

“I STARTED DOING SUCCESSFUL FILMS WHEN I WAS **READY** FOR IT”

Sir Ian McKellen: master of his own destiny, a man who's never let himself be backed into a corner. *Total Film* chews the fat with the thesp who's as happy busting blocks as he is trading boards...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

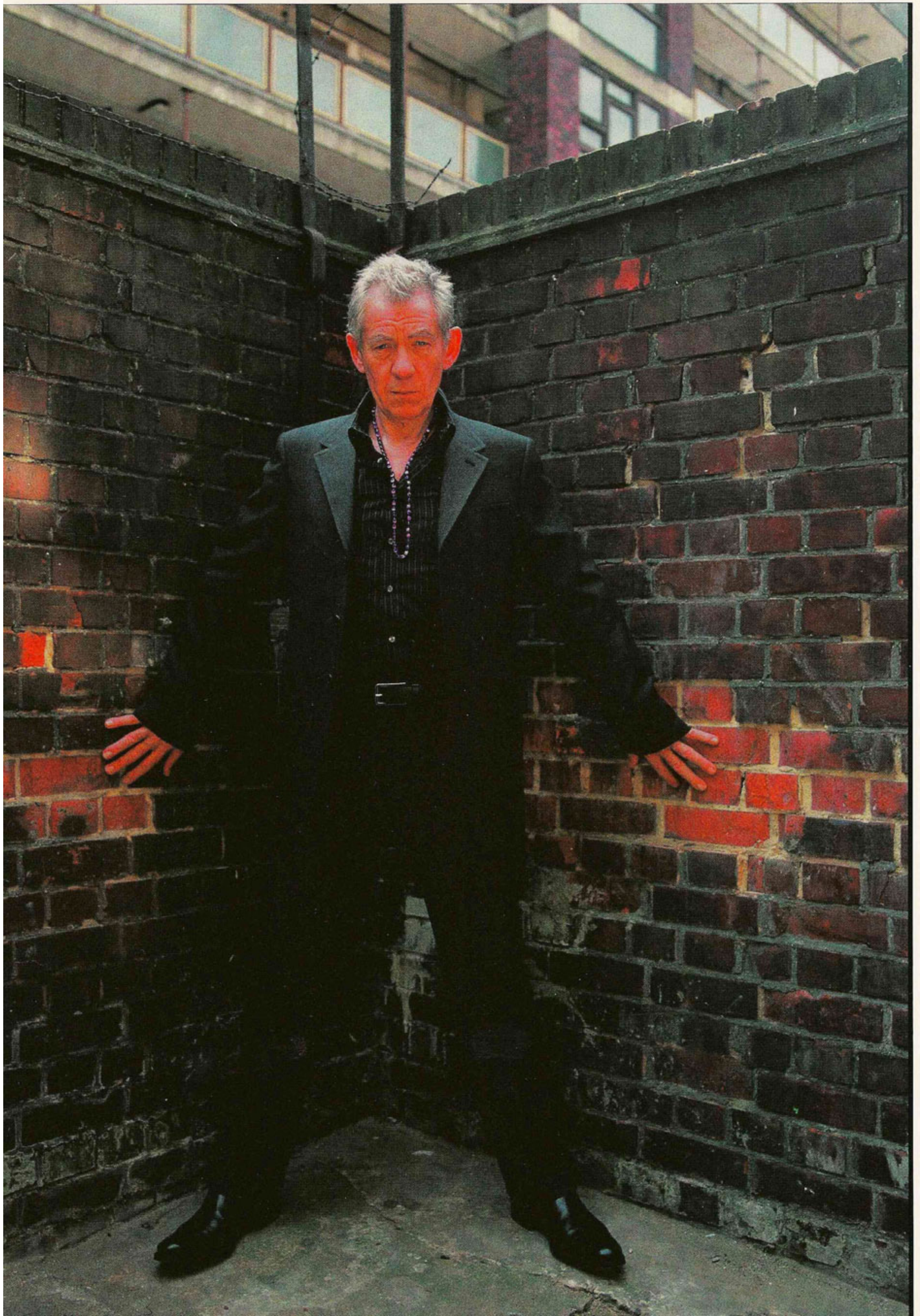
PORTRAITS **JASON BELL**

As far as Ian McKellen's concerned, there's nothing wrong with being a latecomer to movie stardom. It happened when it was meant to happen, when McKellen was ready for it to happen. That's not to say that there haven't been a fair few frustrations, rejections and lost opportunities along the way. But these were in the days before he started receiving summons to etch his commanding, stage-honed presence in a memorable, late-'90s burst of imposing movie roles, including Richard III, Magneto and, of course, Gandalfs Grey and White.

"I've presented myself to the film industry on a number of occasions over the last 50 years, but it's only recently that it's all come together," says the 64-year-old knight of the

realm (since 1990, royalty fans), entrenched in a brown leather sofa in London private members' club The Electric. "I've had my *Tom Jones* late in my career, whereas Albert Finney had it very early on."

There is a difference, though. As polished as McKellen's contemporaries (Finney, Peter O'Toole, Alan Bates, etc) are in the thespian stakes, and as healthy and thriving as their careers are (or were), with *X-Men*'s cheeky, metal-mastering mutant Magneto and the powerful, profoundly benevolent wizard Gandalf, McKellen's late-career surge has eclipsed them all. (After all, why have one globally recognisable super-human role to rule them all when you can have two?) >>



If the Lancashire-born, Wigan-raised actor worries that his status as one of Britain's most revered stage actors of the last 40 years — or even the magnificent, Oscar-nominated turn he gave as *Frankenstein* director James Whale in *Gods And Monsters* — will be overlooked in the face of such world-conquering juggernauts, he doesn't let on. "I remember on 14 September 2001, I went down to Ground Zero, and all these policemen were coming over to me saying, 'Hey, Magneto!' They weren't saying, 'Hey! *Gods And Monsters!*' [Laughs] But it's nice to think that I'm part of the real world, and now entertaining a different sort of person than I used to."

