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Reader's Digest

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RD EXCLUSIVE

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

Kenneth Branagh on Wallander, self-help—
and the book that's shown him the meaning of life!

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How to...
find treasure,
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praise a child,
turn junk into
cash





An introverted Swedish investigator? It's a long way from Shakespeare, but **Kenneth Branagh** explains why the role suits him just fine

The trees in Skåne province all bend from the waist, stretching bare, beseeching branches to the red streak on the horizon. It's only September but there's a stiff squall blowing in from the sea and you sense the sun won't be back any time soon.

Kenneth Branagh leans into the blast, arms outstretched, mouth agape. He looks like an old Norse carving of a wind-eater.

"You don't get days like this in Los Angeles!" he bawls happily.

It was partly the epic swing of the seasons that drew the Hollywood A-lister back to the southern tip of Sweden for a second series of *Wallander*. If Branagh is the star of BBC1's adaptation of Henning Mankell's stories about a small-town detective with world-class issues, the spectacular Scandinavian landscape takes second billing.

"It's a bigger, emptier space than most of us are used to," says Branagh, as film cameras and catering tables go over like ninepins in the wind. "It's quite a tough environment and I think that has an effect on the concerns and interests of the people who inhabit

Private Detective

BY E JANE DICKSON

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHIL FISK

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it. In these parts, there's a real connection to the elements; it scours the small things and connects you to something very primal and primitive."

When it comes to big ideas, Branagh's your man. Whether he's wringing the certainties out of Shakespeare or sleuthing in Skåne, intensity is the Belfast-born actor's stock in trade. The character of Kurt Wallander—introspective, self-questioning, engaged in the problems of society—is, he says, a kind of template for "the more examined life".

"*Wallander* is drama for grown-ups. I love that about it. It's my experience that there are various preoccupations that creep up on you when you hit north of 40. You start thinking about life in different ways. Mortality, which was just starting to leave a faintly audible message on your spiritual answerphone at 35, is now ringing fairly regularly. And it's saying, 'There's a whole series of things you blithely ignored before, but it's time now. You really want to start thinking about this stuff.'"

He makes Mortality sound a reasonable chap, more Uncle Mort than Grim Reaper. Branagh, 48, may do a good line in midlife crises—last year he wowed West End critics as Chekhov's ennui-ridden Ivanov—but he has never felt the thespian urge to "identify".

"I've always thought of acting as an imaginative act. For me, it's pointless trying to bring specific experiences in your own life to bear on the part, partly because they rarely match up and also because if you felt identification was the only way to go, you'd never play a murderer. I think that for the audience

it can be cathartic to watch people go through these crises—that's kind of the point of theatre. But as an actor, I don't find it remotely therapeutic. There are things that I recognise in Wallander, though. I understand that frustration of realising that although you've reached this advanced age, you're probably not going to end up as the wise old Methuselah man that you imagined. You still feel like the pillock you were at 16. Then you look in the mirror and this old git is staring back at you."

If anything, middle age suits Branagh.

As a younger man, he was perhaps more admired than loved by the British public, or at least by the British press. At the height of his early fame, around the time he reprised Laurence Olivier's role in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, prodigious talent and barnstorming energy were marked down as bumptiousness (it didn't help when he published his memoirs aged 28). When he married Emma Thompson in 1989, the press set them up—and, at every conceivable opportunity, knocked them down—as "the new Olivier and Leigh". (The couple divorced amicably in 1995.)

Received less cynically in Hollywood, Branagh was recognised as the outstanding actor of his generation, but he was never going to fit the matinee idol mould. Now, as Wallander, he has pulled in a whole new generation of fans, many of them female. It's easy to see why. The passionate opinions have settled to an attractive donnishness.



LEFT BANK PICTURES/BBC



Kenneth Branagh as Wallander (right), hot on the trail and “engaged in the problems of society”

I’m fascinated by psychology. It’s what Hamlet says: ‘There’s nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’ Every self-help or religious book I’ve ever read confirms this

And if he’s edging past the sell-by date for heartbursting heroics, the grizzled hair and fuzzy beard are just the thing for existential angst.

“I often find that as Wallander, my natural pose is slightly open-mouthed, not so much in wonder at the world as

in slightly pained bewilderment. He’s not sharp or witty, he’s not front-footed like that, but there’s a raw sensitivity there. He has a disposition to consider how he lives, at the same time as acknowledging that in other aspects of his life—family, relationships—he’s a bit of a mess.”

No British detective, Branagh insists, would get away with this degree of soul-searching.

“The Swedish context makes a difference. Society here doesn’t view self-analysis with quite the same degree of suspicion as we do in Britain. People at home have said to me, ‘What Wallander needs is a good kick up the arse.’ As New Age-y or New Man-y as we may have got, there is still a kind of stiff-upper-lip, ‘get on with it’ mentality that we hold sacred. There’s a fairly strong part of the British DNA that says, ‘There’s always someone worse off. Just get over yourself.’ ”

Certainly introspection was not much encouraged in 1960s Ulster where Branagh spent his early childhood. “Keeping your feet on the ground,” he says with wry affection, “that was the thing. And not such a bad thing either.”

Even now, he admits only shyly to a sizeable self-help habit. “I’m fascinated by psychology. It’s what Hamlet says: ‘There’s nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’ Every self-help book, every book on Eastern religion or mind control I’ve ever read confirms this. And I read a lot of them.”

