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Standing on the stairs at the Old Vic Theatre, Sir Ian McKellen is happy. None the least because we've managed to do an entire cover shoot with the star of the Da Vinci Code, X-Men and Lord of the Rings in the brief time he had available before he had to head off to the Donmar theatre, London to resume his starring role in The Cut. There is no length Factory won't go to for it's first knight.



SIR IAN MCKELLEN

factory's first knight

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Factory: So many actors are deeply private people – deciding on a profession that is so totally public and with such a large amount of potential media intrusion seems a strange choice?

McKellen: It is a very interesting question. Of course, (people seem to forget that) acting is just a job. I don't suppose every school teacher necessarily defines themselves by calling themselves a teacher. If you asked them to describe themselves they might say father, Christian, or Muslim or Englishman. Mightn't they? I think the same is true of an actor. And it is a bit of burden to be thought of as an actor all the time. Press interviews as a part of the job – well it is a relatively new thing. It is the studios wanting to get publicity on the cheap, frankly. I am not being paid to do this. You have got a magazine to sell, and that's lovely, and the studios have a movie to sell. And stuck in the middle is muggins, really. Who then gets asked all sorts of personal questions (by journalists) that you, Howard, wouldn't dream of answering any more than the studio bosses would dream of answering. Actors don't ask to talk personally – and I am one of those actors who avoids talking about personal things. I do have opinions on certain things but I have made a rule that I only talk about things that I am an expert on. And I am only a world beating expert on just two subjects. One of which is acting, which I have spent a lot of time thinking about, and the other is being gay. I have spent a lifetime being that. Anything else from my private life, I don't talk about. Where I go on holiday? Whom I live with? Whom I am attracted to? The clothes I like to wear? All those sort of personal things. I don't connect questions about things like that with my work. It is a part of me, of course, but I don't see why I should talk about me all the time, but I am always happy to talk about the work.

Now why do people who want to be private want to be actors - why do they do their work in such a public way? As far as gay people are concerned, certainly of my generation, when the law tells you that you may not have relationships, that you may not indulge your passions and your emotions in the way everyone else is allowed to do, and indeed is encouraged to do so by getting married and celebrating their heterosexuality, it was a release. Actors, people who discover they have a talent for acting, discovered that they could have an emotional release in their work, something they were not allowed to do publicly and openly in the rest of their lives.

I go could out onto a stage and go inside myself and present it to the public in a way I wasn't allowed to do in other areas of my life. Well, that's the theory (McKellen smiles). But it seems to apply to me – and another reason I became an actor is that I had heard that a lot of other actors were gay and it was a way of meeting other gay people. Of course, when I was 22 (as a gay man) it was illegal to make love. It wasn't legalised until I was 27 years old. Every time I made love until I was 27 I was breaking the law and risking the possibility of being prosecuted and being put in prison for doing it. The actor Dirk Bogarde went right through his life without saying he was gay – that was the amount of pressure that was put upon us.

(In terms of doing press interviews) we are rather pushed into this position by studios. Then we are sent on chat shows where the last thing they want to talk about is the work. All they want to talk about is the cut of the trouser or the latest squeeze. I am not very good at that – and why should anyone be good at it?

And worse still. Nothing is more tedious than actors pronouncing on subjects they are not experts on. I don't think it endears people to talk about their personality unless you are going to it over a long ranging way in an autobiography or something.

Factory: You have played some really outrageous characters, I remember Apt Pupil and Gods and Monsters in particular.

