

A performance worth the wait

Ian McKellen brings Beckett's classic play to our shores

JANE CORNWELL

IAN McKellen grabs his bushy beard with both hands and yanks his cheeks sideways. "Can you imagine," he says in his stentorian voice, "living with this thing for over 250 performances? To look in the mirror every morning and see it there on your face? It makes one feel old." He slumps in his armchair, crumpling the jacket of his dark blue suit. "I mean, I am old," adds the pre-eminent classical actor, 70. "I just don't particularly want to look any older."

The facial hair won't be coming off for a while yet; at least not until *Waiting for Godot*, in which McKellen plays co-lead Estragon, finishes its forthcoming tour of Australia and New Zealand. When McKellen first broached the idea of performing Samuel Beckett's renowned 1953 play about, well, everything and nothing — an idea he took to his former lover, theatre director Sean Mathias — he could hardly have anticipated its phenomenal success. Celebrated as the must-see theatrical event of the season when it opened at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in 2009 (with McKellen's fellow X-Man Patrick Stewart as Vladimir), *Waiting for Godot* broke box-office records for both the theatre and the play. Its run was extended. A national tour

followed. The production went back into the Haymarket in January (with Shakespearean actor Roger Rees replacing Stewart) and ran until earlier this month. Reviews were glowing. "McKellen's droll, wry Estragon is even funnier than last year," wrote *The Times*. "Masterly McKellen glitters in *Waiting for Godot* revival," said the *Evening Standard*. The existentialist play's two vaudevillian tramps wait endlessly for the mysterious Godot, diverting themselves by bickering, moaning and clowning around — and popular demand for this accessible "Godot with a difference" has kept the antics going.

"Maybe it will go on for ever and I'll never be rid of this bloody beard," quips McKellen, lighting a cigarette. "Still, why shouldn't it? You should never throw away your hits. When you have a big success it is so tempting to think that your next project will be successful but that is not, in my experience, the case."

Mathias — in whose art-deco bedecked Oxford St apartment the interview is taking place — reclines on a designer sofa in green jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with comic book superheroes, and smiles. "I've seen this play more than eighty times," says the 54-year-old Welshman, an actor whose CV spans everything



Ian McKellen plays Estragon in one of the most popular and praised productions of Samuel Beckett's two-act masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*

from a role in the British TV drama series *Minder* to playwriting and directing in London, New York and his second home of Cape Town in South Africa.

"I dream about it of course," he adds with a sigh. "Even when I'm shopping or Hoovering, random lines from the play will just pop into my head. But this is a play that merits continual work. It is actually extremely funny. Beckett was right to call it a tragi-comedy; there is so much emotion that keeps bursting through."

McKellen nods. "I would hate it if Australian audiences thought they were simply getting the tag end of our long run," he says. "I am very much looking forward to performing in Australia again. It was when we were in Sydney doing Strindberg [he played the Captain in the Mathias-directed *Dance of Death* in 2004] that I felt we had finally..." There's a long pause as he searches for the words. Cracked it? "No-o-o." He thinks for a few beats then points a finger sky-

wards. "It was more like climbing Everest and going, 'Ah look! There's the top!'"

"We're both obsessives," offers Mathias from the sofa.

So does the fact that they are ex-partners — the two men were together for 10 years after meeting as actors at the 1978 Edinburgh Fringe Festival — help or hinder their working relationship?

"It helps," the director says firmly. "It makes communication easier, more intimate. But then I prefer being on intimate terms with my cast. Many directors don't." McKellen speaks back over his shoulder as he takes his ashtray into the kitchen: "I don't work with Sean because he is a good friend," he booms. "I work with him because he is a wonderful director."

It was Mathias who encouraged McKellen to take the role of Max, a gay Berlin Jew, in Martin Sherman's groundbreaking 1979 production of *Bent* at London's Royal Court Theatre ("Martin in-

'It's a play about the struggle of old age'

IAN MCKELLEN

sists Beckett came to see it and that we shook hands in the pub afterwards," says McKellen. "But I think I would remember if I did"). Mathias has since directed his ex in a supporting role in the 1997 film version of *Bent* and on stage in *Dance of Death*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*. For Christmas 2004 and 2005 he directed *Aladdin* at the Old Vic with McKellen as the outrageous pantomime dame Widow Twankey, prompting the media to divulge the nickname that had been known to the gay community ever since the actor was knighted in 1991: Serena.

"Serena" was wittily coined by Stephen Fry at a gay fundraiser," McKellen told Britain's *Independent* newspaper in 2004. "In the US I am invariably Sir McKellen.