Gurdjieff, the early 20th-century Armenian mystic and “awareness” guru,

THE MAN BEHIND WALLANDER

Henning Mankell's

Wallander novels are arguably the biggest Swedish export since flat-pack furniture. The series of ten murder mysteries, translated into 40 languages, have sold more than 25 million copies worldwide.

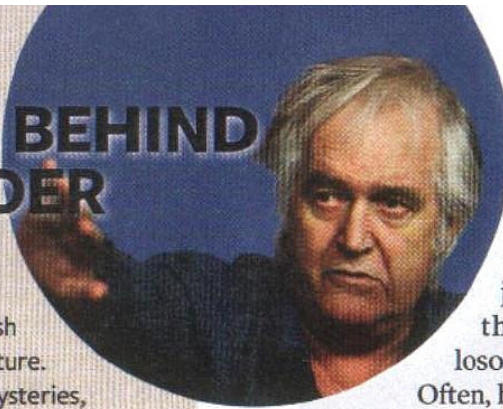
Born in Stockholm in 1948, the son of a judge, Mankell studied in Paris at the time of the 1968 uprising and remains a heart-and-soul radical. The *Wallander* novels were initially inspired by the collapse of Sweden's socialist dream, but encompass universal themes of social injustice.

"My books," he explains, "all have in common my interest in what it means to be human and my search for understanding of the terrible world we live in and ways to change it."

Since 1986, Mankell has divided his time between Sweden and Mozambique, where he founded Maputo's Teatro Avenida, a theatre company with a strong consciousness-raising agenda. Proceeds from bestsellers are largely ploughed into HIV/Aids charities.

Together with his wife Eva Bergman, he has funded the construction of three children's villages in Mozambique, providing homes for 150 orphans.

"There are 800,000 orphans in this country," he points out. "I can't help them all, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't help some. An HIV-positive European can expect to live a relatively normal life. In Africa, they just die. I can't imagine a more cynical image of injustice." **EJD**



is a particular favourite and Branagh has just been reading up on Gurdjieff's disciple, the Russian philosopher Ouspensky.

Often, he points out, the most esoteric disciplines reach the simplest conclusions.

"Ouspensky, at the end of his life's work, was asked to define his system for having a wonderful life. He said, 'Be cheerful.' I had a version of that from my mother. I suppose you want the answer to the meaning of life to be more profound. But 'Be cheerful' is profound. It depends how you receive it."

For Branagh, finding meaning and pleasure in simple things is a skill recently learned. Like any convert, he is keen to share his secret.

"My most useful book," he offers, "is a publication called *What is that?* and it's published by Reader's Digest. You'll find that sounding phony, because here I am doing an interview for the magazine, but there it is.

"I am a *Reader's Digest* reader," says Branagh, sounding more and more like a person in recovery, "and I have been for five years."

What is that?, he explains, "is full of insights to the natural world—trees, flowers, fauna. I wander round the garden with the book, identifying things. I guess it's got something to do with purpose and focus, but I find it of enormous benefit. *Reader's Digest* is literally helping me to smell the roses."

GETTY IMAGES

A similar focus has been reached in his professional life. Next year, he will direct Anthony Hopkins in *Thor*, a film adaptation of the *Marvel* comic strip. This sounds a bit of a wild card until you learn that during breaks in the *Wallander* schedule, Branagh has been researching Norse mythology in academic institutions across Scandinavia. Critics, formerly snide about the pitfalls of early promise, have started to discuss Branagh's career in terms of "a game of two halves".

"Am I going in for the second half?" he wonders. "Perhaps I'm in the second third, perhaps I'm near the end of the game. You never know what the gods have in store. But I don't feel any pressure at this point in my career. For me, it's all new. You don't carry any weight of achievement or failure. You can't, or you'd go mad. If your career, to use a terrible metaphor, was some sort of meal, you're reducing the sauce, trying to make it richer, purer. My interests now are in this refinement. How much can you get out of the tricky business of portraying other people and not seeing the joins?"

"Alongside that," he continues, "there's what I'd call the celebrity side of life. I've found it's more helpful to me, as a person and as an artist, to be a little quieter, to do a little less. I have

huge admiration for the energy and commitment of people who take up political or humanitarian causes—Henning Mankell is a case in point and he manages it with tremendous grace—but at the same time I have an ambivalence about the whole 'celebrity endorsement' thing. Sometimes the message gets blurred. On certain issues it's better just to keep your head down and make your contribution as an individual, in private."

Living beyond the celebrity circuit in Berkshire with his wife, art director Lindsay Brunnock, Branagh seems to have attained his personal nirvana. Were he Californian, he might be jumping up and down, Tom Cruise-style, on a sofa by now, trumpeting his good luck to the world. Belfast boys don't jump. Branagh calls, instead, on Shakespeare's vision of domestic felicity.

"There's this beautiful bit at the end of *King Lear* where the old man tells his daughter how they'll talk and talk and take upon themselves 'the mystery of things'." Branagh pauses, not just for dramatic effect. "I'm ready for a bit of that."

The second series of *Wallander* starts on BBC1 this month

Buy Kenneth Branagh's favourite book at the special price of £10 (usual price £26.99)! To order your copy of *What is that?* from Reader's Digest for £10 (plus £3.99 p&p), please call 0871 351 1000 *, quoting reference 148.



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