



The Pitmen Painters

By Lee Hall

Inspired by a book by William Feaver
Directed by Leslie Martinson

REMINDER:

POST-SHOW
DISCUSSION
WEDNESDAYS

1/25, 2/1, 2/8

with cast and artistic staff

Appreciating Arts Education

Robert Lyon has his work cut out for him as he sets out to teach “art appreciation” to the miners of Ashington, England in the first scene of *The Pitmen Painters*. Within minutes it seems there could never be a group less suited to the task; the men, having left school at age eleven, have no frame of reference for what he’s teaching, and little interest in “looking at paintings of cherubs and all that.”

Rather, the men’s interest lies in understanding what they deem “proper art.” As one miner puts it, “We just want to be able to look at a picture and know what it means.” They have no grand aspirations of fame and fortune, no idea that their own work will one day be celebrated by “proper” artists. They merely want to be able to understand an artist’s meaning, and thus, to know more about the world around them. They do eventually learn to find meaning in the works of other painters, but only after first learning to express themselves.

Had the tale of *The Pitmen Painters* been invented by arts education advocates it could hardly have said more to promote their cause. The fact that the story is true only deepens its resonance.

Though we can be grateful that children are no longer ousted from school to join the work force as pre-teens, the education many receive includes no more in-depth study of the arts than the pitmen had. With legislation like No Child Left Behind in the US and the English Baccalaureate in the UK, schools are forced to focus on more “essential” subjects.

While neither program specifically excludes the arts, courses like art, music, and drama all too often go by the wayside when funding becomes scarce. This is a real disservice to our youth; though the number of students who will grow up to be professional artists may be low, the skills and habits instilled by studying the arts, including self expression, critical thinking, and innovation, are invaluable to all.

Fortunately, as *The Pitmen Painters* teaches us, it is never too late to learn. Education is a lifelong process, and we at TheatreWorks strive to introduce new ideas and provide food for thought with everything we do. ★ Katie Dai



PATRICK JONES & PAUL WHITWORTH / PHOTO MARK KITAOKA

Contrasting Artists

"WHITE RELIEF" BY BEN NICHOLSON

In the first act of *The Pitmen Painters*, the miners puzzle over a recent acquisition of Helen Sutherland, a wealthy art collector. The piece in question is described in the script as "a circle cut out of a square—entirely white." It is as different from their own work as night and day, an example of abstract art which has no obvious meaning. In contrast, the miners' paintings are fairly literal representations drawn from their own lives. (For more on these diverging schools of art, see "Painting 'What You Know,'" on page 3.)

The artist responsible for the abstract piece was Ben Nicholson. The son of two painters, he seems to have been destined for the art world. He was educated at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he was the contemporary of several notable artists. His sister became an artist; one of



"MY LIFE AS A PITMAN" BY OLIVER KILBOURN

his brothers an architect. His three wives were (in order) a painter, a sculptor, and a photographer. He was, in a word, an insider.

Nicholson appears in *The Pitmen Painters* during the second act. While at Helen Sutherland's estate, he has a chance encounter with one of the miners, Oliver Kilbourn. The two have a brief exchange, during which the audience marvels at how these two men, whose lives have taken such different paths, should both wind up in the same place. But while both men create breathtaking works of art, their lives remain as different as their paintings. Nicholson is a career artist, with all the celebrations and tribulations that go with the job. For Kilbourn, who has spent his whole life in a mine, painting is a reason to come up for air. ★ Katie Dai

The Pitmen Painters Plot Synopsis

It is 1934 in Ashington, a city in the far north of England. A group of coal miners, many of whom left school before they were teens, are attending the first meeting of an Art Appreciation class offered by the Workers Educational Association. When their teacher, Robert Lyon, starts showing them slides of famous works of art he quickly realizes that they don't have a common vocabulary—many of the miners have never left Ashington and the town doesn't even have a library. Lyon quickly changes course, and after some discussion the group agrees to a "learning by doing" method through which they will learn about Art Appreciation by creating art. When some of the art they create proves to be extraordinary, Lyon begins introducing them to other artists and collectors and they face decisions they never dreamed of before they started painting.