Sitting down with *Total Film* to cast his eye over a film career that *should* have begun 38 years ago, McKellen is jovial, humorous company, laughing frequently and not feeling the need to lace his replies with a dose of spin. Striking up what seems to be an illicit cigarette ("We're not talking about it," he says), he kicks off the conversation with a genuinely intriguing line of questioning about film magazines, and *Total Film* readers in particular. "Now tell me, are they big *Lord Of The Rings* fans?" Just a bit, Sir Ian. Just a bit...

So, how was your farewell party in New Zealand last summer?

There were about 200 people having champagne and beer on the set of Minas Tirith. And they showed a little five-minute film in your honour with bits of you acting in the film — and bits which, quite rightly, didn't make it in. It was a very jolly affair.

On your website [www.mckellen.com], you said that you weren't exactly sure where your own farewell gift — Gandalf's sword — was. Have you got it back yet?

[Guilty whisper] I haven't, no! I told Peter Jackson, and he did look mildly alarmed. I'm sure it'll just be in a cupboard somewhere.

How did you find working with Peter Jackson? Did he change at all over the course of making the three films?

Well, Peter stood up for the story of *Lord Of The Rings* all the time. That was always his principle concern: "I want people to understand what's going on." And he very much wanted on-the-nose acting, in which everything's very clear. And sometimes I resist that because I'm always looking at what's really going on underneath, because it's often more interesting than what's actually being said. But I think, without any disagreement, the performance that he's put on the screen is my performance, and one which does have a subtext, too.

Peter was always on the side of the actors. I never once saw him begin to lose his temper. Not to say he didn't become agitated. He could get very excited and he laughs a lot. We made each other laugh. I feel I've discovered some cousins in New Zealand I didn't realise I had, and they're called the Jackson family. We all feel like that. And if we're not in *King Kong*, there's going to be rebellion from the Fellowship, I can tell you now!

