

A TOWERING TALENT

Ciaran
Hinds
one of the
best and

bravest Irish actors, talks to Claudia Woolgar
about how he works and what he has done.

Aloof, leather clad and lithe, Ciaran Hinds makes an imposing Achilles in the RSC's current production of *Troilus and Cressida* at the Swan Theatre, Stratford. It is a poised performance of cold pride, where every movement is deliberate, save his fierce fight with Hector, which startles and frightens with its spontaneous energy. A far from easy role, Ciaran Hinds's portrayal of Achilles shows him to be one of Ireland's foremost young actors and a man whose attitude to his profession must guarantee his continuing success.

Born in Belfast, Hinds started out reading law at Queen's University: 'But I was really learning how to play poker and snooker'. One of the law tutors who had seen Hinds act at school advised him to transfer to a UK university to read English and Drama. Encouraged by this support, he applied to drama school, and I just went all out for it. He gained a place at RADA and does not appear to have looked back.

His work in the theatre has been mainly in Ireland and the UK. He has worked with the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre; *Field Day*; *Druid*; the Abbey (most recently as Cuchulain in James Flannery's 1989 Yeats season, about which he comments: 'I wasn't sure about putting Yeats on the stage ... and there was some kind of firmness that we lost'). He has appeared in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* and hopes to go with the RSC to London. Hinds has also done some film and television work which includes his role in the controversial *Who Bombed Birmingham*. 'The main influence on me when I was

younger was Irish dancing. I learned with Patricia Mulholland who did Irish ballet - Irish dancing but with mime, dance and movement put into the old legends of Ireland.' He recalls the type of movement he learned at this stage as being very free; and this ability to move, to know how to use the body, is clearly something he considers to be crucial to the work of an actor. 'One great shame here (at the Swan) is that they have one of the most brilliant voice teachers, Cicely Berry ... but they have nobody to work on movement full-time. Actors are physical as well as vocal, emotional and spiritual.' Hinds would not accept that this was because Shakespeare is so particularly textual in its focus. 'It is text, lyrical, voyages of vocal gymnastics - and there was a time when that alone was true. But the physical element in theatre in the last fifteen years has been enormous. You sometimes see people who are awkward but you can't say that drama school is responsible for that because it's part of a continuous process.'

This sense of learning the skills of the profession through experience and throughout one's time as an actor is a belief which returned again and again as Hinds discussed his work. He particularly stressed this point in relation to his time with the Glasgow Citizens' Company (where he has actually done most of his work, 'because I was asked - no one else was offering me any work'). Leaving behind the make-up and the sequined jockstraps of the seventies, Hinds feels he developed as the company changed

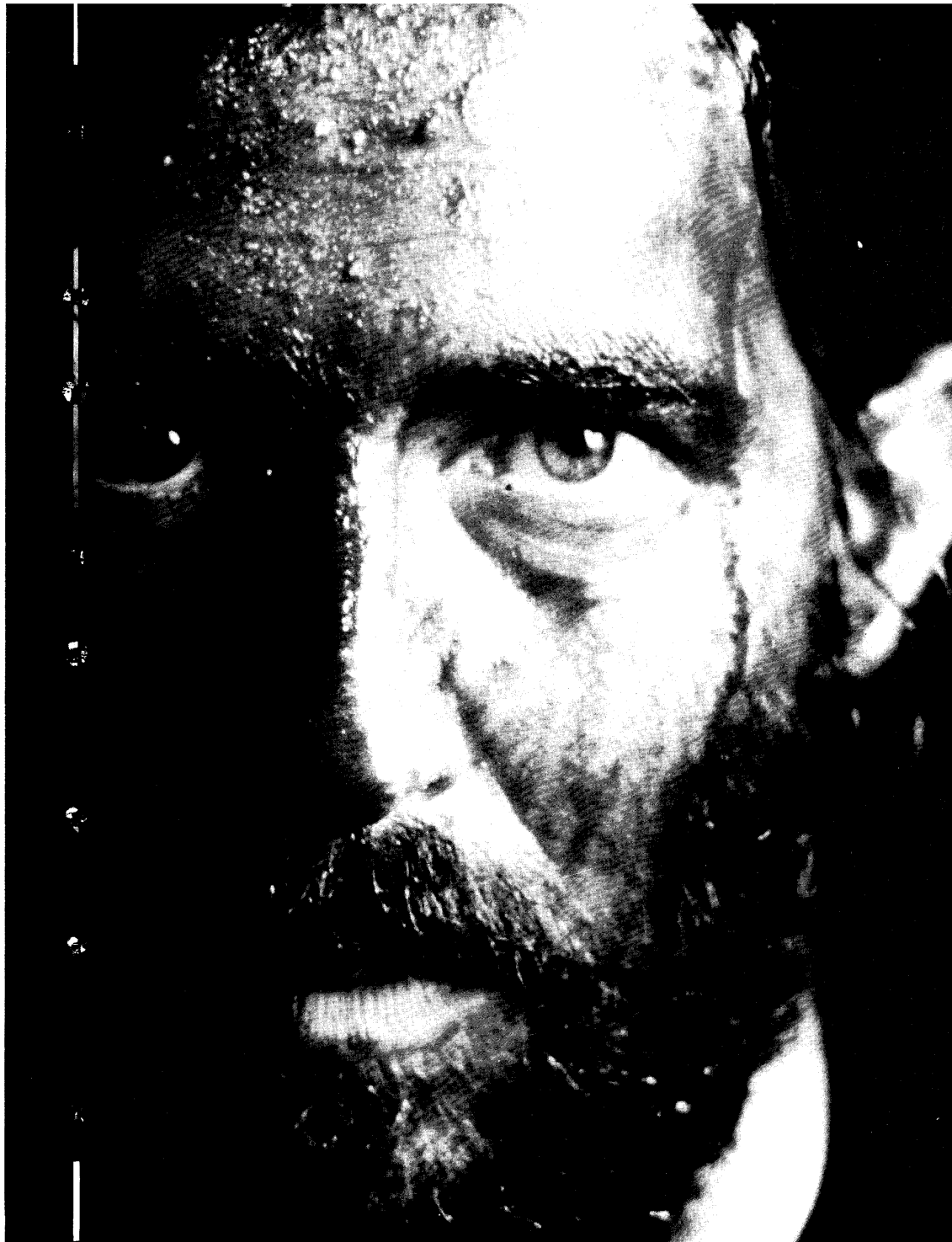
in their style. This belief in a gradual process of development leads him to dismiss the notion of any one role teaching him more than another. 'I think that's an impossible question because it's a continuum. At times you sink down but then you rise again and you learn something else from the influences around you. I don't think you learn from yourself particularly. You try to ... sometimes you fail, sometimes you get away with it ... but I don't think that there's any recipe.'

