

Summer Theater Listings

TheaterWeek

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IAN MCKELLEN

A Knight Out

By Gerard
Raymond

Paul Rudnick
on his new play

The Drama Desk Awards

Theater Music: *Damn Yankees,*
Carousel, Mandy Patinkin



A Theatrical Revolution

How two artists, Ian McKellen and Tina Landau, interpret Stonewall.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Flashback: New York City, June 27, 1969. On Broadway, Alec McCowen gives a tour de force as *Hadrian VII*, James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander ignite the stage with an interracial love affair in *The Great White Hope*. Julie Harris is the chief attraction of the popular comedy *Forty Carats*, and Woody Allen stars in *Play It Again, Sam*. *Zorba, 1776*, and *Promises, Promises* are the new musicals in town, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Cabaret*, and *Mame*, hold-overs from previous seasons. (*Hello Dolly!* is on hiatus, but Pearl Bailey will return to the show after a two-week vacation). Off-Broadway, *The Fantasticks* is about to enter its 10th year, *Hair* and *Oh Calcutta!* titillate audiences with bare flesh and *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* is a big success for the Negro Ensemble Company.

The previous season's ground-breaking drama, *The Boys in the Band*, which placed a group of gay men center stage, is an unexpected hit. A camp classic in the making, *Dames at Sea*, featuring the captivating Bernadette Peters, is playing at the Theater de Lys (now the Lucille Lortel) on Christopher Street. On the same street—literally on the street—an improvised drama takes place in the early hours of June 28th: A chorus line of drag queens with their arms linked together kick their heels high into the air and prance down the street.

A small portion of the audience is not enjoying the show—a riot squad of twenty-four policemen stands by, ready to charge . . .

The rioting and street protests had erupted in response to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a Mafia-run gay bar on Christopher Street. The eight officers who

entered the bar were besieged by a crowd of over 300 people throwing beer cans and bottles and a shower of coins. The raid was routine, but on this occasion the patrons weren't docile. Take your pick from the several theories as to why they retaliated: Were tempers fueled by Judy Garland's funeral earlier that afternoon? Could it have been the unbearable heat of that summer or was it the full moon? It will never be a fully explained, but this unprecedented act of defiance from gay people against the police has become the symbolic event of the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement. A quarter century later, it reverberates through much of the theater playing New York this month. (See below.)

Stonewall, Night Variations

The momentous events which took place outside the Stonewall Inn on June 27, 1969 are recreated and deconstructed in *Stonewall, Night Variations*, a music theater spectacle written and directed by Tina Landau. It is presented by En Garde Arts at Pier 25, overlooking the Hudson River near Chambers Street in Lower Manhattan.

Tina Landau was seven years old when the Stonewall Riots occurred, but this project, which she initiated, is her most personal work to date. "It's a kind of roots search," she explains. "I look at the various cultures that I might belong to and I have a lot of confusion. Am I foremost a Jew, or am I a woman, or am I an American (and what is that?), or am I lesbian?"

This show came about, Landau says, after she found herself in the middle of the Gay Pride Parade last year in New York. She had hitherto avoided such festivities because she didn't want to get involved

with crowds and groups, and thought of herself as a loner. Now suddenly part of the throng of celebrating lesbians, gays and supporters, she "kept having one epiphany after another." It was, "one of those silly lifetime experiences where I thought, what I have been running from is so beautiful and so important. I had never witnessed that kind of feeling—of community and family."

Many people go through three basic periods of self awareness, Landau explains: "a period when you are closeted, with shame or denial, then one of realization or acceptance and then a period of action, of moving on it in some way." *Stonewall, Night Variations* marks Landau's transition into the third period. Accidentally becoming part of the Parade set Landau thinking about how it all started, and reflecting on the time when words like "pride" and "visibility" were not associated with homosexuality. That very day she proposed a Stonewall piece to En Garde Arts artistic director Anne Hamburger. Landau has recently started writing her own projects, after ten years of directing other people's work, including the classics and several musicals. Theater is a tool for learning, she says, adding that she regards it her "post-graduate education about life."

En Garde Arts specializes in site-specific theater, but very early on they realized the Stonewall piece could not be staged outside the bar where the events actually occurred. The area is too residential and scores of visitors are expected to flock to the neighborhood for the Stonewall 25th anniversary celebrations and the concurrent Gay Games IV. They also met with considerable resistance from community boards in Lower Man-

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hattan who seemed to fear that the company was planning to recreate a riot on the streets. Landau started writing the piece only after they secured the use of Pier 25, the site of the former Amazon Club.

