

# Shakespeare's kings take to the road

Kate Kellaway asks Brian Cox and Ian McKellen about their roles as Lear and Richard III in the Royal National Theatre's new touring company, launched at the South Bank last week.

IAN MCKELLEN looks fit and sportily dressed; his spectacles swing on a chain — a fierce but elegant prop with which to submit his new role, Richard III, to rigorous scrutiny.

Brian Cox looks rather unfit — weighed down by a long grey beard that has taken him six months to grow. His hair spills down his shoulders. He looks ready to take on King Lear.

Richard III is directed by Richard Eyre, *King Lear* by Deborah Warner. The Royal National Theatre's newly-formed touring company perform in both productions. McKellen plays Kent in *Lear*, Cox plays Buckingham in *Richard III*.

'We've had 15 weeks of rehearsal,' says Cox. 'We began with *Lear* and moved extremely slowly. Then we did four weeks on *Richard* and moved extremely fast. It was schizophrenic. Our lighting man, Jean Kalman — he's French — described it as like having two mistresses on the same day. Ian would say to me: 'Isn't *Lear* going well?' I'd say: 'We've done good work on *Richard*.'

If good work is to yield any single result, McKellen hopes it will be to make the audience take Richard III seriously. He does not agree with those who see him as 'a stage villain who should be played for laughs'.

Not does he see Richard as he was in Antony Sher's electric performance. He does

not believe that Richard's deformity is a manifestation of evil. But he is at pains to anatomise Shakespearean villainy and to respect its various parts. This king is a 'booted spider' who must have his legs labelled.

Richard III is a villain because — McKellen checks the points off from a list of notes — he is an expert liar; and, like Iago, he does not lie to the audience. He is fuelled by hatred, elated by deceit. His good qualities are intelligence, wit and bravery, but they are perverted when 'put to the service of his villainy'.

Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* as a young man for the Barbican in their theatre in Islington. McKellen believes it 'stands alone', quite distinct from the Henry VI plays which Shakespeare wrote for the Rose Theatre.

While McKellen tempers the jokes in *Richard III*, Brian Cox uncovers the comedy in *King Lear*. 'There is as much of Spike Milligan and Tony Hancock in *Lear* as of Laurence Olivier and Michael Redgrave,' Cox discusses *Lear* in an engagingly homesy fashion and a grumbling Dundee accent. He talks about him as if he were a difficult but lovable neighbour.

*Lear* has 'certain unpaid bank accounts'. He has family problems too. 'He doesn't know how to handle his three girls. He has at once indulged them, and at the same time deprived them. If you can't get your children right, you certainly can't get your kingdom right.'

The last Shakespearean hero Cox played was Titus. 'I like *Lear* more than Titus, although I had a sneaking

liking for Titus. The thing I didn't like about Titus is that he is a soldier.'

McKellen is obsessed with Shakespeare's soldiers: Othello, Coriolanus, Macbeth, Julius Caesar — and Richard. He asks: 'What is it that goes so terribly wrong when soldiers are idle? What happens when a great soldier like Richard returns from the war and suddenly finds himself out of a job? What happens when he finds people are talking to someone Shakespeare's soldiers all have terrible relationships with women.'

and vain until a friend told him to stop worrying about being a star and concentrate on trying to be a good actor. 'Now,' he says, 'as I wander around in my gear, I think: this is definitely not a pulling part. You're covered in shit or flowers and you've got torn underwear and long straggling hair. But one of the great lessons about these roles is that when vanity is stripped away you get at the part.'

In *Richard III* there is much to satisfy vanity: smart military uniform, glorious coronation garb, silver armour.

McKellen says: 'I helped design the costume but I am not scaring it yet.' For Cox, meanwhile, has been stormed by *Lear*. During the half hour offstage before the Dover scene, he takes a shower, wraps himself 'like a baby' and goes into a cocoon. On stage he asks himself: 'What am I doing this for?'

The answer, he thinks, is 'something to do with energy; giving my energy to the audience for an evening, saying to them: How does that seem? Does that go anywhere for you, for an evening?'



'Shakespeare's soldiers all have terrible relationships with women': Ian McKellen as Richard III, the soldier home from the wars. Photographs by Neil Libbert.



'He doesn't know how to handle his three girls': Brian Cox as Lear.

## Kate Kellaway with Cox & McKellen

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