

# Ian McKellen Speaks Out

*The eminent actor now mixes art and politics*

by Gerard Raymond

**F**or most people, I am a famous and well-respected actor in the mainstream of British society. I also happen to be an out gay. If we could only get more people who are also flourishing in society to join me and say they were gay, I think we could transform the situation very rapidly." The actor is Ian McKellen and he is talking about his two major concerns of the past year: fundraising for AIDS and fighting Section 28, the British law prohibiting any perceived "promotion" of homosexuality, which was passed in May 1988.

McKellen is currently playing the lead in Alan Ayckbourn's futuristic comedy *Henceforward* in London's West End. He also stars in the current film *Scandal*, based on the infamous John Profumo/Christine Keeler affair which rocked British society in the '60s and eventually toppled the Conservative government of the day.

Described by one critic as the heir to Laurence Olivier, Ian McKellen has acquired a solid reputation in both classical and popular roles. He attended Cambridge, where his contemporaries included directors Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn, playwright Simon Gray, and actor Derek Jacobi. His professional career began in 1961 and has included a triumphant season at the Edinburgh Festival, where he played *Richard II* and Marlowe's *Edward II* (1969); *Romeo and Juliet* and a legendary *Macbeth* (opposite Judi Dench), for the Royal Shakespeare Company (1976); the West End production of *Bent*, Martin Sherman's searing drama about the plight of homosexuals in Nazi Germany; an acclaimed *Coriolanus* (directed by Hall), and Michael Frayn's adaptation of Chekhov's nameless play, produced under the title *Wild Honey* at

the National in 1984. For his bravura performance as Platonov, the drunken school teacher in the latter play, he received the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actor.

McKellen made his U.S. debut in *The Promise*, a Russian play by Alexei Arbutov which lasted a mere three weeks on Broadway. The short-lived run was picketed by American Equity actors, led by Roy Scheider, protesting the hiring of English actors in New York. The Equity controversy raged again when Peter Hall cast McKellen as Antonio Salieri in the 1980 Broadway production of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. Nevertheless, his portrayal of Shaffer's conniving "patron saint of mediocrity" won him the Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards for Best Actor.

In 1986, McKellen turned down the part of Kenneth Halliwell, Joe Orton's homicidal lover, in the film *Prick Up Your Ears*, in anticipation of a long Broadway run for *Wild Honey*. The reviews, however, were cool and the play closed shortly after opening. McKellen took the unexpected free time and toured with his one-man show *Acting Shakespeare*, which he had previously performed for a limited Broadway run in 1984.

