." Lobbying against Clause 28, McKellen used his connections to buttonhole pol-

SKETCHBOOK BY HARRY BLISS





iticians, including one of Britain's most fervid anti-gay spokesmen, Michael Howard, who was later the Conservative Party leader. After a fruitless meeting, Howard requested an autograph for his children. McKellen obliged. "Fuck off! I'm gay," he wrote. To this day, if McKellen finds himself in a hotel with a Bible in the bedside table, he turns to Leviticus 20:13 ("Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination") and tears out the page. "It's the one thing I find difficult to defend but do go on doing," he said.

McKellen's knighthood, conferred in 1991, proved "a wonderful gift." It arrived, he said, "just at the right moment, not to boost my own self-confidence but to boost the confidence of a group of people who were trying to change the laws." The activists failed to prevent the passage of Clause 28 (which was later repealed by New Labour), and their battles with the establishment led to the realization that they needed a permanent, professional lobby. McKellen played a central role in the formation of the resulting organization, which is called Stonewall. His visibility was not welcomed by all gay activists. The filmmaker Derek Jarman, calling McKellen "Sir Thespian Knight," mocked his late arrival to the cause and Stonewall's intention to negotiate with what Jarman perceived as the enemy. But, less than

twenty years after Stonewall was founded, McKellen could point to its astonishing achievements: gays in the military, an equal age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals, civil partnership. "Stonewall was created in this room, just at the end of that dining table," he told me when we talked in his London kitchen. "There'll be a blue plaque out there one day."

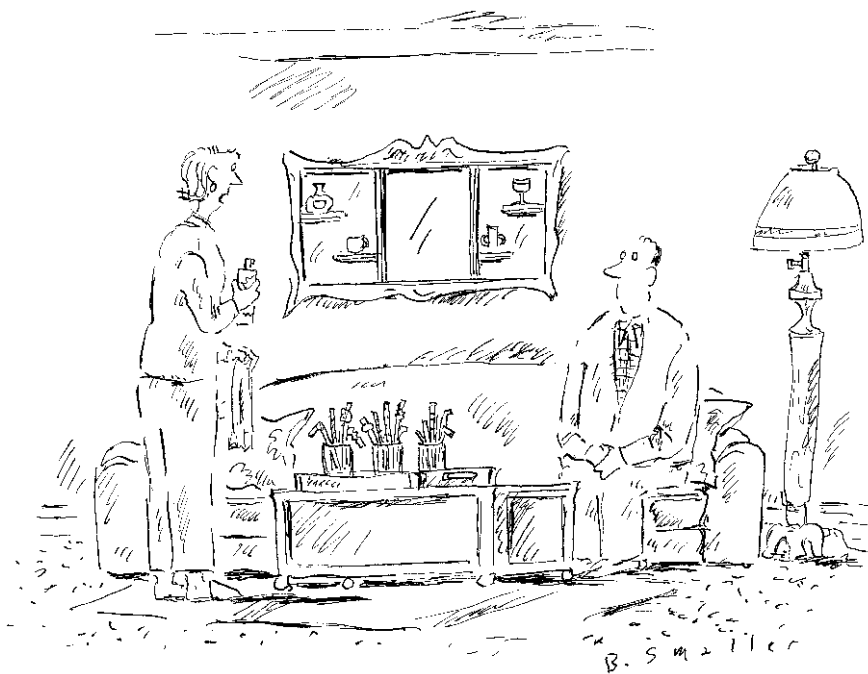
In a sense, McKellen sees Lear as the theatrical apotheosis of his hard-won authenticity. The part requires an actor to tap into an enormous range of feeling. "You're giving the audience some of your spirit through the character," he said during a break. "You must just allow that to happen. You have to be brave. You have to be daring. You have to be modest as well. That's all to do with temperament, not to do with technique at all. I am able now to do it because I came out when I was forty-nine. There was nothing about myself anymore that I couldn't share. That's when I discovered I could cry onstage."

