

ENTRANCE

A STAR'S WARS - the final chapter....

In 2005, it is a dark time for actor Ian Liston.

After a diagnosis of aggressive prostate cancer in March 2003, hormone therapy has ceased to work. Not willing to accept outmoded treatment - DES, aspirin and assurances of "major advances in palliative care" – he was referred to the prostate cancer research team at the Royal Marsden Hospital / Institute of Cancer Research.

Their research gave him, over the next eight years, the benefit of a sequence of trail blazing drug trials for taxotere, abiraterone, alpharadin, and then, with the development of gene therapy and the discovery of the BRCA2 gene mutation, olaparib....

treatments which thanks to Ian are now a source of hope for new prostate cancer patients...

There then came a time when the drugs stopped working. Radical radiotherapy treatment in May 2013 destroyed the cancer but so weakened Ian's immune system that an infection in late September 2016 developed into sepsis and pneumonia and he died on 1 October 2016.

But let's now see Ian as many people will remember him – as Wes Janson in Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back.....

OPENING WORDS

First time I've started a funeral with a movie clip.

Good afternoon everyone. We're here to celebrate the life of Ian Liston who died on 1st October aged 68. His widow, Vivien, is here. His aunt, Auntie K, isn't able to be here – she is 95 and lives up north – she is too frail to travel. But Ian is in her thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

I should introduce myself. My name is Ian Willox. I'm a celebrant for the British Humanist Association. Ian's wanted a non-religious funeral. That doesn't mean anti-religious. This is a ceremony for everyone – including those with a religious faith.

THOUGHTS ON LIFE AND DEATH

With or without religion, the main point about a funeral is to remember. Because Ian will live on in our memories. Our memories are Ian's afterlife.

And Ian being Ian that's a lot of memories and a lot of afterlife.

So let's remember...

TRIBUTE

Ian was born in Liverpool - well in Crosby – the respectable part of Liverpool – on 4th August 1948. He was an only child. Ian's father, John Liston, worked on the docks for Cunard. His childhood was a happy one: he spent many hours with his friends on the beach at Crosby. His parents were so proud of him when he got a place at Walton Grammar School where he developed a lifelong love of cricket and rugby. But not – unfortunately - learning. He did mess about a bit. His O level results were miserable and he was told he would have to repeat a year to be able to retake his exams. He lasted three days of that year.

Instead he went to technical college, got his A levels, then signed up for a degree course in Business Studies at Enfield Polytechnic – now the more magisterial Middlesex University. As part of his course, he did work experience for what was then the Gas Board – not at all a happy period - although he got his degree in the end.

Which all seems very untypical of a likely lad like Ian. All his life he seemed to have the knack of being in the right place at the right time – though not necessarily in the right order.

Let me give you an example. He was 12. One night after church choir practice in Crosby, he came out of the vestry to find his bike had a flat tyre. He was trying to repair it when the adult members of the choir came out. One of them - who just happened to be involved with the local operatic society - saw him and simply said: "Ah Ian, you'll do!". So at the tender age of 12 Ian was plunged, starry eyed, into a whole new magical world of theatre. He was hooked. As a young lad willing to learn – and skive off school and homework – he became involved with several operatic societies. Too young to play principal parts and with an unbroken voice, he became a spear-carrier in the *The Mikado*, a train bearer in *Iolanthe* and a drummer boy in *The Gondoliers*.

Then there was his maritime career. He loved ships and if he had not made the theatre his life, he would probably have gone to sea.

In fact, one night, after a show, over a modicum of wine, he told me that he had run away to sea as a young man. On closer inspection it turns out he spent a summer as a junior steward - on the famous ferry across the Mersey. It was a lucrative position – turning on his habitual charm, he made lots of tips.

He joined the Everyman Theatre, in Liverpool, as an assistant stage manager in 1964. By 1970, he had ventured into film as a location manager on *Gumshoe* (1971) and Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!* (1973). He then moved from location manager to actor. He was on stage in, for example, *The Dame of Sark* on tour in 1974 with Dame Anna Neagle. He was in television. In fact at one time he was rarely off television. He was in *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Softly Softly*, *Z Cars*, *The Onedin Line*, *The Professionals*, *Dr Who*. He did a spell on *Coronation Street* – until his screen girlfriend had to be written out and his character went off to the North Sea oilrigs and never came back. He did 10 years as a regular on *Crossroads* as Ron Brownlow.

These were the days when, with only 3 channels, a show could expect 18 million regular viewers. And actors like Ian got household recognition. Not always welcome. Vivien remembers – very early on in her relationship with Ian - sitting in a motorway service station car park (Ian had gone off to buy a paper) when someone banged on the car window asking "Scuse me love but is your

bloke on the telly?” And when she said that he was, the enquirer shouted over his shoulder to his fellow travellers: “Told you!”

