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Sir Kenneth Branagh
returns with a third
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One
knight
in Sweden

NEW CRIME DRAMA

Wallander

Sunday, BBC1 HD, 9pm

In his role as all-round disaster-magnet Kurt Wallander, Kenneth Branagh has seen plenty of reasons to explain the Swedish detective's famously morose demeanour, from divorce and alcoholism to his father's battle with Alzheimer's disease and his own multiple meltdowns, not to mention the frequent grisly and violent scenes he experiences doing the day job.

But even Branagh was shocked by the woes that befell Wallander in the new third series of the hit Swedish thriller, which starts on BBC1 this week. 'I remember getting the draft of the first episode,' says the freshly knighted actor as we meet to discuss the latest three-part run. He recalls how, after finishing it, he shook his head and groaned: 'This is the bleakest thing I've ever read...'

And yet everything starts off so well, as in the first episode, *An Event in Autumn*, Wallander is in a good place. He has moved to the countryside with his girlfriend, Vanja, her son and a friendly pooch, police work has taken a backseat in his life and he is off the booze...

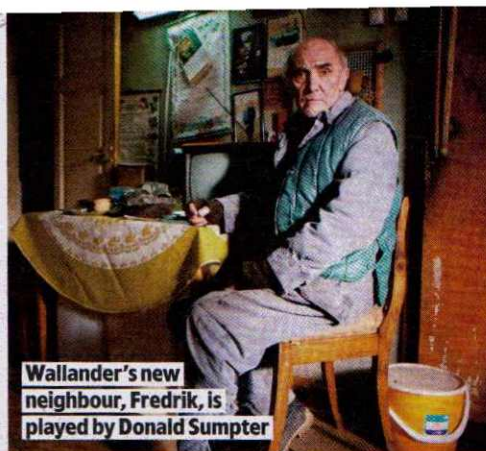
Branagh says he even had to scribble the word 'smile' on his script to remind himself to lighten up. 'We begin with the possibility of some sunshine,' he admits. 'Wallander's starting a new life. He's got the dog, the girlfriend and the kid, and he's even smiling. He's trying, as it were, to get home.'

Sadly, the dream sours quickly when the dog discovers a skeleton in Wallander's backyard, under some blackberry bushes. 'You might say it's cosmically funny, the idea of a body ending up in his garden to ruin his dream,' says the 51-year-old, with a dark chuckle. 'Wallander is a comparatively rational man, but even he starts to think: "Is it fate? Is somebody up there pointing their finger at me and saying, "You'll never be happy?"' I mean, it's not just a terrible event; it's literally in his own back garden.'

It's not the only nasty surprise in store. The mysterious death of a young woman on a ferry prompts another murder inquiry, and detective Ann-Britt Hoglund (Sarah Smart) is attacked during the investigation following an error of judgement by her colleague. 'I can't tell you what it costs her, but Wallander's breaking of the rules has a terrible price,' Branagh hints. 'So he carries this guilt into episode two.'

If this sounds too gloomy, don't worry. The series will brighten up a bit, Branagh promises, partly because Wallander isn't facing such ghastly personal issues in the subsequent two episodes. The

second, *The Dogs of Riga*, is an espionage drama in which the murder of two mafia members leads him to Latvia. The third, *Before the Frost*, sees the return of Wallander's daughter Linda (Jeany Spark) when a childhood friend of hers goes missing. 'It is about the great business of getting on with life, his relationship with his daughter and the possibility of



Wallander's new neighbour, Fredrik, is played by Donald Sumpter



Con O'Neill plays a local career criminal



Saskia Reeves reprises her role as Wallander's girlfriend, Vanja Andersson



Sarah Smart (right) returns as Ann-Britt Hoglund with Rebekah Staton as new cop Kristina Albinsson

'I think Wallander would like to have more sex but, essentially, he's a romantic'

another generation of Wallanders,' Branagh explains. Surprisingly, both films also feature romance for the gloomy detective. 'The law of averages says that some women fancy Wallander,' Branagh laughs. 'I think he would like to have more sex but, essentially, he's a romantic. So, in part, this series is about Wallander, in the face of unbelievably bad luck, trying to pursue romantic adventures.'

Branagh says he is getting better at living with his miserable alter ego. During series one and two, he distanced himself by watching comedies or 'visiting flower shows'.

For the new run, he rented a seaside villa near Ystad in Sweden, where the show is filmed, with his wife, art director Lindsay Brunnock.

Previously, I'd been in a little house on my own, which was a pretty isolated experience,' he reveals. 'I wanted to be able to walk down to the edge of the water and feel the wind on my face, to sort of blow this man right out of my hair.'

In London, Branagh's mood was further lifted last month when he was awarded a knighthood in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. 'I came back to the house, and there was a very large envelope which said Cabinet Office all over it,' he says. 'I wondered whether it was an incredibly overdue parking fine that I wasn't aware of.'

Branagh's busy schedule means it may be some time before he revisits Wallander, the longest-running character he has played on screen. His next project is a film version of Wallander creator Henning Mankell's novel *Italian Shoes*, set on a Swedish island and starring Anthony Hopkins and Judi Dench.

However, Mankell insists that there will be a fourth run of the series. 'I know Ken is keen to continue,' he says, adding that, although the next run is likely to feature the final Wallander novel, *The Troubled Man*, it wouldn't necessarily spell the end for Branagh's take on the character.

'Without mentioning the names, I think there are stories I wrote some 15 years ago that it might interest him to do,' he says, smiling. For Branagh, it appears Wallander's on-screen trials and tribulations aren't over quite yet...

The Wallander effect

Dark, subtitled, foreign dramas becoming must-see TV? Four years ago, you would have put more money on ABBA reforming. But that was before Kenneth Branagh helped turn UK viewers on to Scandinavian crime drama in 2008, when he starred in the first British adaptation of Swedish

author Henning Mankell's Wallander novels.

The BBC followed that in 2009 with the Swedish version of *Wallander*, starring Krister Henriksson, and viewers have since gobbled up Danish offerings *The Killing*, *Borgen* and *Those Who Kill*, as well as the Swedish-Danish co-production *The Bridge*.

That success has also seen actors from Scandinavia crossing over to British TV, from Sofie Grabol (Sarah Lund) popping up in the *Ab Fab* Christmas special to her *The Killing* co-star Soren Malling (Jan Meyer) playing an undercover cop in a forthcoming episode of Branagh's *Wallander*.



Sofia Helin and Kim Bodnia in *The Bridge*

In Mankell's view, they owe a huge debt to both Branagh and the BBC. 'It was a revolution the BBC started,' he says. 'And Ken has been the locomotive, if you like, dragging all the wagons behind him.'

Crime drama



Wallander

BBC1 HD, 9pm

Kenneth Branagh's Swedish sleuth finds his latest case close to home when he discovers a skeleton buried in his garden



Wallander

CRIME DRAMA BBC1 HD, 9pm

**EDITOR'S
CHOICE**

The first of three new investigations featuring Kenneth Branagh as author Henning Mankell's gloomy Swedish detective. *See feature, page 4*