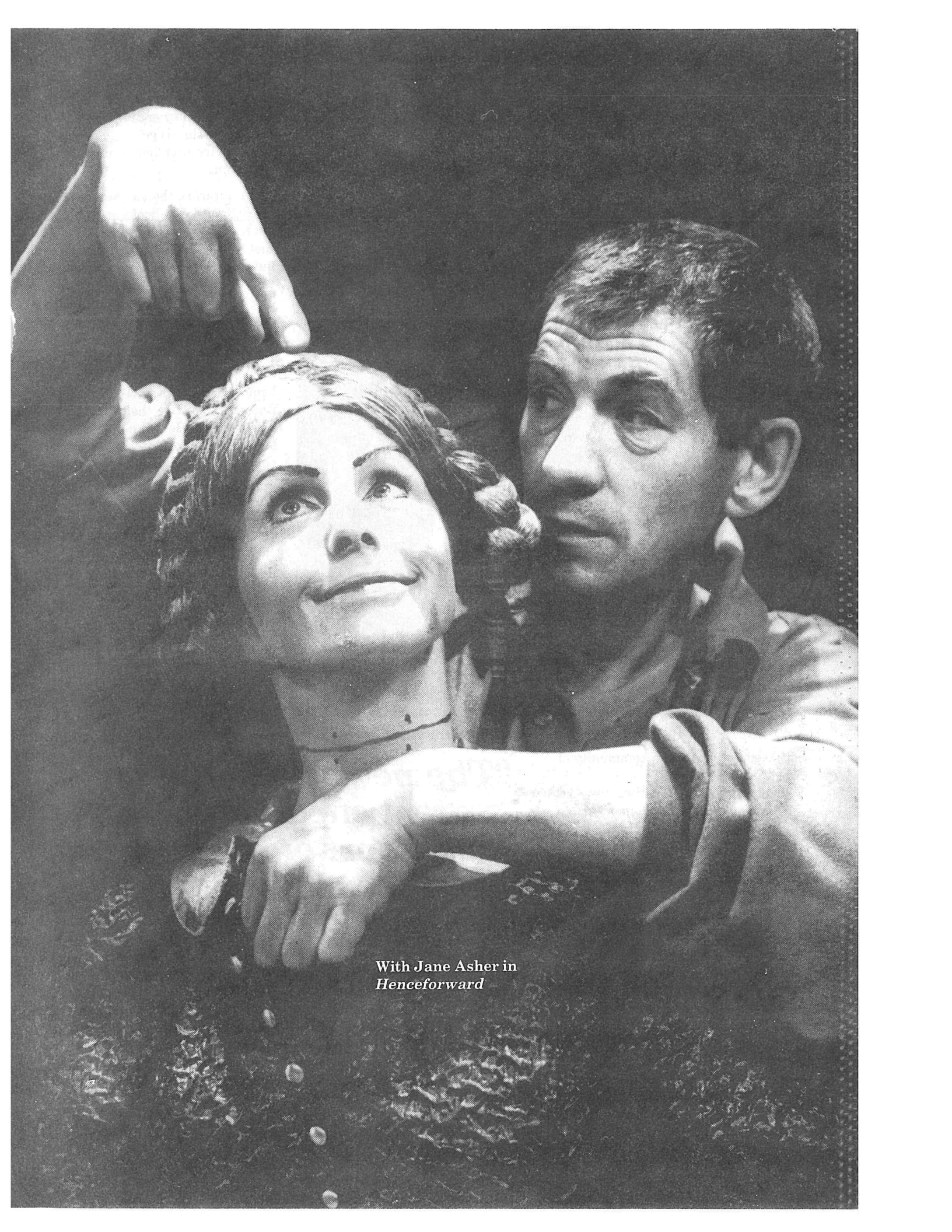
The 1987 tour of *Acting Shakespeare* took McKellen to San Francisco, where two friends, novelist Armistead Maupin and Terry Anderson, convinced the actor that it was time for him to publicly acknowledge his sexual orientation. "They felt it was important for gays in the public eye to come out, to encourage people who were less privileged to do the same. They noted there wasn't a single celebrated actor in the United States or the United Kingdom who had,

on his or her own volition, come out. An astonishing fact; particularly astonishing in America where you have politicians who are out, gay medical organizations, gay lawyers, gay teachers, gay this, that, and the other. You don't actually have a single famous film actor or stage actor who is out." He qualified the position in Britain: "Sir John Gielgud was named as gay, of course, 30 or 40 years ago, when he was prosecuted for a misdemeanor, and Simon Callow has been out for a long time, but I think that is about it."

McKellen's eloquence about the fascist implications of Section 28—which broadly prohibits local authorities from funding anything that in any way "promotes homosexuality, or permits the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality in schools as a pretended family relationship"—is clearly what has made him a spokesperson for the gay community in England.

"When Section 28 arrived it seemed to me that I couldn't publicly attack it unless I explained that I had taken it very personally. I couldn't talk about 'them,' I had to talk about us and me. And so I completed the process of coming out, which was to tell the media that I was gay. I did it on a radio broadcast, in a debate with an editor of a national newspaper about the effects Section 28 might have on the arts. The idea for the debate actually came from Richard Sandells, an actor. [Sandells is one of the organizers of Gay Sweatshop, a company that has been touring gay and lesbian-themed plays in Britain for 12 years.] I was able to use my knowledge of PR and friends and connections in the media to get a lot of attention. And suddenly I became a

John Haynes



With Jane Asher in  
*Henceforward*





Tom Collins/Miramax Films

As John Profumo in the film *Scandal*

spokesman for a wider community of gays and lesbians.

"You musn't overestimate my contribution. There are many, many people who have been working in many different capacities, fighting for lesbian and gay rights for a long, long time. What made my position interesting was that I did have access to the media and I am middle-class and reasonably respected in society. [McKellen is a Commander of the British Empire and is considered a likely candidate for a knighthood.] It was very difficult for my views to be ignored and very easy for me to get heard."

