



[Print document.](#)

Ian McKellen  
By Gerard Raymond

Sir Ian McKellen is back on the New York stage, delivering a theatrically charged performance opposite Helen Mirren and David Strathairn in Swedish playwright's 1900 tragi-comedy about a marriage gone sour *Dance of Death*. Although an appearance by McKellen on the stage is always reason to celebrate, this is especially good news now for fans, many of whom thought the 62-year-old British actor/knight had decided to devote his energies solely to the screen after a distinguished four-decade stage career. After all, in the past three years, McKellen's film career has been in high gear, with Oscar and Golden Globe nominations for *Gods and Monsters* and showy roles in high-profile blockbusters like *X-Men* and the upcoming *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although he was last seen on the British stage during a five-month engagement at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in the North of England (in which he played Prospero in *The Tempest*), *Dance of Death* marks McKellen's return to the American stage after a seven-year absence. His New York credits include *Amadeus* (1980; Tony and Drama Desk Awards), the short-lived Broadway production of Chekhov's *Wild Honey* (1986), *Richard III* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (1992) and Broadway's *A Knight Out* (1994), a one-man show about his career as a gay activist. McKellen recently sat down to chat with Broadway.com about his long-awaited return to the boards.

### **Has *Dance of Death* ever been on your wish list of plays?**

It wasn't planned—but that's how it works. I don't plan my career about plays I want to do and then go out and find out where to do them. On the whole, I respond to suggestions. I was keen to do this because it is a great play and Sean [Mathias] was directing it. I like working with him.

### **Did you read the new adaptation of the play by Richard Greenberg before accepting the part?**

No it wasn't even commissioned at that point. Ideally one would have read the script beforehand, but I trusted Sean's judgment about Richard Greenberg and I trusted that it would be in safe hands. It was on the assumption that it would be a wonderful translation, which it turned out to be. It brings out the comedy and seems, as far as I can make out from people who know Swedish, to be accurate and Strindbergian. So I am very happy with it indeed.

### **You were working in London in 1967 when Laurence Olivier played the same role to wide acclaim. Any comparisons with that production?**

I've read that translation and found it very unyielding and nowhere near as speakable as the version we've got. I think we are very lucky to have this version. Also they added on to the evening the sequel that Strindberg wrote—*Dance of Death Part II*—in which you meet Edgar and Alice's family and Kurt's son and the story develops with them. The Olivier production, while wonderful as it was for his performance, I don't think is remembered as a production particularly, and certainly not as a translation.

### **Like Edgar in *Dance of Death*, your *Richard III* also followed a celebrated Olivier performance. How does it feel working in the British tradition where generation after generation of great actors have placed their stamp on classical parts?**

It is just a fact of life that some people in the audience will know the play maybe better than the actors do because they have been living with it for so many years. I think in the end the Richard III that audience's know is a summation of all the Richard IIIs that they have seen during their lifetime. Very few people who come to see our *Dance of Death* will have a memory of Olivier some 30 years ago, but because it is on video they may well have seen it the previous evening and that might well affect their view of our efforts. But actually most people in the theater at any one time will not have seen the play before and may not even know how the story develops. So it can be inhibiting I think only if you have seen a production or a number of productions that you have enjoyed or been impressed by. I always try and rid my mind of any specific memories of earlier productions because they belong to the personality of the people who were doing the play at that time. The point of doing a play, of course, is to bring yourself to it and you don't want to be taking it any sense of competition with anybody else. And, of course, if you are doing a play which has been successful in the past you can know one thing for certain that that it is a good play and it works with the audience—often regardless of the performances of the actors. There is nothing more difficult than doing a new play where there is absolutely no yardstick and no previous experience that the play is actually going to work. That's a really different enterprise all together and rather braver than picking up an old play, you know.

### **This production marks your first time back on stage since the West Yorkshire season over two and half years. How does it feel to be back on stage again?**

When Sean came up with this idea I was very happy to do it because I thought it was time I did a play again. I was a little bit worried as to whether I would enjoy it. It wasn't that I thought that perhaps I would have lost the knack of working in front of



an audience, which is obviously the crucial difference between filming and theater. Working in a large theater is hard work physically because your performance has to reach the back row and that is a constant problem. When you are working in film the actor does not have the responsibility to project the performance at all. That is done by the mechanics of filming.

But as it turns out I'm enjoying it enormously. And of course the performance doesn't stop because you've had a first night and have been judged by some critics. You carry on exploring and deepening hopefully your appreciation of what you are doing. There has been a six month gap since between finishing *The Lord of the Rings* and doing this play so I was able to readjust. If perhaps one had followed hard on the other then I might have been less relaxed than I am.

### **So we can expect to see you continue working on the stage?**

It will all depend on what the material is like. I now seem to be in the happy situation where I get invited to do film as well as theater so it will just depend on how I feel, really. Yes I am hoping to do more films and I am hoping to do more theater, but what they will be or when—that all remains to be seen at the moment. When I finish the run of *Dance of Death* I have to do *X-Men Part II* sometime next year and then after that I suspect I would probably want to do a play and probably in London. If I had a plan that will be what it would be.

### **You mentioned that working with Sean Mathias was a key to your doing this play. Could you comment on your long friendship which has evolved from being lovers to working colleagues?**

Apart from our private relationship we've worked together a lot and that has remained constant from when I first acted in the play that he wrote called *Cowardice* [1983] in the West End. Since then I have been in three or four or maybe more productions by him. He's one of my favorite directors. So that's all aside from the joy of working with a friend, which actually isn't necessarily joyful because there can be professional tensions. But in our case we seem to have matured quite well together and I expect we'll do more work together.

### **How do you feel about working on Broadway again?**

It is a nice community of theater people on Broadway. I always enjoy it. You feel, I think, very welcome as an outsider and probably more so than an American actor might feel working in London. In London there are so many other major distractions. After all, London is where the head of state lives and where the national government is organized. It's always exciting here in New York because you feel in this town, where show business is a crucial part of its image of itself, that you are contributing to the city. Theater is more important to New York than it is to London as a city.

### **The Sir Ian McKellen Official Home Page ([www.mckellen.com](http://www.mckellen.com)) is very well organized and offers a comprehensive picture of your life and work. How did it come about, and are you personally involved with its upkeep?**

I wanted to avoid writing an autobiography and this seemed to be a modern alternative to that. I give it as much time as I can but it has to come second when I am actually working. I write a lot of E-Posts [for the site] but Keith Stern is the energy behind it all. The website just grows in response to people who come and look at it and it is very much guided by what they seem to want to get out of it. It began simply as a record of a career and an archive, but it seems to have become something a bit more lively than that.

### **Finally, could you tell us something about *Dance of Death* and what it is that attracted you to this play?**

If anybody wants to know what the play is about they'll have to come and see it! It is one of the great plays, perhaps the first great play, of modern drama. But that of itself wouldn't be a reason to do it if it didn't go on being a play that spoke to a modern sensibility, which I think it does. That's helped by the translation of course. It is certainly a revolutionary play and still remains shocking, I think. There is a wide variety of styles in this particular Strindberg and that's one of the exciting things about doing it. It has melodrama in it, it has dollops of potential tragedy and farce and comedy all mixed in together—surrealism and well as naturalism. It is finding the balance between all those elements which is part of what makes it fun to do each evening. And hopefully the audience picks up on those various elements and feels that the meal that is being set before them is quite a rich and varied one.