

Ian McKellen, meet the Bard

The actor reflects on some of Shakespeare's greatest lines, written 400 years ago, and their relevance today

BY STEVEN MACKENZIE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PROLOGUE

“Shakespeare is more than just plays in the theater,” Sir Ian McKellen said. “I’ve got a little collection of Shakespeare figurines at home. That’s Shakespeare to me. A walk along the Avon is Shakespeare to me. A pub with his name on the sign. Shakespeare is a hydra-headed brand ... which I hope you’ll quote. I’m rather pleased with that.”

McKellen is at the launch of the British Film Institute’s Shakespeare on Film season, timed to celebrate 400 years of the Bard’s work (which is a nice way of saying that he died 400 years ago). Although associated most with the stage – obviously – no writer has more film credits. The Internet Movie Database, or IMDb, lists 1,120 titles based on Shakespeare’s work. Among the series of events and films being screened, the undisputed highlight of the BFI’s Bard season will be a bus tour of London locations – including Battersea Power Station and Tate Modern, both used in the 1995 film adaptation of “Richard III,” which its star, Sir Ian McKellen, will host.

Aside from his new job as a tour guide, McKellen is one of the world’s best-loved actors, adored for playing Gandalf in “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings,” and reveling in the role of a malevolent Magneto in the “X-Men” franchise.

He is no stranger to the small screen either, having had an extended stint in Coronation Street and camping it up savagely alongside Derek Jacobi in the sitcom “Vicious.”

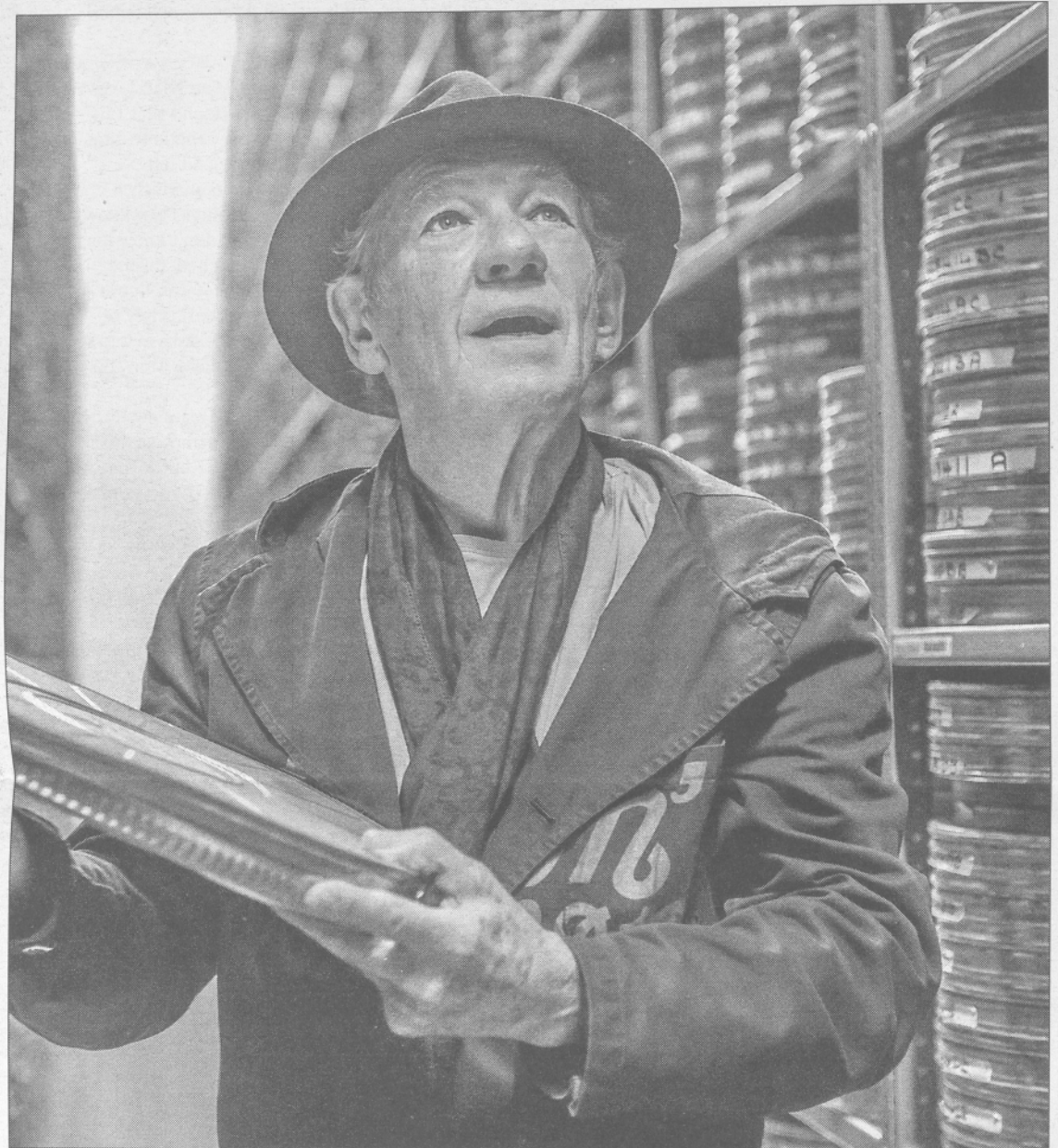
But it is on stage where McKellen belongs, and the words of the Bard he was born to speak. So when he sits down with Street Roots’ sister paper The Big Issue U.K., wearing an immaculate three-piece suit and tartan tie (which if I’m not mistaken is the colors of the Clan Macbeth), we decide to ask him some of the questions Shakespeare posed in his plays that still resonate today.