To add lustre to his already very public profile, Ian also starred in TV commercials – including the *Brylcreem Bounce*. He was under strict instructions to go only to one very prestigious barber in Mayfair to get just the right sort of bounce in his quiff.

One day in the mid-70s, he was in his agent’s office. He was asked to look after the phone while his agent was in the loo. The phone rang. It was Irene Lamb, a famous casting director. “Who’s that?” she asked. “Ian Liston”. “Oh darling, you’ll do.” Would he mind spending a day at Elstree Studios in a ‘big’ and very hot frock? “It’s only a day, darling, a cough and a spit in a sort of ‘cops and robbers in space’. The part would normally have been given to an extra but it was decided that an actor able to take direction would be more suitable. So there was Ian as the AT-AT Driver in the iconic white stormtrooper’s costume – but - significantly - with his face behind a mask.

After the day’s filming was over, Ian was leaving the studio when the exit barrier came down in front of him. “Are you Ian Liston? You’re wanted back on the Star Wars set”. The actor cast to play Wes Janson was ill. Was Ian free? He was – and that recall turned into four week’s filming.

Which is how Ian became Wes Janson in *The Empire Strikes Back* – the clip you saw at the start. A small part - but one which had Ian going to *Stars Wars* conferences for the next 40 years.

Ian always loved the fact that in the final cut of *The Empire Strikes Back*, Ian, as the AT-AT Driver, shoots down Ian, as Wes Janson.

Wes Janson, in fact, survived to tell the tale – and Ian was presented at a *Star Wars* convention - rather spookily - with copies of Admiral Janson’s memoirs to sign.

Meanwhile, developing behind Ian’s acting career was another one. Producing.

It all started with an impromptu music hall performance in a north London pub in 1974. Ian formed The Hiss & Boo Company in 1976 to continue to put on ad hoc music hall and variety shows which promised “A predominance of prestigious performers – of assorted sexes – presenting the prerequisite proportion of panache, rarely seen in this price range”. [Thank you Mr Chairman.]

The bill toppers included Roy Hudd, Ruth Madoc, Bernard Cribbins, Barbara Windsor; and the late greats: Roy Castle, Leslie Crowther, Dora Bryan and Danny La Rue, and many other ‘names’ playing theatres and venues large and small throughout the UK.

The Hiss & Boo shows *just* worked. Ian chaired about 4,000 shows over the years. They entertained; they made people laugh. They became a regular feature in London, the regions and even the Middle East.

And they provided a springboard into production in mainstream theatre – at which Ian became equally successful.

First there was the rock musical *Drake's Dream* in 1977. Then the touring production of Welsh National Opera's *Dear Ivor*. Followed by *The Mr Men Musical* and *Cluedo*.

In the single year of 1987, Ian, in conjunction with the Theatre of Comedy, produced *Dangerous Obsessions* at the Apollo, toured *See How They Run*, won three Olivier Award nominations for *Groucho: A Life In Review* at the Comedy Theatre and – I have to draw breath here – put on the musical *Nunsense* at the Fortune, *Corpse!* at the Strand and *The Broadway Babies* at the Donmar.

Ian had offices in The Strand Theatre in London, and an office in New York's Times Square.

As is the way with show business, not all projects work. Ian's backers for a revival of *An Ideal Husband* pulled out at the last minute and Ian faced losing his home in Walton-on-Thames. Rather than simply winding up his production company, he used his parent's inheritance to pay anyone owed money on the production.

In January 1994, he placed an advert in the Rendezvous section of the Times. He described himself simply as "an Actor/Producer. Single. Sane. Solvent. Seeking to share theatre, dinners etc with similar". He got 150 replies - one of which was from Vivien. "I doubt whether the love of my life has had the forethought to put an ad in the Times...but it is difficult to meet people in London so perhaps we could meet for a drink?" They did. They met outside Richmond Tube Station and went for lunch at the Mexican restaurant next door. Vivien's first impression? "A nice, cuddly man – with a big smile – in a tweed coat and a woolly blue scarf".

Ian took her to a rugby match. And a couple of shows. And then cruising on the Thames...

In the days when Ian lived in Walton on Thames he kept a boat. A 27ft river cruiser. Vivien was working as a solicitor in the City and Ian would pick her up from the station and they would go for a spin on the Thames whenever they could – evenings and weekends. They'd even moor up beside John Lewis to go shopping.

They were married on 29 April 1995, a date which of course had to fit in around Ian's shows. 21 years ago.

That same year The Hiss & Boo Company switched its focus to pantomime productions and over the next 20 years presented over 140 productions throughout the UK. The first panto was in Hereford in 1995. The stage was built over the swimming pool. So there was a bit of a whiff of chlorine throughout.

The panto business took off. In one year Ian had six venues on the books – Truro, Barnstaple, Newport, Lichfield, Enfield - and London Zoo. He had dedicated costume and scenery stores to cope with the demand.

