

# Passengers in an icy Noah's Ark

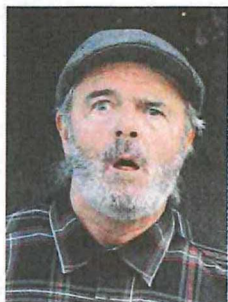
## An interview with Ian Burns and Fergal O'Byrne about the play *Extremophiles*

BY JESPER KAALUND, *ANGLO FILES*

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN KROG



Fergal O'Byrne has been writing for the screen, stage and radio for over 20 years and it became his full time career in 2013. He has won awards for his stage plays, for instance the Eamon Keane Award for *Extremophiles* (2018). He has been living and working in Copenhagen since 2017.



Ian Burns is the Artistic Director of That Theatre Company. He has lived and worked in Denmark since 1990. Before Ian came to Denmark he worked in repertory theatres in Manchester, Harrogate, Sheffield, Coventry and Scotland. He also appeared in the original musical productions of *Lennon* and *Blood Brothers* in London's West End. His TV credits include *Coronation Street*, *Angels*, and *Liebe Mutter*, an award winning film for Channel 4 and ZDF. His Danish credits include *Absalons Hemmelighed*, *Julekalender*, *Russian Pizza Blues*, *Blændet*, *Livvagterne*, *The Outsider* by Charlotte Sachs Bostrup for TV 2 and most recently a new TV series for Swedish Television called *Max and his Amazing World*. Ian founded That Theatre Company in 1997 with Julian Simpson.

**DRAMA** – *Anglo Files (AF)*: Please give us a brief outline of the play and explain why the play is called *Extremophiles*?

– *Fergal O'Byrne*: The play is set in a remote Antarctic Research Station. As the deep winter approaches the main bulk of the international research staff head back north on

the supply ship, the RSS Shackleton. Only three people remain; Angela, Lars and Bertram. Commander Fiskler originally goes to the ship but changes his mind and treks back to the research station. The reasons for his return and the effect this has is revealed as the play unfolds.



Extremophiles are microorganisms that live in extreme conditions of heat, cold or acidity. They are found in the deep underwater thermal vents or deep in the ice in extreme earth environments. The people who choose to work and live in the Antarctic research stations are humanity's version of extremophiles. They are surviving at the out limits of what the human body can endure. There is also the pun on the word *extremophiles* – the enjoyment of being in the extreme. Most researchers working in these bases have commented how gratifying it is to live at the edge of survival.

– AF: What inspired you to write the play?

– Fergal: All of my plays feature the location as a character. *Extremophiles* is actually part of a grand four play project called *The Location Quarter*. The other three plays use locations such as a remote Scottish Castle, an online video conference call and a dentist waiting room on a Martian colony.

I am fascinated by how people create specific environments and how they respond to the location they find themselves in. The inspiration for *Extremophiles* came after reading about how the Halley VI research station in Antarctica had to relocate about 15 kilometers because of a crack in the ice shelf due primarily to global warming. Luckily, the station was very cleverly designed and the three units could be moved in a relatively short amount of time.

I was fascinated by this and how they then had to make a decision whether to leave some staff to “winter over” and keep the base and the experiments ticking over. The small staff that remain must endure months of darkness and possible rationing with limited access to the outside world. That plays havoc on the human mind and there have been cases of people not coping with the isolation and



## EXTREMOPHILES

A new play by Fergal O'Byrne



constant darkness. Food rationing can also induce hallucinations in certain instances.

So, for the play I have three (and later four) people staying in the station. The outside world is in turmoil and as far as they can ascertain it is close to nuclear war. Their communications are patchy at best and when a storm knocks out all the comms they are left completely stranded – unsure if there will be a world to return to when the sun eventually tips its head above the horizon again.

– AF: What did you like about the script and why is *Extremophiles* the right play for That Theatre?

– Ian Burns: It's a very relevant subject matter and ticks the boxes for us with its four real characters. We sadly receive little support from the Arts Council. We play “on-the-door” and Krudttønden has only 100 seats.



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I am also relishing the opportunity of improving and developing myself and That Theatre Company as a focal point of excellent storytelling and to having a lot of fun along the way. If there's no fun then why bother?

Our next production will be another of Fergal's plays. It's rare to meet and work with a good living writer and again I hope this is the beginning of a new chapter for us all.

– *AF*: Critics have called Fergal O'Byrne “an emerging unique voice”. How would you describe his voice? What makes it unique?

– *Ian*: He has a lovely Irish gift of making the audience laugh and then feel guilty for laughing and then if he makes them feel sad, he is able to pick them up with a feel-good line or comment. I love that ability. I have worked with a script by Marie Jones and she has the same ability. A Night in November was our first production as a theatre company.

– *AF*: At the homepage of That Theatre, *Extremophiles* is called a “morality tale with very few moral absolutes”. Can you elaborate on that, please, without spoiling the play?

– *Fergal*: The four members of the research station face some daunting challenges. They are cut off from a world that may be destroying itself and all their loved ones. They have to ration their food as they are unsure if the supply will return, ever, and they are then faced with a complete curveball problem

when the woman in the group, Angela, announces she is pregnant.

That is as much of the plot that can be revealed but there are some twists and turns and they all face individual and collective moral dilemmas. In the freezing cold of this most southern desert morality can be tested to its limits. Can they cope individually and as the possible last representatives of humanity? Think of them as passengers in an icy Noah's Ark.

– *AF*: The play is a dystopian story about the last people left on Earth. Is the play in any-way political, is it climate fiction or something else that we might put a label on?

– *Fergal*: I would never regard my plays as being political, but the audience will probably infer there is a polemic to the work; the fact that we have the capability to destroy ourselves in nuclear armageddon or simply by destroying the planet beyond repair. I leave that to the audience. I want to show how, no matter the odds, the human spirit has the capacity to ensure and survive – just like the tiny extremophile microorganisms. I would like to think despite the inferred dystopic hat-tips there is also hope. I will have to leave it for the critics to attach a label.

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– *AF*: Tell us a little about your character in the play.

– *Ian*: The older man with life-experience and seeing that time is running out for himself and for the planet. Very generous and honorable character blessed with a sense of humour.

– *AF*: What do you think will be the greatest challenge about this part?

– *Ian*: As usual, being believable. I am looking forward to working on Fergal's great play. I think he has a unique voice and I hope that we as a team of good actors & technicians can do it justice. I do think that it will be a challenge and I'm looking forward to embracing that challenge in collaboration with him. He will be joining us during the rehearsal process which can only be exciting.

– *AF*: How is Helen Parry as a director?

– *Ian*: Helen Parry has a great eye for detail and for keeping the tension sharp between the characters. Hardly likely that the ball will be dropped under her direction.

– *AF*: What do you expect or hope the director will do when staging your play?

– *Fergal*: Helen Parry is a very experienced and successful theatre director and I feel very confident that she can extract the best from the text and the actors. We have already had some interesting discussions about the layers in the play and how to bring these subtly to the top and then let them fade into the background, as required. She has an insightful eye and can tease out nuances from the text which sometimes surprise me. I found myself even saying once "Did I write it like that?". She just smiled back. That is when you know you are in good hands.

She will also work closely with the stage, lighting and sound designers; these three components are important to react to the right atmosphere. How can we make people feel they are in a cramped research station at the bottom of the world? Well, let's just see.

– *AF*: What makes the play teachable and what makes it interesting for young people?

– *Ian*: It's a now subject matter. Ice caps melting. Earthquakes. Fires. Epidemics. If they don't find this well written story relevant, then the planet is in worse trouble than I thought. ■