

48-51 FIENNES HIMSELF

Call him old-fashioned, but Ralph Fiennes' intense talent puts him at the pinnacle of contemporary acting

Words Philip Watson Photographs Lorenzo Agius

RALPH FIENNES IS SITTING on an antique armchair in the drawing room of a Georgian hotel in Dublin. It is midday and he tells me that he has only just got up – he is unshaven and looks perhaps a little crumpled – yet he remains faultlessly turned out and infuriatingly handsome. He is wearing a black polo-neck sweater, tan-coloured trousers with a theatrical side-buckle, and shiny black boots. We are surrounded by a classical stage setting of deep sofas, damask cushions, oil paintings and ornamental plasterwork.

Ralph – pronounced "Rafe", an old English locution – speaks precise, elegant English with a soft, beautiful middle-class accent, and sitting there, drinking coffee from a Wedgwood china cup served on a silver tray placed on a walnut





side table, he looks every bit as if he's from another age. The Suffolk-born actor could be a Victorian gentleman or a Thirties film star. I ask him whether he thinks of himself as a little old-fashioned.

"Maybe I am, but I don't wilfully try to be, and it's not some sort of perverse position that I adopt," he replies. "I think some of the things I'm interested in – Shakespeare, the theatre, classical music – people might regard as old-fashioned. I love discovering something that's contemporary and out of my world, but I suppose I've been reluctant to take on email and computers and things like that. And I'm definitely in the camp of people who think that it's not always better to be modern, that compared to some ancient cultures, it's we, with our obsession with wealth and the 'modern way of living', who could be retarded."

If this makes him seem like a superannuated high court judge (three years ago he admitted he had never heard of the popular British comedian Frank Skinner), then it should be stated from the outset that there is something refreshingly anachronistic about Ralph Fiennes. He believes, it seems, in such old-fashioned values as hard-work, dedication, punctuality and integrity – in taking things seriously. He believes acting and the theatre are important. He is a thinker, an embracer of ideas. There is nothing glib or frivolous about Ralph Fiennes.

Many of these qualities can be seen in his latest film, *The White Countess*, a sumptuous Merchant-Ivory production that, appropriately, he describes as "being from another era". Set in Shanghai in 1936, the film charts the unlikely yet tender relationship between a blind former American diplomat named Todd Jackson

(Fiennes) and Sofia, an exiled and poverty-stricken Russian noblewoman played by Natasha Richardson. Jackson realises his ambition to open a nightclub that is a sanctuary of harmonious good living, and employs the countess Sofia as its civilising and luminous hostess. Shanghai, however, is a city being torn apart by war and turmoil, and the dream can only last so long.

It is a graceful and masterly period piece – Kazuo Ishiguro wrote the screenplay, and Vanessa and Lynn Redgrave are also in the exemplary British cast – that has the moral ambiguities of a Graham Greene novel and the conflicting interior and exterior worlds of the film *Casablanca*. It is, however, decidedly out-of-step with modern mainstream cinema. There are no certainties, no special effects, no sex scenes. The *White Countess* is theatrical, still, understated.

"Some people said to me that the screenplay was too literary, that there was too much dialogue and people sitting around talking," says Fiennes. "But then I thought: 'I love that, you don't get that in films today, and well, f*** it, that's the reason to do it.' I was also moved by Jackson's idealism and drawn to the delicacy of his relationship with Sofia."

Fiennes is admirably convincing as the blind Jackson. Having spent time with and studied a man named Hugh Huddy, who he met through the Royal National Institute for the Blind, Fiennes eschews props such as dark glasses or glazed contact lenses in favour of a performance that uses technique and observation alone to achieve the look and demeanour of a blind man. At one point, demonstrating the way that a blind person can get the position of someone they're talking to slightly wrong, he focuses blankly on a point somewhere between my left ear and shoulder, and the effect is instantly compelling.

Todd Jackson is perhaps the apogee of Fiennes's celebrated craft – that of being able to distil and portray the complexities and contradictions of a character's interior life. He achieves a real emotional transparency on stage and screen; it's an intensity that is also present in real life. He often plays characters who reveal something deep, hidden and painful behind their public faces.