**B**ut what are the dangers of Section 28? "The wording doesn't mean very much so it could be taken to mean almost anything. Our local author-

ities fund arts organizations and license public buildings like theaters, movie houses, and libraries. The new law could have a great effect on the arts as a sort of backdoor censorship. I think it will be very unlikely that there will be a single lawsuit brought. There doesn't need to be. Once you put a piece of legislation like that on the statute books, everybody knows where they stand. If they are a librarian, a theater director, or a cinema manager, they stand very carefully looking over their

shoulders at a law which is extremely vague, and are very careful about the sort of work they encourage. The self-censorship that is going on is very difficult to monitor but is undoubtedly happening.

"In libraries, the gay sections have been stopped. The books are still there but they may now be difficult to find. Is that censorship? Well, it's a bloody nuisance for people. It means that you can't stumble over the gay section one day. You can't quietly go there and take out the books you need and improve your education or self-knowledge. The effect it has had on schools is deliberately pernicious. Children discussing homosexuality in school can't expect to find any positive help from their teachers because it is against the law for a local authority school to promote homosexuality and, in talking about it in a positive way, you are, presumably, promoting it. A hole-in-the-corner way of talking about it will encourage the kid, of course, to think that homosexuality is something that should be whispered about, rather than spoken out loud and something to be proud about. The law stands as an amazing catch-all statute, and if a government less liberal than this were to arrive one day, then all sorts of activities can be shut down."

Has anything positive come out of this law? "In a sense it was a sort of Stonewall [the event that marked the

***"The new law could have a great effect on the arts as a sort of backdoor censorship."***

beginning of the modern gay movement in the United States in 1969] imposed on us from the outside. There was no violence in the streets, but there was violent argument in the media and in public places. It had a huge beneficial effect because it's given all lesbians and gays a sense of purpose and a unity, and it's a rallying cry. Everyone knows what Section 28 is. It has had a huge effect on the atmosphere of thought and social development in this country; the debate that happened over the first six months



of 1988 showed the government up as being truly illiberal. The Government privately admits its mistake and was amazed at how easy it was to mobilize opposition against the particular law. I have that from people in the cabinet who are actually quite ashamed that anything like this should have happened. At a time when laws are being liberalized everywhere, including behind the Iron Curtain, that an old democracy should pass a restrictive measure like this made one ashamed."

***"Most of my letters are from straight women who congratulate me for coming out."***

**M**ckellen has also been very active in fundraising for AIDS. In December of 1987, he presented a seven-week season of *Acting Shakespeare*, which had not previously been seen in London, at the Playhouse Theater in the West End. The entire box-office take was donated to London Lighthouse, an AIDS counselling organization which was, at the time, in the process of building a hospice.

"They were running out of money and the building was going to have to be halted when I heard about it. I realized that I could very quickly raise the sort of money they needed. We set a target of a quarter-million pounds [roughly half a million dollars] and raised double that amount. What was very interesting was that at the end the Government chipped in with three-quarter million pounds to London Lighthouse because it had 'caught the public's imagination.' So it really was a case of the government being led by public opinion and public opinion actually being led by the gays who organized it. Since then I have gone round the country on weekends doing the same show raising money for local AIDS organizations outside London.

"There are many more remarkable stories than mine, I think, to be told. What's depressing about the AIDS fundraising scene is that closeted gays are being as unhelpful here as they are in the United States. That is a very dif-

ficult source of money to tap: people who are in the mainstream of society, but who don't declare themselves to be gay and are not willing to give money even anonymously. One shouldn't underestimate the importance of people in the public eye who declare themselves and speak their views on AIDS. I think that's my major contribution. No one can claim that I was doing anything beyond that or anything special. I think I am just part of the publicity machine as it were—a part I

am very happy to play."

Has a gay public profile affected his acting career—one that has been associated with some of the major romantic roles of the classical canon? "Judging by my post, I've never been as popular. Most of my letters are from straight women who congratulate me for coming out and say it won't affect their enthusiasm for me. There was one letter from a rather old lady who said I had been her fantasy sex figure for so long she couldn't bear to replace me. And, she said, after all, it's only a fantasy so what the hell does it matter that you're gay! The problem of being gay is basically other people's problems. It becomes your problem because other people are worried about it.