Inspired by the kitsch decor of the abandoned club (it included a miniature golf course), Landau decided to exploit the theme park nature of the site. "I call it a hallucinogenic carnival," she says. A barker invites the audience into a Gay World—located at the edge of the city, the fringe, literally pushed out into the river. The audience walks through a series of side shows, where they meet the principal characters, and make their way through what Landau calls "a yellow brick road of the mind." When the show proper begins, the ghosts from the past are conjured up by the barker to reenact the hour which led up to the riot.

The spectacle has a cast of over 60 and is enhanced with musical numbers as well as filmed segments (by Jennie Paris in *Burning Livingston*) which offer an intimate, close-up view of the action on stage. Cultural moments from the period are evoked (expect to see icons like Judy Garland and the Supremes) and actors read documentary testimonials from people who were actually present on that night at Stonewall.


The legacy of Stonewall, Landau says, is not in the facts, but in "the metaphor, the mythology and the mystery. My sense is there wasn't a strong political consciousness. It is about little moments of resistance on the part of ordinary people, and the moments were very personal and idiosyncratic, but out of that intersection something extraordinary happened."

Ian McKellen's Knight Out


In August 1969, two months after the Stonewall Riots, Ian McKellen was at the Edinburgh Festival playing a sensational gay role which very few actors had attempted at that point. The play was Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, which the local authorities tried to get banned because two men kissed on stage. But the irony was that the 30-year old McKellen was in the closet at the time; he heard nothing about the incipient gay rights movement. He came out publicly nearly two decades later in 1988.

Now the 55 year-old actor, Sir Ian, as he is known since his knighthood in 1991, is appearing at the Lyceum Theater in *A Knight Out*, a one-man show he has devised specifically for the Gay Games Cul-

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tural Festival in New York

TheaterWeek: What is your show about?

Ian McKellen: The format will be similar to *Acting Shakespeare* [his previous solo show]—it will be me introducing pieces and chatting about them—but the theme will be gay-related material; there will certainly be a lot more autobiography. It is going to be an entertainment. It will include some Shakespeare and classical theater, some performances that have not been seen here, like *Edward II*. I will briefly look back at *Amadeus*, I think it will be fun to do Salieri again; and there will be a few unexpected bits and pieces from an assortment of sources.

The “knight” side of it will be that side of my life which has been to do with mainstream theater, the bulk of my career and my experience. The “out” will be the other side of my life since I came out, things that interest me as a public figure. It will be about those two aspects, the actor and the activist, how they overlap, and what their relationship is.

I like the idea of doing a show which is just for those few thousand people who are interested. I am assuming I get the right mix—of the people who are specifically here for the events happening that week, and the audiences in New York who might turn out to see me in whatever I was doing. It will be just for us in a particular time and in a particular city.

What exactly is the relationship between the actor and the activist, and how do they overlap?

I suppose the division amongst those of us who are gay and in the theater is whether we identify ourselves as gay actors or whether we are actors who are gay. I tend to be the latter. It is a little bit late after 30 years to imagine a total revolution in my interests in the theater. I'll not become an exclusively gay performer, but I look back on the work I have done in the last five years, and an awful lot of it has been gay. But then a lot of it was before, the difference simply is that now I am happy to draw people's attention to the fact that I am a gay man appearing in *And The Band Played On* or *Tales of the City*, or indeed doing this show.

What is absolutely new is my activist side after I came out and got involved in politics. I have been peculiarly fitted to act a part in the general gay movement in the United Kingdom because I get to speak to the mainstream press. That is basically

what my job is, unappointed PR man on behalf of the activists, professional, and volunteer, who actually try to change the laws in the UK. So I don't really draw a distinction in the relationship between that and my professional work. It's performing in public. It's true it is not acting on the stage, but it is presenting a script, or a set of attitudes, collectively put together by other people; I happen to be the person articulating it. I find that work, I surprise myself in this, just as satisfying; and whilst it is happening, perhaps more satisfying than anything else I can imagine myself doing.

When I went on the March on Washington this year and did a speech from Shakespeare to, I'm told, a million people, my life seemed to make some sense. There I am capable of performing in public and making the link between Shakespeare's humanity and the particular concerns of a large minority of which I happen to identify myself. It is very, very fulfilling and it makes me feel better about myself. I wish I got involved much earlier on.

You have recently been doing a number of small parts in movies. Does Hollywood see you as a gay actor?

