One of the great portraits of life in the theatre, Ronald Harwood’s “The Dresser” brings Ian McKellen (Mr. Holmes, the X-Men franchise, The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit trilogies, Gods and Monsters) and Anthony Hopkins (The Silence of the Lambs, Shadowlands, The Remains of the Day) together on screen for the first time. It also marks Hopkins’ first scripted television appearance in over 20 years.

Based on Harwood’s original text, adapted and directed by Richard Eyre, the film tells the story of one fateful night, backstage in a small regional theatre during World War II, as a troupe of touring actors stage a production of Shakespeare’s “King Lear.”

Bombs are falling, sirens are wailing, the curtain is up in an hour, but Sir (Hopkins) who is playing Lear (and is one of the last of a dying breed of great English actor-managers), is nowhere to be seen. As the company tries to decide what to do, Sir unexpectedly arrives at the theatre, disorientated and exhausted. A battle of wills ensues, as his long-suffering dresser Norman (McKellen), fiercely resists the insistence of the stage manager Madge (Lancashire) and Sir’s partner Her Ladyship (Watson) that the show be cancelled, resolutely contending that Sir will be ready to go on.

Norman struggles to prepare Sir for his 227th performance of Lear, but Sir cannot remember what play he is about to perform, let alone his lines. He tries to focus Sir’s wandering mind, cajoling him with stories and reminiscences that reveal the two men’s long history and indispensable relationship, one that transcends both friendship and professional duty.

Sir’s eventual return to stage alternates between forcefulness and reluctance. Once back in his dressing room, the worn-out, old trouper reflects on his lifelong accomplishments and seeks to reconcile his turbulent relationships with those in his employ, before facing his final curtain.

“The Dresser” is a wickedly funny and deeply moving story of friendship and loyalty inspired by Ronald Harwood’s own experiences working as a dresser for the great actor-manager Sir Donald Wolfit. Harwood describes the role of the actor-manager in the foreword to his play:

“From the early 18th century until the late 1930s, the actor-manager was the British theatre. He played from one end of the country to the other, taking his repertoire to the people. Only a handful ever reached London; their stomping-ground was the provinces and they toured under awful physical conditions, undertaking long, uncomfortable railway journeys on Sundays, spending many
hours waiting for their connections in the cold at Crewe. They developed profound resources of strength, essential if they were to survive. They worshipped Shakespeare, believed in the theatre as a cultural and educational force, and saw themselves as public servants. Nowadays we allow ourselves to laugh at them a little and there is no denying that their obsessions often made them ridiculous; we are inclined to write them off as megalomaniacs and hams. The truth of the matter is that many of them were extraordinary and talented men; their gifts enhanced the art of acting; they nursed and kept alive a classical repertoire which is the envy of the world, and created a magnificent tradition which is the foundation of our present-day theatrical inheritance ..."

The film also stars Emily Watson (Oscar® nominated for both Breaking the Waves and Hilary and Jackie) as Her Ladyship, Sarah Lancashire (TV’s “Happy Valley” and “Last Tango In Halifax”) as stage manager Madge and Edward Fox (The Day of the Jackal, “Edward and Mrs. Simpson” – and who co-starred as Oxenby in the 1983 feature film adaptation of “The Dresser”), as company stalwart Thornton. The role of Oxenby in the new version is filled by Tom Brooke (The Boat That Rocked), alongside Vanessa Kirby (Queen and Country) as Irene.

The idea of the on-screen revival came from executive producers Colin Callender and Sonia Friedman. Callender explains, “Sonia and I went to see Ronnie (Harwood), to say that we weren’t trying to re-make the wonderful Peter Yates film, but that we wanted to re-visit the days of ‘Play for Today’ in England or ‘Playhouse 90’ in the US. The single drama was the staple of the genre in those early golden days of television, with many writers and directors coming from the theatre. In England, in particular, the genealogy of television drama is the stage and so it’s a joy to revisit that.”

Casting the Leading Men

Playwright Ronald Harwood says, “I am honored to have watched my friends, Anthony Hopkins and Ian McKellen deliver a master class in acting in Richard Eyre’s majestic production of ‘The Dresser,’ a play of mine which I hold dear for a number of personal and professional reasons. The true glory of this production is that it has brought together on screen a dream cast that sadly one would never have been able to see on stage.”

