

IAN MCKELLEN has seen his fair share of bug-eyed toadies and evil fairy queens in his time—and that was before he even signed up for *Lord of the Rings*. *Man About Town* meets the eminently chic actor and tireless gay rights campaigner whose wizardry and wisdom reach well beyond the fictional frontiers of Middle-earth. Utterly enchanting.

Text  
by Matt Mueller

Portraits  
by Marius W. Hansen

Styling  
by Benjamin Bruno

192



I know he's expecting me and I'm bang on time for our appointed rendezvous, but it still startles me a smidgen when Sir Ian McKellen answers his own front door. Thankfully, he doesn't bellow, "You shall not pass!" but rather invites me to do just that, pottering distractedly around his kitchen, scanning his smartphone, making mild chit-chat (the need to water a new straw rug, for one) and fixing me a cup of tea. His pullover's charcoal, jeans green, slippers Ugg, hair white-grey and possibly gelled; it's standing to attention, anyway. When I remind McKellen that I interviewed him a few years ago for a career-retrospective piece, he levels his twinkly blue-grey eyes at me and intones, "Yes, I remember that interview. Well, we'll probably do exactly the same interview again." I laugh; he doesn't, ushering me into a sunken conversation pit in the new extension of his 18th century terraced house in East London. I collapse onto a blue sofa with the plate of ginger nut biscuits he's provided; he settles into an orange armchair with a box of matches and a half-consumed pack of Marlboro Lights he'll steadily work through over the next two hours, as we run the topical gamut from his Wigan childhood to 1970s British theatre to Rupert Everett (defending the actor following his *Daily Mail*-ish rant against gay parenting) to his dawning sense that there's no place like home.

But the obvious place to begin is with Gandalf and *The Hobbit*, Peter Jackson's still-baking adaptation of the J. R. R. Tolkien fantasy novel in which McKellen reprises the role that has come to define him—at least so far as his screen career is concerned—as the bearded and benevolent Middle-earth wizard. McKellen has just returned from 18 months spent in New Zealand shooting the films. Yes, films: compared to Tolkien's doorstep-sized *Lord of the Rings* threesome, *The Hobbit* might be a slender tome but Jackson is still attempting to squeeze a trilogy out of it. McKellen didn't find out about plans for a third film until just before wrapping on the second. "And there we were, thinking we were finished," he sighs. He'll journey back to Wellington for a further five weeks next summer. "It's a slim volume to be turned into three films, but I suppose the fans won't mind," he says. "They wouldn't mind if there were 13..."

Unlike the 'Gandalf Europop Nod' that he informs me—with barely concealed delight—recently took YouTube by storm (2.9 million hits for a video of the smiling sorcerer nodding along to a Europop beat), McKellen takes a little while to warm up, reclining comfortably, pausing plenty, looking a tad fatigued (a year and a half stuck in New Zealand will do that to a man) and rubbing his arms as if he's caught a draught.

Blue wool jumper by  
POLO RALPH LAUREN  
and amber papier-mâché  
mask from NATIONAL  
THEATRE COSTUME.





Purple cashmere and wool jumper by RALPH LAUREN PURPLE LABEL.

But once he's wound up, McKellen is a keen, unbarred tour guide through his life and career, occasionally waspish and always compelling, that renowned booming voice saturating the room with its deep, cavernous tones. For the illustrious thespian, the big difference Down Under this time around was that Jackson's Wellington facilities are now state-of-the-art, whereas on *Lord of the Rings* much of the shoot took place in an unheated paint studio. That, and the fact that McKellen went out a lot less. "I was being well looked after by my driver, who's also my minder, my physiotherapist and my cook," he says. "It was much easier to invite people around."

While he has always been keen to do *The Hobbit* should it ever get made, it spent years mired in a rights and development purgatory that he came to find "disturbing... I was trying to get on with my life and career while sort of keeping myself free, but it was getting ridiculous." Thus, it wasn't an automatic 'yes' when Jackson called with definite confirmation that all was proceeding and he was back in the director's chair. "I'm 73 and the idea of going to do a job that's going to take 18 months is a big commitment," he says. "It was territory I knew well and felt I'd explored to the full, so there wasn't that excitement or challenge of a new part. I didn't like the idea of anybody else playing Gandalf, but it would have been perfectly possible. I mean, who remembers now that there were two Dumbledores [in the *Harry Potter* franchise]? I could see there were good reasons why I shouldn't, but in the end it was a friend who said, 'You'll just have to think of all those nine-year-olds who want to see Gandalf again!' And I want them to see the real Gandalf, not some ersatz interloper."