Computers address me as Siri McKellen. I answer to all."

The recipient of a Tony Award and two Oscar nominations, McKellen's long career as a bravura stage actor — he played King Lear and Sorin in *The Seagull*, back to back, in the Royal Shakespeare Company productions that visited Melbourne in 2007 — has been somewhat eclipsed in recent years by his big screen triumphs as Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings trilogy and Magneto in the X-Men series. Today the exaggerated gravitas of both characters leaks, with tongue firmly in cheek, into our conversation.

"I live on my own," says McKellen of his long-time home in Limehouse next to the Thames River in London's East End. "Each night, to help me wind down after the play, I sit up in bed playing sudoku. Then when I go to sleep I tend to see all these rows of numbers floating across and down, and if I can only find the missing number then everything will be OK.

Which of course it is," he adds, puffing up with Gandalf-like grandeur in his seat. "In my dreams I am sudoku."

Mathias rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "Well, I'm staying awake worrying about whether the *Godot* set — a crumbling theatre-within-a-theatre design by Stephen Brimson Lewis — will make it to Melbourne in time for the opening."

We imagine Beckett's lone tree, where Estragon and Vladimir meet to wait for Godot, poking its way out of the top of the ship that set sail for Australia three months ago. "The set intentionally has a trapped, apocalyptic feel; it could be Haiti or New Orleans or anywhere post-disaster. This is a play that is very aware of its theatricality, that acknowledges it is actually a play."

"It set a precedent when it came out," says McKellen. "It felt more absurdist, more confusing than. But in the years since, we've had *Monty Python* and *Little Britain*

and other things, and *Godot* has become more accessible as a result. It's no wonder comedians love doing this play," he continues. "Barry Humphries, who I'll be lunching with when I'm there, was in the first Australian production in the 1950s. Mel Gibson did a *Godot*, too, I think."

"But we both feel that age is an important factor. I don't know how this play works with young actors. Vladimir and Estragon have aches and pains and problems with short-term memory and the like. This is a play about old men. It's a play about the struggle of old age against the fading of the light."

McKellen strokes his beard. "It's a play," he says, "that illuminates life."

Waiting for Godot is at the Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, May 6-23; His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, May 28-June 6; Her Majesty's Theatre, Adelaide, June 9-12; Sydney Opera House, June 15-27.

Brooke cleans up

BROOKE Satchwell has been announced as a last-minute replacement for Pia Miranda in the Black Swan - Queensland Theatre Company co-production of *The Clean House*, which opens in Perth on April 27. Miranda pulled out following the birth of her first child in March, saying the workload of rehearsals and a two-city season was too difficult so soon after her daughter's arrival. The whimsical romantic comedy about a Brazilian cleaning woman who would rather be a comedian will be directed by Black Swan's artistic director Kate Cherry, with actors Sarah McNeill, Carol Burns, Hugh Parker and Vivienne Garrett. The Queensland season begins June 28.

Out in the open

THERE has been plenty of talk about landscape painting during the past week after Sam Leach admitted he copied a painting of an Italian scene for his Wynne Prize-winning work, *Proposal for a Landscaped Cosmos*. That painting borrowed heavily from Adam Pynacker's 1660 oil *Boatmen Moored on the Shore of an Italian Lake*, underscoring the realities of contemporary landscape painting. But while most painters continue to work in their studios, it seems painting en plein air hasn't gone out of fashion just yet. Yesterday NSW Arts Minister Virginia Judge announced that 214 entries had been received by the NSW Parliament Plein Air Painting Prize, almost twice last year's number. Now in its third year, the prize is open to Australian artists focused on a subject "found in NSW", and created en plein air. The \$20,000 winner will be announced on May 19.

Neighbours cameo

AUSTRALIAN soap opera *Neighbours*, consistently more popular in Britain than in its homeland, is giving British viewers the chance to audition for a cameo role. The show, which launched the careers of Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan and Guy Pearce, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year and is offering female British fans the chance to appear as a character for a month. Aspiring actresses can download the audition script, then upload their audition tapes to YouTube. A panel will pick the top five, with the top two decided by public vote. They will fly to Melbourne, where the show is filmed, before producers make the final decision.

Hall refurbishment

THE Victorian government has released plans for the \$128.5 million refurbishment of Hamer Hall that will open the 30-year-old building to embrace the Yarra promenade. The project will be lodged with Heritage Victoria this week, with a 28-day public consultation to follow.