McKellen: I've played some really bad people like Richard III and that Nazi in Apt Pupil. And on stage I've played Macbeth and Iago, who is perhaps the worst of them all. The approach to finding these characters, to creating them is to search for the reasons why they are doing these things. It is rarely because they relish bad behaviour – there is usually a compelling reason. If I have learnt anything from acting I have learnt this: that there is no such thing as evil. It doesn't help matters to say that Saddam is evil or that the (London) bombers were evil – because all you do is put a label on them. And when you do that the only thing to do with them is to blow them sky high. Isn't it a better thing to find out why they are doing this, rather than put a label on it? You can say that they are doing bad things, or maybe you can categorise their actions as evil? But their personalities? No. They think they are going to heaven (because of their actions). They think that martyrdom is within their grasp. (They think that what they are doing is right and good). If you are an actor, of course, that is the interesting problem and the interest in the character. Why do they do these characters do such dreadful things? Because, on the whole, it is not really part of human nature to behave badly to each other. So why? And that's why those parts are always the most interesting and why I play them with relish. But you will always find me on the side of the character.

I play these characters because they are wonderful to play, goodies are difficult to play. That's rather the triumph of Lord of the Rings and Gandalf because Gandalf is good through and through. It is very unusual to find a movie like Lord of the Rings where you have nine members of a fellowship, all of whom are trying to do good. It is very unusual to find that and why we should all give a sigh of relief that young people like Lord of the Rings so much. They are responding to good people (who are striving to do good things against all odds).

Factory: As an actor, what did you draw on to create Gandalf?

McKellen: Considering Gandalf has been around for seven thousand years he is very human. You recognise the type, there is an awful lot of Tolkien in him, the pipe smoking academic who is a little careless about what he wears and likes having a jar and being with the common folk. He couldn't be more English if he tried, Gandalf, could he? A fantastic part to play. Just as with the evil behaviour of the

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baddies, you try to find out why, what motivates them and humanise them, equally it is hopeless to say Gandalf is simply an immortal, an astari, but if you say he likes smoking a pipe and he likes to drink and smoke and that he will walk miles to have a drink with his pals, it is loveable, eccentric and immensely human. When you see him flying on the back of an eagle – you believe in him.

Preparing for Gandalf was relatively easy, I looked at the drawings by John Howe and Alan Lee CK who have been illustrating the novels for years now. All the fans of the book thought we looked like Tolkien's Gandalf, but we didn't, we looked like Howe and Lee's Gandalf. I also listened to rather scratchy recordings of Tolkien's voice reading bits of Lord of the Rings and I took comfort from that because it was a rather theatrical delivery which made me think that perhaps he wouldn't be adverse to the thought of the films being made. Also, there was a tone to his voice which was witty and had a lot of nicotine in it – which gave it rather (deep) English sounds. So it was rather easy. Stanislavski has a passage saying that when you have delved into your own past, understood the character, talked about it non-stop, rehearsed it into the ground, and if you still haven't got the character – if all else fails simply look into the mirror and start putting things on your face. I used to do this in rep when you only had two weeks to rehearse. You'd learnt the lines and turned up to the dress rehearsal and had absolutely no idea what you are doing. (So I'd sit in front of a mirror and, by way of an example,) put a moustache on and then something else, and suddenly you'd look at your reflection and say, 'oh, look at that, oh, I say, I could like that character'. (Simply starting to see someone else emerging in a reflection can provide you with your character. And this is what happened with Gandalf). Once we'd started creating Gandalf in terms of make-up, it took about two days for us to get it right, when we'd finally got the nose on and I did a little twinkle (in the eyes) – and there it was! In the mirror. We had the character.

Factory: Most people at retirement age are thinking about golf and taking it easy. You've ended up as an action hero with Lord of the Rings and X-Men?

McKellen: It is one of the real advantages of being an actor if you are into having an active life beyond retirement age. The benefit of age and experience is that you know how to act better than you used to, and that has been my constant aim, to get better at the job of acting. And recently I have been allowed to act in movies, because I have been in films that have done really well, and I am in the middle of learning how to act in front of the camera. And I am still learning. Next year I am doing Lear and I want to get ready for the play as it is quite demanding. I love not working too. If you are not begging and gagging for work it is likely that something you really want to do will turn up. I would love to do The Hobbit. 🌟

