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Theatre Tulsa successfully mines The Pitmen Painters

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Theatre Tulsa

The Pitmen Painters

Rating: ★★★★★

Based on a book by art critic William Feaver, Lee Hall's *The Pitmen Painters* is a clunky piece of drama, featuring characters we know very little about and many scenes that appear to have been cobbled together, where arguments about art, politics, class and even more art abound. Not a great night's entertainment you might think, but there you'd be wrong. Theatre Tulsa's production of *The Pitmen Painters*, currently running at the Philbrook Museum, is funny, captivating and often stimulating, with fine performances from an excellent cast.

Hall, best known for *Billy Elliot*, once again returns to his working class roots in this true story of a group of coal miners who, in 1934, took up an evening class in art appreciation. Under the guidance of teacher, Robert Lyon, theory is quickly abandoned in favour of practice and the group

begin to produce remarkably promising and talented works, eventually coming to receive national recognition for their paintings. Hall follows these men through the Second World War and up to the nationalisation of the coal mines, using their story as a backdrop against which to argue about the importance of art, class, politics and individuality.

The script's often didactic tone, hidden agendas and unconvincing transition of miners into art theorists, as opposed to actual artists, poses many problems for performance. In tackling these problems director Vern Stefanic makes some astute decisions, beginning with placing this production in the historic Philbrook Museum. The Philbrook's cultural and artistic ambience provides the perfect backdrop against which to raise questions regarding the significance and importance of art. However, there is a small price to pay as the auditorium's acoustics are not as favourable as those in a purpose built theatre and the stage space is restrictive. The use of large, black flats to narrow the space even further creates a claustrophobic environment on stage, reinforced by the minimum set. While this sense of claustrophobia was successful for the most part, reflecting the closed conditions these men lived and worked in, it occasionally looked cramped. Lighting by David Lawrence managed to effectively provide some depth and relief, but color came primarily from images, often of paintings, projected onto a large screen that dominated the back wall.

Stefanic's real achievement however lies in eliciting impeccable performances from an outstanding cast. Attention to detail, right down to a credible North of England accent, ensured performances were strong, convincing and engaging, elevated above the slim mouthpieces that appear in the script. Kurt Harris, as the artist and teacher Robert Lyon, intent on saving the noble working class, delivers a wonderfully rounded performance that always engages, even when lecturing about art. Craig Walter, as the Union man George Brown, and Don Miller as the Marxist, Somme veteran Harry Wilson, play the elder statesmen of the group with wonderful finesse. Nate Gavin is always engaging as Jimmy Floyd, the group's less educated member and Jarrod Kopp crafts a compelling performance as Oliver Kilbourn, the group's most gifted and conflicted artist. Susan Webb as the art patron Helen Sutherland provides a wonderful contrast to the working class artists in a performance that is subtle yet powerfully present.

Supporting cast are equally strong. Credible performances by Hunter Cates as the rookie Lad, a sort of fifth member of the group who leaves for war and Michael Bernart, as the artist Ben Nicholson, bring added dimension to the production. As does Sara Wilemon as the artist's model Susan Parks, who, in two brief cameos, manages to portray with compelling authority an independent woman in a conservative man's world.

On the surface *The Pitmen Painters* might appear to be advocating Socialism. More accurately it is a condemnation of Britain's Labour Party who, in recent decades, has been perceived as abandoning their working class roots. But where *The Pitmen Painters* truly resonates is in its portrayal of artists who are restricted by practices that inhibit them from achieving their true potential. And with the worrying prospect of serious cutbacks to the arts being a very real possibility in the foreseeable future *The Pitmen Painters* is a timely reminder that art is vital, that society needs its artists and that a society and its people are bitterly impoverished without them.

Like the mines to which it refers, *The Pitmen Painters*, is potentially something of a black pit. One could very easily get lost in there or come up with only a handful of coal. But Theatre Tulsa have dug deep and, in the process, have managed to produce something of a diamond in this, the first American production of the recently re-written *The Pitmen Painters*.

The Pitmen Painters runs at the Philbrook Museum July 9th, 13th, 14th and 16th at 8.00pm, and on July 10th at 2.00 pm.

Tickets are \$18.00

Warning: This production contains brief nudity.



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