

## INTERVIEW

**What distinguishes the villainy of Richard from that of other Shakespearean antagonists such as Iago and Macbeth?**

You're right to mention Macbeth, because if you think about it, the plot of *Macbeth* is very similar to the plot of *Richard III*. They're both very successful and highly admired soldiers who, having won the war, come back to a civilian peace and feel they don't have anything to do, so they decide to go into politics, with disastrous results. In Macbeth's case, he puzzles over it and has a conscience about it and realizes that he's doing wrong but can't stop himself, and that's his tragedy.

Richard III on the other hand seems to be absolutely amoral, and yet at the end of Richard's story he does have a nightmare in which he puzzles with his conscience as to whether he has been or has not been a villain. I think he decides in the end that he hasn't been. And his motive for all his actions, I think, is not that he is a psychopath. He doesn't actually do the murders himself. He's not mentally disturbed in that sense, but he gives the orders and they are obeyed.

The motive, the will that keeps him going almost gleefully, is wanting to take revenge on all those people who have pointed a finger at him, spat at him as Lady Ann does, maybe when he was in the playground as a kid and at home with that dreadful mother—as she always seems to me, certainly in the way Maggie Smith plays her—but also from Richard's point of view to have a mother who has declared her hate from the minute he was popped into the cradle. Her last words to him: "Well I hope you die in the upcoming battle." With that disadvantage it's almost as big as the physical deformities, which he's admirably conquered, but they really are the source of his problem, because of other people's reaction to it. As a gay man, of course, one can sympathize with that.

**Do you think there is anything heroic about Richard? Is he merely a victim of circumstance who deserves pity?**

No, I don't think that Shakespeare's providing any excuses but he's providing a few explanations, and that's what initially intrigued me when I was rehearsing the part for the stage in the past. People do dismiss Iago, Macbeth and Richard as just being evil. But I don't think Shakespeare made those simple assessments of human nature. He understood that people did evil things, but he was intrigued to know why someone behaved as they do, and that explanation is there. I don't suppose it leaves anyone to feel sorry for Richard, but it does lift the story away from melodrama toward a tragic waste. Tragic, of course, for the people who are killed; tragic for society as a whole that such a man should be able to become so powerful, but also tragic in that he does have an enormous strength, which he abuses.

**This version of *Richard III* is set in a fictionalized Britain that draws upon parallels to fascist Europe in the '30s. Why did you choose this setting?**

When I do Shakespeare I always want the story to be as clear as possible, particularly for people who know nothing about it in advance. One way of doing that very quickly in Shakespeare is by setting the plays, as I always do on stage, in some recognizable period where the actors are wearing clothes and not wearing costumes. You can tell, once you put people in 20th-century costumes, whether they are rich or poor; what their social status is. What they do for a living can possibly be revealed, and you need to get

the full joy out of *Richard III* to understand who all these people are whom you very quickly meet and who often very quickly meet the sticky end.

The 1930s were perhaps the most recent period in history in which it was credible at a time of social upheaval that a king might have fallen for a dictator coming out of the aristocracy or the royal family. But...our film is not a comment on the '30s, we just borrowed the imagery and reassure ourselves that this is not history, but it might have been—history that never happened. It's just borrowing a period and setting ourselves down in the middle.

**You mentioned earlier a parallel of feelings that may be shared by a gay man and Richard in relation to the disdain that others in society may**

I was preparing for *Richard III* during the past two and a half years or so, I deliberately didn't do any theater work and went around picking up any job I could get on screen, whether it was television or film, just to comfort myself that when it came time to do *Richard III*, I would treat the camera as a friend rather than an intruder. And that's how it worked. I was very comforted when we were doing *Richard*, and I would now like to do more, but not just for its own sake. It would have to be a good script, and it would have to be a part I really wanted to do. It would have to be a director I trusted and so on. So the two likely options are that if work of that caliber comes along, I probably want to do it.

At the same time, I have not been on stage in London for five years, and I've never been on stage

I suppose I simply didn't leave enough time for films to happen, if they were going to happen.

