

a Canadian Jimmy Hutchinson *life on the* European stage



ACT 1 1943. The world is at war, but in quiet Niagara Falls, a baby boy is born to a carnival boss and a young woman with music in her heart. The parents divorce and the little boy is raised by his grandparents. But while his classmates dream of becoming firemen and cowboys, this boy has stars in his eyes – movie stars.

ACT 2 25 years later. Now a young music teacher, our hero returns to university for more studies, but in every free moment he sings – in bars, in synagogues and in churches around Montreal. The road beckons, and as understudy to the baritone in a ballet production, he tours Europe. At a prestigious opera school in Zurich he hones his talent as a comic baritone and the audience discovers, as **ACT 3** opens, that our hero's story can only be a musical...



PHOTOS: ROY BEUSKER

An epic in itself, the story of James Patrick Marco ‘Jimmy’ Hutchinson doesn’t need embellishing to be almost as dramatic as his stage productions of the past three and a half decades.

‘Sometimes I think I haven’t done anything with my life and then I wonder: How many Canadians have worked for 11 years in German and 20 years in Dutch?’ he says, the smile lines on his face coming to life. It’s a modest realisation for a man who’s currently appearing in the €10 million production of *Rembrandt De Musical*. Or for a man who’s been nominated for two John Kraaijkamp Musical Awards (the Dutch equivalent of Broadway’s Tony Awards). Or even for a man who, as voice coach, has the cream of the best-known performers in the Netherlands as his students. (The 2006

John Kraaijkamp awards included eight nominations and four winners who’d worked with Hutchinson at one time or another.)

Sitting in his immaculate and *gezellig* apartment in Amsterdam Oost, he is relaxed, recalling his 63-year history. Each story has a person attached to it, like his music professor in Montreal 40 years ago: Luciano Della Pergola, a former comic tenor at La Scala in Milan. ‘He recognised that I had a comic talent and he trained it. He taught me not to be afraid of using colours in my voice or doing what my feelings let me do. He always said: “You can’t learn to be a comic, but you can train it.” That is so true.’

A baritone, Hutchinson trained with the International Opera Studio in Zurich, and although his first contracts were with opera companies, his heart was in musicals. ‘For the opera, you are pigeon-holed, with your voice and your character. The comic characters are either bass or tenor. But for a musical, where my heart’s always been anyway because of the singing and the dancing, I can play anything I can sing.’

And so he has, beginning with *Kiss Me Kate* in German in 1974. For the next 11 years he worked at city theatres in Lüneburg, Koblenz, and Aachen. His steady contracts kept him working in opera corps and choirs; as characters in operettas, ballets and musicals; and in children’s theatre and straight plays.

It was 1985 when he finally crossed the border to work through the comic baritone roles with the Opera Forum in Enschede, now the Nationale Reisopera. In 1993, Joop van den Ende invited him to audition for the musical thriller, *Sweeney Todd*. He landed the role of the villain judge, Rechter Turpin. It was a turning point.

‘Then came a big decision. Do I stay with the opera with a contract until I’m 65, with security? Or do I become a freelance for the first time in my life at age 50?’ Seeing the glint in Hutchinson’s eyes now, there could be no question: ‘Something inside of me said, “Follow your heart, baby.”’

And he did, knowing that he could always give voice lessons, specialising in

musicals. So at an age when many people are winding down, Hutchinson was gearing up for one of the busiest times in his career.

After *Sweeney Todd*, he took on a Dutch production of *My Fair Lady* (including two German productions, he’s performed *My Fair Lady* more than 500 times!) and then worked with Opus One Theatreproducties on several musicals, including *The Jungle Book*, where his role as Baloo the Bear earned him his first Kraaijkamp nomination.

‘The role of Baloo was an amazing, amazing role for me. The music was good and the director gave me a lot of suggestions and direction and then just let me do it. So it really came from the inner soul.’ Somehow, as he recalls the role, a bit of inner Baloo seems to slip out.

Hutchinson went on to play in the Ollie B. Bommel classic *De Trullenhoedster* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with Opus One, before returning to another Van den Ende production, *42nd Street*.

‘To be a part of the ultimate American musical...’ he pauses. ‘I was the first to tap the part. It had never been done in a major production. They thought it was great to find a Bert Barry who could tap *Shuffle Off to Buffalo*.’ Or, as he sang in Dutch, ‘*Boemelen naar Buffalo*.’

Next came his role as Sultan Gez El Gapsel in *Aladdin* and his second Kraaijkamp nomination.

‘The honour of having been nominated twice blows my mind,’ he explains. ‘People ask why I’m so good in children’s theatre. I’m a teacher, so I know how children think. That’s why I have success as a vocal teacher. I am a pedagogue. I know how to go about this with patience and the realisation that it’s not going to happen immediately. I treat every one of my students not in a childish manner, but as a child who is learning something for the first time.’

Rembrandt de art history course?

In *Rembrandt De Musical*, Hutchinson seems to have found the perfect situation: an eager clientele for his coaching skills as *zangcoach* for the production as well as a showcase for his comic baritone talent

as Linckaerd, a cunning Amsterdam merchant.

Let's face it, any production that begins with a piece called 'Vader is Dood' can use a little comic relief. Hutchinson, along with **Peter Lusse** (Rippert) – a Dutch comedy fixture who has played in the *Flodder* films, lent his voice to the translation of *A Bug's Life*, and appeared in a long list of Dutch television standards – provide a well-balanced comedy duo that harkens back to Laurel and Hardy or even Abbot and Costello routines.