Church again opens its door to creativity

In contemporary life the functions of religion and art have their points of convergence

RACHEL CAMPBELL-JOHNSTON

THE relationship between art and Christianity began in the catacombs. The two have been intricately involved ever since. You have only to look at the work of the great Western masters — the devotional delicacy of medieval manuscripts, the grand biblical dramas of Michelangelo, Rembrandt's dusky meditations on divinity, the iconoclastic Picasso's appropriations of religious symbolism — to see how closely the stories of faith and culture have always run.

Recently we have seen a flurry of contemporary art commissions in churches, such as Antony Gormley's *Flare II* in the Geometric Staircase of St Paul's Cathedral in London.

Though this may feel novel, it's worth remembering that for centuries the church was the main patron of art. Art galleries are often termed the cathedrals of art, but it's the great cathedrals of Europe that have long been grandiloquent testimony not just to humanity's spiritual aspirations but to its loftiest cultural ambitions.

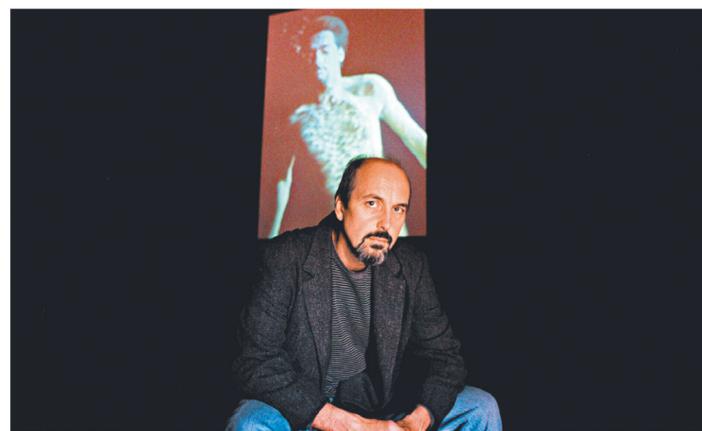
Indeed, the latter often took precedence. The renaissance Pope Julius II is remembered more for his artistic commissions — the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Raphael's Vatican frescoes, the rebuilding of St Peter's — than for his theological impact on the Roman Catholic Church. More powerful than pious, this notoriously cantankerous church leader would habitually use a cane to punish insubordination. Artists responded to religious

commissions with some of their finest works. And it was not just money that moved them. They worked in the service of a faith that could lift their talents above the level of mere illustration and offer a supreme test of skill.

For example, think of images from the passion and crucifixion of Christ. The stripped body of the saviour offered a perfect opportunity for a bravura display of human musculature in all its divinely wrought magnificence. Anatomical study was raised to celestial heights and ecclesiastical authorities appreciated such skills. In the 16th century, when Benvenuto Cellini, a master of mannerism's emphatic forms, allegedly staged a crucifixion so that he could scrutinise the body in agonised contortion, the Pope said to have pardoned him because his sin was secondary to his nobler intent.

The crucifixion became a benchmark of artistic talent. And though, as the nature of patronage changed, as powerful families and a rising mercantile class supplanted the church, as personal portraits replaced the altarpiece and landscape graduated from a mere backdrop to become a subject in its own right, religious depictions still remained a yardstick against which skills could be matched.

Even in the increasingly secular 20th century, artists continued to play on the profound emotive resonance of Christianity's iconic images. Francis Bacon's tortured figures, battered tangles of flesh



Pre-eminent video artist Bill Viola with his work *The Messenger*

JOHN FEDER

on bleak expanses of canvas, snarl the pain of existence from the foot of the cross.

Stanley Spencer discovers miracles in English village life. Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo*, a temporary occupant of Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth, spoke of human vulnerability as it set its frail figure alone upon the brink of a granite block. And Antony Gormley, making his own body the mould for a series of crucified effigies that were displayed along the walls of Derry, found in a time-honoured iconography a modern-day symbol of sectarian strife.

Over the past decades the irreverent subversion of religion has been most discussed. From Damien Hirst's apostolic gathering of bloody cows' heads, through Sarah Lucas's crucified Christ made out of cigarettes, to Sam Taylor Wood's glossy magazine-style *Last Supper*, artists have played transgressive games.

But in so doing they pay homage to the power of religion. On the flipside of their blasphemies lies an acknowledgement of the

potency of the symbols they attack. Chris Offili was assured of an international reputation when his vision of an Afro virgin Mary complete with pornographic seraphim stirred up a rumpus in New York.

Culture often takes the role of religion in our contemporary world. Galleries are modern-day temples, regularly attended by the people on their day of rest. Art has become a cult. It is there to make us wonder how our lives may be raised above the mundane.

