

# FIERCE

With that familiar steely stare, Ralph Fiennes has packed up Voldemort's evil magic wand to play and direct the tale of Shakespeare's most tragic hero – Coriolanus BY MATT MUELLER

With his brooding personality and fierce gaze, Ralph Fiennes is a famously intense presence. So meeting him with his head shorn of hair, his face caked in fake blood and clad in the camouflage uniform of a warmongering general is a slightly disconcerting experience.

Making it even more disconcerting, I'm sitting in claustrophobic proximity to Fiennes in his trailer, beside the bombed-out shell of a once-magnificent hotel in the midst of Serbia's grey capital, Belgrade. It was practical economics that brought Fiennes' directing debut – an adaptation of *Coriolanus* – to the republic, but it's a decision that has paid off handsomely. After all, where better to set a modern-day twist on Shakespeare's tragic tale about a brilliant Roman general undone by pride and arrogance, as glimpsed through the modern-day prisms of Iraq, Afghanistan and the Balkans? There is authentic war-torn terrain to hand, for one. And the notion of a nationalistic military hero whose own despotic rage blinds him to obvious realities yields more than a few present-day parallels.

"There are so many resonances with stuff that's happened here," Fiennes says. "I came for the locations and then literally did an internal double-take, where I was like, 'All this stuff that the play's about has been part of recent history here.' Those huge demonstrations against [Slobodan] Milosevic and the anger against an authoritarian figure who refuses to go."

Fiennes had been dreaming of directing a film version of one of the Bard's toughest plays ever since he played Coriolanus in the Almeida Theatre Company's 2000 production at Gainsborough Studios. And he considered other leaders besides Serbia's late, disgraced ex-president – men

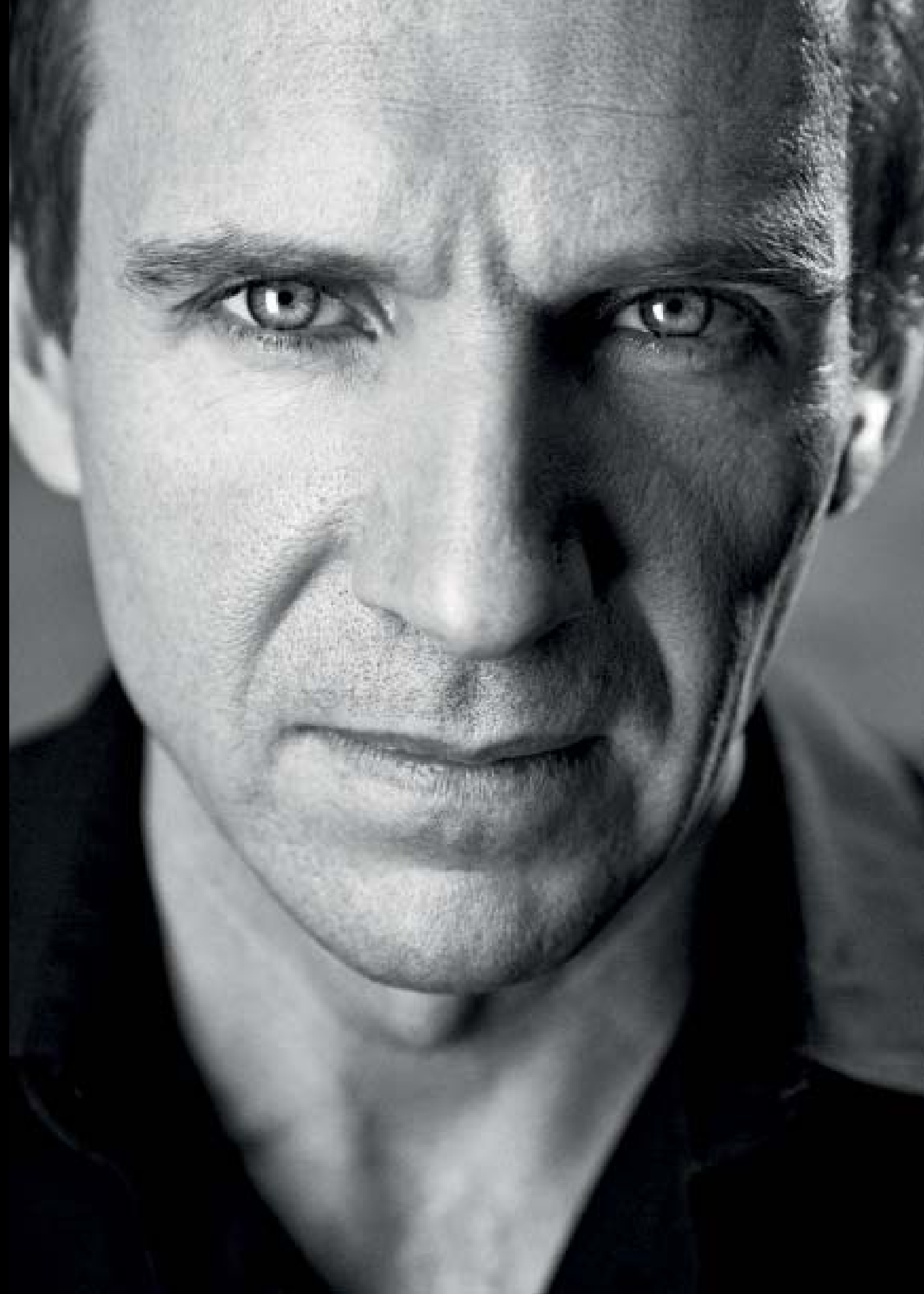
who, he says, "come steeped in unbending nationalism and authoritarian intransigence": Vladimir Putin, "and the tougher Israeli leaders like Ariel Sharon. They all reflect aspects of Coriolanus. They're not always people we like, but they're fascinating because they are people who make change. As a story of power, politics and unbending wills, *Coriolanus* has so many resonances to things that are happening now."