'You need the comic relief, but it can't be the Jimmy and Peter show. We have a chemistry, we get along,' says Hutchinson. 'I think the amount we do is just right. The audience wants to see more of us.'

Some in the audience might think they've seen more than enough of Hutchinson, if they can recognise his bare buttocks in the rambunctious tavern scene. The scene, which introduces the conniving barmaid Geertje Dirx (Annick Boer) to the audience, features a range of real-life characters, some of whom are later depicted in projections of Rembrandt's so-called dirty etchings.

'Oddly enough, as open as the Dutch are, there have been people who were actually offended,' explains Hutchinson.

But the quick glimpse of nudity is soon forgotten amidst the opulent costumes. Over 1,400 pieces of clothing make up the attire that meticulously matches the Rembrandt works projected behind the actors as they bring each tableau to life – not only the *Nightwatch* (complete with Saskia's apparition soon after her death) but the portraits of Amsterdam's elite, where each collar (*molensteenkraag*) required 20 metres of lace.

'It's a total art course,' he continues. An art course with dazzling musical numbers.

The production is a major one, but so is the honour of having been part of the spectacle. 'To be part of this production, for me as a foreigner, to even be consid-

ered for this, is a thrill,' says Hutchinson. 'I'm the only foreigner that's not a native Dutch speaker (There are a few Belgians). I told them they could change my name to Jimmy van Hutchinson.'

Scenes from Upcoming Productions

What's next for 'van Hutchinson,' after Rembrandt closes at the end of this year?

'I'm not making any promises, but I think Rembrandt may be my last big one. I'm not going to stop – just my last big one,' he clarifies.

Along with more comic baritone roles that might come his way, Hutchinson has a one-man show that's popular with corporate events and parties, banquets and weddings: *Hats off to Broadway*. 'It's show music. I do a parody on opera that I wrote about a cowboy going to Nashville, but the Grand Ole Opry is sold out, so the cowboy goes to the opera instead.' At this he breaks into a song, first in a cowboy twang and then in an operatic outburst. 'I accompany myself on piano and provide commentary in Dutch, German or English,' he says, without missing a beat.

And then? 'I've spent most of my adult life in Europe. I would find it difficult to go back to Canada, but I don't know if I can stay after I retire,' he says with the usual expat uncertainty about Dutch immigration regulations.

'But I'm one of those people who, if there's what seems to have been a disappointment, it's always worked out. Whatever happens, I make it the best. I've been very lucky that way. One door will close, and I think, 'Oh my goodness, what am I going to do?' and another one opens up simultaneously. So if it means I can't stay, there's a reason somehow.'

Jimmy Hutchinson, 63, is a comic baritone currently appearing as Linckaerd in Rembrandt De Musical in Amsterdam's Royal Carré Theatre. A Canadian by birth, he has spent most of his career in Germany and the Netherlands, appearing in a wide range of productions, especially musicals. Nominated for two John Kraaijkamp Musical Awards, he was a judge in the 2004 AVRO Sterrenjacht and has a one-man show Hats Off to Broadway. He also is a successful vocal coach, specialising in musicals. <



PHOTO: ROY BELSER

Rembrandt De Musical: Understanding a Dutch masterpiece

Rembrandt's 400th anniversary only comes around once every... well... 400 years! So choosing a way to commemorate the occasion should be taken seriously. There is a wide, wide range of events to choose from, but if you are truly set on paying homage to the Dutch icon, at the top of your list should be tickets for Rembrandt De Musical.

A musical in Dutch? Sure the music's astounding and the lyrics are clever, but if your language skills are lacking (or you have guests in town), should you even bother to attend a performance in Dutch? Oh, yes. Definitely bother!

First of all, the production is visually opulent. Over 450 costumes – 1,400 pieces of clothing – make up the wardrobe. Posing, dancing and moving in front of Rembrandt's masterpieces, the actors reconstruct many of his greatest works: *Nightwatch*, of course; Saskia (Wieneke Remmers) posing as Flora and other characters; a remarkable likeness of Jan Six (Quirijn de Lang) in front of his portrait and even *The Anatomy Lesson*, the artist's big breakthrough. And behind the actors in their authentic costumes, Rembrandt's works are projected – oversized and in detail.

But *Rembrandt De Musical* has another ace in the hole for non-Dutch-speaking theatregoers: *ShowTrans*. This audio device is like having a Dutch friend – a concise Dutch friend with good manners – sitting next to you, giving you a very quick and thorough rundown on what's about to happen in each scene. After telling you a few lines: 'Saskia is 29 years old when, a mere eight months after the birth of Titus, she passes away. The painter is heartbroken by the loss of his charming muse, who inspired some of his most beautiful paintings,' the imaginary friend shuts up and lets you enjoy the scene.

ShowTrans is available in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian for €10 per performance. Each person needing translation requires a separate apparatus (earplugs cannot be shared and the description does not repeat). The same descriptions are listed in English in the back of the programme (€15). To get the very best understanding, read through the programme listings, then listen on the headset during the show.

Rembrandt De Musical
Royal Carré Theatre, Amsterdam
Until 10 December 2006
Tickets: €19 - €69