

# TheaterWeek

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**Sir Ian** as  
**Richard III**

*By Gerard Raymond*

**Kathleen Tynan on  
National Theater  
Director  
Richard Eyre**



**An Interview with London *Times*  
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# Sir Ian McKellen's *Richard III*

Hiding the hump leads to a new interpretation of the deformed villain.

by Gerard Raymond

**N**OW IS THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT. . . . "God. It seems terribly unfair of Shakespeare to begin his play with such a famous speech," wrote actor Anthony Sher describing the challenge of playing Richard III in 1984. Forty years earlier, Sir

Laurence Olivier had made the part his own, playing Richard as a leering hunchback. In 1954 Olivier immortalized that definitive performance on film. But whizzing about the stage as an evil cripple on crutches, Sher liberated the character from the Olivier interpretation eight years ago. Now Sir Ian McKellen, who is often touted as Olivier's successor, presents a new portrait of Shakespeare's infamous king in the Royal National Theater's touring production, which will play five U.S. cities in the next 16 weeks. And it is radically different from the

previous two before him.

Dressed in military uniform and employing the clipped speech of an upper-class officer, McKellen sets the tone for his Richard in the first lines of the famous opening speech. He has a limp, and one of his arms is withered, but at first glance you hardly notice the deformities. Like his tightly reined emotions and his well-concealed designs to seize the crown, everything about this villain is carefully masked.

"It was not a conscious choice to do it differently from those distin-

guished predecessors," McKellen insists. "Richard cannot be as deformed as his enemies say he is, because he was first and foremost a soldier and would have had to be involved in combat. I actually present him with a considerable handicap—he has a distorted spine, he is ugly from the side where his face is blasted and his hair doesn't grow properly—but you don't see much of it because he spends his life covering it up, as many people who have a deformity do."

For McKellen, Richard's ability to hide his weaknesses is one of the keys to his success. "He is a man who has had to take control of himself against the most enormous physical odds. And that willpower allows him to fight his way to the top, just as it allowed him to fight successfully on the battlefield."



John Haynes

Ian McKellen as Richard III at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

**“It’s a distortion to see Richard as a 1930s fascist. The production’s a metaphor for the last time a tyrant might have arisen in Britain.” —Ian McKellen**

**T**wo years ago Richard Eyre, director of the National Theater, asked McKellen to organize an international tour of two plays for the company. *King Lear*, directed by Deborah Warner with Brian Cox in the lead was one selection. The other was a more difficult choice. McKellen hesitated before deciding to perform *Richard III*. “I disliked the idea that physical deformity was an outward manifestation of Richard’s inner moral turpitude. But once I studied the play, it was perfectly clear that what sends Richard off the rails morally is the *attitude* towards his deformity.” McKellen points out that, in the play, Richard’s mother, the Duchess of York, hates her son. When she bids him goodbye prior to his departure to battle she wishes him dead, reminding him that he had been a trouble for her ever since he was conceived. “His mother hates him simply because he is deformed. There is no man in the world who can recover from that.”

McKellen invited Richard Eyre to direct the production, but, initially, Eyre had a low opinion of the play as well. “I thought it was a vehicle for great actors,” says Eyre, “but then I discovered it was a much richer play.” Eyre refers to the very moving scene in the fourth act where the three queens mourn the deaths caused by Richard. “That is an extraordinarily potent aspect of the play that I hadn’t been aware of before. They all start off as very arrogant, defiant women, and are all broken by the power of Richard. Gradually you see women bearing the brunt of the evil deeds perpetrated by men.”

A distinguishing feature of Eyre’s production and McKellen’s interpretation is their astute political reading of *Richard III*. The play’s “very detailed and brilliantly observed” political scenes, Eyre observes, are “a kind of archetype for the rise of a dictator.” Shakespeare even includes what Eyre calls the “burning of the Reichstag scene,” in which Richard whips up an imaginary riot to give him the excuse to take strong measures to quell it. With a militaristic Richard systematically consolidating

his power in this production, Eyre presents a plausible scenario of what could have happened if fascism took hold in England during the 1930s.

Indeed, when the production opened in London in July 1990, many of the English critics hailed it as a perceptive modern interpretation of Shakespeare’s take on late fifteenth-century events, but some purists were offended. “‘We have ways of making you relevant,’ I imagine Richard Eyre snarling at his copy of the collected plays’ ” declared one of the dissenting critics. “I didn’t start with any director’s conceit, or say it had to be set in the twentieth century,” counters Eyre calmly. “But this is a play about tyranny, and if there is one characteristic that historians will celebrate or mourn about this century, it’s that it is a century of mass tyranny.”