Colin Callender and fellow executive producer Sonia Friedman initially joined forces with the intention of producing “The Dresser” for the stage. Callender says, “The first actor we thought about to play Sir was Anthony Hopkins. I had worked with Anthony years back and flew out to LA to sit down and to meet him for breakfast. The first thing he said to me was, ‘I’m not going to do it for the stage, but I will do it for television.’ And that’s what inspired us to film the play for the BBC and STARZ.

Callender continues, “Tony’s been passionate about this since day one, and it’s partly his passion and commitment that has actually enabled it to happen. Ian had always been offered the role of Sir, but rarely, if ever, offered the role of Norman. He enthusiastically embraced the possibility of working with Tony, but also of playing Norman. Standing on the set every day, seeing Tony Hopkins and Ian McKellen together, as actors at the height of their skill, craft and talent, was just glorious.”

Casting two distinguished actors of a similar age, as Sir and Norman, brings a whole new and affecting dynamic to the play’s relationship and director Richard Eyre was excited by its potential: “Anthony and Ian are great, great talents. They’re absolutely at the top of the game.”
Eyre further explains, “There aren’t many screenplays like this one, in which there are two equal parts for actors of the same sex and age. The structure is absolutely rock solid, the information is leaked out the way you want it, and the preparation for Sir’s entrance into the story is a classic piece of exciting build-up.”

Despite having known each other in passing for many years, “The Dresser” is the first time that Hopkins and McKellen have worked together on film.

Hopkins explains, “Ian and I have known each other over the years, but not closely. We were at the National Theatre together, but not in the same company. I saw a number of his productions and I’ve always been a great admirer. We met in California, by accident, when Ian was there doing ‘King Lear’ and I was staying in the same hotel nearby one night, as the Pacific Coast Highway was closed and I couldn’t get home. Driving back in the morning, I remember thinking ‘I’ll work with him one day’ … So here we are.”

McKellen adds, “When I heard that Tony was going to be in ‘The Dresser,’ I immediately said yes. It’s true about really good actors, that they make you act better yourself. It’s not off-putting that they’re so good, it’s a wonderful gift and I can plug into his energy. I get to be very, very close to him. I see him as he delivers the performance, and I tell you, that is such a thrill.”

For Hopkins, the experience has also proved to be equally thrilling. He asserts, “This has been the best, most powerful acting experience I’ve had in many, many years. And it’s a sheer pleasure, working with Ian, because he’s a great actor. I enjoyed this so much, I didn’t want the weekends to come!”

For Sarah Lancashire, who plays the stage manager, Madge, “It’s a privilege just to stand and watch Anthony and Ian. It feels like a little bit of history in the making, to be honest. We had two weeks in a rehearsal room before we hit the sound stage and just being able to sit there and watch these extraordinary talents was breathtaking.”

**Themes Explored In “The Dresser”**

“The Dresser” was adapted for the screen by director Richard Eyre, who has remained faithful to Ronald Harwood’s original play. “I think it’s a mistake to think of the piece as being purely about theatre and the process of acting,” Eyre explains. “As with ‘King Lear,’ it’s about mortality and a man who senses, at some stage, that his life is running out and that he’s possibly spent his life worthlessly. It is ‘will he or won’t he’ make it on stage and the deterioration of Sir’s mind, but at its center it’s about how you face the end and how you have the courage to endure over adversity. And that’s equally true of actors, because the theatre is a microcosm of the greater world.”

Eyre was approached to join the production by Colin Callender, who explains, “The Dresser” is about this man, towards the end of his life, coming to terms with, or not, the key relationships in his life. The man happens to be an actor, who happens to have a dresser who works with him, but at heart, it’s about a man coming to terms with his mortality, his legacy and how he has treated people along the way. Richard has brought two wonderful things to this production.
Callender continues, “Firstly, Richard saw it as a sort of thriller – he loved the idea that the play’s about to open in an hour and the leading actor is nowhere to be seen. When he finally does arrive, we don’t know if he will remember his lines, or even go on. But what Richard has really worked at, which makes it extraordinarily moving, is grounding the play in a real place, with real people. Even though they’re actors, the characters themselves are very real – and heartbreakingly so. Richard’s determination to keep those characters grounded is what makes this particular production so powerful.”

Anthony Hopkins recognizes and feels kinship with the old actor’s intimations of mortality: “Self-doubt is there in all of us. Underneath it all is the dread of death and the awareness of death. And the awareness that it’s all so fragile.”