**How has your increased visibility as a gay man affected your acting career? Were you advised against coming out to the media to avoid harmful effects upon your career?**

Yes, I was advised by an agent that he felt it was unhelpful for me to come out, so he's no longer my agent. And he was wrong, it was extremely helpful to me personally, and by personally I mean my career as well as my life outside acting. My life has changed radically in that I do not have a huge interest that I find as absorbing as being an actor, which is trying to understand how I can contribute to changing the laws in the United Kingdom and social attitudes that militate against happy lives for lesbians and gay men, and that brings me enormous satisfaction apart from the relief of coming out.

It wasn't that I was hiding it from everybody, it was only the press I really didn't talk to about it, and sometimes my family. The relief was just enormous, and with the relief came a release of emotions that I had been keeping hidden. So I think I have found what other people have said, that my work has gotten better and a bit deeper than it used to be. I am being more self-confident. I am perhaps ready to indulge my emotions and delve into them a bit more than I would have done in the past. But as for getting jobs, no, I think everybody should come out: Their bank balance will improve, their reputation will be secure, and there will be plenty of jobs. That's how it's worked out for me.

**Was your performance as Max in the premiere of *Martin Sherman's Bent* instrumental in your decision to come out?**

Well, it would be very nice if I told you that it was; it wasn't. It was Armistead Maupin and Terry Anderson, his lover, who talked to me about coming out in a way that no one had ever talked to me about in England. It's ironic that no one ever suggested that I come out until I was in San Francisco, which is why I don't hesitate to talk to closeted people about it, because I think it takes time and you need to talk to someone who's talked it through. But no, *Bent* only really made sense to me when I revived it, when we did it at the National Theater, 10 years after we'd first done it, by which time I was out and took a special relish in associating myself with the play.

**Are there any future projects on the table for you at this time?**

Well I have quite a bit coming up, and it's all finished. I'm in an HBO movie called *Rasputin*; I'm playing the Czar Nicholas. There's a movie coming over from England called *Jack and Sarah*, which has been a big hit in England since last summer. *Restoration* with Robert Downey Jr., I'm in that too, which is how I got to meet Robert.

**Are there projects that you are interested in pursuing?**

I'm just sitting back at the moment and doing what we're doing now, probably across the world: publicizing...encouraging people to see the film, and that will take quite a long time. After that I don't really mind whether it's a wonderful part in a film or a wonderful part in a play. I'm sure I'll enjoy it whatever it is.

*Richard III opens Friday, Feb. 2, at the Movie House, 1220 SW Taylor St. in Portland. Call 225-5555 and press 4609 for ticket prices.*

## COMING OUT—A ROYAL EXPERIENCE

Openly gay actor Sir Ian McKellen talks about his role in the new film *Richard III*

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.



Ian McKellen in *Richard III*

**express toward them. Did this influence your approach to the role of Richard?**

I don't think it did in a great way. If you're trying to [in playing a character like Richard] understand what it feels like to be reviled and to have to live very much inside yourself and to become detached from the rest of society and be dysfunctional, then as a gay man, of course, there are areas there that one can delve into from what at times it feels like to be gay—where you do feel cut off from society because society doesn't want you. It's not your fault, it's their fault. And if you're of a certain cast of mind, you might decide to take revenge on this attitude. I wouldn't press the parallel too far. I was just referring to how it was useful to me to sympathize or understand what it felt like.

**As you begin to take on more film roles, does this demand for you an eventual move away from the realm of the theater?**

I wouldn't mind if that's what happened. When

in Portland, so there's more work to be done in the theater. I'm glad that at last I've played the leading part in a very good international movie, because it was something I've never done before.

**Why has it taken so long for you to begin a career in motion pictures?**

Well, it's a mixture of chance and temperament I expect, and basically, I was enjoying myself too much in the theater and was very happy to take on long-term contracts at the Royal National Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company and in other places. Once you do that, the word gets around that you're not available or that you're not interested in film, and one's contemporaries go ahead and take advantage of it. I don't have any regrets because I've loved doing the theater and still do. I do quite a wide variety of theater work...I have a couple of solo shows that I sometimes do, and indulging my ambition to be a stand-up comedian [laughter]. So there's still lots of new work to be done in the theater, and