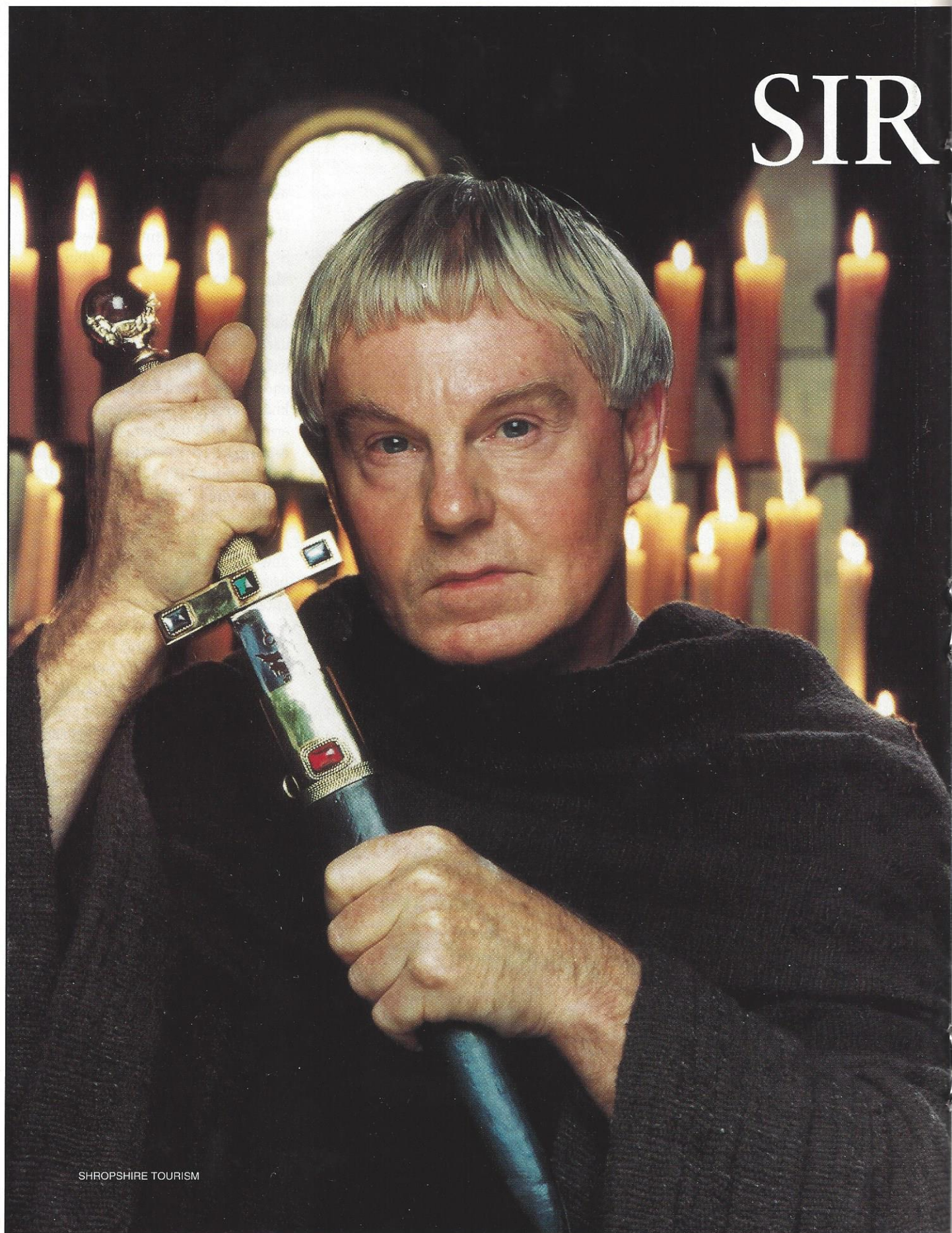


SIR



SHROPSHIRE TOURISM

DEREK JACOBI

One of England's greatest stars of the stage and screen shares his views on the theatre, Shakespeare, and success with Managing Editor Bruce Heydt.

The acting profession is as rich in superstition as any, so Washington D.C.'s Ford's Theatre, with its darkly tragic history, seemed an unlikely place to meet one of the brightest stars of the English stage. Yet that's where Sir Derek Jacobi agreed to chat while he was in town in April, 1997 to accept the Shakespeare Guild's Sir John Gielgud Award for Excellence in the Dramatic Arts. But then again, in this case, the venue was somehow uniquely appropriate; Jacobi has portrayed Hamlet, the tragic, brooding Prince of Denmark, more often than any other actor except Gielgud, and many of the ghosts of both history and literature are old friends to him.

At the theatre, I was directed up a flight of stairs to a second-floor room, where I found a casually dressed man. For a moment, my eyes fooled me. Seeing neither the tonsured haircut or the Elizabethan tunic that I've come to associate with the actor, I might have said a polite good morning and hurried past in search of Sir Derek, had not the small cluster of theatre devotees crowding round him made it plain that this was the man being so deservedly honoured.