"Although in the past I have lost work because I told film producers that I was gay, I cannot blame my rather thin in-

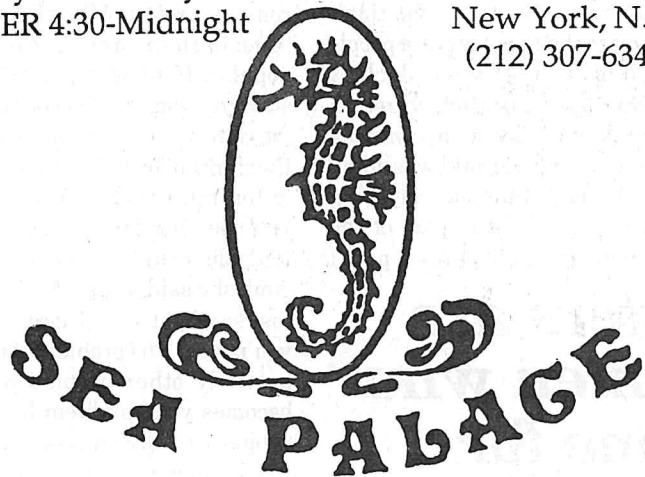
With Jane Asher in *Henceforward*



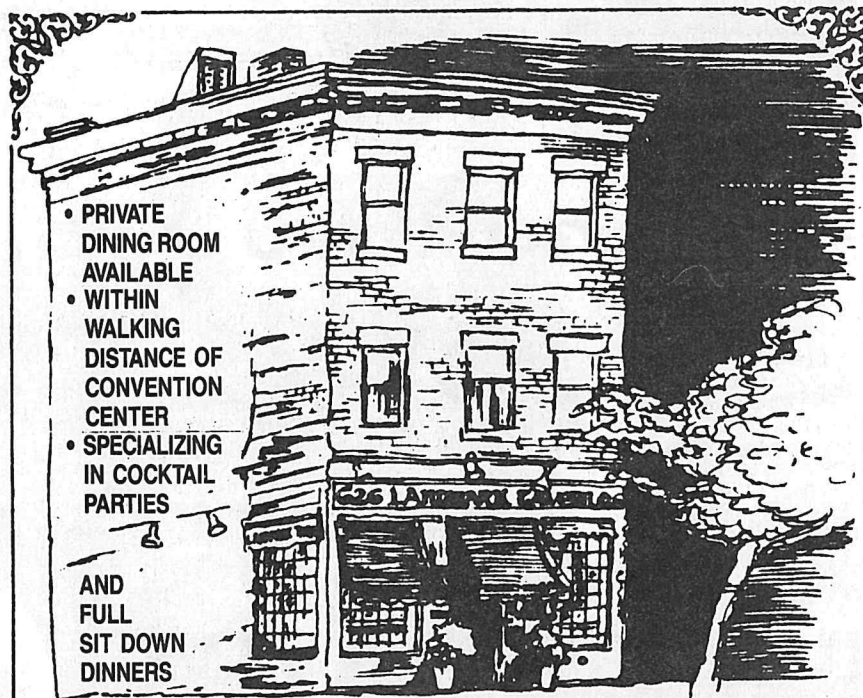


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ternational film career on that fact. [McKellen's films include *Priest of Love*, in which he played D. H. Lawrence, and a memorable cameo as a Foreign Office bureaucrat in *Plenty*.] I don't expect it to flourish now that I am openly gay, but I play John Profumo in the upcoming film *Scandal*. The only thing that everyone knows about John Profumo, a politician of 25 years ago, is that he was a raving heterosexual. That was my first job after coming out. And my second job is that I am now playing in the biggest hit in the West End—an Alan Ayckbourn play in which I play the father of a child who spends all his time arguing with his estranged wife about access to that child. Nobody seems to find it difficult to accept me in that role, so I expect my career will carry on much as it has done in the past."

**W**ill politics figure more prominently than acting in McKellen's life? "When I came back from the States in 1987, I had enough money to not work for a year and I intended not to work through 1988. I wanted to attend to other things in my life, to put my work perhaps in a better context. It was therefore fortuitous that I was in that frame of mind and had the time to join in the political work I've been doing. If Section 28 had happened a couple of years ago I wouldn't have got involved, because I would have been working too hard. That having happened, another big change in my life is that I would never want to be working so hard on my acting that it would exclude other possibilities. Those other things center on being aware of what is happening to lesbians and gays and helping wherever possible.

"It would be very foolish of me to stop acting altogether and just become a gay media figure; I would rapidly lose my credibility. If you remain in the public eye, you can have a huge impact on the gay scene and other people's perceptions of the gay scene. You can be an example to people, of course, and encourage young people who are worried about their own sexuality. You can also be a bewildering irritant to people who like to dismiss lesbians and gays as being out of the mainstream of society. That's really what I will spend a lot of my time doing in the future." □