It's a choice we've seen in parts as diverse as Coriolanus, the autocratic warrior who crumbles before his mother's instruction; the Hungarian Count Laszlo de Almásy in *The English Patient*,



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for which he was nominated for Best Actor awards for both Oscar and Golden Globe; urbane, confident yet fatally flawed Charles Van Doren in *Quiz Show*; and most memorably perhaps, sadistic, self-loathing Nazi camp commandant Amon Goeth in *Schindler's List*, the 1993 film that propelled him to an Oscar nomination and stardom. More recently, in *The Constant Gardener*, he played a decent, mild-mannered diplomat stubbornly pursuing the truth surrounding his wife's death, and a despicable yet charismatic medicine man in Brian Friel's play *Faith Healer*, which has brought him to Dublin's Gate Theatre.

"I am interested in..." he begins, then stops, putting his fingertips together. "I'm pausing because I want to say the right thing... I think that internal conflict in someone, the gap between the public person and the private self, or a character suddenly discovering something about themselves and who they are, all create a fantastic tension for any actor to explore."

Fiennes may well possess some of these tensions personally, yet he is also of the persuasion that an actor's private life is not a matter of public concern or journalistic inquiry. We know that he grew up as one of seven siblings (one adopted), in England and Ireland, and that his mother Jini was a novelist, painter and travel writer, his father Mark a photographer, farmer and builder, and the explorer Raulph Fiennes is a distant cousin.

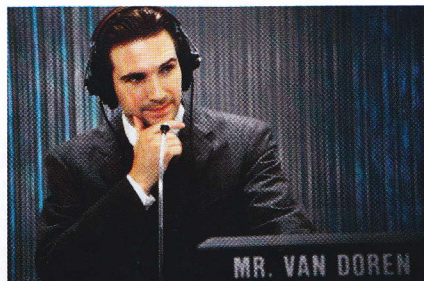
After that, however, his personal affairs have remained largely unreported – although the 43-year-old has unwittingly provided the tabloids with plenty of material. A brief résumé would read thus: left his first wife, actress Alex Kingston, in 1996 for Francesca Annis, 16 years his senior (and who, at the time, was playing his mother on stage in *Hamlet*), only to split from Annis earlier this year. Stray into this most personal territory and the shutters go up.

However, the very considerable public charm of Mr Fiennes is readily engaged. At the end of our interview, a middle-aged American woman, who has been sitting at the table next to us, introduces herself to Ralph. She tells him that she saw *The White Countess* recently in New York, that she loved the film and his performance, and how much she admires him as an actor. He is standing now and is tall and poised, his hair swept back from his sharp-featured face, and his grey-green eyes alert.

He shakes her hand, asks her if she is enjoying her time in Dublin, and engages her briefly in a discussion about American theatre. He is polite, charming and self-effacing, and she is utterly elated.

"What a gentleman," she says to me, all a-fluster, after he has gone. She is right: winningly old-fashioned, splendidly English, gentleman Ralph Fiennes.

Faith Healer transfers from Dublin to the Booth Theatre, New York from 18 April. *The White Countess* is out now.



Role call From top: *The White Countess* (2005) Set in Thirties Shanghai, a blind American diplomat (Fiennes) falls into a relationship with a young Russian refugee played by Natasha Richardson. *The Constant Gardener* (2005) Fiennes plays a widower who's determined to get to the bottom of an explosive secret involving his wife's brutal murder. *The English Patient* (1996) A young nurse tends a badly-burned plane crash victim (Fiennes) who has a fateful love affair in his past. *Quiz Show* (1994) Directed by Robert Redford and set in the Fifties, Fiennes plays a TV quiz show contestant in this film exploring the corruption behind the scenes. Based on a true story. *Schindler's List* (1993) Steven Spielberg cast Fiennes as Nazi Amon Goeth in his epic WWII based-on-truth story of Oskar Schindler – the hero who saved 1,000 Polish Jews from certain death during the holocaust. Fiennes' performance was ranked number 15 in the American Film Institute's Villains list.