It was alarmingly easy slipping back into Gandalf's robes, he found, while also worrying with Andy Serkis—who returns as Gollum—whether they were churning out facsimile impersonations. And there were more scale issues this time when it came to manufacturing the illusion that Gandalf towers over Middle-earth's more diminutive residents; whereas *Lord of the Rings* contained four hobbits and one dwarf, in *The Hobbit* there are 13 dwarves joining the titular Bilbo Baggins on his perilous adventures. McKellen calls it a "blessed relief" when he actually got to act in scenes opposite Cate Blanchett, Hugo Weaving and Christopher Lee, all returning in human-sized dimensions.

Did he enjoy working with Jackson again? "Yes, I did," he replies. "People ask, 'Has he changed?' Yes, he has—he wears shoes now. He's 12 years older, but basically he's the same man who sat on my sofa with his wife and asked, 'Will you play Gandalf?' back in 1999."

McKellen insisted on having a couple of extended breaks factored into his schedule, one of which allowed him to return to England to star in an Eduardo de Filippo play, *The Syndicate*, in Chichester. During his downtime in New Zealand, he even managed to assemble and tour a one-man show around the islands, channelling the profits to the Isaac Theatre Royal in earthquake-devastated Christchurch and mixing it up between remembrances of his life, career, *Lord of the Rings* and Shakespearean soliloquies. "I was just showing off, basically..."

Ian Murray McKellen was born on May 25, 1939, in Burnley, Lancashire, to a father, Denis, who was a civil engineer and a lay preacher, and a mother, Margery, who died when he was 12 and informed her sister that, if Ian should become an actor, she would like that because actors gave so much pleasure to people. Even before that stirring pronouncement, both McKellen's parents infused their son with an immersive appreciation of theatre, taking him habitually from their Wigan home (where they moved when he was three) to plays in nearby Bolton and the larger touring productions that came to Manchester (including a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *King Lear* starring Sir John Gielgud, during which he recalls smacking the woman seated in front of him over the head with his programme when she laughed inappropriately). By his early teens, he was venturing out on his own to see plays and variety bills, gaining backstage access at the Bolton Grand and turning his childhood hobby into a fully fledged passion by leaping enthusiastically into school plays where, he recalls, "I was thought to be quite good at it."

"I rather liked the secret life of backstage. Even now, I long to know what the Queen is doing before she steps out onto the balcony. But it didn't seem an odd thing to my family that I might want to act, even though we had no tradition of it except that we all liked going to the theatre. Not the cinema, it was always the theatre. That's why I think I never had great ambitions to be a film actor."

McKellen once claimed that acting offered a refuge from the bullying he experienced at school, although he now insists that's been overstated. "I was terrified of going to school because of the bullying, but the next

day the boys who had said horrible things to me had sort of forgotten it," he says. What he doesn't dispute, however, is that coming to realise he was gay put a rather large damper on his early confidence. Does he recall when he accepted his sexuality as an immutable fact? "It's difficult to put a date to it because it wasn't a topic that you could talk about then," he says. "There wasn't the language, there wasn't a word in the vocabulary—there was only silence. It's very hard not to think that you're an absolute freak and you're out there on your own."

At the same time—and despite the lack of information beyond censorious newspaper articles—McKellen insists he felt fairly comfortable about his predilections. "**There didn't seem anything odd to me about being attracted to images of men,**" he says. "**I'd look at images of classical art and it would be the men's bodies I'd be looking at rather than the women's. I didn't think, 'Argh, what's wrong with me?' It only gets complicated when other people say, 'What's the matter with you?'** Well, there's nothing the matter with me—what's the matter with you, actually? It takes a lot to be that brave." It took a long time for McKellen to be that brave, at least in the public eye: he belatedly came out in 1988 when speaking out against Margaret Thatcher's controversial Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which banned teachers from shining a positive light on homosexuality in schools.