For an actor who has torn through Shakespeare's tragedies on stage, from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* to *Julius Caesar* and *Richard II*, it's only fitting that Fiennes should take on one of these plays for his big-screen directing debut. But, despite adding plenty of contemporary twists, he was determined to keep the verse intact. "Pretty much every word is Shakespeare's," he says. "But I didn't want it to be too poetic. The best Shakespeare I hear is when I believe it's being spoken by real people."

As you'd expect from someone who's earned his reputation on the big screen as a performer of quiet, methodical depths – from *Schindler's List* to *The English Patient* to the role of arch-fiend Voldemort in the Harry Potter franchise – Fiennes as a director appears meticulous, organised and efficient. Standing in a bombed-out corridor of the Hotel Yugoslavia, he patiently orchestrates the framing of a fight sequence before stepping in front of the camera to engage in combat with Coriolanus' main nemesis, the Volscian general Tullus Aufidius (played by Gerard Butler). Looking mean, moody and dangerous, both actors give their all in a choreographed dagger duel before Fiennes leaps up from the floor and quick-steps to the camera to see what's been captured.

The actor-director admits that, at first glance, Butler seemed an odd fit in this Shakespearean universe. Furthermore, with a Hollywood-sized entourage in tow, it seemed the Scottish star had decided to bring his A-list status to the low-budget Serbian shoot. But Fiennes is a man who ►

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knows what he wants. "His star profile is great for us," says the 48-year-old. "But mostly, I just had an instinct that he would be great for it. And he is magnificent." While Butler has been comically dropping down to do press-ups in between takes while his assistants flutter about attending to his needs, Fiennes has been quietly reining in his counterpart's interpretation of Aufidius – something Butler will no doubt thank him for later when he sees his effectively restrained turn.

When it comes to his own performance, Fiennes has enough self-belief and stature not to need his ego stroked. But then his worship of Shakespeare goes back to childhood, and he's notched up as many Shakespearean credits as he has on-screen leading men. Still, it must be a daunting challenge trying to deliver a complex character while calling the shots behind the camera.

"It's definitely been challenging," he admits. "But I've had amazing support from my cinematographer, my script supervisor and the producers, and their advice has saved me. It's been extremely tough, but I haven't regretted it. There are days when it can be seamless and days when it feels crazy. But it was always a two-headed creature in my head. I wanted to play the part again, and I had a strong idea of what the whole film should be."

The chief reason *Coriolanus* isn't viewed as favourably as Shakespeare's other plays, and is staged far less frequently, comes down to the simple fact that he's so damn unlikeable. But that's what appealed to Fiennes. "It isn't a comforting play," he says. "It has no lyricism in it, and he is tough to like – but that's why I like him," says Fiennes. "Tragic figures don't have to be likeable. But what was interesting, in my experience, was that audiences, against their initial instinct, start to sympathise with Coriolanus because they see that he's trying to hold to his own truth. It's like that character Daniel Day-Lewis played in *There Will Be Blood*. He was hard to like, but compelling.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Gerard Butler as Aufidius in *Coriolanus*, directed by Fiennes; Fiennes in the title role; on set directing co-star Vanessa Redgrave; on the red carpet with Redgrave at *Coriolanus*' October 2011 London Film Festival premiere



I like complicated and challenging characters."

Several months after the shoot wrapped, Fiennes graced the red carpet at *Coriolanus*' London Film Festival premiere. Taking the stage to introduce the film, he appeared proud but also a little nervous, even though the film had received effusive reviews at the Berlin and Toronto film festivals. His appearance couldn't have been more different to the bald, bloodied visage I encountered in Serbia; his hair had grown out and he had a full shaggy beard in place for his role as Prospero in Trevor Nunn's production of *The Tempest* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Following the screening, Fiennes fielded questions from the appreciative crowd, answering one question with, "I thought most of what I'd shot was rubbish," and heaping praise on co-star Vanessa Redgrave, who is being tipped for awards recognition in her role as *Coriolanus*' ferocious mother.

Later, at the film's post-premiere party, Fiennes appeared relaxed and relieved, and as he worked his way around the room, he expressed how delighted he was that his bold, confident vision seemed to have been embraced on his home turf.

It bodes well for the film's commercial and awards prospects, and Fiennes has declared his intention to get back behind the camera as soon as he can. That will have to wait for now, however, as he reprises his role as Hades in the *Clash of the Titans* sequel, plays Magwitch in a new film version of *Great Expectations* and enters the world of Bond villainy in the next untitled 007 thriller, to be directed by Sam Mendes.

"What they say is true," he concludes. "You never know whether you can do anything until you try." ■

***Coriolanus* opens on 20th January in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian