

Alphonso - 2018/2019 Tour

We always said it would be an uphill task promoting a show about someone most people had forgotten, played by someone no one had heard of.



So it was. We opened at the **Lamb Theatre in the Old Town, Eastbourne** – an ancient inn with a thriving pub theatre that

claimed Charles Dickens as one of its earliest performers. With capacity a little in excess of forty, we ran for five performances and bedded the show in.



Shortly afterwards, we played 'for one night only' at the

Brighton Fringe. We

had chosen a venue

adjacent to the Theatre Royal, where Billy Merson had performed 'Alphonso' for the first time in 1910. The nearby Unitarian Church, with its high columned

BRIGHTON FRINGE.

façade, was reminiscent of the Lyceum and we mustered a 75% capacity house. The strains of a jazz band at a pub across the street were audible during the final scenes, adding to the sense of a vibrant festival around us. *Fringereview* rated us 'Highly recommended'.



Our next foray was to the **Nottingham Arts Theatre** in Billy Merson's home town. An invitation to promote the show in a charity concert at the nearby **Malt Cross Music Hall** pub, where he had played in his early career, floundered when it went into receivership a week before we were due to perform. Worse than that, it appeared that Nottingham residents had long forgotten their very own comedian.

Following frantic flyer placements, a *BBC Notts Radio* interview and a *Notts TV* appearance we managed to fill the studio theatre and received good feedback in the *Nottingham LeftLion Arts Review*.

Fringe festivals had been targeted as potentially fertile venues and the **Pavilion Theatre** proved a splendid setting during the **Hailsham Festival**. It had been built in the 1920's as a deco cinema,

looked like a music hall – both internally and externally – and

provided a perfect backdrop for a story that reflected the impact cinema had in eclipsing variety.



Our subsequent charity performance in the crypt of **St George the Martyr, Borough High Street,**

London, attracted a capacity house with many members of the *Players' Theatre* attending. Versed in this genre of theatre, the reception throughout was akin to rolling back the years. By coincidence, there were further Dickensian connections. A surviving wall of the *Marshalsea Prison*, where his father had been imprisoned for debt, forms the northern boundary of the Churchyard and the church features prominently in *Little Dorrit*.



Three further charity performances followed in and around Lewes. All sold out and the final performance of 2018, at the Lewes Little Theatre, was given a four star review by the *Brighton Evening Argus*.



We took a break for Christmas and prepared for the year ahead. Despite our apparent ability to attract audiences, we kept our original misgivings in mind.

BURY ST EDMUNDS
FRINGE
FESTIVAL 2019

Performances at the **Bury St Edmunds Fringe Festival** in Suffolk and **Benenden**, in Kent, required an inordinate amount of publicity to generate interest. We worked hard and were fortunate to secure an interview with *Radio Suffolk* and a three minute television feature on *BBC South East Today*.



We subsequently played at the Assembly Rooms in **Chichester** – a beautiful Regency building where both Liszt and Paganini had performed.

The next day we appeared at the **Kino Teatr, St Leonards on Sea** – a delightful venue boasting a well-tuned grand piano and, in keeping with music hall tradition, a bar in the auditorium.

We had been advised that, if the sun shone, people went to the beach but, if it rained, matinee

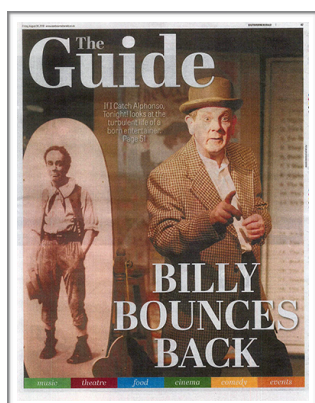


audiences swelled. It was a glorious hot day but we nevertheless enjoyed an appreciative, if diminished, house.



The **Eastbourne Royal Hippodrome** is a beautiful theatre, designed by Charles Phipps in 1883. Billy Merson

had played there in Variety during 1938 and had declared in his curtain speech that he would have done so before had he known how warm-hearted Eastbourne audiences were.



The *Eastbourne Herald* had featured us on the front of their entertainment guide and printed a fulsome preview. It felt strange to finally perform on a stage that he had



occupied and, although we were playing solely to the stalls area of the theatre, there was an element of excitement and anticipation from an enthusiastic house.



