



MODERN ENGLISH CLASSIC: (left to right) Christopher Connel, Michael Hodgson, Deka Walmsley, David Whitaker in *The Pitmen Painters*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

The Pitmen Painters: sublime, real-life portrait of miners as artists

The Pitmen Painters

Written by Lee Hall

Directed by Max Roberts

Through December 12, 2010

Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street

(212-719-1300), www.ManhattanTheatreClub.org

By Scott Harrah

This import from London's National Theatre is, without question, the most thought-provoking British play since 2004's *The History Boys*. However, Lee Hall's biographical, true-life adaptation of William Feaver's book about the Ashington Group—coalminers from Northumberland, England who became painters—is both cerebral and complicated, and that's why it is also so riveting. Everything in the first act, from Hall's crisp dialogue to the outstanding performances of the cast, has us rooting for this quintessential story of “outsider” artists in the 1930s. What also makes *The Pitmen Painters* such great theater is the way it gets us thinking about such intellectual questions as “what is art?” and, “can a person transcend his or her class,” — even in stodgy old England, the land that virtually invented classism?

Fortunately, despite a few narrative glitches in the less-compelling second act, one doesn't have to be an Anglophile or particularly savvy about British history and politics to appreciate the simple message here. Substitute Newcastle-upon-Tyne (where the show originated) for Pittsburgh or Cleveland in the same era and this could easily be an American story. *The Pitmen Painters* gets us thinking about whether anyone can give up a prosaic occupation and livelihood to pursue one's true dream in life.

The story focuses on five miners who sign up for an art appreciation class taught by their instructor, Robert Lyon (Ian Kelly). The miners, used to everything being black or white, are astonished when they learn that art is essentially a “gray area” based on perception and emotions instead of facts and science. The true brilliance of the first act is watching the remarkable Ian Kelly teaching the men how to think outside of their comfort zones as they watch slides of everything from High Renaissance and Michelangelo to Van Gogh's works. Playwright Lee Hall's crackling repartee about art and society and Max Roberts' fluid direction of the outstanding cast all help make discourse about the Sistine Chapel and British oppression seem like lighthearted fare, and it is surprisingly entertaining and never comes across as preachy or heavy-handed.

The men are a microcosm of working-class archetypes: Harry Wilson (Michael Hodgson), who works not in the mine but a dentist's office and has a penchant for socialism; and Oliver Kilbourn (Christopher Connel), the miner whose paintings so inspire wealthy benefactor Helen Sutherland (Phillipa Wilson) that she offers to pay him a stipend if he'll quit his job to become a full-time artist.

Unfortunately, the second act is not as seamless as the first. Although the plot twists dealing with Helen's generous offer to Oliver are truly intriguing, there is a bit too much esoteric expounding about socialism and Britain's role in the postwar world, as the once-glorious Empire crumbles and the nation must deal with its own domestic crises. However, the solid ensemble performances of the cast keep us interested in the characters' lives despite the story's minor snags. Credit must also be given to Deka Walmsley, David Whitaker, and Brain Lonsdale, all of whom are excellent. Ultimately, *The Pitmen Painters* is a fascinating portrait of ordinary people struggling to make a better life for themselves through art and education.

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