

## Purveyors to the Court of Modern Variety

### The Ashton Brothers

Stage performances are by definition fleeting, and to a greater or lesser extent the same thing applies to theatre genres. In the Dutch language area, for example, the farce machinery of yesteryear and the radio play, if not yet dead, have become seriously marginalised. One genre that has suffered the most from the urge to experiment in theatre and the dawn of the new media is the time-honoured revue and the related variety show.

In the Netherlands, the popular comedian André van Duin (° 1947) is one of the last - perhaps the very last - to practise this genre in a professional blend of familiar and more contemporary forms of entertainment. But Van Duin is not the only one at work under the more general label of 'stage entertainment'. Although they probably appeal to a different - mainly younger and more theatre-oriented - audience, the four members of the Ashton Brothers also take inspiration from the elements of old-fashioned variety.

The Ashton Brothers, or simply the Ashtons, as they are often called, are Pepijn Gunneweg, Pim Muda, Joost Spijkers and Friso van Vemde Oudejans. They got to know each other as students at the Amsterdam Academy of Popular Entertainment. Having completed their course, in 2001 they decided to put on a show together. They took the name Ashton Brothers from a group of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Australian circus artists.

*The Tragedy of the Base*, derived partly from study assignments from their time at the academy, was an immediate bull's-eye. The impresario Jacques Senf discovered their talent at the International Theatre School Festival in Amsterdam and scheduled a tour for the following season. The show, expanded and adapted, opened in December 2002. The audience and the press were enthusiastic about it and its sustained success enabled them to schedule a second season, including several performances abroad. *The Tragedy of the Base*

thereby set the tone for a long series of successes both in the Netherlands and abroad.

This first show contained all the ingredients that would characterise the later productions. It won the Ashtons the Pall Mall Export Prize, an award for striking young talent in the Dutch culture sector. Here's a quote from the jury report: 'The Ashton Brothers make use of the variety tradition, but in an innovative form, and they overwhelm us with their unbridled youthful energy. The components of their show are acrobatics, slapstick and music, where humour is rapidly alternated with emotion and grand theatrical effects with moments of close intimacy.' This is a description of the content of the Ashton shows that is equally valid today; in each new production the balance may change, but not the ingredients.

The Ashtons made their international breakthrough with their second show, *Ballyhoo!*, which they also performed at the Fringe in Edinburgh. Partly because there is hardly any spoken text in the performances, and because the foundations are universal theatre arts, the Ashtons' idiom is understood all over the world. There is barely any textual depth to their shows and so their quality can be measured only by their entertainment value. And the strength of this is clearly demonstrated by the fact that *Ballyhoo!* kept going for two years and three hundred performances. On 3 October 2007, the group put on a show in Ljubljana at the invitation of the Dutch embassy in Slovenia, in the presence of the present King and Queen of the Netherlands.

Spring 2008 saw the premiere of their third show, called *Charlatans, a Medicine Show*. This piece remained on the group's repertoire for a very long time, though this was not simply as a result of its resounding success, but mainly because the initial touring schedule could not be completed due to a serious, long-term illness that Friso van Vemde Oudejans had to contend with. It's true that a replacement was sought and found, but even so about seventy performances had to be cancelled. In the end, the original foursome, including Van Vemde

© L. van Velzen



Oudejans, now declared cured, continued performing *Charlatans* until 2012.

In the meantime, other makers of music and theatre have discovered the extra dimensions yielded by collaborating with the Ashton Brothers. After a previous collective performance with the Dutch Wind Ensemble in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2009), during the 2011-12 season, the Ashtons appeared as guest performers in *Tales of 1001 Nights* by *Het Zuidelijk Toneel*, a major theatre company from the south of the Netherlands. With their musical talent, their daredevil feats and perfect sense of timing, they gave the performance the dynamism it occasionally lacked at other moments.

Since December 2012 they have been performing their tenth anniversary show, *Treasures*, a treasure trove of previously performed acts, now perfected even more, plus new material, all in a fantastic set with inventive use of perspective tricks. Van Vemde Oudejans says of the older numbers: 'You can perform them twenty times and yet still change them every time, though of course only the details. They can be polished like a diamond. There is always a facet that can be made sharper, flatter or shinier.'

*Treasures* will be touring at least until the end of April 2014. It once again comprises the typically masculine, morbid and above all magical elements we are used to from this foursome. Unfortunately it is impossible to describe exactly what one experiences and enjoys in just a few sentences. Is it possible for anyone who has

never seen the Ashtons to imagine, for example, a goat singing *Ave Maria* and then, after being fatally shot, taking a hilarious minute to die? Or the vain attempts by the actor Pepijn Gunneweg to reanimate a goldfish? Or two half-naked men playing rival penises?

But there are also a great many subtle and delicate moments. Though perhaps slightly too few to help determine the rhythm of the performance. In general the scale is grand, but there are also the minor grievances, and there are brilliant musical episodes when the laughter fades to make way for silent emotion. The actors' teamwork sometimes takes the spectator's breath away and audiences are full of wonder for their physical and mimetic skills.

It is no surprise that the quartet's antics rejoice in constant attention and that others try to take advantage of this too. Not only the Dutch Wind Ensemble and *Het Zuidelijk Toneel*, but for example the organisation that was responsible for the festive opening of the transformed *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam on 13 April 2013, too. Once again the Ashtons performed there in the presence of royals. It is an agreeable notion that even the most elevated circles have the opportunity to wonder at these Purveyors to the court of modern variety.

JOS NIJHOF

*Translated by Gregory Ball*

[www.ashtonbrothers.nl](http://www.ashtonbrothers.nl)