What was the casting process like? Were you at the top of Peter Jackson's wish list?

So he claims. But I'm pretty sure that enquiries

were put out to Sean Connery and Tony Hopkins. In the end, he went for perhaps the riskier choice.

Why risky? Wasn't it Jackson's intention when casting the trilogy to avoid going for star names?

Well, the cast you end up with, which may well be the best one, is often nowhere near your first choice. But once you have the actors, then everything is directed towards making them as good as possible. The films would have been very different if it had been Sean Connery; Gandalf would have come from Scotland for a start! And, of course, there were a number of actors, including Richard Harris, who were hoping to play Gandalf. Auditions took place, I know.

It's interesting you mention Richard Harris, because a story came out that you'd been offered the role of Dumbledore after he passed away.

Before Richard Harris died, there was an enquiry: would I be interested in playing in *Harry Potter*? And I said, "Yes, certainly." But I've not heard anything since. So whether they were already sensing that Richard was ill, which I couldn't have anticipated at that point, or whether it was for another part, which is what I assumed, I don't know. But, no, I was never up for Dumbledore. And it would have been unseemly because Richard Harris had made it clear what he thought about my acting shortly before dying. He said I was "a passionless actor", and so were Derek Jacobi and Kenneth Branagh. I was very happy to

be in such esteemed company! But as I say, Richard Harris was mainly a disappointed man because I had played Gandalf and he had to settle for Dumblewit. Or Dumblebore, I should say.

Alec Guinness was famously annoyed by the constant attentions of *Star Wars* fans, but, what with the regular updates you post on your website, you seem to embrace it.

Well, I don't know what he didn't like about the attention he got. It could be that he just got fed up with small children asking him to sign not as Alec Guinness but as the character [Obi-Wan Kenobi]. But perhaps I don't quite see it from his point of view because, after all, my script was written by JRR Tolkien, one of the great writers of the 20th century, and his was written by George Lucas, who, in the end, is more interested in the pictures than the words.

Going back a few years, your film debut was meant to be in the wartime actioner *The Bells Of Hell Go Ting-A-Ling-A-Ling* opposite Gregory Peck. But the movie was never completed...

It wasn't and I couldn't have been happier. I was so bored sitting in Switzerland waiting for the weather conditions to be right. It was a summer movie, and then it started to snow early that year and the producers realised that they'd had it. So they pulled the plug. But I wonder what might have happened if, suppose it had been a huge hit, and there was I, a good-looking young lad...

THE **McKELLEN** COLLECTION

Ten standouts from Burnley's sharpest cine-thesp... By Andy Lowe



PRIEST OF LOVE (1981)

Christopher Miles' functional DH Lawrence biopic, with McKellen stately and just a little bit sleazy as a saucy old DH, who moves to the US and Mexico, on the run from England after *The Rainbow* book-burnings. He finally washes up in Italy after a dose of TB and settles down by writing, er, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. ★★ ★



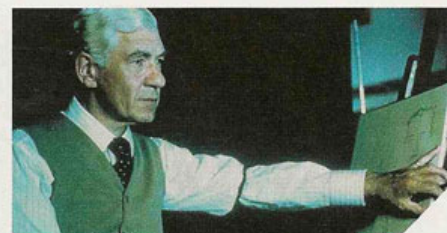
THE KEEP (1983)

The start of a beautiful foeship with Michael Mann [see page 90], this is an arty horror pic about an unholy force in a spooky Romanian castle during World War Two. A promising set-up sees McKellen's Jewish archaeologist brought in to help Nazi soldiers who are losing their lives to a shadowy killer. ★★ ★



RICHARD III (1995)