He noticed me looking at a printout of a *Guardian* article by Germaine Greer that lay on top of a pile of books. "SO IAN MCKELLEN DROPS HIS TROUSERS TO PLAY KING LEAR. THAT SUMS UP THE RSC'S WHOLE APPROACH," the headline said. Greer's harangue—she didn't like the old people or the teen-agers or the

foreigners in the audience, Stratford's hotel accommodation, the set, the actors' elocution, and that was just the beginning—had been written more than three weeks before the press opening, while the show was still being fine-tuned. (Greer had bought a ticket and transgressed the journalistic embargo.) McKellen said that he found the piece "deeply hurtful"; nonetheless, he'd sifted through it for "anything that I can understand how to put right—not in her terms but in my own." Greer had taken McKellen to task for the doddering shaking of his hands: "McKellen displays his usual astonishing repertoire of gesture and movement; he begins with hand tremors . . . proceeds to spastic arms and rubbery hands, totters and teeters, grunts, gapes and squints, until he is as irritating as any fractious, befuddled, sclerotic old bugger you've ever met." "She was sort of right," he said. "I was discovering how to work in this alien theatre, and I wanted everybody to see—a theatrical gesture for a theatrical space. It's very difficult to act for someone close and someone a long way away. So I have amended the wobbly hand." He added, "I don't take it as the last word on what we're up to." The intercom announced McKellen's approaching cue for Act IV. With a cavalier flourish, he tossed the pages onto his dressing table and went back to work.

After the performance, as he returned to the dressing room, a deep, plummy voice boomed over the intercom. "Tremendous, tremendous," Nunn was saying. "I was particularly caught by the understudy for Soren, who, when he finally is able to learn the text, I think he's going to give the real Soren a run for his money."

The next day, with a matinee of "The Seagull" and an evening performance of "King Lear"—seven hours of performing—ahead of him, McKellen was back in his dressing room, ready to chat right up to his first entrance; he seemed to require no special psychic preparation for assuming a character. "I get myself into a little routine, which involves getting the hair right and putting on a little makeup," he said. "That will be the moment when I step over the line into the play." When he had finished donning his costume as Soren, he put his face close to the mirror and scrutinized himself. "There he is!" he said, seeing the character in his reflection.

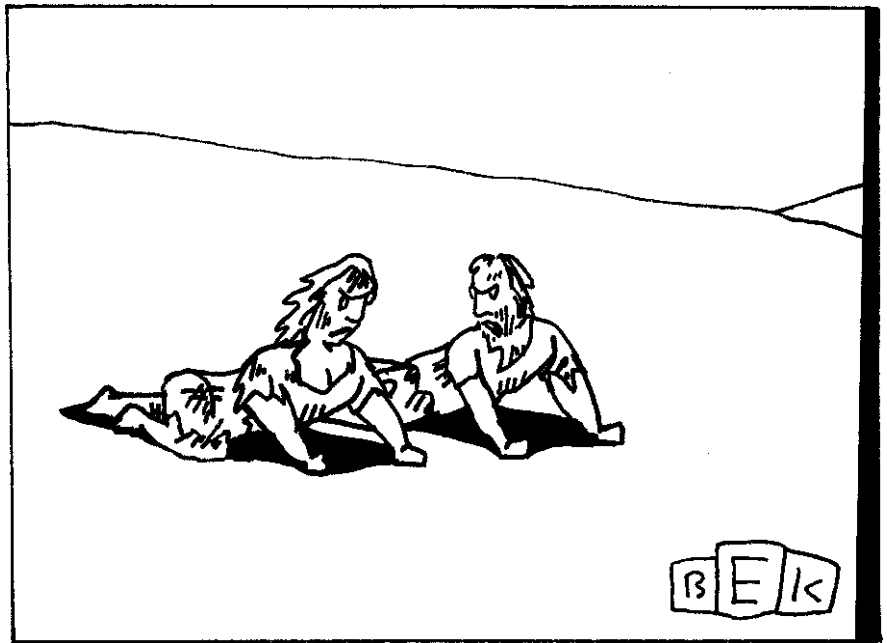


*"Just because you collect them doesn't make them collectibles."*

"Slightly watery eyes, I think he has. I do a yawn before I go on, and they water a bit." It was show time.

