

# The play's still the thing

The actor on *Wolf Hall*, working with Spielberg and imminent mega-stardom

HERE is a tide in the affairs of men,' says Shakespeare's Brutus, 'Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.' Mark Rylance, the actor Al Pacino says plays Shakespeare 'as if the Bard had written it for him the night before', is riding the highest tide of his career. He's the central character in the television event of the year, *Wolf Hall*. Next week, he's in the more familiar territory of the stage for *Farinelli and the King*, the sellout new play by his wife, Claire van Kampen. Then, he'll be in Vancouver for the Steven Spielberg film of the Roald Dahl classic *The BFG*, followed by the director's Cold War thriller *St James Place*, in which he will star with Tom Hanks.

With three Tonys (for *Boeing-Boeing*, *Jerusalem* and his Olivia in *Twelfth Night*), two Oliviers (*Jerusalem*, *Much Ado About Nothing*) and a BAFTA for *The Government Inspector*, in which he played weapons expert David Kelly, Mr Rylance is often spoken of as the finest stage actor of his generation. But with a relatively anonymous face, he has—until now—escaped the ghastly cult of celebrity: camera phones capturing his every move and demands for 'selfies'. Is he ready for this change? 'I really don't know what will happen,' he says. 'I think there's more of that stuff if you're young. I'm 55; when you get to this age, people aren't so distracted by fame.'

This degree of exposure might have come two years ago. Mr Rylance was due to recite Caliban's 'Be not afraid' speech in the opening ceremony of the London Olympics when the family suffered an appalling loss, the death of his 28-year-old stepdaughter Nataasha from a brain haemorrhage. Mr Rylance, who is very close to his stepdaughters (the elder, Juliet, also acts and has taken his name), was replaced by Sir Kenneth Branagh.

Watching him in the understated but extraordinarily intense scene

in *Wolf Hall* in which Cromwell's wife and daughters die from sweating sickness, one cannot help but think of his personal tragedy. His Cromwell—more human than the monster of history—is very much the author Hilary Mantel's.

'It wasn't my job to read other views of Cromwell and debate whether her view was legitimate or not. I don't think there is a historical truth that she's avoided and eccentrically gone into a different place. Because people so admired Thomas More, they've rather set Cromwell as his foil. Hilary's had another look at More and found him not to be as pure, as utopian as we've imagined.'

There was a sense during filming, he says, of working on something that was more than just a TV drama: it was about 'the survival of the BBC' itself. 'One became aware from the visits of people such as [Director-General] Tony Hall, that this kind of work—really wonderful, detailed work, with a great director, great locations—this won't be happening if those who are against the BBC have their way. We were very aware of that. When I first acted with the BBC in the 1980s, there were 40 different teams of cameramen, grips and so on. All of them are gone now, there's no sense of a company

or consistency. The BBC's been degraded for a number of years.'

Mr Rylance played Anne Boleyn's father in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, but his forays into film have been rare. Working with Mr Spielberg was, he says, a delight: 'He's like a very, very creative child. Incredibly intelligent, but adores stories and is very well organised.' Mr Rylance will be animated in *The BFG*: 'I act it with a little girl in a room and then they'll stretch me to 24ft and give me big ears, but I'm told it will still be my eyes and my voice.'

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Out of character, that voice is soft and sing-song with an accent that's hard to place, the product of a childhood spent largely in the American Midwest. He feels 'English at heart', but 'a bit of both'. Summers were spent with grandparents in Sissinghurst, Kent: 'My grandmother knew Vita Sackville-West. We used to nick apples from her gardens.' Critics bandy the 'genius-eccentric' tag

around about Mr Rylance, perhaps encouraged by his propensity to quote the Minnesota prose-poet Louis Jenkins in lieu of acceptance speeches. He has a reputation for being Puckish with journalists, but—and here I should admit that he is a neighbour, in south London—I find him incredibly helpful: good company, erudite, interesting and interested in many things.

He is enjoying being 'at that stage of my career where I can do some of everything', but one senses he will be glad to return to 'the intimacy between actor and audience' in *Farinelli*, his wife's first play. She's a composer and arranged the Tudor music for *Wolf Hall*. They've been married some 25 years, having met at the National Theatre.

Mr Rylance, whose next stage project is also in the USA, in *Nice Fish*, a play he created using Mr Jenkins's writing, rarely has time off in the conventional sense—'every day is a mixture of imagining and working'—but he enjoys gardening, thinking about crop circles and walking Apache, Nataasha's Jack Russell, who once scampered on stage when Mr Rylance was in *Twelfth Night* on Broadway.

There's also his stewardship of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust, which explores arguments that other people wrote or collaborated on the plays. It's possible, he thinks, that Sir Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford and Mary Sidney were involved—like the Old Masters, I suggest, who worked for and with their patrons in the art world. 'Exactly!' he exclaims. 'And they do now, too. Do you think Spielberg makes his films alone? No, he has all kinds of people who help him, but he's the central genius. It's a grand mystery [about Shakespeare] and I'm a great lover of mysteries.'

He continues: 'I'm amazed that people are so certain and closed down. I think that's a very boring life.' Boredom is far away when Mr Rylance is around.

Flora Watkins

### Mark Rylance

Mark Rylance plays Thomas Cromwell in the six-part BBC adaptation of *Wolf Hall* (on Wednesday nights) and Philippe V in *Farinelli and The King* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe, London SE1 from February 11 to March 8 (020-7401 9919; www.shakespearesglobe.com)

**Where is your favourite place in Britain?** The Rollright Stones, on the Oxfordshire/Warwickshire border—I was married there

**What is your favourite building?** The Royal Opera House

**Book?** Any collection by [American Pulitzer Prize-winning poet] Sharon Olds

**Music?** The Estonian composer Arvo Pärt

**Food?** Indian curry

**Alternative career?** Pilot

**Dinner guest?** Sir Francis Bacon

**Who is your hero?** Edouard Manet