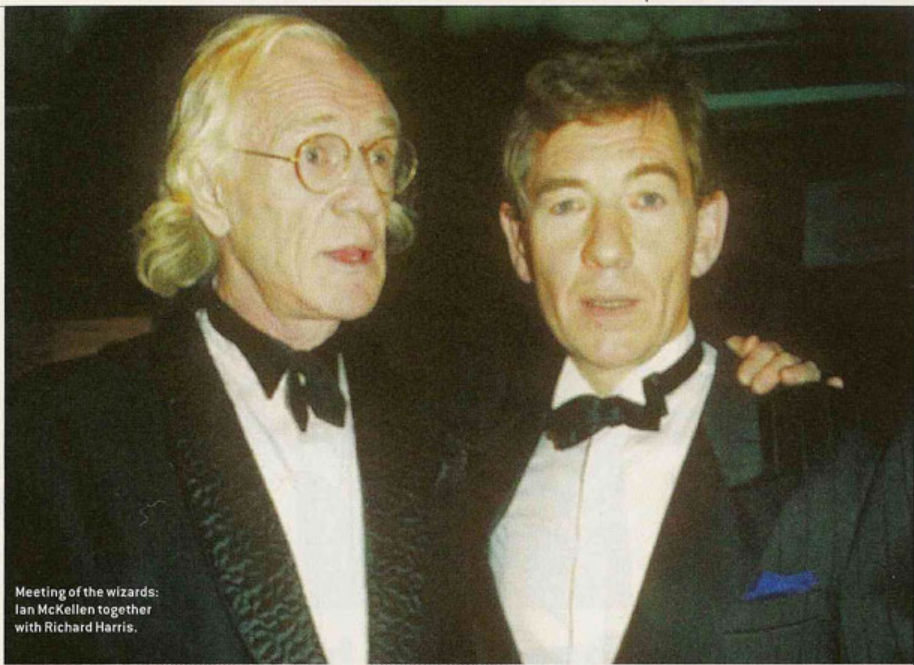
Drawing on his classical training, McKellen is both menacing and magnetic in this '30s Britain version of the hunchbacked one's ruthless rise to power. Sir Ian plays it suitably nasty and scheming, rolling off the quotes with obvious joy. Should have won an Oscar, had to make do with a BAFTA nomination. ★★ ★ ★



GODS AND MONSTERS (1998)

Bill Condon's biopic about the last month in the life of troubled '30s horror director James Whale focuses on his unwillingly platonic relationship with his dashing, non-gay gardener Clay (Brendan Fraser). McKellen is pitch-perfect as a visionary-but-lonely figure, providing fatherly focus to Clay despite his personal demons. ★★ ★ ★





Meeting of the wizards: Ian McKellen together with Richard Harris.

“Richard Harris was a disappointed man because I had played Gandalf and he had to settle for Dumbletwit. Or Dumblebore, I should say...”

But it didn't and films didn't really impinge on my career until very recently, although I've done about 35 of them. But, until recently, none of them were successful; that's the difference between me and other people of my generation, like Albert Finney, whose early films were huge hits.

Apparently you went up for a role in *Barbarella* around that time...

Indeed, I did! And Jane Fonda cooked me eggs and bacon at lunchtime, just before the screentest with her husband, Roger Vadim. That was in Rome, where there was an agent who took a shine to me and kept trying to get me roles. One of the best days of my life was when I went over to do a screentest to play a Sicilian bandit. They got me done up with this tight pair of pants and a sort of bandit outfit, and they applied some stubble, one hair at a time. And I thought, "My God, I look sensational!" I just wish I had the photographs to prove it. And I had to come on and be all butch. About three weeks later, the word came back that, "Ee ees much too charming, the Een-lish." But, again, I wonder if that had happened... I mean, it was about the time when Clint Eastwood was making his spaghetti Westerns, and look what happened to him. But I suppose I was in some successful films when I was ready for it. When I was confident.

You were in one of Michael Mann's early films, 1983's *The Keep*...