That Sunday, there was a reunion for the drama club at McKellen's former grammar school, the Bolton School, which he had attended on scholarship. It was held at noon in the wood-beamed, low-ceilinged Scholars Room of the Falcon, an Elizabethan hostelry, about a five-minute walk from the Courtyard Theatre. For many of the assembled Old Boys, this was the first group gathering since they had appeared together fifty years earlier in "Henry V," McKellen's last school play. Graham Chesters, the self-appointed class historian, had brought along school programs and photos, which he set out on a table. "That's myself and Ian in 'Henry V,'" he said. He pointed to a program from Athletics Sports Day, 1953, when McKellen had come third in the high jump. "He was renowned for having no sporting interests. But there it is in print," Chesters said. He also showed off some programs for Speech Day declamations—with the young I. M. McKellen, in various years, reading Tennyson's "The Lotus-Eaters," Keats's "Hyperion," and Bridges's "The Winnowers."

McKellen is by no means the only Boltonian to have distinguished himself in the world. Among those gathering on the day were John Boulter, who ran twice in the Olympics; David Hargreaves, a retired professor of education at Cambridge; the historian Norman Davies, who wrote "Europe: A History"; and Sir Harry Kroto, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, in 1996. McKellen arrived formally dressed, in a gray suit with a flowered blue shirt and black shoes. He was immediately surrounded by his friends. Although he had requested that he not be the focus of the afternoon, inevitably he was seated at the center of the horseshoe-shaped table. When it was his turn to speak, he reminded the assembled of "the wonderful time we had at Stratford camp." For a week, every summer in the mid-fifties, with a couple of the Bolton masters as chaperons, a bunch of student theatre fanatics had camped in tents upriver at Tiddington and spent their waking hours in Stratford going to plays. At night, around the campfire, the teachers and students had dissected the performances. "I learned for the first time that it was possible to go



*"Why isn't it O.K. for us to have different mirages?"*

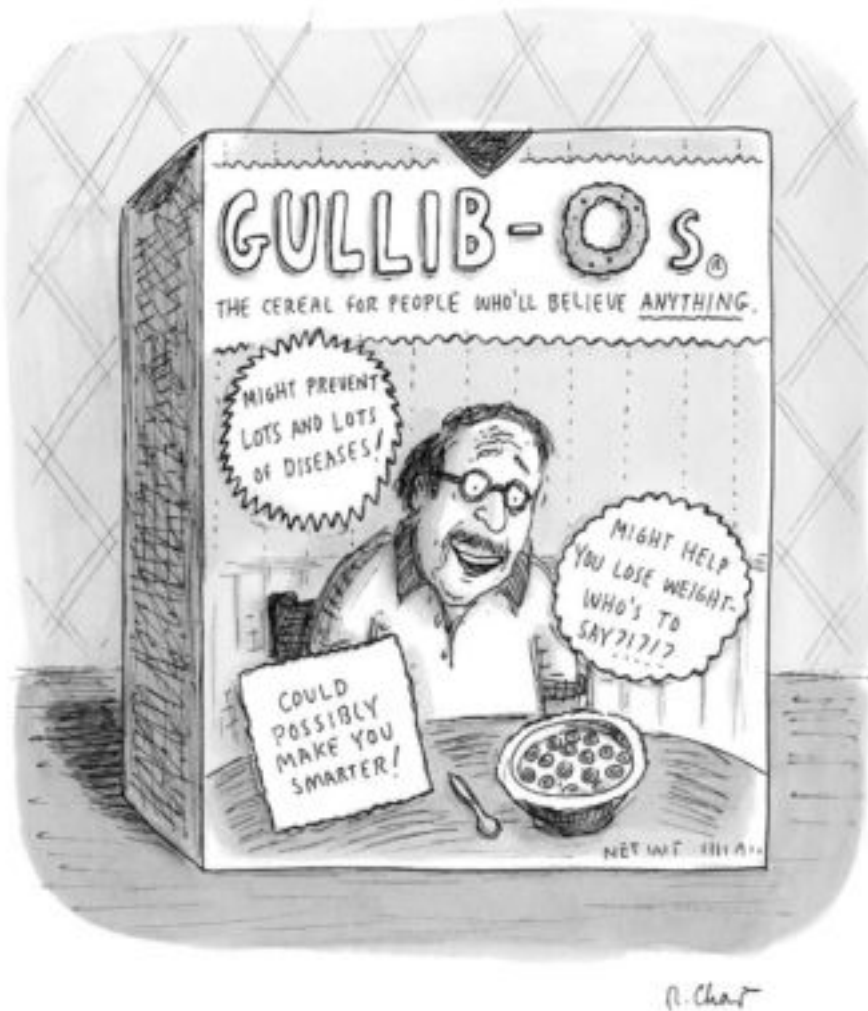
to the theatre and have an opinion about what you saw," McKellen said. (His critical faculties were already sharp enough at the time for him to be dissatisfied with Paul Robeson's Othello.)