Dramatis personae: In the following, The Big Issue’s Steven MacKenzie will be standing in for Shakespeare. Ian McKellen plays himself.

ACT 1 SCENE 1

William Shakespeare: *The opening line of “Richard III” is, “Now is the winter of our discontent.” Is now still a winter of discontent? Is it always?*

Ian McKellen: What I like about that first line is the first word, now. Shakespeare



British actor Ian McKellen has performed Shakespeare both on film and on stage.

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is now. Not tomorrow. Not yesterday. Now. If you trust Shakespeare and if you’ve got good actors and a good director, it will seem now. Even if it’s set in the past, the preoccupations and the characters will seem to be still alive and still relevant. As for winter of our discontent, that was used as a constant headline in the not too distant past. Somewhere in the world it is a winter of discontent.

W.S.: *The 1995 film adaptation you co-wrote and starred in was set in a fascist version of Britain in the 1930s. That was not now ...*

I.M.: Shakespeare was writing about relatively recent events but using them to create his own story, so it seemed a good modern equivalent.

We’re all aware that there was not that sort of king in the 1930s – just as there wasn’t actually that sort of king in the actual period. There’s an air of fantasy about the

film, but it’s also real as well. In the 1930s, our royal family might have sided with the fascists.

ACT 1 SCENE 2

W.S.: *Also in “Richard III” is the line, “An honest tale speeds best, being plainly told,” but Shakespeare’s work isn’t always known for its simplicity.*

I.M.: It’s not the language that’s complicated. If you’ve got good acting practitioners, they’ll make you understand it. There is nothing in the opening speech of “Richard III” that a 10-year-old can’t understand.

And I suspect when people say, “Oh, I don’t understand Shakespeare,” it’s because they’ve been exposed to an actor who wasn’t very good. Or they tried to read it themselves. I don’t think a child should any more read Shakespeare than they should

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CELEBRATING SHAKESPEARE

The British Film Institute’s Shakespeare on Film will include events and film screenings marking 400 years since Shakespeare’s death. The program will include an international tour of Shakespeare films and a “Richard III” simulcast in April, featuring a live discussion hosted by Ian McKellen. Visit bfi.org.uk/shakespeare-film-0.

Closer to home

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland is one of the oldest and largest professional nonprofit theaters in the nation. The 2016 season opens Feb. 26. Visit osfashland.org.