As one of the founders of the lobbyist group Stonewall, McKellen has vigorously campaigned for gay rights ever since and believes that when civil partnerships finally give way to gay marriage, "the fight for equality in Britain will be accomplished as far as the law is concerned." Including football terraces, Middle England and Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail*? That might take a bit longer, although McKellen—who travels the country speaking at schools about his experiences and Britain's gay rights evolution—recalls recently addressing a crowded assembly in East Anglia when a young girl stood up to ask whether he had a boyfriend. "I said, 'Well, I don't at the moment' and 1,300 people went, 'Awww!' If a 13-year-old girl can now ask a 73-year-old stranger whether he has a boyfriend, then we must be doing something right."

Although his devout parents raised him in a blanket of Christian tolerance and his stepmother was a Quaker, McKellen stopped going to church as soon as he left home for Cambridge University on a state scholarship. But belief in God has lingered with him throughout his life—until recently. "Big step," he says, inhaling deeply and releasing a heavy sigh, "but it's only in the last 12 months that I can really say to myself, 'I'm an atheist.' It's been a big wrench considering how I was brought up, but I've been encouraged by other high-profile atheists arguing their case." Richard Dawkins, presumably? "Yes, and Stephen Fry and others where I agree with what they are saying. And, of course, the way that religion has in my lifetime latched onto homosexuality as an example of something that is anti-God, anti-life and anti-humanity means that even if I were a believer, there are very few options for me."

But while religious fervour diminished once away from the family bosom, Cambridge turned out to be everything a grammar school boy from the north of England might dream it to be in the late '50s and early '60s—not quite the *Brideshead Revisited* vision of punting down streams in boater hats quaffing champagne, but fabulously romantic nonetheless. "The buildings were old, and you were required to wear a gown after dusk—which was familiar to the boys freshly out of public schools, but news to me," McKellen recalls. "On my first day in college, dining in my gown on these huge refectory tables—all rather alluring—they served venison—venison!—and cabbage. I left the cabbage; I had never left anything on my plate in my life. Think of the starving children in China, Ian..." Plunging headfirst into the Cambridge life, McKellen didn't intend to study acting, but drifted that way and began "my inevitable, relentless move towards becoming a professional actor." College contemporaries included Trevor Nunn and Derek Jacobi, on whom McKellen had a hefty crush. "I'm not the only one! He said to me in an unguarded moment that he'd had one on me too, but he's since strongly denied that. I'm seeing him tomorrow, I won't bring it up."

While there wasn't a gay community per se, there were plenty of boys sharing beds with other boys, although for McKellen "there wasn't much sex at Cambridge—not until just as I was leaving." As he's swift to point out, homosexuality wasn't decriminalised in England until 1968—it wasn't an easy time to be gay. In one of his earliest jobs after leaving Cambridge—taking Christopher Marlowe's play about Edward II, the gay king, up to the 1969 Edinburgh Festival—McKellen recalls kissing another man on stage and getting rapturous reviews (although one local councillor tried to get the production banned), but resenting the irony that he and his then boyfriend were breaking the law in Scotland by sleeping together because homosexuality was still illegal there.

Perhaps a residue of the moral cloak he'd sheltered under in his youth, McKellen describes himself as the relationship kind. From 1964 to 1972 he lived with Brian Taylor, a history teacher from Bolton, and their two terriers in London, followed by the theatre director Sean Mathias, with whom he cohabited for a decade until 1988 and who remains his best friend to this day. "I can't complain from that point of view. I lived in a series of monogamous relationships. Thank God, otherwise I'd be dead. I avoided Aids because I was perhaps not involved in gay liberation and other organisations that were stressing sexuality above everything else. I wasn't promiscuous or exploring in the way that other people were. But all my friends have always known I was gay, all my employers. The only areas in my life where I didn't talk about it honestly were to my close blood family and to the media. It was easy enough to dodge the press back then. They'd say, 'Are you married yet or have you got a girlfriend?' I'd say, "No!" and that was the end of that. And although we didn't talk about it, my family met all my boyfriends. They just didn't invite them over for Christmas."

