

*She was Ricky Gervais's scatty sidekick and now has Hollywood in stitches, too.*

**Alison Jane Reid**  
*speaks to Ashley Jensen about feminism, fish 'n' chips and... er... the invention of the vibrator*

# The first lady of FUNNNY

**A**SHLEY JENSEN, Princess of British Comedy, makes the art of comic timing look simple. Of course, it isn't at all. It is rather her twinkling, carefully honed ability that really makes the audience believe that she is so terribly, disastrously inept as Maggie, Ricky Gervais's hopeless sidekick in *Extras*. Or enables her to absolutely steal the show in *Ugly Betty*, when she gives spectacular, noisy birth on the catwalk.

It was a mesmerising performance, with our girl crucially upstaging the whole scary fashion circus with every grimace. Quite a feat, in these no-holds-barred, reality TV-obsessed times – and a barbed comment on society's loss of restraint, decorum and innocence.

No wonder America has fallen for Jensen: she's a genuine blonde, the kind they seem to have forgotten how to make. They even love her Scottish burr. Part latterday Joyce Grenfell, with a razor-sharp ability to deliver tragedy with prim seriousness, she is also a glowing, but perhaps not-quite-perfect, Hollywood dream girl. And she is refreshingly normal, too: she prefers no-frills camping and herbal tea to Botox.

So what next? After *Accidentally On Purpose*, her most recent US sitcom, which didn't make it to a second series, Jensen looks like a girl in need of a better script. Thankfully, she has just finished making *Hysteria*, a film that is already beginning to create quite a buzz for its female director, 'a wonderful woman called Tanya Wexler', and its clever treatment of two, still relatively taboo subject areas: women's emancipation and the invention of the... er... vibrator.

'There is that subject matter, it's true,' says Ashley, trying her very best to look coy. 'But there is more to it than that. It's a

romantic comedy that works on many levels. It is set in 1880, and there is a lot about men's attitudes towards women at that time, to the rise of the suffragettes and the emancipation of women.

'On the one hand, you've got Jonathan Pryce,' explains Ashley, 'who plays a doctor who is offering – now, how shall I put this – erotic massage, which he employs to treat women for a very nasty condition called Hysteria. So popular are his treatments that he has queues of rich women lining the street.

'And on the other, you have his daughter, played by Maggie Gyllenhaal, who is an arch feminist and goes out saving vulnerable women from poverty and violent husbands. I play one of the women she tries to save; it's a clever, interesting film.'

But how, I wonder out loud, does the film propose to show these lengthy massage sessions? 'Quite graphically, I can tell you,' says Ashley, absolutely deadpan. 'But within the realms of taste.'

I can't wait.

Now 41, Ashley attended Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, then spent years grafting away at the craft of acting in more mainstream British television, with roles in *EastEnders*, *Casualty* and *Roughnecks*, alongside pithier stage roles at the Royal Court and Traverse Theatre, and the high point, playing Regan in *King Lear*. Then came the surprise – international acclaim for *Extras*, for which she was nominated for an Emmy Award, and the tag of British funny girl. 'That was both exciting and strange,' she says, 'because no one knew I could be funny.'

But success hasn't changed her one bit. Though – shock, horror! – she does admit to using a stylist for the red carpet. Most of the time, however, she prefers to slouch around in her favourite red cowboy boots. To that you can add a voice like smoke and



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