

BRILLIANT AND BELLIGERENT BURNS AT HIS VERY BEST

Hancock's last half hour

KRUDTTØNDEN, SERRIDSLEVSVEJ 2, 2100 CPH Ø; PERFORMANCES MON-FRI 20:00 & SAT 17:00, ENDS 27 MARCH; TICKETS 120KR, CONCESSIONS 45KR, WWW.BILLETNET.DK; DURATION 65 MINS; WWW.THAT-THEATRE.COM, 3313 5042, INFO@THAT-THEATRE.COM

You don't have to be a Hancock fan to enjoy this, but you do need to do your homework - though it'll be the most refreshing homework you've done for a while. From the beginning, Hancock's trademark comic instinct fills the room with a joke about the wall-mounted moose that challenges the limitations of the snug venue. Meanwhile, his iconic black hat and coat watch over the events like a ghost - a pristine spectre hanging over the ensuing degradation.

We join him midway through a benediction of epic proportions: a drunken sage on a heavy mission to find the ultimate meaning of it all. But happily for us, he casts aside traditional navel-gazing approaches to enlightenment, and chooses comedy as his medium instead. The targets of his incisive rants are diverse, and he takes on some big shots. Shakespeare, Orwell, Freud, sex and of course God, are weighed and found wanting.

It's a bittersweet ride, with highs that are as funny as the lows are poignant, and the oscillation between the two keeps your mind fresh and alert. To use an analogy that Hancock would have despised, if you plot the play like a wave on a graph, with the peaks and the troughs describing the mood, then it's a varying frequency 'sine

wave' that defies the laws of physics, because the amplitude of the highs rarely matches that of the troughs ...

I'm glad he isn't around to see that. But if you take the diametrically opposite approach to analysing comedy, then that is what the play is all about, as Hancock sprawls around the bedroom, spouting a short lifetime's collection of anecdotes, advice and observations as he attempts to distill from them the tangible, fundamental essence of comedy. The high times are how you'd like to imagine him alone, bouncing around a bedroom in earnest, and yet being hopelessly and incidentally funny to the observer. When he stops railing about or against something, then he sinks rapidly and visibly, before the introspective juggernaut lurches back on its inevitable course with the next flash of manic inspiration.

It's a tribute to Ian Burns that despite lacking the physical bulk of the real deal, he nails the voice and sonorous laugh, filling the stage by himself. Hancock's pent up angst is physically portrayed through the nuances of Burns' movement, inducing sympathetic tension you only notice when it evaporates with the next chuckle. Add the studied breathlessness, along with the sheer proximity of this dynamo, and the result is an intense experience.

According to the disclaimer at the beginning, real vodka fuels the on-stage antics, and each drink energises and steadies the large persona a little more, in the beginning at least. Burns does drink a lot though, so either there's some diluting going on (so his drunk acting is the more impressive), or



photo: Mark Jones

Burns, with only a moose for company, delivers an intense solo performance

the drunk 'acting' is real and his grip is remarkable. Either way, it works, and if watching drunks was always this much fun, then Central Station would be a rich seam of comedy.

Reality keeps popping into the production, causing the audience's role to vary as it playfully probes the fourth wall, keeping you on your toes. At one point Hancock finds another bottle of vodka in the fridge, and ostentatiously turns his back on the audience to drink it, engaging the audience as concerned onlookers rather than passive priests at a confessional. It's a harrowing trip, but an interesting one, with a gallows humour that most people would aspire

to in their own darkest hours. As you'd expect from Hancock, it's the funny side of depression - with lucid clarity of thought - and like an action movie star's cold last quip, Hancock plays to the crowd to the bitter end.

Watching an actor's descent into introspection may possibly be the thing most guaranteed to invoke nausea in the world, but here it is funny and grounded and highly watchable. Like a cross between Peter Ustinov and Harold Steptoe, Hancock is erudite and cantankerous, and maintains a pleasing lyrical ingenuity throughout his intriguing mental detonation.

Peter Sims