Hinds's 'recipe' for preparing for a role - part of the continuing process of learning the art of being an actor - is a blend of the text, rehearsal and an interesting third element of the actors working with him. He denied doing a great deal of background research and clearly does not hold with the total (internal and external) immersion into a character which the Stanislavski school demands. 'You start from the text because those are the actual words. The subtext and what these people come from you can invent for yourself until the cows come home. I don't particularly believe in the method of work where it's what you actually display at the time, like what the character had for breakfast; although I fully appreciate that some people do. I think it's more internal - for me anyway - that you actually have a feeling about where you come from and where your mind is and where your heart is, rather than the external things like what they'd wear and how they'd walk. Those elements of the character come through with a balance of rehearsal and trying and failing.'

The externals are, too, more than likely to be moulded by the designer and not by the actor at all. Hinds showed great acceptance and respect for the decisions of designers - despite thinking 'Here we go again' with his Achilles costume, after Cuchulain last year. 'I trust designers because they want to make a visual statement. They watch the way you work and when they say 'Wear this', it shouldn't detract from what you're doing.'

For Hinds, this mutual respect for those working with him on any given project is evidently vital to his professional work; and perhaps a key to his success as a member of a company. He spoke about his work in

As Ashwataman in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*





Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* and remembered the experience of working with Yoshi Oida, the great Japanese performer who has been responsible for much of the training of Brook's company. Hinds, 'a six foot Irishman playing the son of a five foot Japanese man', found himself faced with an actor who worked differently from himself. Oida began telling him what to do and, far from having a fit of wounded pride, Hinds accepted the advice. 'If I'm playing his son, I do exactly what he tells me and I don't question it. Then it becomes a true relationship where you do anything for your father and you don't worry about what you, as an actor, would choose to do. You get that right out of the way and then you can begin to search deeper into a real contact and a depth which wasn't there.' It seems that, after all, Hinds does pay some heed to Stanislavski's belief in living the part.

With his work with Oida, Hinds learned that the deepest contact with the audience comes from surrendering oneself to them. In this sense the intellectual ability of an actor or a director (and Hinds is clearly an intelligent and thoughtful man) can often hinder that communication. Hinds described Brook as 'a brilliant intellectual', but a man who, having worked with a variety of ideas, then stripped them all away to reveal the purest form of communication. And this is communication not solely with the audience but also among the actors. There will inevitably be conflicting interests and ideas of who wants what done how, but Hinds believes that if it is all out in the open then it can work and a balanced whole will be created on stage. 'You would hope that everybody would be bringing the same idea, which is to put on something which is a complete unit with everyone's involvement, rather than just people bringing their own individual bits.' There was no attempt to pretend that this is an easy process, but he affectionately referred to 'the peculiar dichotomy of bitchiness and generosity in actors'.

Hinds's willingness to work with others towards a common goal translates itself into a very positive opinion of theatre directors - or at least the ones with whom he has been fortunate enough to work so far. He had nothing but praise for Brook and dismissed the notion that Sam Mendes

(who directed *Troilus and Cressida*) was too young to be directing at the RSC. 'Sam is a very, very clever, talented man. Age really has got nothing to do with it. He's got this company with some amazing actors in it and he's got the balance right to get the story across. Everyone in the cast has enormous respect for him. In the end, you trust your director.'

Inevitably, there will be directors who want to lay down all the rules and stamp their authority on a production but then the performance will be little more than the director's concept with no sense that there are other human beings involved in it. Criticism of this dominance of one influence in the forming of the whole leads Hinds to seek for a balance in his performances. Just as the director's view must not dominate, so too with individual actors (irrespective of their role). 'There must be real life ... all the influences put into the story no matter how small. And when it works - and it's really rare - it leaves you shattered.' For Hinds, the best director is the one who can make that happen and make it happen by opening channels in his company, tapping 'all the resources which we have inside the body, mental stimulation, emotional stimulation - and then to home in on what the truth is'. Having surrendered oneself and then having focussed on what seems to be the truth, the communication should work and the performance should speak to its actors and audience alike.

Though this advice may seem to put forward a concise plan of action for the perfect performance, Hinds refused to accept any notion of an ideal blueprint for training actors. He felt sad that Ireland - a country with its own culture and its own identity - did not have a national training school which reflected that; but when pressed to define how an Irish drama school would differ from an English one, he did not feel that the form would really be that different.

Ciaran Hinds is undoubtedly a young actor who wants to get it right; but at the same time he has the maturity to recognise that there is no such ultimate achievement. The result is a thoughtful actor who works hard and deserves the opportunities he has been offered. Despite his success, there is no sense of having 'made it', of having 'got there' - 'Got where? To be honest to yourself.' ■

In the RSC's *Richard II*