

Finalists for the 1994 Sunday Times-Royal National Theatre Ian Charleson Award

ACTOR	DRAMA SCHOOL	THEATRE/ <i>PLAY</i>
Mark Bazeley	.	Cheek By Jowl/ <i>Measure for Measure</i>
Henry Ian Cusick	Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama	Glasgow Citizens Theatre/ <i>Oedipus Rex/ Torquato Tasso</i>
Anastasia Hille	Drama Centre	Cheek By Jowl/ <i>Measure for Measure</i>
Marianne Jean-Baptiste	.	Cheek By Jowl/ <i>Measure for Measure</i>
Guy Lankester	Bristol Old Vic Theatre School	Bristol Old Vic/ <i>Twelfth Night</i>
Jude Law	.	Royal Shakespeare Company/ <i>Ion</i>
Toby Stephens	London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art	Royal Shakespeare Company/ <i>Coriolanus</i>

Winner: Toby Stephens

The award commemorates Ian Charleson (August 11, 1949 – January 6, 1990) a Scottish actor, who died of Aids, aged 40, while playing Hamlet in Richard Eyre's production at the Olivier. No one who saw Charleson's performance is likely to forget it. He was a bright, shining Prince facing an inevitable darkness. The dynamic, elegant, precise delivery, a frisky but melancholy humour laced with sardonic venom, the poised, virile, athletic command of the vast stage, were hiding a body holding on to its last ounces of strength with a precarious, but determined, ferocity. Actors who worked with him say he was so weak that the slightest push might have toppled him over; but to the unknowing spectator none of that was apparent. People knew that Charleson had been ill but had no inkling of the nature of his illness; yet they sensed, that when he spoke of special providence in the fall of a sparrow, of the inevitable approach of that fell sargeant death, he spoke as someone who saw and understood the imminent end.

The point about Charleson was that he reached greatness too late. Ian McKellen said about him that he played Hamlet like someone who had rehearsed the role all his life; and in his last weeks Charleson realised that his future, if he should have one, ought to lie with the great Shakespearian roles. Looking back, Charleson's short life seems to have been an unselfconscious preparation for such greatness; and yet, after his huge success in Chariots of Fire, he waited, with strong but decreasing hope, for the call of Hollywood and the Big Break. It never came. That was Hollywood's loss.

The Ian Charleson Award honours the actor whose name it bears. But it also warns young actors to be firm with themselves and guard their priorities.

Classical acting is the bedrock of the theatre. The classical actor lives in two worlds simultaneously: the world of the past in which his play is set, and the world of the present for which he is playing. He is an ambassador of the mind and the imagination, charged with representing the ideas of the past to the country called the present, and he has to take care that we in the present understand his mission. He has to be able to speak a language of both.

Shortlists for the Ian Charleson Award, have been drawn up with an eye to promise, achievement and technique. In our view, clarity and precision of speech are the indispensable foundation of all acting. An actor who does not speak well is like an electric light which blinks: you know that there is something to see, but you cannot make it out. The other main factor, the psychological understanding of the role, is inextricably bound up with clarity of speech: they are both tributaries of an art fed by the same source. Our shortlisted actors have been chosen because they show that they understand this: we all wish them a strenuous, but successful, future.

(THE SUNDAY TIMES, January 30, 1994)