Yep. Before he went off to do *Miami Vice*. >>



SCANDAL (1989)

McKellen has just the right air of fractured statesmanship as John Profumo, the '60s Conservative cabinet minister with a taste for exotic ladies – most notably Joanne Whalley-Kilmer's Christine Keeler. But McKellen's limited screen time sees him upstaged by terminal victim John Hurt as scapegoat Stephen Ward. ★★★



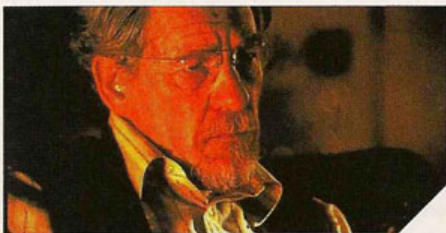
SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION (1993)

The film that should have made Stockard Channing a bigger star than she is... McKellen is dependable as a South African millionaire being entertained by upscale couple Channing and Donald Sutherland, when con man Will Smith shows up, claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier. The faintly pretentious talkiness betrays the stage origins. ★★★



LAST ACTION HERO (1993)

The moment Arnie became self-aware – with uneven results. Li'l Danny [Austin O'Brien] is pulled into Movieland and meets his apparently fictional movie hero [Schwarzenegger]. Cue plenty of self-referential guff about movie good guys and bad guys. McKellen pops up in an enjoyable cameo – as that nice Mr Death. ★★★



APT PUPIL (1998)

In his first collaboration with director Bryan Singer, McKellen is an ex-Gestapo officer hiding out in America. Like any great actor, he makes himself the best thing in an otherwise crass Stephen King adaptation, which does little to honour its subject matter [cats thrown into lit ovens, lingering Holocaust anecdotes]. ★★



X-MEN/X-MEN 2 (2000/2003)

A rather happier Singer/McKellen team-up, in which the actor gives life to comic-book bad guy Magneto. X2 provides him with the cooler lines ["You are a god among insects," he tells Aaron Stanford's impressionable Pyro] but denies him much of the first movie's spark-throwing face-offs with Patrick Stewart's Professor X. ★★★★★



THE LORD OF THE RINGS TRILOGY (2001-2003)

McKellen spent 14 months (plus reshoots) swanning around New Zealand, nailing his motivation as literature's second-best wizard [after Merlin, naturally]. He manages to colour Gandalfs Grey and White with the right blend of strength, warmth and authority. ★★★★★



Do you have good memories of working with Mann at that point in both your careers?

No. He wouldn't be surprised I say that because, uh... I was playing a man with a wasting disease, and there was one period in Betws-y-Coed in north Wales when it rained and rained and rained. And I was there for 14 days on the trot, going in, being made up, and just sitting all day waiting and therefore not working. And I just said, "I've got to leave", and they got me a helicopter and flew me back to London. I think I avoided some sort of breakdown that time. And I thought I was ill-cast, really. I was playing a Romanian character and I'd had someone teach me a Romanian accent, and on the very first day, Michael Mann went, "Nah, it's not working. Make it more Chicago." "Make it more Chicago? I don't have a Chicago accent." I just wasn't confident enough in myself.

Did you gain confidence when you played the disgraced Conservative minister John Profumo in 1989's *Scandal*?

Well, I didn't think I was very good in that. My appearance wasn't right — that hair... But it was very nice to be in an English film about an English subject. I mean, so often when you go to be in American movies, you're expected to become American, and that's not playing to my strengths. My strength is that I'm English and can understand the Englishness of Richard III, the Englishness of James Whale, the Englishness of Gandalf. Once I have to start being sort of transatlantic, I get a bit nervous.

You've said that you deliberately took the role in *Scandal* because you wanted to play "a raving heterosexual" after you'd come out...

Yes. That part was a gift because I had just come out, and the perceived wisdom is that once you're openly gay, that's the end of your career. So I thought, "I'll show them." Coming out affected my career entirely for the better; my film career has since taken off.

