An evening with Ian McKellen & Hamlet & Falstaff & Romeo &... 

IAN MCKELLEN
ACTING SHAKESPEARE

By JULIAN WEST

In the face of it the one-person show is an actor's dream: control over what goes in, the opportunity to portray a dozen characters in an evening, and the audience's undivided attention. If you're doing Shakespeare you can monopolize the famous speeches, omitting the boring bits in between.

Ian McKellen insists he had no real affection for the format until he was asked to put such a show together for the Edinburgh Festival in 1977. That was to become the Broadway hit Acting Shakespeare seven years later.

Acting Shakespeare is taken two ways. McKellen acts Shakespeare's plays; he also acts Shakespeare, or, at any rate, many of his acquaintances. This helps put the pieces into historical context, and gives a glimpse of the life of the world's greatest dramatist.

But of course the main event is the sequence of scenes which have been expertly selected for our entertainment: Macbeth, Jacques, Falstaff, Hamlet, Bottom, Prospero... all put in their appearances in this toccata for Shakespearean actor.

Which all sounds fairly highbrow and pedantic. What, are we in for a history lesson as well as an evening of Elizabethan monologue?

Not a bit. McKellen's manner is far from didactic as he converses with the audience, and seeks to involve them at every turn. At the beginning of the show, he invites audience ("you're not spectators; they go to football matches! ") to call out names of Shakespeare plays we have seen until all 37 are named. "You've done it!" he congratulates us heartily.

Shakespeare's life as related by McKellen's easy personal terms is quite engrossing. And Shakespeare's language, as Ian McKellen shows, was written "to be understood": simple, clear and beautiful.

Interwoven are a number of anecdotes from McKellen's own not uneventful life. He mentions Francesca Annis, Peter Shaffer, John Gielgud, Vanessa Redgrave and a fair number of others encountered while starring in roles at Stratford in the mid-seventies or in the West End (3 consecutive Best Actor awards).

As if this were not enough, while appearing in 21 undergraduate productions while at Cambridge, he managed to be a contemporary of Derek Jacobi, David Frost, Trevor Nunn, Peter Cook and John Cleese. There must have been some unforgettable performances into Acting Shakespeare.

Perhaps the most remarkable is his Macbeth, who over the course of a sequence - speeches degenerates from a brash, confident soldier of commanding stature (Timothy Dalton leaps to mind) into walking shadow of a man, broken and... (Please turn to page 15)

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