Hollywood, they don't even notice. What they see me as is a classical actor with a knighthood who hasn't done many movies and doesn't mean anything at the box office, but who adds a bit of weight to the bottom end of the cast list. And if that is how they are going to go on looking at me well, more fool them.

But I wanted to buttress my own lack of confidence with regard to film, and looking at the work I had done, particularly with regard to *The Ballad of Little Jo* and *Six Degrees of Separation*, I am now much more confident than I was that I can be in front of a camera and not make a fool of myself. All my career I have always thought that one of the very satisfying things about acting is that you do get a chance to get better. One way obviously is to keep breaking new ground. I have increasingly worked in small theaters over the last seven, eight years, and a natural extension of that is to work in the smallest theater of all, which is cinema; and that will feed back into my work in the theater. But I feel I am ready to do something which is meaty in film. The project I most want to achieve before going back to the theater is *Richard III*, which we hope to be filming before the end of the year. If I do, then I shall pick up an offer to go back to

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the National Theater about this time next year.

When you took on the role of *Edward II*, before you were out, were you concerned about being stigmatized as a gay actor?

It never crossed my mind. It was a good part. I wasn't out in that I hadn't talked to the press about it, but most people don't have to do that. I was always out, I openly lived with whoever I was living with at the time. When Sean Mathias [McKellen's lover for eight years] and I went to the Tony awards together as partners in 1981, I got a number of messages of congratulations and thanks that we had openly done that. Well, what was one meant to do? We went everywhere in public. What I hadn't, and you can't do this until you are absolutely out, is make the connections between your own situation and other people's. And that to me has been the crucial, advantageous and wonderful aspect of coming out.

Young actors are told by their managers and their agents to cool it. And they listen to that advice because their principal concern is to have a career and make money, and the world is a wicked place. It is isn't enough for me to say it hasn't affected my career, because I am in the middle or at the end of my career and they are just starting out. But I don't see, in the theater at any rate, that being openly gay is much less of an obstacle than being black or being a woman. I know many young actors who are nervous about it, but that is understandable when you are told by society to be nervous about coming out.

I have to keep making the point that there are a number of distinguished actors who are out and have made a point of saying they are gay, though unlike me they don't then particularly want to go on and become regular activists, and that is fine. Alec McCowen is out, Nigel Hawthorne, Antony Sher, Simon Russel-Beale—they are mainstream, extremely distinguished, and successful actors whose careers have not been inhibited one little bit. They really should be the model for young people to realize that you don't have to go on saying it, you just mustn't lie.

How did you feel about receiving your knighthood?

I don't deny it gives me a warm feeling every so often. It is a nice pat on the back, which is part of why one is an actor—you know, look at me, look at me, aren't I being good? A nice review, a Tony award, a

sense of other people saying "Yes, well done and thank you"—that is how I view it. The big bonus is for activism, ridiculously. It means that I have got a bit more clout. That is the way British society works. Maybe that does in the end more harm than good, but at least I have been able to turn that to the advantage of other people. I don't professionally use it at all. I have to instruct people not to call me "Sir" in the theater. I know Americans are intrigued by such things, and I thought *A Knight Out* seemed too good a joke not to use it.

How do you feel about yourself after coming out? Has it done anything for your personal life?

My big problem as a person has been my lack of self confidence, which is one of the reasons acting was a good job for me. It helped to give me confidence long before I was a professional actor. Now that process has continued. I have only got to look around at people of my generation who are not in a job that they have enjoyed doing and have not been able to take hold of their own lives in an utterly confident way, to know that I am very lucky to come through.

Then I look at kids in the Stonewall [an activist group in London] office during the recent age of consent campaign [in Britain] and it is a reflection of the theater. One of the joys of theater is that you mix with people of different generations. You work with very old people and very young people and you are all equals; different experiences but you have each got some expertise to bring that comes out of whatever age you happen to be. The same is true of activism. There are 16-year-olds—16-year-olds—who are out, whose parents support them in being out, who are involved and whose work is just as significant as mine. That is the future and it is just a joy to see them at it. I think what I was doing at 16! The bewilderment and sense of being cut off from anybody else like me.

The only thing that would make my life better now is if I were sharing it with somebody who I loved. The fact that I am not is greatly compensated by the fact that I have so many new friends, so many new interests, and yet am I still allowed to go on having the career that I always did. So you meet a very happy person, really.

Gerard Raymond is the author of New York Scene, a gay guide to New York; GMP Publishers. TW

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