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FILMS MUSIC THEATRE FOOD COMPETITIONS AND MUCH MORE

THE ACTOR Kenneth Cranham, famous for roles as diverse as Pompey Magnus in the BBC's Rome series and the Inspector in the Royal National Theatre's enormously successful production, *An Inspector Calls*, is originally from Scotland, but you wouldn't think it.

After 59 years in London – his family relocated when he was four – no trace of the north remains in his accent.

The swish Barnsbury gastropub where we meet is one of Cranham's locals. Following stints in Camberwell, Tulse Hill, West Dulwich, South Kensington, Piccadilly, Mortlake and Highgate, he has been in Islington for a long time now – how long exactly he “can't tell any more – longer than anywhere else”.

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A man for all seasons

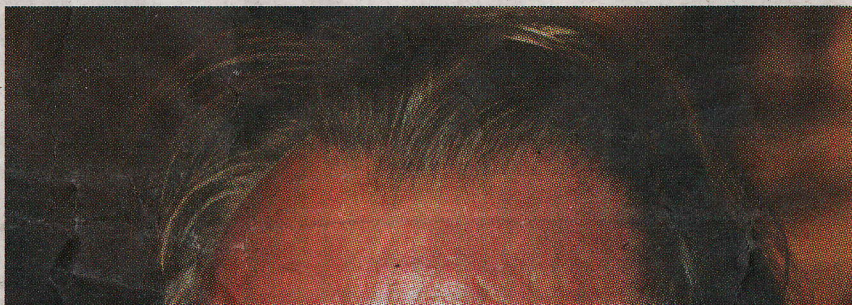
By **JO CAIRD**

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■ CRANHAM as Pompey Magnus in the TV series Rome in 2005.



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Among the topics that we are here to talk about is one close to the actor’s heart – the launch of *The Royal Court Inside Out*, a book that chronicles 50 years of the theatre’s history through personal anecdotes and accounts from the people who made it what it is.

Having contributed some “quite good stuff” to the book Cranham was asked to sit on the discussion panel at the launch, a role that he accepted with great pride.

Over the course of a more than 40-year acting career he has performed at some of the country’s top theatres, but is “particularly passionate” about the Royal Court because it represents for him more than just a place of work.

“It’s the only club I’ve ever belonged to, the only place that I’ve ever gone to start days and see who I’d meet,” he said. “A very stimulating place. And much more important to me than drama school or anything like that.”

It was here that he first worked with “two great teachers”,

directors Bill Gaskell and Peter Gill. He describes this period as “the best of my young career”.

The characters Cranham plays are more often than not gruff, aggressively opinionated and hard, but the man himself is none of these things. The 63-year-old actor maintains eye contact to the point of flirtatiousness and frequently laughs a laugh that would be described as dirty if it didn’t come from such a nice man.

Anecdotes come easily to him, his conversation littered with the names of those he has worked with and been close to: Only Fools and Horses and Vicar of Dibley star, Roger Lloyd-Pack; Nobel Prize-winning playwright Harold Pinter; the late art critic (and fellow Islington resident) Bryan Robertson.

Since graduating from RADA in 1966, Cranham has compiled a CV that features many of this country’s top theatre names. As well as Gaskell and Gill he has worked with the directors Peter Hall, Howard Davies, Max Stafford Clark and Richard Eyre, to name a few.

What is most impressive though is the number of hugely influential British plays on this list; Cranham sums it up when he says, matter of factly: “Nobody’s got a CV of 20th-century drama like mine.”

His time at the Royal Court in the 1960s and 70s coincided with an immensely fertile moment in British drama, with new plays produced there to great critical acclaim – and very often raging controversy).

Having been involved in this new wave of writing as it was breaking, he is now getting the opportunity to explore some of the work that came before and informed these writers: last year Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* and Patrick Hamilton’s *Gaslight* and, in January, Pinter’s *The Homecoming* at the Almeida Theatre in Islington.

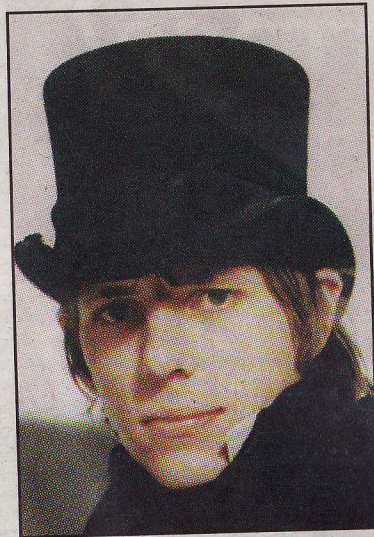
Of Max, his role in this production, Cranham says: “Max and the Tramp in [Pinter’s] *The Caretaker* are the two big elderly actor parts. And I think actors would choose one or the other.”

When asked about unfulfilled career ambitions his response is: “Listen, if I can pull Max off that’ll cheer me up.”

Pinter himself asked that Cranham



■ KENNETH Cranham: enjoys a variety of roles



■ THE YOUNG Cranham as Noah Claypole in the 1968 film *Oliver!*

take on the role in Michael Attenborough’s production, having been impressed by his performances in television adaptations of *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

Cranham is excited about the play and very pleased to be working so close to home, but right now is “in a dark room” about what he is “going to come up with”, waiting until rehearsals begin before thinking too hard about it.

Although being involved in serious theatre is important to him, it is just one part of Cranham’s hugely successful career. He talks of finding the balance between intellectually challenging but financially unsustainable theatre roles, and the more lucrative, but perhaps less meaningful opportunities that film and television provide.

He gives an example of this juggling: “When I was at the Royal Court all those years I would do

television...because I was earning £15 a week. I would have to do a Z-Cars or a *Softly Softly* or something just to clear all my house bills.”

Variation, however, is clearly something Cranham enjoys and given the choice he would continue working in different genres.

“I quite like doing the different things because I don’t feel jaded. I surprise myself still, I don’t know what I’m going to do next.”

Playing Max in *The Homecoming* will take him up to the end of March, after which he doesn’t know what he will be doing.

Whether a new film, like *Hot Fuzz*, the Simon Pegg comedy he appeared in that was released at the beginning of this year, some new British writing – he is very keen to return to the Royal Court after a 36-year absence – or a television role to pay the mortgage, it certainly won’t be long before we see more of Kenneth Cranham.