

# BWW Review: Wondrous Ensemble in THE PITMEN PAINTERS at American Stage

by



*"[It] begs the question: why we assume that art is the exclusive domain of the educated, the privileged, the elite? Why do we assume that these people have more to say than anybody else. And here is the lie to that assumption. Here is the proof that we as society have got it*

*wrong and in every mine, every street, workplace there is the potential for works of art to blossom and grow and amaze us with their riches." --from THE PITMEN PAINTERS*

There are certain shows that I love so much that I feel protective of them. I go back to them at key times, recounting various scenes in my head, replaying some of the moments over and over. Great theatre alone should do this for me, but not all phenomenal shows are this close to my heart. In the film world, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* is obviously one of the great cinematic works, the masterpiece of masterpieces, but his later, messier *Touch of Evil* is much closer to me, and I find myself feeling protective of it, especially when someone shoves it aside for the more famous *Kane*. Lee Hall's *THE PITMEN PAINTERS*, the last play of the American Stage season, is one such show to me. I love it in a way that is very personal.

When I was five, I discovered a love of art by sheer accident. My parents had forced me into the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and it was there that I saw it: Jan Vermeer's *Girl in a Red Hat*. There was something in

her eyes looking back, a moment captured for eternity, a mystery of sorts that haunted me. It was a tiny painting, but it stood out in a room of Dutch paintings, eclipsing all those Rubens, Rembrandts and Hals. It was almost fifty years ago, and yet I remember it like it was just last year. And I realized at that moment in 1968, at the age of five, that I was meant to be in the arts in one way or another. My parents bought me oil paints, and at age 6, I painted my own version of *The Last Supper*. It turned out to be nothing but a canvas smeared in darkness with a single dot of yellow light in the middle; very abstract for an upcoming first grader.

Not long after that, I became feverishly obsessed and even, at age five or six, toured a group of tourists in a re-creation of the Sistine Chapel ceiling at the National Geographic Museum. Some years later, in fourth grade, I scribed my own (unpublished) art book, *Lives of the Artists: From Giotto to Picasso*. This thing called art, I knew, would be my calling. (I would move from painting to the theatre in my teens.) The characters in **THE PITMEN PAINTERS**, a group of miners whose lives will change due to art, will have the same epiphany as this suburban kid; they just happened to be much older than I was.

Set in Ashington, England between 1934 and 1942, **THE PITMEN PAINTERS** follows the lives of miners who take an art class and suddenly find another purpose in their lives. Their works would ultimately lead them to be known as the Ashington Group, and they will become curiosities and marvels of the art world. It's actually based on a true story, and the paintings used throughout (on two overhead screens) are the real stunning works by these "mere" miners.

The production at American Stage is powerful stuff, one of the best shows of the year. And the cast is superb.

Gregg Weiner, so memorable as Rothko in American Stage's *Red* last year, gives an equally strong performance here as perhaps the most talented painter of the lot, Oliver. His work is full of layers, longing, understanding

the meaning of art like none of his contemporaries. He gets it. If there is a lead role in *THE PITMEN PAINTERS*, it's Oliver. It's a mesmerizing turn. Derrick Phillips, unrecognizable with his long beard, adds humor to the part of Jimmy Floyd. I have enjoyed Phillips in several past roles, especially his various roles in Jobsite's *Lebensraum* which showed off his versatility; but I also thought he was at best anachronistic (in looks) in *The Children's Hour* and fine in *Silent Sky*. Here, he is sensational and irresistibly funny. He absolutely shines in his best local performance yet.

Steven Sean Garland is always a joy in the various shows that I've seen him in over the past several years, from a fairy/mechanical in freefall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a Caliban unlike any other in a not-very-good production of *The Tempest*. He is always so real, so alive, but also very comfortable in his own skin onstage. And he's as good as it gets here. His accent is spot on, and he rightly speaks his lines quickly, shooting them out of his mouth like a hail of bullets. We understand his character--a union worry wart who is always afraid that they are breaking some rule or another--and Garland is at the top of the list for a Best in Cast honor.

V Craig Heidenrich's Harry Wilson is the Marxist of the group, and he adds so much to this already incredible ensemble. There's a moment when he tells one of his fellow artists to take advantage of some good fortune, and you see it in his passionate eyes that when one of the group succeeds, the entire group wins. It's a sterling moment.

Britt Michael Gordon does well enough as the Young Lad, but hits a haughty bulls-eye as the successful artist, Ben Nicholson. Ally Farzetta stands out in her brief scenes as a model (the mere idea of her posing nude sends the Ashington Group in a tizzy, and this is the closest that the play gets to resembling a TV sit-com). Denise Cormier is brilliant as the wealthy Helen Sutherland. Gavin Hawk plays Robert Lyon, the Ashington Group's teacher, and provides a nice balance to the mighty miners. He's an instructor whose wide-eyed enthusiasm and belief in these artists is just wonderful to

behold. And Hawk plays him as almost timid in manner but soulfully strong in his convictions.

This is one amazing ensemble, and their accents are for the most part consistent. They are guided beautifully by director Brendon Fox. Scott Cooper's set design is a wooden paradise, where chairs and easels are moved about, minimal but used to maximum efficiency. (The canvases are blank; we see the actual artwork from the overhead screens.) The overall lighting (by Phillip Franck) is exquisite. Jerid Fox's projections work quite well (there was one minor glitch in the projections on opening night, but nothing too jarring).

Rarely do I single out set changes in a production. But in this production of *THE PITMEN PAINTERS*, it is woven in the fabric of the show, as important as many of the scenes. To the sound of whistles and chiseling (great sound design by Rachel Harrison), the actors move with precision setting up the next scene. It's quite effective and always keeps us in the moment, reminding us of the Ashington artists' day job. I have seen shows where set changes last so long, you can order a medium steak at Bern's, eat it, and visit the dessert room in the time it takes for the scene to change. That may be an exaggeration, but not by much. In one show, I once had to endure a five-minute set change for a thirty-second scene (and that's not hyperbole). But here, in this show, the set changes come across as works of art in and of themselves. Every director needs to see *THE PITMEN PAINTERS*, especially if they want to find creative ways to tackle lengthy scene changes. Some directors don't realize that pace matters so much in a production, but director Brendan Fox obviously does. You watch the changes excitedly; it's masterful staging.

There are still some issues. Act 1 is far stronger than Act 2, and sometimes the script seems to belabor certain points. But the show is so powerful, and it's message that art resides in anyone from all walks of life who desires it is so important, that the show flies by. It's the type show that will lead you to

research more on the internet, to check out all of the Ashington Group's splendid paintings. This is what the best theatre does; it doesn't end with the applause at curtain call. It keeps replaying itself in our minds.

THE PITMEN PAINTERS ends the theatre season with a glorious stroke. In a year of several memorable American Stage productions (*Jitney*, *4000 Miles*), this one stands as the finest of the lot. It's a lovely production.

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