He disapproved of casting reality TV stars and non-professional performers in pantomime, preferring to recruit actors, dancers, singers, musicians and technicians with proven talent and experience rather than 5 minutes of fame on television. Stick with the experts.

There is only one Hiss and Boo panto this year – *Cinderella* at Newport. Don't miss it if you get the chance. The Welsh being rude to the Welsh. It's a riot.

In 1997 Ian and Vivien moved to Sussex – where they have lived ever since.

Everything seemed to be going well. Until 2003. In March Ian was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer. His doctors advised him to find a convenient hospice and assured him that there had been great advances in palliative care. Ian was not about to accept that. Instead – as in his professional life - he headed for the experts.

Under the care of the Royal Marsden, Ian participated - over the next 13 years - in 7 drug trials and 8 clinical studies. The aim was to buy time...and then more time. The aim was to survive.

In early 2013, the drugs stopped working. The only option was an experimental radical radiotherapy. It destroyed the cancer but also fractured the bottom of his spine and compromised his bladder and bowel. Ian was very ill. He was bed-bound, on morphine and unable even to walk for weeks. His mobility proved to have been permanently damaged.

On top of everything else, there was a fire in March 2013. Ian and Vivien had to be rescued by fire crew. The conservatory had to be rebuilt and the entire house re-decorated.

But Ian, once again, bounced back. In the early summer of this year, he and Vivien went on a cruise of a lifetime from San Francisco up to Alaska where they saw everything: glaciers, seals, whales and bears.

Though the strain of treatment over 13 years had taken its toll. Ian was unable to fight an infection and he died on 1st October.

Vivien has received very many cards, letters and messages since Ian's death and she is profoundly grateful for all of them. There are common themes.

Ian was never the 'big star' but was much admired by members of his profession, fellow cancer patients and friends. He was always generous with his time and was happy to give advice to other entertainment professionals, particularly young artists starting out, and did whatever he could to help them.

He devoted a huge amount of time to promoting the understanding of prostate cancer and to talking to fellow patients and medical professionals about his experience of treatment. His contribution in the cancer field has been described in messages from cancer professionals as 'profound and invaluable'. His 13 years of cancer were bleak, sometimes very bleak – but he loved life. He loved to laugh. He loved to make other people laugh – and generally he succeeded

He was larger than life. Many of the tributes describe him as "a gentleman" – he would have liked that.

QUIET REFLECTION

We're coming to the end of this celebration of Ian's life. But before we do we're going to pause for a moment of reflection. A chance for you to digest all you've heard. A chance for you to recall your own memories of Ian. A chance, if you wish, to pray silently. Ian had an enduring love of Edward Elgar's music. Which is why Vivien has chosen this piece for the period of reflection.

***THEY ARE AT REST* - Edward Elgar -Trinity College Choir, Cambridge**

They are at rest.
We may not stir the heav'n of their repose
By rude invoking voice, or prayer addrest
In waywardness to those
Who in the mountain grotts of Eden lie,
And hear the fourfold river as it murmurs by.

And soothing sounds
Blending with the neighb'ring waters as they glide;
Posted along the haunted garden's bounds,
Angelic forms abide,
Echoing, as words of watch, o'er lawn and grove
The verses of that hymn which Seraphs chant above.

COMMITTAL

Just as we welcome a child into our lives we must say goodbye to those who leave us. This celebration of Ian's life is complete. It's time to say farewell to him. This may be difficult but it is important. I hope the memories we've talked about here may give you some comfort. Please stand for the committal.

FINAL FAREWELL

Our atoms and molecules come from the earth;
Are ordered by ancestry;
Are fired into life by union;
Are sustained by the earth and powered by the sun;
And return to the earth when life ends.

John Stuffin

Ian Stuart Liston. Son of John and Marian Liston. Nephew of Katherine Liston. Husband to Vivien. Water Rat. Member of the Garrick. Council member of UK Theatre (formerly the TMA). Creator of Panto Central. Creator of Wes Janson – and his nemesis. Cancer campaigner. Chorister. Spear Carrier. Ferry Steward. Actor. Producer. Mr Chairman. Master of the theatrical anecdote. We commit your body to be cremated. Rest in the hearts and minds of all you love and all who love you.

CLOSING WORDS

Please be seated. We've celebrated Ian's life. We've said our goodbyes. But we have our memories. And the rest of our lives to remember.

If you want to share those memories – or just some refreshment – you're warmly invited to join Vivien at the Royal Oak Pub. You'll find details in your order of service.

As you leave you'll see that you can make a donation in Ian's memory to the Institute of Cancer Research and to the Royal Marsden. Again you'll find details in your order of service.

Please take good care of yourselves and each other.

Thank you for coming.

EXIT

Music - David Carter