Sarah Lancashire adds, “As an actor, I think “The Dresser” is the greatest piece ever written about actors. It is such an emotionally driven piece and you see exactly what makes actors tick – the need to get on the stage – especially in this instance, when the stakes are so high and Sir is so ill. It just makes that world feel very accessible to people who are not in the theatre – you really see how it works, where the loyalties lie. But this extraordinary inner strength, which is needed for him to get on the stage, and the way Norman beautifully cajoles him to, holding his hand metaphorically, all the way through, is so beautifully done. It is a love story. I have no doubts about that. It is a great, great love story.”

Colin Callender, confirms the appeal of Norman’s role: “I think some of the most engaging films and television dramas take you behind the scenes, into a world which the audience doesn’t normally get to see. That idea of peeling back the veil on a hidden, private world is something that’s very appealing to an audience and certainly is true here. The dresser is the sort of invisible character who would pass through the frame in the background in most movies, but in this film, he’s center stage. Centering the narrative on a character that you would not normally see is very touching.”

Dressing The Stage

“The Dresser” was filmed at Ealing Studios, where production designer Donal Woods created a dressing room and surrounding backstage corridors, to match exactly to the Hackney Empire, where the stage scenes were later filmed.

As Woods explains, “The main set is Sir’s dressing room, which was written in the play as a double room with a sofa, a stove and a sink. It’s probably too big to be a dressing room, so we made it feel like it was a room that had been converted, because he is ‘Sir’.”

Woods continues, “It’s a film set during World War II that has hardly any of the War in it, but the resonance of the situation obviously impacts on how you view the script and the story. Nobody would have been painting or restoring a theatre, in a time when the world was concentrating on other things, so we based the set on the colors of the ’20s to imply that it had been neglected since that time.”

“Equally, as a touring repertory theatre company, their own stage sets would have been quite simple. They had to travel around the country in a truck, which wouldn’t have been as big as any
trucks we have today, and the gates for the castle or the storm cloth would have been used on many, many different productions, be they King Lear or Othello or Macbeth. We wanted to give the set credibility, but without it looking too much like a pantomime set.”

For both the production design team and make-up artists, recreating the theatrical props and make-up of the time was vital to the story.

Woods says, “It’s been a collaboration between Richard Eyre, Jenny Shircore, the make-up designer, and ourselves to make sure everything worked in a modern way for modern screens, whilst also being authentic to 1941. We re-labelled some of the modern make-up sticks with the 1940s' Leichner labels and wore them down, as though they’d been used.”

Make-up designer Jenny Shircore adds, “It’s been a very close collaboration. We know all of the sorts of make-up that would have been on the dressing table in the 1940s and have been advising the props team and the production designers on what should be where and how, as well as telling Anthony how to use them.”

“Richard wanted us to do a test,” recalls Hopkins. “And so we took these sticks and I remember plastering them on my face — and it all came back to me. In those days they had brushes or a pencil and I could see the cheekbones and then I had to wrinkle my brows and smear the white over as highlights. I'd look in the mirror and think, ‘Ah, that's it, that's it,’ and it all came back. Richard said, ‘You haven't forgotten?’ I said, ‘No, I haven't.’ And you put on the mask. What happens with Sir, this character, is that he has worn a mask all his life. And, at one point, just before the end, I take half the mask off and that's when I begin to deteriorate. My lady wife, as I call her, she's finished with me, she can't take any more and I know my life is over. Without her, I’m in the dark and I have to give up. I finally take the final part of the mask off — and I think that's a pretty powerful image.”

The war period was also an important factor in the costumes for costume designer Fotini Dimou. “The people and the characters are very much like the people of the time, with the ‘make do and mend’ attitude. They had no money and were recycling clothes, so I tried to show the war’s effect.”

And, as with the versatile set design, a touring theatre company would have needed to make their costumes stretch across many different productions.

Dimou continues, “On stage, there is an element of fantasy and exaggeration, but because they were a touring company, they’d have the same costumes for different plays, but with a different hat or cape. And, of course, there was no research done in those days — it was their own version of medieval times, so there’s a little bit of a collage with the costumes.”

The costumes for the two leads, however, were very important to perfect, especially for Norman. Dimou says, “Ian knew very much what he wanted and he brought a lot to the process. Norman would have had things hand-knitted, so that’s what we did, we hand-knitted things for him. We copied a vest pattern and made an apron. He has a collar that is starched, out of respect for Sir. And as for Sir, he'd have the best costume in the company, because he’s the leading man. He’s Sir!”
Dimou also adds, “The role of the dresser is very important. It’s a skill to be a good dresser – they become friends with the actors, they look after them, they have to maintain the costumes. It’s a very important profession. I know actors who always use the same dresser, because they trust them. They will find that same person and keep the relationship going.”