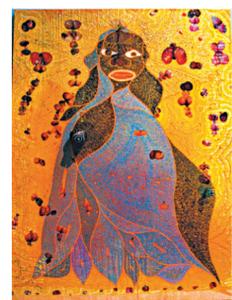
As we wander through museums, we ponder the sort of questions that theology once asked: why is this here at all? What does it mean? In an era in which religion is too often reduced to dogmatic squabbles, art reopens the mind and emotions to the wider questions of the world.

But now the balance of power has shifted. It is less art that needs the church, but the church, in its waning popularity, that needs art. It should embrace the opportunities offered to it by culture. There have been a few attempts to revive its patronage over the past cen-

tury. Matisse's Chapel du Rosaire on the French Riviera, designed by the pioneering modernist in every detail from the stained-glass windows to the holy-water stoup, remains a place of prayer as much as artistic pilgrimage.

And last year Anthony Caro, in what probably counts as the most significant religious commission since then, installed a series of his big industrial sculptures in niches behind the font in the bombed-out choir of the church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Bourbourg in northern France. The result is a truly extraordinary fusion of Gothic architecture and contemporary sculpture, of soaring stone arches and monumental abstracts in wood and steel.

And yet there is opposition to new religious art. When Leonard McComb's sculpture *Young Man Standing* (also known as The Golden Man) was displayed at Lincoln Cathedral in England in 1990, it provoked national controversy and was withdrawn from exhibition because its nudity was considered indecent.



Chris Offili's *Holy Virgin Mary*

Similarly, in 1996, when the video artist Bill Viola installed *The Messenger* in Durham Cathedral, there was an outcry because the figure who moved through the images' watery depths was unclothed. One might have assumed that the divinity who moulded Adam and Eve might not have minded nudity, but among the more prudish sectors of society it appears to be felt that a fig leaf — or at least a loin cloth — should remain firmly in place.

Meanwhile, Coventry Cathedral is commemorating the famous bed-in for peace by John Lennon and Yoko Ono with an exhibition of photographs. And, alongside the falling and flailing of *Flare II*'s whirling metal angel, next year St Paul's will permanently install two giant multi-screen installations by Viola.

Such works may not be directly religious, but they speak of a wider desire for the values that faith has traditionally espoused. Canon Giles Fraser, the chancellor of St Paul's, quotes from *The Tempest* in response to the elegance of Gormley's construction. "What seest thou else?" Prospero asks Miranda. "That's the fundamental Christian challenge," the canon says. It is a challenge that contemporary art can also pose.

THE TIMES

Priscilla set to become the queen of Broadway

A local favourite heads for the holy grail of musical theatre

MICHAELA BOLAND

MUSICAL theatre star Tony Sheldon is set to kick up his platform heels on Broadway in the role of Bernadette in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* when the Australian musical opens there next March.

Sheldon owned the role of the older transgender character when the stage version of Stephan Elliott's hit film opened in Sydney in 2005.

Priscilla transferred to Melbourne the following year before a return season in Sydney preceded its West End debut in March last year with enhanced sets and costumes.

Sheldon's mother, stage veteran Toni Lamond, confirms Sheldon will open *Priscilla* on Broadway, most likely at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on West 46th Street.

"I'm so excited," she says. "This is the holy grail. Getting to London was one stop and this is the whole way."

Sheldon was the only original cast member in the London season. Lamond says the producers auditioned widely and had to convince British Actors Equity he was invaluable to the production. Late last year he was recognised with a nomination for an Olivier Award for the role.

Lamond says it has been just as tough to secure his passage to Broadway because he doesn't have a green card.

"Every Australian has to go through this overseas. People



Tony Sheldon as Bernadette

think we just march in, but it's terribly, terribly hard," she says.

Original director Simon Phillips, artistic director of the Melbourne Theatre Company, is attached to direct the Broadway version.

It will be produced by the original Australian team led by Back Row Productions.

Sheldon will be joined onstage by American actors Matt Cavenaugh (*West Side Story*) in the original Guy Pearce role and Will Swenson (*Hair*) will undertake the Hugo Weaving role.

Sheldon took his final bow on the West End last month.

Lamond says he is on holidays ahead of a publicity tour to Canada, where another production of *Priscilla* opens in Toronto later this year.

At the Olivier Awards last month, Australian designers Tim Chappel and Lizzie Gardiner won the best costume award for their work on the musical.

Chappel and Gardiner already have shared an Academy Award in 1994 for their creations in the original movie.