Surveying the jolly, confident Old Boys with whom he'd shared an important part of his life, McKellen told me, "We were probably all on scholarships. Those of us who went to university, we didn't pay a penny. It just reminds me of my roots. The sap is still coming up from the roots." McKellen sees himself as one of those vagabond players "who simply don't have anything to keep them at home"; nonetheless, his sense of home is always with him. He can wander far afield so securely precisely because he knows where he's from. One speech had mentioned, as proof of McKellen's international popularity, that his image, in its "Lord of the Rings" incarnation, was on a New Zealand stamp. McKellen pointed out that he had asked specifically that his likeness be used for international postage. "It's not the stamp that's used the most," he said. "It's the stamp that travels the most."

I saw McKellen for the last time, in Newcastle, on a bright day in July, by which point he'd played Lear about fifty times and collected glowing reviews. At noon, the autograph hounds were al-

ready gathered outside the stage door. Before taking off for Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and New York, the R.S.C. tour had brought McKellen back to one of his favorite British stages, the Theatre Royal, an imposing twelve-hundred-seat theatre at the top of Grey Street. Today's matinée was "King Lear"; all twelve hundred seats had sold, so McKellen arranged to wedge me in on one side of the stage between the lights and the sound system. "You're tucked away in the box," he said. "You'll have the time of your life, just peeping over."

Then he excused himself for ten minutes in order to do his voice exercises. (Instructions were printed out on his dressing table: "Blow the cheeks up and use the fingers to pop them," "Purse the lips like a goldfish, then smile," "Balance a pencil on the upper lip, making sure the breath is coming from the center.") When he returned, he explained why he needed them. "The danger is when you're playing a very tense part that you get angry and your neck starts getting tense, which impedes the voice," he said. "I'm constantly getting too tense up here." He touched the back of his neck. McKellen counts as his "career low" a night in the mid-eighties when he lost his voice while performing "Acting Shakespeare," his one-man show, at the Royal National



Theatre, for an AIDS charity. He had just done his gruffest tones for Falstaff, and, when he segued into a monologue from “Romeo and Juliet,” his voice disappeared. “Full house. No mic. I whispered, ‘I’m sorry, I have no voice.’ Big laugh. They thought it was part of the show,” he said. Instead of leaving the stage to compose himself, he lay down in front of the audience. “I kept thinking the voice would return while I whispered for help from the audience. John Mills handed up a lozenge from his wife’s handbag,” he told me. “I said, ‘You’ll just have to excuse me.’ I lay on my back and did some voice exercises.” After about fifteen minutes, he had recovered enough to continue.

