

# British actor Ian Holm (1931–2020): Classical performance adapted for the screen

By Paul Bond  
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The late Ian Holm, who died in London June 19 at age 88, was a formidably complete actor, who adapted his classical theatre grounding and mastery superbly to film work. He was a consummate ensemble player, equally impressive in character parts and leading roles, with something impressive and intriguing in every performance.

Ian Holm Cuthbert—he used his mother’s family name for the stage—was born near Ilford (in North East London), of Scottish parents. Ten years younger than the brother in whose shadow he felt himself to be, Holm was often on his own during his childhood. Unhappy at school, where he was bullied over his height (he was 5’6”), he grew to be rather introspective.

It is difficult not to see Holm’s subsequent representations of a characters’ inner lives as being drawn, at least in part, from this family background. His father was a psychiatrist, a pioneer of electric shock therapy. Holm said he was fascinated by his father’s patients, stating that this was what first drew him towards performance. The introspective child was interested in what he called the challenge of pretending to be sane. Some of Holm’s best performances rested on a deep sense of social or physical isolation.

When he was 12 his brother died, and he felt an increasing “desire to be noticed” as a way out of introspection. He began amateur dramatics and spent a lot of time soaking up British and American film classics. Holm remained an admirer his entire life of Richard Boleslawski’s *Les Misérables* (1935), starring Charles Laughton.

Holm’s determination to break from the introspection fuelled a steeliness that underlies even his gentlest of performances. When he shyly raised the possibility of becoming an actor, his father said, “Prove it.” He did.

Holm won a place at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Unlike many actors of his generation, he did not then spend much time in weekly repertory theatre, but auditioned successfully for the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon, the precursor of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

Spear-carrying and understudying in his first season (1954), he impressed company director Anthony Quayle, who invited him back the next year, with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh heading the company. Holm played Donalbain in

*Macbeth* and Mutius in *Titus Andronicus* directed by Peter Brook.

It was the beginning of his long association with the company. After a brief stint doing weekly rep in Worthing, he returned for a tour and West End run of *Titus Andronicus*. Holm was a committed company player, giving noted performances in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*. He agreed to understudy Michael Redgrave as *Hamlet*, a performance he admired and studied carefully from the wings.

Small and precise of voice, he always had a good comic sense. For Peter Hall he gave a celebrated Puck in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and was Fool to Charles Laughton’s less successful *King Lear*. The inner twinkle would stand him in good stead in the cinema.

His acting and his attitude made him an obvious candidate when Hall created the RSC in 1961, and he was at its core over that formative decade. The company was producing Shakespeare, but also encouraging modern writing and more recent classics. Holm was in his element.

He balanced supporting roles alongside more substantial parts, like Trofimov in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* with John Gielgud. He was central to the 1963–64 cycle of Shakespeare’s history plays, playing, among others, *Henry V* and giving a calculatedly horrific *Richard III* for the concluding *Wars of the Roses* trilogy, directed by John Barton.

Holm established himself as one of the great interpreters of Harold Pinter with Peter Hall’s premiere of *The Homecoming* (1965). Holm played Lenny, the pimp son of patriarch Max, circling menacingly around the wife of his returned brother. The Broadway transfer won four Tony Awards, including for Holm as Best Supporting Actor. It was filmed in 1973.

Holm always felt “proprietary” about the play, and returned to it magnificently in 2001 at The Gate, Dublin, as Max. The portrayal worked chiefly because of Holm’s view that “Lenny is Max as a young man.”

After a decade he took a break from the RSC, appearing in new plays by Terence Rattigan, Edward Bond and Arnold Wesker. Back at the RSC, after a good production of George Bernard Shaw’s *The Devil’s Disciple*, he was crippled by a paralysing bout of stage fright ahead of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (1976). He described it as “like someone

pulling a curtain down.”

Exhaustion may have played a part, but he required medication, and took a break from the theatre. In 1979 he returned briefly in Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, but he was dissatisfied with his work and did not come back to the stage again for nearly 20 years.

Holm was happily still able to work on screen. His earlier appearances had shown him using his vocal precision and close focus to transfer the best of his technique to the different medium without appearing too big for the screen.

He had already done some interesting work, playing Poincaré in Richard Attenborough’s adaptation of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) and giving an excellent performance as David Riccio in Charles Jarrott’s *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971) with Vanessa Redgrave.

His film breakthrough came as the android Ash in Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979). His stillness and sense of inner working was unsettlingly powerful and remains watchable. It launched a string of performances in which he went back to his strengths as an ensemble player.

In Terry Gilliam’s *Time Bandits* (1981) he was a hilarious, height-obsessed Napoleon, and Oscar-nominated as marginalised outsider trainer Sam Mussabini in Hugh Hudson’s *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Gilliam cast him again as Jonathan Pryce’s perpetually anxious and overwhelmed boss Mr. Kurtzman in *Brazil* (1985), a valuable insight into the vulnerability he could portray.

His first lead role since 1971’s *A Severed Head* finally came in 1997. Atom Egoyan, casting him as the lawyer encouraging a class action after a fatal bus crash in *The Sweet Hereafter*, said he was surprised Holm had not had more leads because “he is often the most memorable thing about the movies he’s been in.”

This is true—he was excellent even in the otherwise execrable *From Hell* (2001)—and it may also be true of Egoyan’s film. The depth of humanity in Holm’s performances was not always well served by the superficiality of some of the films they featured in, with directors happy to use his qualities to stand in for something bigger that was absent in their filmmaking.

It is a credit to Holm that his performances were often better than the films because of his essential seriousness as an actor. He was continually astute and revelatory when playing historical figures, like Yakovlev in Franklin J. Schaffner’s *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971), or Heinrich Himmler in the television series *Holocaust* (1978).

Some directors wanted Holm for the inner warmth he could convey without excess show, but even there something else shines out. He certainly could do charming, but it was rarely just that. Even in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* films, Holm’s Bilbo Baggins contained a genuine emotional richness. The scene where he asks Frodo if he might just try the Ring one last time carries a weight absent elsewhere.

The carefully crafted characters with complex inner lives kept coming. As Ruth Ellis’s old flame Desmond Cusson, he was the essential lynchpin of Mike Newell’s *Dance with a Stranger* (1985), about the last woman to be hanged in the UK, almost touching in his devotion and suppressed frustration. As Lewis Carroll in Gavin Millar’s *Dreamchild* (1985) and as J.M. Barrie in the television series *The Lost Boys* (1978), he was superb in indicating the inner conflicts of a character, without being obvious and therefore unconvincing. It is a rare skill.

He was not lost to the classics, with varying results, playing Polonius to Mel Gibson’s *Hamlet* for Franco Zeffirelli (1990), and Fluellen in Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989). Branagh described Holm’s technique as, “Anything you can do, I can do less of.” Self-deprecatingly, Holm claimed this was because he was “a lazy person” who did not do much research, but Branagh’s description points instead to his technical expertise. Holm stripped everything down to an understated and unshowy core.

This makes his transition between media all the more remarkable. When asked about returning to the theatre he would say, “If Harold Pinter writes a new play and if it has a part for me...” In 1993 Pinter did that, and Holm gave a fiercely angry performance as Andy, *Moonlight*’s dying former civil servant. They worked together again a year later on *Landscape*.

Returning to his two great lodestones, in 1997 he played King Lear at the National Theatre. Critics also drew attention to the Lear-like qualities of his performance as Max in the 2001 re-staging of Pinter’s *The Homecoming*.

The majority of performances in Ian Holm’s long career merit a viewing even where the productions might not be so significant. Many of his finest performances have been preserved on film.

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