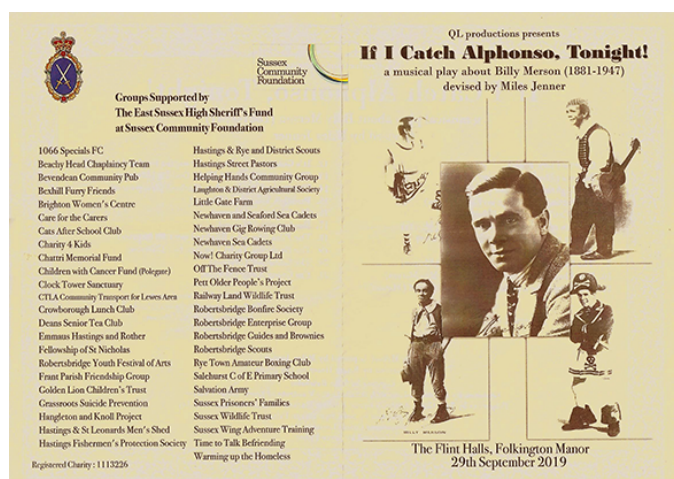
A well-received performance at the **Rye Arts Festival** was followed by a final, sell out, charity performance at **Folkington Manor** in Sussex.



Of the fifteen venues we played during 2018/19, five were charity performances and all ticket sales were donated to the

respective causes. We estimate that these raised £9,500 in total and that subsequent donations, from anonymous donors who had attended a performance, increased this figure by a further £7,000.

As a production company, we just about covered our costs – aided by the fact that we were all unpaid and heavily subsidised our travels in the sure knowledge that these were the nearest thing to a holiday that we would get.



We have reached the end of our two year tour and simply do not have the time or funding to extend it. **We are, however, happy to stage charity performances in aid of good causes** where organisers are able to generate an audience at a suitable venue. **Please contact us via our website page if this is of interest.** In the interim, we are about to make

a film version of the show to ensure that **'The Billy Merson Story'** survives. It will be produced by **Rob Reiner of *Gilrei Video***.

I would like to sign off by recording my gratitude to the many people who gave their time and experience, freely and enthusiastically, to realise a long standing ambition to research and stage a tribute to Billy Merson. In particular, **Roger Roser** who transcribed songs from vintage recordings when sheet music was unobtainable and embellished them with his own arrangements. As well as being an intuitive accompanist, he is an accomplished musical director. There would have been no show without him.

I am also indebted to the professional actors and directors who read the script in draft form and/or attended the show in rehearsal and performance. In particular Lloyd Johnston, who had played Billy Merson in *"Meet Mr Merson"*, staged by Emma Touring Company in the 1980's, and greeted my tentative enquiries with a generosity of spirit that spurred me on. The support, constructive comments and encouragement that I received from those many friends cannot be underestimated. Neither can the patience of my dance tutor, Lorraine Davis, who instilled in me the minimal routines required and the confidence to perform them.

All the production team are listed in the programme on our website. Each and every one was fundamental to the success of the project and I cannot thank them enough for their enthusiasm and commitment. I am also indebted to my son, friends and colleagues who transported the set, props and costumes to our various venues.

Finally, I would like to record my heartfelt thanks to my wife, Sally, who lived and breathed the project with me and was there – erecting and striking the set, feeding us in transit and glued to the script backstage - at each and every performance. Her honest appraisals throughout were invaluable.

Everyone worked so hard and we shared such happy times together - that will be my abiding memory.

Miles Jenner

The Venues of the Tour 2018/2019

If I Catch Alphonso, Tonight!

Premiered May 2018 at Lamb Theatre, Eastbourne

Then toured at the following venues :

Brighton Fringe Festival

Arts Theatre, Nottingham

Hailsham Festival

St George, Borough, London

Selmeston, Sussex

Cliffe, Lewes

Lewes Little Theatre

Bury St Edmunds Fringe Festival

Benenden, Kent

Assembly Rooms, Chichester

Kino Theatre, St. Leonards-on-Sea

Royal Hippodrome, Eastbourne

Rye Arts Festival

Folkington Manor, Polegate

No further venues are pending at present.