When the closet finally did crash down around his feet, his family actually expressed relief, claiming they'd been dying to talk to him about it for years. As aforementioned, he declared his sexuality during a BBC Radio 4 discussion (in which he also called the host Peregrine Worsthorne "a homophobe") about Thatcher's notorious Section 28. Coming out liberated him in a multitude of ways, unleashing him as the tireless activist he became—"Suddenly, I had a purpose," he says—and making him feel whole as both a man and an actor. Having spent decades trying to avoid a film career, or so it seemed, he suddenly approached it with a vehement passion, and within a decade had gone from playing the disgraced Conservative minister John Profumo in *Scandal* (1989) to the first of two Oscar nominations as the tormented gay Hollywood filmmaker James Whale in *Gods and Monsters* (1998). It was his delicious fascist martinet twist on King Richard III in 1995, however, that he credits most for turning him into "a serious screen proposition. More than any other job I've ever done, that film changed my life. Because of that, I got cast in *Apt Pupil* by Bryan Singer; because of that, I ended up playing Magneto in *X-Men*; and although I've never asked him, I'm sure Peter Jackson must have seen *Richard III* before he asked me to play Gandalf. Up to that point, I think others thought of me as an actor who shouted in the evenings."

Ironically, given all she did to unleash his wrath with her legislative homophobia, McKellen confirms the rumour that it was indeed Margaret Thatcher who recommended him for his 1991 knighthood. He spins a hilarious yarn about lying in a Parisian hotel room eating croissants at breakfast, watching the news and awaiting Thatcher's final exit when the phone rang with a person on the other end claiming to be from 10 Downing Street. "I said, 'Oh, I know, isn't it fun. Why don't you come up and join me?' assuming it was another member of the company," chuckles McKellen, who was on tour with *Richard III*. It turned out the call was genuine and Thatcher was offering him a knighthood. "I told them I'd call them back because I was initially in two minds," he says. As soon as he hung up, the Iron Lady emerged for the final time from 10 Downing Street. "The fantasy is that she'd been behind the door saying, 'I'm not going out there until I've heard from Mr. McKellen whether he's going to accept his knighthood or not!'"

Although it's been useful for knocking down establishment doors with his Stonevall lobbying cap on, **he dislikes being called Sir Ian. He likes Stephen Fry's nickname, now part of common vernacular, even less. "Yes, it was him and, yes, it annoyed me," growls McKellen, sparking up another snout. "Although at the closing of the [1994] Gay Games at the Yankee Stadium, I said, 'My name's Sir Ian McKellen, but you can call me Serena.' Whoaaah! It was lovely to hear 64,000 people laugh and cheer.** Actors have often had camp nicknames, even when they're straight. It's all affectionate."

Despite headlining two massive franchise trilogies, McKellen's Hollywood career didn't exactly sputter in their aftermath but nor has it soared in the way one might have expected (his juiciest noughties film role outside the confines of *Lord of the Rings* and *X-Men* came in *The Da Vinci Code*). But that's left him time to dip his big toe in evening soaps (a ten-week stint on *Coronation Street*), Christmas panto (two seasons as Widow Twankey in The Old Vic's *Aladdin*), TV mini-series (*The Prisoner*), short films for friends and his first, most ardent love, theatre (*King Lear*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Seagull*). When I enquire whether playing Gandalf set him up for life, allowing him to be as choosy as he damn well pleases, he guffaws loudly. "I'm *not* going to tell you what I got paid. But I did get more money than I'd ever had in my life—and they got me cheaper than they would have done if they'd employed a more established actor. Peter [Jackson] always likes to claim that I was his first

choice, but I don't think that's true. You're *never* first choice. That's a fact of life. The other side of that fact is the understanding you must have, which is, 'You're the best they could get so glory in that!' You got the part, it's yours—it doesn't matter who was offered it first."

