

# In the company of a most distinguished actor

By Charlotte Pyne

Oscar Wilde, Tony Hancock and Casanova are just three of a wide range of roles undertaken by Copenhagen's favourite English-language theatre performer Ian Burns in recent years, and the Copenhagen Post was delighted to spend the day with him as he prepared for and starred in a performance of Edward Albee's 'A Goat, or who is Sylvia?' in Malmö last week - or at least when we finally tracked him down, that is ...

The day did not start well. As I waited to meet actor Ian Burns at Copenhagen's crowded Central Station - surrounded by pigeons, backpackers in need of a shower and irksome American tourists in search of the Little Mermaid (good luck with that) - I had the sinking feeling I had been stood up.

Standing at the ticket information office wearing a shade of pink not seen in public since Barbie went to Dollywood, looking not the least bit inconspicuous, I slowly became aware that the ticket man was staring at me with growing amusement and pity. As I tried for the umpteenth time to reach Burns on his phone, I realised this was it: I had been stood up, jilted, deserted.

OK, perhaps I'm exaggerating the situation; I had been ditched at a train station not at the altar Miss Havisham-style. The plan had been to accompany Burns on the train across to Malmö where he was starring in a dramatised reading of Edward Albee's 'A Goat or who is Sylvia?' I was to spend the day with the cast and watch the final rehearsal followed by the opening night's performance.

I may have been sans Ian Burns, but I was not going to let a small detail like that stop me. Casting the smug ticket man a contemptuous



Burns in Malmö ahead of his role as an irritating family friend

backward glance, I trotted off to platform five, boarding the train to Malmö alone (sob!) in search of Burns or, more specifically, Theatre 23, where he was rehearsing.

Not being blessed with an accurate sense of direction, I often struggle to find my way home, let alone find new places. However, with the help of directions from a very nice and patient taxi driver (yes they do exist), I managed to find the theatre in record time. Still slightly traumatised from my 'standing-up' at the station, I was determined to have it out with the adopted son of Danish theatre, but when I eventually located the evasive Burns, I was immediately won over by his charm and dashing smile. It turned out that Burns had been at the station all along, although unfortunately, due to mutual misunderstanding and perhaps slight ditzyness on my part, we managed to wait at opposite ticket offices.

'A Goat, or who is Sylvia?' was the maiden performance

of the International Theatre of Malmö - a company set up just seven months ago by the RADA-trained and hugely talented, actor and director Emmy Abrahamson.

The play is centred around Martin, a disorientated yet successful, middle-aged architect, and his subsequent affair with a goat named Sylvia. Martin, played brilliantly by Kevin Benn, struggles to come to terms with his love for a goat, the reaction of his wife Stevie (Sue Hansen-Styles), and his bewilderment at the social unacceptability of his animal infatuation. The character of Ross, the humorous yet slightly irritating family friend played by Burns, challenges the limits of friendship and loyalty when he exposes Martin's unconventional love affair to his wife. The third dimension to the play is created by the couple's son, Billy (Fraser MacLeod) who is wrestling with his own homosexuality and the revelation of his

father's curious sexual

preferences.

Although a seemingly absurd narrative, this tragicomedy provocatively interrogated the limits of love and forced the audience to question its own tolerance of social taboos such as infidelity, homosexuality, incest and bestiality. Hanson-Styles' dazzling portrayal of Stevie's raw anger, heartbreaking sadness and utter despair at her husband's adultery, elevated the play above the realms of sheep-shagging, or should we say goat-shagging jokes. Her convincing performance as the scorned wife bestowed the play with a sense of gravitas, making it impossible not to be drawn into the couple's shattered lives and empathise with their pain and turmoil.

As I watched the final run-through, which, I must say, was pretty polished considering they had only had four previous rehearsals, I wondered about the demand for English-speaking theatre in Scandinavia. In 1997, Burns and Julian Simpson founded 'That Theatre Company', an English-language theatre with the aim of establishing highly professional and entertaining theatre that appealed to minds and hearts. Since then the group has expanded, and has enjoyed working with other resident British actors Tom McEwan, Linford Brown and David Bateson, to name but a few. Burns's desire to bring English-language theatre to Denmark has not dwindled over the past decade; if anything his passion for presenting well written, modern drama seems to be mounting - and what's more, his enthusiasm is infectious.

'That Theatre Company has a strong commitment to education,' explains Burns, stating that in his experience 'children and young people, who take part in English-speaking drama workshops and watch English-language performance, have a greater aptitude for language comprehension'. It is students, therefore, that make up Burn's hardcore following, relishing the opportunity to see innovative material performed in their homeland.

Refreshingly, Burns is an actor who is in touch with his audiences; he's aware of what they require from English-speaking theatre by chatting with them in the bar after performances or responding to email correspondence. Just so you know, previous requests from audiences have ranged from more American accents, more naked women on stage and, perhaps ambitiously, free beer at shows.