For Lear, McKellen had taken to heart a note from Jonathan Hyde, the actor playing the Earl of Kent, who had suggested, for the storm scene, “maybe a little more feeling and a little less noise.” “I’ve increasingly tried to get out of the way of the words,” McKellen said.

“Stop telling the audience what you feel. You have to feel it yourself, but you don’t have to express it. That’s what I’m constantly trying to do: fight against my own tendency”—here he boomed—“to Give Them a Show!” Before I took up my position at the side of the stage, I asked him what he told himself before going on. “‘Let it happen,’” he said. “‘Listen to the actors. It’s because they’ve spoken that I speak.’ I want to thrill them with Shakespeare, not with me.” He looked up at me. “There is a difference,” he said.

From his first entrance, McKellen delivered on his promise. When, during the ceremonial divesting of Lear’s kingdom, he reached the doom-laden line “while we unburthen’d crawl toward death,” he threw it away with an inspired self-mocking chuckle. Later, enraged by Cordelia’s refusal to match her sisters’ encomiums, he held up the coronet that was to have been Cordelia’s crown, turning it on its side so that

it formed a large zero, then shouted through it to Cordelia, “Nothing will come of nothing: Speak again.” On this bedrock of nuanced choices, moment by moment, McKellen made the poetry and the character of Lear both vivid and exquisite.

Backstage, already changed into jeans and a red Nelson Mandela T-shirt, McKellen greeted Armistead Maupin and his husband, Christopher Turner. (Maupin had arranged to give a reading in Newcastle that night, so as to catch McKellen’s performance.) McKellen gave them the news that the previous week the Bishop of Carlisle had attributed the summer floods—it was the rainiest June on British record—to “our moral degradation,” and in particular to Britain’s acceptance of gay life styles. “This is God’s revenge,” McKellen said. “I just thought you should know that.”

Later, after the reading, McKellen and I went to a restaurant, where we waited for Maupin and Turner to join us. Our talk led to a discussion of McKellen’s former relationship with Sean Mathias, who figured “huge,” he said, in his story. The pair had met at the Edinburgh Festival in 1978, when McKellen was thirty-nine and Mathias was twenty-two. “I was immediately taken,” McKellen said. “He was quite eccentric, had his hair dyed bleached blond. He was in a play. He was more potential than achievement. I made him laugh.” Mathias, who is Welsh, was smart, combustible, outgoing, and challenging. “We were a great couple. We would swagger out together and it was good. I loved his friends. He didn’t much care for mine. He thought they were too stuffy,” McKellen said. “Sean has been in my life since we met, without a break, even when we broke up. The first time I broke up with somebody, I didn’t see him for fifteen years. When I broke up with Sean, we saw each other the next day, and the next day.”

When Mathias first moved in with McKellen, he found McKellen’s place “like a museum.” He made him take down all the posters of himself. “I’m living with you, not your reputation,” Mathias said, according to McKellen. Over the years, as an actor, a writer, and then as a director, however, Mathias benefitted from McKellen’s artistic endorsement

and collaboration. "It was exciting to see him growing in front of my eyes," McKellen said. At the same time, Mathias wanted to move forward in the relationship—with a home, a family, and a life in which McKellen didn't "always put himself first." "He was constantly bickering and an irritant to me, not easy to handle," McKellen said. "We had dreadful arguments. I don't like getting angry. I don't find getting angry in 'King Lear' easy." In the mid-eighties, when McKellen weighed the offer to take his Royal National Theatre hit "Wild Honey" to America, the couple came to a tipping point. "If you go to America, I can't come with you," Mathias, who wanted to concentrate on his own career, told him. He went, and they broke up.