Sir Sean Connery and Sir Anthony Hopkins might have allegedly been offered Gandalf, but as with all glorious screen incarnations, it's now impossible to imagine anyone else in the role. McKellen has left his permanent, inexorable imprint on Gandalf—and, as he told me a few years ago, it's such the better part than that other eminent conjurer. "I do double-takes when I see Mike Gambon in the *Harry Potter* films. They made him look like me! I suppose that's a compliment. I once asked him, 'Mike, do you ever get mistaken for me? Because people come and thank me for the *Potter* movies...' He said, 'Oh, Ian, the whole time.' I asked him, 'What do you do?' And he replied, 'Oh, I just sign your name!'" McKellen erupts in a throaty chuckle before adding, "It's funny, isn't it? Two actors with rather similar careers—in the theatre at any rate—and we're both most famous for playing wizards."

Possessor of one Tony Award (for his portrayal of Antonio Salieri in *Amadeus* on Broadway) and two Oliviers (for *Wild Honey* in 1984 and *Richard III* in 1990), McKellen's storied stage career reached lofty peaks in the '70s, when he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company under the artistic directorship of his old Cambridge chum Trevor Nunn and received rave reviews for leads in *Romeo and Juliet* and a 1976 *Macbeth* opposite Judi Dench that's the stuff of theatrical legend. "We did think it was a golden age," he says, "and looking back, it was."

Although he never acted with Laurence Olivier, McKellen joined Olivier's new National Theatre Company in 1965 but left after nine months feeling "there was too much competition, too many of us of the same age all fighting for the same parts." His "untouchable" idol fired off a letter, warning McKellen that "I would be 'haunted by the spectre of lost opportunity.' He didn't have a way with words. And in my case he was wrong." Two decades later, McKellen was part of Channel 4's launch night broadcast, playing a mentally handicapped man in Stephen Frears' *Walter*, and theatre's by then feeble elder statesman rang up to praise his former *protégé* for the best performance he'd ever witnessed on television. "There you are," McKellen smiles fondly. "The family take a lot of impressing but I managed to please Olivier."

Despite the chain-smoking (he started at 12, has given up many times), he appears robust and feels fit as a fiddle. "Keep moving and get the heart pumping," advises McKellen, who has been vegetarian ever since becoming entranced by a bloated, unidentifiable animal corpse that washed up on the Thames riverbank. "My recommendation to people is to climb stairs. I would never take a lift to the third floor." Having said that, he has recently installed a lift in his home, for the eventuality when stair-climbing won't be so easy, and—not uncommonly for men his age—has been diagnosed with prostate cancer. "But," he observes, "you can still say of yourself, 'I've got prostate cancer and I'm perfectly healthy,' because as long as it's contained in the prostate it's not doing any harm."

McKellen has always despised anything that smacks of time-wasting. He tried slowing down a few years back but simply found himself bored during his self-imposed six-month hiatuses. Since returning from New Zealand, however, clearly drained from the long shoot, he's cancelled a few small jobs and trips he had lined up, including an expedition to Nepal with gay rights activist Peter Tatchell to support the Maoist Party's efforts to legalise gay marriage. He wants time to decompress at home and recharge his batteries for 2013, when, apart from a summer return to Wellington, he and Patrick Stewart are planning to perform *Waiting for Godot* on Broadway. But while stressing that "I'm not retiring," McKellen also makes a blunt confession: "I can sense the ambition is fading a bit. I don't feel as much compulsion as I used to."

Having ploughed every theatrical furrow he ever dreamt of—"I keep turning down Falstaff; that pops up regularly. Dreadful part," he says—the only thing he feels is missing is a stage musical, having come closest when his ex, Sean Mathias, asked him to reunite with Dench for a 1995 revival of Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*. But having had the voice lessons, he was forced to drop out when the money for *Richard III* came through.

What else? He swears that joining a local theatre company and "playing the old man every so often" would be an extremely desirable turn of events: "I'd quite like to end up in a company somewhere," he vouches. "I wouldn't feel that was a decline at all, I would think of it as coming full circle. Or maybe I could end up in a soap opera. In either case I would like it to be from home..."



Light blue cashmere and wool jumper by POLO RALPH LAUREN and yellow cashmere and wool scarf by RALPH LAUREN PURPLE LABEL Hair and grooming by Gary Gill. Fashion assistance by Natalie Cretella.

