



McKellen, Sir Ian (b. 1939)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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While Sir Ian McKellen is certainly not the first gay British subject to be knighted by his monarch, he is nonetheless the first to receive this honor after making a public acknowledgement of his homosexuality. Ironically, McKellen's knighthood became a greater issue of controversy within the British gay cultural community than in the mainstream.

Ian Murray McKellen, arguably the finest Shakespearean actor of his generation, was born May 25, 1939, in Burnley, Lancashire. His earliest acting experiences came while he was yet in grammar school. He attended St Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, on scholarship and earned a baccalaureate degree in English in 1961.

While at Cambridge, he performed in numerous student dramatic productions, which earned him an acting apprenticeship at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, where he made his professional acting debut in 1961. Over the next three years, he played a wide variety of roles in various regional repertory theaters.

He made his London debut in 1964, as Godfrey in James Saunders's *A Scent of Flowers*, for which role he received the Clarence Derwent Award for best supporting actor.

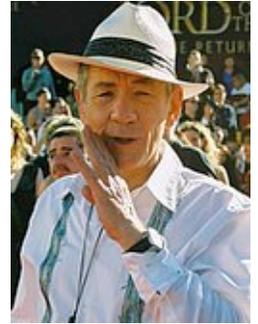
In 1965, McKellen made the first of many appearances at the National Theatre, London, as Claudio in Franco Zeffirelli's production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. His film debut came the following year in Waris Hussein's *A Touch of Love*, which featured a screenplay by McKellen's friend from Cambridge, Margaret Drabble; in the film, based on Drabble's novel *The Millstone*, McKellen played a gay character opposite Sandy Dennis.

During the 1960s, McKellen's career branched out into stage direction as well, at first in regional theatres. In 1972, he directed his first London production, a revival of Joe Orton's *The Erpingham Camp*; later that year he co-founded the Actors' Company, a group based on the principle of equality among and management by its members.

McKellen's debut with the Royal Shakespeare Company came in 1974, with his performance in the title role in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*; other roles with the company include Romeo, Leontes (in *A Winter's Tale*), Macbeth, and Sir Toby Belch (*Twelfth Night*).

Over the course of his distinguished career on the British stage, he has received the prestigious Olivier Award five times, and in 1981 received the Tony Award for his portrayal of Mozart's nemesis Salieri in the Broadway production of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*.

Until the 1980s, McKellen's career focused primarily on the stage, a medium in which he remains energetically involved. In 1981, he made his first film appearance in a starring role, as D. H. Lawrence in *Priest of Love*.



A photograph of Ian McKellen in New Zealand by Stefan Servos. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

Other major parts followed in *Plenty* (1985) and *Scandal* (1989). In the latter film, he played the disgraced 1960s British cabinet member John Profumo (a role a number of other British actors turned down) because, as McKellen states, he wanted to prove after coming out publicly that he could convincingly play a character remembered only for being a "raging heterosexual."

While McKellen had quietly lived a gay life for many years, he came out during the course of a 1988 British radio program in response to the host's homophobic comments. He has subsequently been active as a member of Arts Lobby against Section 28 (British legislation, finally repealed in 2003, that forbade "intentional promotion of homosexuality" by local governments), and he co-founded the gay lobbying group Stonewall.

The Queen's 1991 New Years Honours List named McKellen a Knight Commander of the British Empire for services to the arts. Yet, in spite of his highly visible work as a gay activist, his knighthood was the source of considerable controversy and divisiveness within days of its announcement, as director Derek Jarman, then dying of AIDS, publicly and bitterly denounced him.

Jarman equated McKellen's acceptance of the honor with collaboration with the decidedly homophobic Tory government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. This polemic was countered almost immediately by an open letter in *The Guardian*, signed by such noted British gay and lesbian artists as Simon Callow, Nancy Diuguid, Stephen Fry, Bryony Lavery, John Schlesinger, and Antony Sher.

Despite this controversy, McKellen has remained a highly visible champion of gay rights, and has used his prominence as an actor to draw attention to the social intolerance that homosexuals routinely bear.

In 1994, he premiered his one-man show, *A Knight Out*, which incorporates his reminiscences as an actor and gay man with the words of various gay or bisexual authors. He has also appeared in a number of gay roles and gay-themed films and television productions, including *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), *And the Band Played On* (1993), *Bent* (1997), and, most notably, *Gods and Monsters* (1998).

In *Gods and Monsters*, based on Christopher Bram's novel *Father of Frankenstein*, McKellen played James Whale, the British-born gay Hollywood director best known for such 1930s horror films as *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*. For his performance in this role, McKellen was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor.

Among his other films are *Richard III* (1996), *Apt Pupil* (1998), and *X-Men* (2000).

As his acting career entered the twenty-first century, McKellen starred as the wizard Gandalf in an ambitious three-part film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkein's fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings*. His portrayal of the wizard in *Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) received accolades from critics and earned him the Screen Actors Guild award for Best Supporting Actor and an Academy Award nomination. He also appeared in *Asylum* (2004).

For the past decade, he has lived with his partner, actor Sean Mathias, who directed him in Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1990) and August Strindberg's *Dance of Death* (2001).

McKellen was Grand Master of the 2002 San Francisco Gay Pride Parade.

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.