Maupin and Turner bustled in. The men's noisy table talk, like their friendship, was a seamless blend of the personal and the political. They spoke about the need for old-age homes for gays and about Tony Blair's bumpy exit from the British political arena. "Blair came and talked to Stonewall and said, 'There are not many things that make you dance for joy in government, but when I saw the first gay people getting hitched I did a skip around Downing Street,'" McKellen said. He went on, "He won't say, 'Look, I did that,' because it doesn't look like the biggest feather in your cap. But, for a lot of people, it changed their lives."

McKellen had arranged a postprandial shindig for his fellow-actors at the Northern Counties Club, up the street. With a panama hat at a raffish angle and a cigarette trailing white wisps into the steely night, he walked between Maupin and Turner, with his arms over their shoulders. Once inside the club, they quickly fell in among the raucous theatricals. Frances Barber, who was a termagant onstage as Goneril, was a kind of hilarious ring-tailed roarer off it. "I'm keeping a diary, but I don't think I can publish it," she said, as McKellen leaned against the wall, smiling. She proceeded to act out her version of McKellen and Nunn at work: "'Trevor, I would like more thunder during that line.' I think, Ian, that it's a half line, and you can do without thunder.' 'No, but, Trevor, I would like some thunder at—' 'Ian, Shakespeare was not a meteorologist.' 'We're aware of that, Trevor, but I would

like—' I've given you dogs. I've given you thunder. I have given you every sound effect that Shakespeare himself has told us to give you. I do feel I have done my duty. Please shut up and do the scene.'" Then, turning to nod in McKellen's direction, Barber went on, "And he says to me, 'He really is a fat-assed bastard!'" Barber sidled over to McKellen, and rested her head on his shoulder, like a little girl. "I'm showing off," she said quietly.

An hour later, McKellen was cleaning up the debris of the night's party, as Maupin spoke of travelling with him in New Zealand a few years ago and stopping to have their photograph taken under a poster for Frostee Boy Ice Cream. "The logo read 'Often Licked, Never Beaten,'" Maupin said. "Ian tried to buy it." He added, "He put the photo on his Web site. He's fearless."

Over the next month, there were intermittent e-mail bulletins from McKellen, charting his progress. In Singapore, where gay sex is punishable by up to ten years in prison, Lear was forced to wear underwear in the storm scene and McKellen spoke to the press protesting the community's "personally offensive" anti-gay strictures. During a TV interview, he managed mischievously to mention that he was looking for gay bars. "When I found a couple," he wrote, "I was greeted rapturously." So, evidently, was the tour. "Singapore was a wow—full

houses and standing ovations," he wrote.

In all this legend of McKellen's brilliance, however, where was the shadow? I'd asked Maupin when we met, but he had no answer. Even in private, McKellen buried his feelings in well-told anecdotes and fine form. "For the most part, it's not his way to unload the contents of his heart," Maupin said. "He saves that for the stage." Then, in late July, Maupin called with a story that suggested that McKellen, for all his bravery and accomplishment, still feels in some way unacceptable to those who were closest to him. In May, 2006, Maupin and Turner were going up to the Lake District, and McKellen had hitched a ride to Grange-Over-Sands, where he was making fortnightly visits to his ninety-six-year-old stepmother, Gladys. As a teen-ager, McKellen had had a strained relationship with Gladys; in adulthood, he had grown devoted to her, the oldest witness to his life. Now senile, however, Gladys had become convinced that the only reason McKellen came to see her so often was that he was having an affair with her cleaning lady. "Ian spun it as a great source of laughs," Maupin said. "He said, 'She wasn't even an attractive cleaning lady. She had an ass like the back-end of two lorries.'" McKellen tried repeatedly to disabuse Gladys of the notion, but she persisted. Finally, in frustration, he said, "Gladys, for heaven's sake, I'm gay."

"So they say," she said. ♦



*"To be frank, officer, my parents never set boundaries."*