

Establishment wizard

The distinguished Shakespearean actor Sir Ian McKellen was knighted for services to the theatre, but says that Gandalf is one of his best ever roles. Anthony Gardner meets him in London

ASUITE 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 Britain's few actor knights. But Sir Ian is anxious to point out that he doesn't actually live at the Savoy: he has simply come upriver from Limehouse in East London 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 looks far from at home.

But perhaps this is equally appropriate. He is, after all, a knight who challenges every 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 attractions is clearly the comradeship it offers him. His ambition when he started out in the early Sixties was not to become rich and famous so much as '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 insists, 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*. December saw 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 mark on the history of the cinema.'

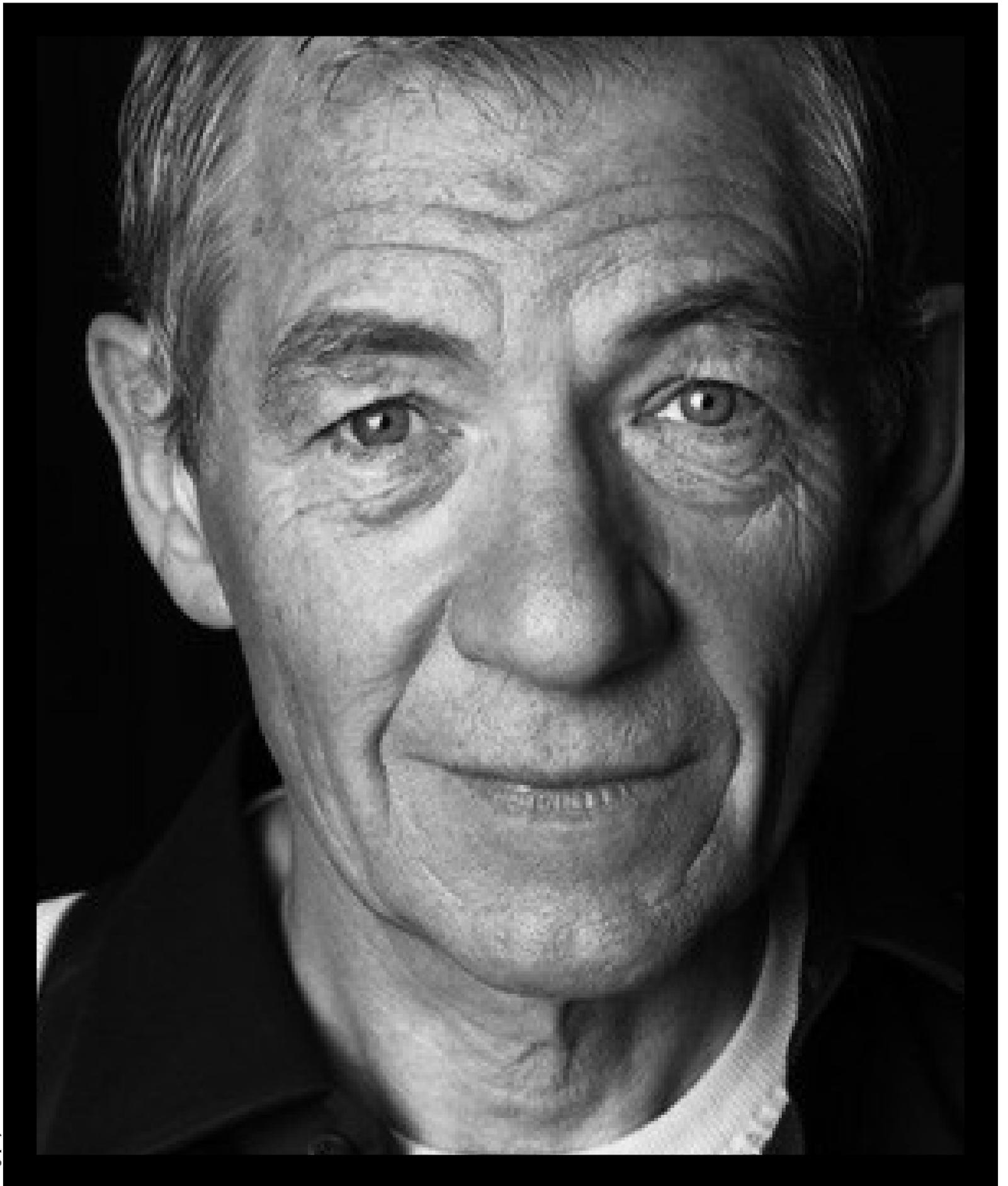
Fair enough; but is there not part of him that, after 40 years of building a reputation as a classical actor of genius, resents finally achieving iconic status as a white-bearded, staff-wagging wizard? 'Not at all. I think Gandalf's a wonderful part – one of the best I've ever played – and, if a lot of people only know me for that, it's better than their 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. (There is also a film version of *The Merchant of Venice* in production, in which he plays Antonio to Al Pacino's Shylock.)

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. If I'd gone off into films earlier – well, suppose I'd never played Macbeth? 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 in 1991. 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 Lawrence [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



Photograph: Jason Bell

that he was gay – ‘And in those days it wasn’t 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: ‘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 – 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 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: 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. Activism has always been important to him: in the Seventies he helped start the egalitarian Actors’ Company, in which roles and pay were shared equally – though he admits that he left because he tired of playing small parts.

He sees this impulse as a family tradition. His mother and father (a civil engineer) were active Christians 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 to speak up for them on occasion. I think my father and grandfather, who was a lay preacher, would both have been approving of the times I’ve done that.’



Sir Ian McKellen as Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*.

Photograph by Pierre Trépo, ©2003 New Line Productions

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Their charitable inclinations made the McKellens’ house in Wigan, Lancashire, in the north-west of England, an interesting place to grow up. During the Second World War, the family took in both evacuees and a German PoW; they also welcomed the first black man to arrive in the town (‘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 Cambridge, I knew I wouldn’t be going back.’

McKellen has written that an actor’s life is full of crossroads. One was his decision not to go to drama school, 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, Michael York, Albert Finney, Tony Hopkins – 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 experience has removed the element of fear. (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. ‘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. ■