Eyre explains how the interpretation of the play developed as he discussed the play with McKellen and the designer Bob Crowley. “We were fascinated by the whole business of a military man facing the problem of peace, which is what the beginning of the play is about.” Eyre had made a film about the Falklands War, entitled *Tumbledown*, a year earlier, for

which he had interviewed people who were dealing with the the after-effects of war. “The most significant thing that I noticed was that the most traumatized people—those who found it most difficult to adapt to peacetime—were the ones who weren’t injured. The injured ones had some sort of legacy, as it were. The others—and isn’t this a post-Vietnam feature as well?—couldn’t find anything in their lives that was one-fiftieth as exciting. And that is Richard. He talks about ‘this weak piping time of peace.’ This is a cripple who has only been able to establish an identity for himself by becoming a good soldier.”

“But it is a distortion to see Richard as a 1930s tyrant or label him as a fascist,” McKellen cautions. “It’s a metaphor for the last time a tyrant might have arisen in Britain,” McKellen explains, “a period of extreme economic distress, with a right-wing movement strongly in place.”

**B**ringing out the politics in the piece may have robbed this *Richard III* of the juicy villainy, which makes it one of the popular plays in the Shakespeare canon. Does McKellen



Richard Eyre and Ian McKellen

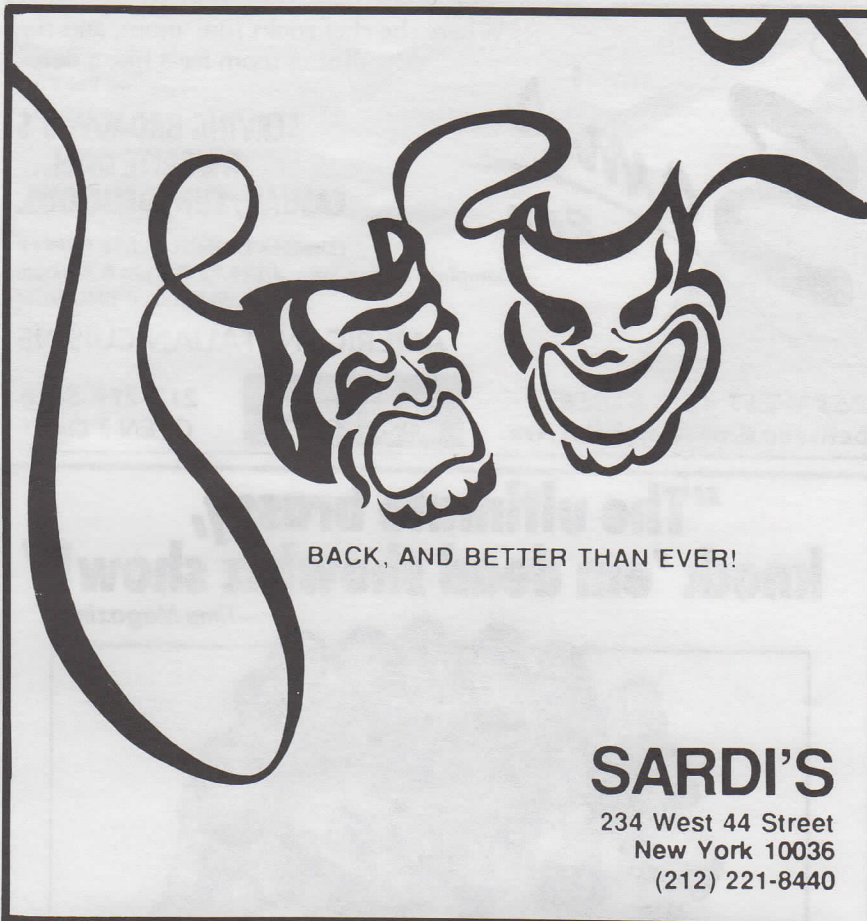
Carol Rosegg/Martha Swope Associates

feel cheated of the opportunity to display the bravura traditionally associated with the role? "No, no, no," he states emphatically. "It is the longest part in Shakespeare, and although we have cut some of it, it remains a very hefty role with enormous responsibilities and every possible opportunity for a very physical performance. It's verbally alive, it has comedy, it has terror, and it has the potential to get the audience really thinking as well as feeling. I also relish those scenes when another actor comes on to challenge me because Richard is constantly meeting challenges. The more it is played as an ensemble work—the stronger the other actors—the more I am buoyed by them and the more the play is achieved."

This production of *Richard III* is very consciously designed for the international tour, which took it to the capitals of Western and Eastern Europe, as well as Japan, Egypt, and now America. "We started with an entirely bare stage and we built up," Eyre explains. "How little can you put on a stage and make it very powerfully expressive and not make an audience feel like they are being shortchanged?" To achieve clarity, to make the play accessible to an international audience, who though familiar with the play, may not entirely understand the language, Eyre opted for a filmic storytelling style, so one can "read the stage very clearly." Eyre adds that McKellen is very vigorous in terms of meaning. "He is always asking, 'What does it say here? What do we mean here?'"