This was not the first occasion on which Sir Derek's name was linked to Gielgud's. For years drama critics have hailed Jacobi as the heir to the great British theatre traditions embodied by the likes of Gielgud and Sir Laurence Olivier, both of whom have had a tremendous impact on Jacobi's life.

Sir Derek was born in the London suburb of Leytonstone on 22nd October, 1938, and his proximity to the West End gave him ample opportunity to experience its wonders up close. It was all the inspiration he needed. His first starring role came at age six, when he played the dual lead in a local library drama group's production of *The Prince and the Swineherd*.

Other parts quickly followed, including one with which he would become forever

associated, Prince Hamlet. 'It was the first role I played after my voice broke', he recalls with mock gravity. 'Having given a wonderful Anne Boleyn in *Henry VIII* and a superb Lady McDuff, I graduated to Hamlet. That production was taken to the Edinburgh Festival, where it received a great deal of attention by the critics, and they all seemed to like it very much.'

Jacobi excelled at Leyton County High School, motivated, above all, by the promise of what might await him after graduation. 'I knew all along that I wanted to be an actor, and I found out that the universities—Oxford and Cambridge particularly—were hotbeds of acting, and that if I could get to one of them, preferably Cambridge, I would not only fulfil my parents' desire for me to have a "second string to my bow", but I would also plunge myself into that world of acting.'

He was, in fact, awarded a state scholarship to St. John's College, Cambridge, which, with characteristic humility, he attributes to 'good fortune' rather than hard work. Sir Derek's major field of study—his 'second string' to fall back on in case he failed as an actor—was history. But he chose his academic programme with one eye fixed firmly on his first love—not in anticipation of performing roles such as Emperor Claudius or Brother Cadfael, but in an effort to minimize his distractions. 'I have a photographic memory,' he explains. 'I can remember things very clearly, and that's all I really needed for history. And all the time I could work.'

The distinction Sir Derek makes between simple memorization and the *work* of acting reveals much about his approach to his roles. For Jacobi, acting begins not with learning lines or repeating earlier performances, a feat which is as simple for him as remembering historical facts, but with a process of exploring undiscovered nuances in every role. Remarkably, after having portrayed Hamlet nearly 400 times, he still sees new possibilities. In particular, he says, the opportunity of por-



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Left: Jacobi sports his medieval look, as Brother Cadfael. Right: Sir Derek as Prince Hamlet in a PBS production.



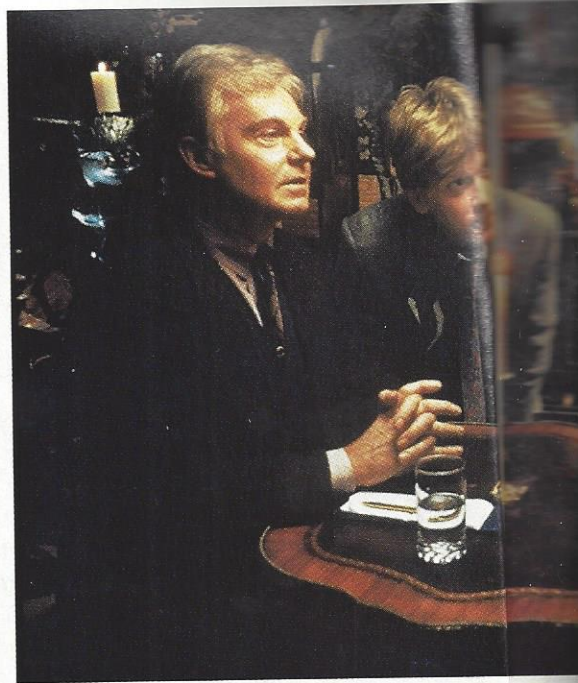
traying Claudius in Kenneth Branagh's recent film production of the play enabled him to see the lead role from 'outside' the character, and he regrets not having a chance to apply this insight to yet another interpretation of Shakespeare's most interesting role. 'You can never plumb its depths. I wish I were still in that time where people of my age were *allowed* to play Hamlet, as they were a century ago.'

Sir Derek's performances for Cambridge's Amateur Dramatic Club provided the springboard for a position with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. During his tenure in Birmingham, he was spotted by Sir Laurence Olivier during a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. Olivier asked him to perform in two productions at the Chichester Festival Theatre. At the same time, the Royal National Theatre Company was being organized, and Jacobi's success in Chichester prompted a further invitation from

Jacobi in a wide variety of roles: as Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit* (top left); with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson in *Dead Again* (above right); and as the Emperor Claudius (bottom right).

Olivier to join the National, where he remained for eight years. Of the many productions he appeared in during this tenure, among the most memorable was an all-male rendition of *As You Like It*, in which Sir Derek played Touchstone opposite Sir Anthony Hopkins' Audrey.