After That Theatre Company's successful run of

'Hancock's Last Half Hour' in March, Burns was told by an elderly member of the English Speaker's Society that he was getting very serious in his old age. The sobriety of the play had, Burns was told, forced the lady to go home and have a large gin and tonic. I jokingly asked if he was concerned that his choice of plays was driving audiences to drink, but Burns replied rather morbidly that 'his ability to choose plays was the only power he had left'. Describing his annual trip to an independent London bookshop, where the owners leave him with a pot of coffee, a pack of biscuits and his requested pile of modern, well written drama, it seems that it is a power which he takes great pleasure in exercising.

Burns's energy to produce English-speaking theatre in Denmark has, however, been compromised in recent years by City Hall's unwillingness to put their money where their mouth is. Speaking to the Post back in March, Burns said that Copenhagen's mayor of culture and leisure Pia Allerslev has acknowledged that 'Copenhagen is failing its international audience of tourists in the summer and should do more to address that'. This comment came after Burns's application for funding was turned down with no explanation. Rather than taking Burns's word for the need for English-speaking theatre in Scandinavia, I was keen to see the turn-out for and audience reaction of 'A Goat, or who is Sylvia?'

Although Theatre 23 is not the largest theatre by any stretch of the imagination, last Thursday saw it filled to bursting with an excited and lively audience. I was intrigued to see the demographic of an audience who would choose to watch an English-speaking play performed in Sweden about a man who has a sexual

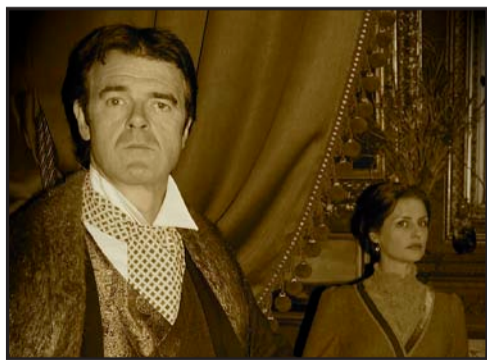
relationship with a goat. To my voyeuristic disappointment, however, the audience did not consist of men with hay in their hair accompanied by their livestock lovers. Instead, the audience was made up of a range of ages, nationalities and backgrounds - brought together by a shared love of thought-provoking theatre. The performance was very well received, with heaps of laughter, gasps of disgust and moments of poignancy in (almost) all the right places. Speaking to the jovial audience afterwards, it seemed that Burns was right: Denmark and Sweden are crying out for English-speaking theatre. I was surprised at the amount of Danes and Swedes in the audience, showing that it is not just ex-pats and tourists with, as Burns puts it, 'a thirst' for English-language theatre.

I joined Ian and the rest of the team for a drink after the show and, with the help of a couple of glasses of wine, began to reflect on the day. Although I am only in Copenhagen for a short time, I could not help feeling proud that my briefly-adopted city (and Malmö, her Swedish sister) can boast such a range of international culture. Perhaps it was the wine talking, but I felt as an English speaker I had a responsibility to support the efforts of dedicated individuals like Ian Burns, Emmy Abrahamson and Sue Hansen-Styles (founder of Why Not Theatre Company) to ensure that Copenhagen continues to flourish as an international city. To reiterate what has been said in this paper before, it's no good complaining in ten years time that there isn't any English-language theatre to take your kids to if you know you didn't support it when you were spoilt for choice. Remember, if you don't buy tickets, they won't put on plays!

## IAN BURNS FACT BOX

Everything you need to know about Ian Burns ...

- He was born in 1957 and is of Scottish heritage but grew up in Luton.
- The principal of his sixth form college advised him to follow a career in acting, after witnessing the affect that his public speaking had on the other students.
- It was a toss-up between being a professional runner or an actor.
- He chose to study at Manchester Polytechnic School of Theatre so that he could watch 'his boys' (Manchester United) play every week.
- He came to Copenhagen in 1990 to perform a run at the Little Mermaid theatre, fell in love (with his future wife and the city), and never left.
- He is now fluent in Danish, has a Danish wife, and two adorable young boys.
- Before coming to Copenhagen, Ian performed on the West End in the original productions of 'Blood Brothers' and 'Lennon'. He has also appeared in the iconic British soap opera 'Coronation Street' and numerous BBC productions.
- His most recent performances in Denmark include the leads in Hancock's Last Half Hour, (as Oscar Wilde in) In Extremis, and Casanova Undone. His next production is The Collector ([www.teaterbilletter.dk](http://www.teaterbilletter.dk)), which starts on October 27 at Krudttønden.



Clockwise from top left, Burns as Oscar Wilde, Tony Hancock, Sherlock Holmes and Freddie Clegg in 'The Collector'