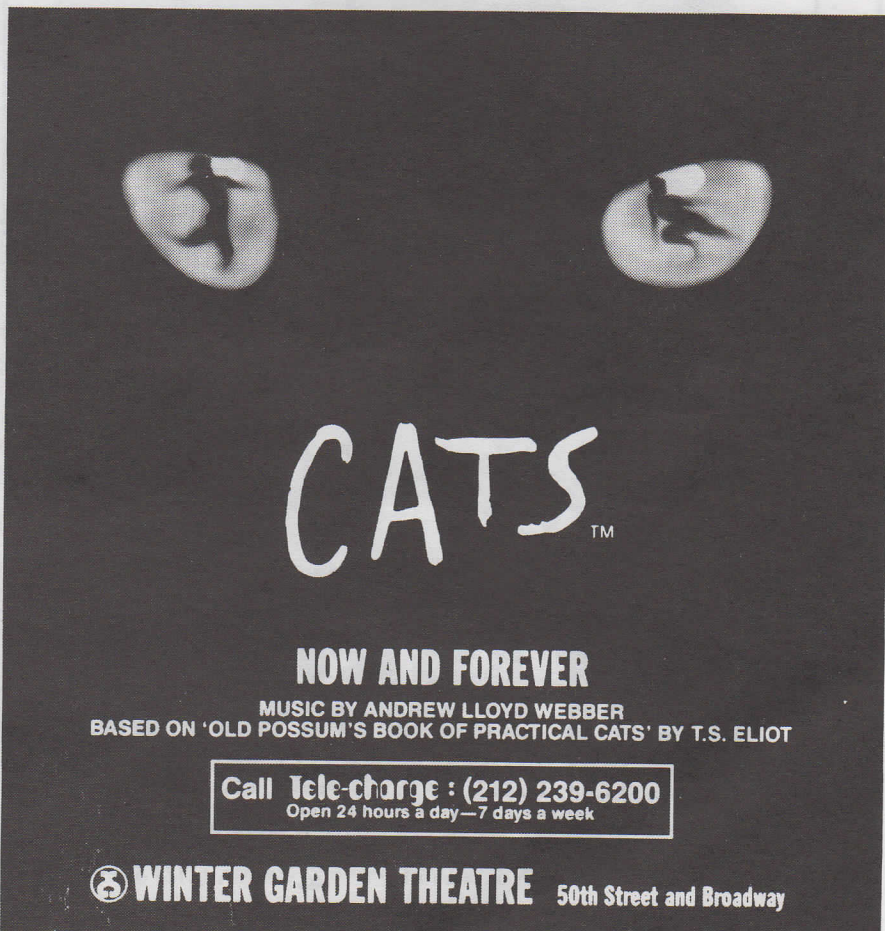
Did the production change over the two years it has been playing? "It is only possible if you have an actor like Ian," Eyre replies. "The great thing about him is that he keeps reinventing it, but he doesn't fuck about. Often when you hear people say that a certain actor never does the same thing twice," Eyre explains, "your heart sinks because it implies that the actor is impatient. With Ian, he just accumulates, discards, and refines."

When the British tour ended in October last year, Eyre claims that McKellen's performance was powerful and simple. "He had cut away a lot of the embellishment without diminishing any of the complexity. If you looked at the arc from the beginning



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John Haynes

McKellen as Richard III

of the run, he had become much more powerful, much more frightening, much wittier, and more effective."

**A**fter a six month world tour followed by a tour of the U.K., McKellen is still game for continuing with the play in the U.S. In fact, McKellen is the rare contemporary actor who loves to tour. "I cannot imagine being an actor and not touring," McKellen says earnestly. "The first actors that I ever admired were on the road." He recalls seeing Sir John Gielgud play King Lear just eight miles from where he lived in Lancashire in the North of England. "I don't see it as a penalty of the job, because you have a wonderful time," he explains. "On the basic level, you are free from the responsibilities of cleaning your house, paying your bills, and answering your telephone. You also enter very quickly into the life of whatever city you are in because you are working there. And if you are politically alert, that's a wonderful way of seeing the world."

McKellen smiles, then adds: "The last thing I should say is *never* throw away your hits. You don't have big hits often—maybe once every ten years, if you are lucky. I had one with *Macbeth* (1976), and one with *Iago* in *Othello* (1989)." The current *Richard III* is proving to be his biggest hit to date. "It is wonderful to celebrate the National Theater and everything it stands for with this production, and to present it proudly to America as an example of the work we do." □