Do you ever get young gay actors seeking advice from you about coming out themselves?

Oh, I see them running out of the room the minute I arrive! I expect they think they're going to be recruited or something. What I tell young actors is this: make up your own mind. What is it you want out of life? Is the fantasy of being a romantic leading man in movies so strong that you're prepared to lie about something as basic to yourself as your sexuality? If the answer to that is 'yes', then you're crazy. Because how many hugely successful romantic young actors are there in the world at any one time? About five. And why have that as an aim? If you're so thrilled about the film industry that you've got to be a part of it and you want to be openly gay, you can become a director, an agent, a writer, a designer, a personal manager...

Most American actors probably think it'll stigmatise them in the industry.

Well, Hollywood has never been at the advance of social change. It's only just discovered that it has black people! I went to the Oscars the year that Whoopi Goldberg was hosting, and the Academy suddenly discovered there were some black people. So gays are, unfortunately, going to have



Better luck this year: Ian McKellen and elusive friend, Oscar.

"Hollywood has never been at the advance of social change. It has just discovered it has black people! So gays are going to have to wait"

to wait a bit. That was the year in which I had my acceptance speech ready in my pocket for *Gods And Monsters* saying how proud I was to be the first openly gay actor to receive an Oscar. But I didn't get to make that speech. I think that might have been more than Hollywood could have handled that year.

Your big-screen career has entered a boom cycle in the last 10 years. What pushed you in the direction of making more films?

Once I decided to do *Richard III*, I did go about preparing for it by taking little parts in other people's films, getting adjusted to the idea of wanting to appear in front of the camera rather than feeling nervous about it. *Richard III* is the only film I really tried to get made, and I suppose that indicated to other people that I was very serious about making films. And since then, people who liked *Richard III* have asked me to be in other things.

Didn't Bryan Singer cast you in *Apt Pupil* after seeing *Richard III*?

Not exactly. He'd seen me do *Richard III*, a very nasty man, but Dussander in *Apt Pupil* is a good deal older than I appeared when I met Bryan, and Bryan said, "I'm sorry, you're just too young." And that was the end of the professional chat.

Then he asked had I seen *Cold Comfort Farm*, because the guy who played the preacher had been a character that Bryan had really enjoyed. Well, that had been the part I played! And he was so astonished that I could have disguised myself that he thought, "Well, maybe he can also disguise himself as Dussander," which is what actually happened — I ended up having an awful lot of make-up on my face in *Apt Pupil*.

Will you be asked back for *X-Men 3*?

We've all asked that question. When I asked Bryan about it, I said, "What would be the crucial characters to come back?" He said, "Wolverine, Xavier..." [pause] I replied, "That's a very short list!" If Magneto's in it, I'll be a bit miffed if they don't ask me. If you have the moral argument represented by Xavier, Magneto should be there. But who knows? I don't have to do Magneto; I'm not contracted to do a third film. But *Mystique* is. And where would *Mystique* be without Magneto?

You must have high hopes for *The Return Of The King* at the Oscars. Will there be hell to pay if it doesn't scoop some major awards?

Who can tell what really goes on in the minds of Oscar voters? I know when I vote for the Oscars, I'm often parading my prejudices: voting for a particular actor, not just for the performance that they're up for, but other performances they've given. Or taking advice from friends... So it's an unreliable poll. But I think the Academy would make itself look a little bit silly, mean-spirited even, if they didn't want to give the Best Director to the man who's brought these films to the screen, because it's an achievement which matches the high achievements of their homegrown talent, like Spielberg and such.

If the movies had been made in Hollywood with an American cast, they would have been sweeping the boards every year. So there's a little bit of xenophobia going on there, I expect. But how can you fail to be affected by the achievements of *Lord Of The Rings* on the big screen? It gets my vote! ☐

The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King is out now and reviewed on page 36.