While Jacobi received nearly unanimous critical praise for his stage work, which included performances as Cassio in *Othello*, Laertes in *Hamlet*, Prosorov in Chekov's *The Three Sisters*, and many others, he didn't develop a large audience of devoted fans until he began dabbling in another medium—television. In 1976 he achieved perhaps his biggest popular success, starring in the Masterpiece The-



atre presentation of *I Claudius*. 'I didn't do *I Claudius* until I had been an actor in the theatre for 16 years,' Jacobi says, 'but I wasn't known at that time, except by the people who came to the theatre—the aficionados of the National had seen me, but the country at large hadn't. Then suddenly I was thrust into people's living rooms, and I achieved what was erroneously called "Overnight Stardom".'

The series is still frequently rebroadcast, a fact that astounds Sir Derek and makes him ponder the reasons for its longevity. 'It was so well written,' he concludes. 'It was a *very* good script. And the



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ness,' he jokes. Most recently, viewers have seen him as Brother Cadfael, the mystery-solving Benedictine monk created by novelist Ellis Peters. The unusual role takes the crime-solving detective genre out of its typical 20th-century urban setting and carries it back to medieval Shrewsbury. For Jacobi, this has some very personal consequences. The tonsured head he sports for the role is real. 'Make-up [artists] shave it twice a week, and hopefully it grows back,' he says. 'It's grown back each time so far,' he notes hopefully. The latest three Cadfael episodes began airing on PBS' *Mystery!* series in January, 1998.

Such success is gratifying, but Sir Derek continues to devote much of his professional energy to a much more difficult assignment; that of creating a popular market for Shakespeare's plays. 'The problem with Shakespeare,' he believes, 'is that most people associate him with exams and tests and learning lines. That's how they start out their association with Shakespeare and it takes a lot to alter that.' But Sir Derek believes it to be a goal worth pursuing. 'The more Shakespeare can be made accessible and popular at the box office the better. Every good production or film helps towards that. I think Kenneth [Branagh] has done quite a lot to inaugurate that.' Branagh's credits include *Henry V*, produced in 1989, *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), and *Hamlet* (1996), with Branagh himself in the title role and Jacobi playing the part of Claudius.

Other directors have taken up the challenge as well, and have followed in Branagh's footsteps. Most recently, Baz Luhrmann has directed a film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* set not in 'fair Verona', but in 20th-century 'Verona Beach'—just one of the many liberties taken with Shakespeare's work in this and many other contemporary productions in an effort to make the Bard more relevant (read 'friendly') to modern audiences.

'I think that probably [Luhrmann's] *Romeo and Juliet* will have a more popular appeal than the four-hour *Hamlet*, but I think *Hamlet* is a braver concept, because in a sense it's easier to take Shakespeare and turn him upside down. It's harder, actually, to play him straight, because it's more difficult to

get an audience to come to see that. Hopefully, when they do they realize that Shakespeare is not the bogey-man that he's been made out to be.

'The interesting thing about *Romeo and Juliet* is that while it "mucks about" with Shakespeare quite a lot, the film's title is not *Romeo and Juliet*; its title is *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. Which is very encouraging, because to put Bill Shakespeare's name along with the title would once have been considered box-office poison. But now it doesn't put people off.'

Maybe the most notable attempt in recent years to popularize Shakespeare has been the casting of Mel Gibson as Prince Hamlet, a decision certainly based more upon the actor's appeal among younger audiences than any reputation as a Shakespearean performer. Sir Derek joked about Gibson's portrayal and his pop image. 'I wanted him to sweat more, and I wanted him to stop combing his hair. He looked so *kempt*, and Hamlet should be anything but *kempt*.' Nevertheless, Sir Derek concedes, Gibson, on the whole, put in a surprising performance. 'I went with all my prejudices running rampant, but I thought he did rather well.'

Hollywood's willingness to hand out roles to unlikely actors could also, of course, lead to some unexpected opportunities for Jacobi. His studies in history have introduced him to some remarkable personalities, and it was natural to wonder if he had ever had any ambitions to portray any of these historical figures on the stage. 'The one who has really caught my attention,' he replied with little hesitation, 'and who I will never get to play of course, is Mary, Queen of Scots. She was my heroine.'

For now, his fans can see him in a relatively rare portrayal of a 20th-century personality in his latest film, *Love is the Devil*. The controversial work, in which Sir Derek plays the lead role, depicts the life of the British homosexual artist Francis Bacon.

But who knows? We may yet be lucky enough to see him play the Queen of Scots. With a 'superb Lady McDuff' already among his accomplishments, and a rare talent to draw upon, it somehow doesn't seem impossible. **B**

episodes were so *funny*. It was that combination of humour and awfulness—and theatricality. It was almost too big for a television screen. It wasn't over the top, but it teetered on the edge.' What Jacobi never conceded, but which goes without saying at any rate, was that his own masterful portrayal of the stammering Roman emperor delighted viewers.

While Sir Derek's first love remains the stage, he doesn't disdain the small screen, and he has returned successfully to television to add further credits to his resume. 'It makes the public aware that you haven't died or given up the busi-

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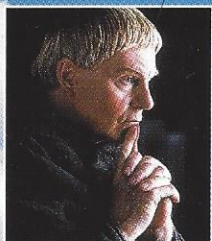
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