THE CAST

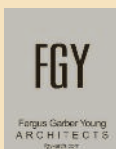
In order of appearance

George Brown	James Carpenter*
Oliver Kilbourn	Patrick Jones*
Jimmy Floyd	Jackson Davis
Young Lad/Ben Nicholson	Nicholas Pelezar*
Harry Wilson	Dan Hiatt*
Robert Lyon	Paul Whitworth
Susan	Kathryn Zdan*
Helen Sutherland	Marcia Pizzo
Stage Manager	Jamie D. Mann*
Assistant Stage Manager	Joyce Davidson*

* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States

Actors' headshots and bios can be found on
The Pitmen Painters page on TheatreWorks' website.
theatreworks.org/shows/1112-season/the-pitmen-painters

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Painting “What You Know”

The mid 1930s saw two very different strains of art. First was the abstraction of Piet Mondrian (Netherlands) and Ben Nicholson (England): non-representational, often geometric shapes rather than painting from life or nature. The other strain was almost diametrically opposed—painting life as the artists knew it. This work was epitomized not only by The Ashington Group of *The Pitmen Painters* (who had no knowledge of formal art), but by the Regionalism movement in the US.

The Ashington Group started painting to learn about art, and became famous for their work in the process. Their paintings are considered Naïve or Outsider Art because they started without knowledge of traditional painting techniques such as perspective.

In the case of Regionalism, the artists made a conscious choice to reject abstraction and return to realistically “painting what they knew”—returning to the American Midwest to work. The most famous work to come out of this movement turned out to be one of the most iconic paintings in history, a father and daughter in front of their farmhouse with a pitchfork: Iowan Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*.

Part of the same movement, John Steuart Curry (from Kansas) painted his works from life, from *Tornado over Kansas* (pictured above) to *Tragic Prelude*, a mural in the Kansas Statehouse featuring abolitionist John Brown and others involved in the anti-slavery movement in the mid-1800s.

The third person in the Regionalist triumvirate was Thomas Hart Benton from Missouri. He, too, painted murals in a realistic style, full of energy and movement and far from the abstractions of other 1930s painters. His subjects include Huck Finn and his African American friend Jim—in fact Benton painted quite a few pieces focused on African Americans, a subject not usually considered “appropriate” for artwork in that time.

There were California Regionalists as well. These artists predominantly painted watercolors of rural subjects—landscapes, towns, and people. Some of these works also contained social commentary, which has been at least partially attributed to the influence of Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera.

In England there was another amateur group of painters, the Wapping Group, which formed in 1939. They sketched and painted by the Thames River as a group, aiming to “appreciate each other’s company while painting outdoors together in all weathers.” Like the Ashington Group, their work has been exhibited in galleries throughout England.

This trend of painting from life continued into the 1950s with the Florida Highwaymen. These African American men from Florida started with no training, as the Ashington Group did, but there was a difference beyond their race. The Highwaymen were not painting to learn or as a hobby as were the Ashington miners, but to make money to avoid working in the Florida orchards, one of the few jobs available to them in the Jim Crow south. A teacher sent Alfred Hair, a young African American, to study with a local white artist, A.E. Backus. Alfred would leave his lessons and teach about twenty of his friends what his teacher taught him. Soon they started selling their landscapes from the back of a car for about \$35. They had great success, even in white neighborhoods, and painted very quickly. Sometimes they worked in assembly line fashion and are known to have completed as many as 35 paintings in a day. Their work was rediscovered in the mid 1990s by Museum Director Jim Fitch and has become increasingly popular. As unlike “traditional” art as their process might have been, their paintings now sell for as much as \$6,000.

All of these artists followed the “paint what you know” dictum, and were successful in their own ways painting scenes and people that many in the art world had never experienced or considered subjects for art. ★ Vickie Rozell

An Interview with Dialect Coach Kimberly Mohne Hill

Dramaturg Vickie Rozell talks with Dialect Coach Kimberly Mohne Hill about *The Pitmen Painters*.

VR: What does a dialect coach do?

KMH: I talk to the director and we decide how authentic we want to be. A lot of times the script tells us; the dialect might be written in, as happens with *The Pitmen Painters*, so we have to go as close to that as we can without being unintelligible. From there I find out about the history of the region and what the sounds are based on—social class, occupation, etc. I look for native sources for the dialect, people who speak it or have been recorded. I write down what I hear as different—if we say “ow” for how and they say “oo”—and I make a chart that tells the actors these are the changes that we are going to try to embrace. We adapt it for the stage but we try to remain as true as we can.

VR: Where do you find recordings?

KMH: There is an oral narrative movement—StoryCorps (a US oral narrative collection), the BBC Voices project, the Library of Congress audio archives—which is recording first hand accounts of native speakers. For the Ashington Group, *The Roots of English* is the story of how English has evolved all over England and they have recordings tracing the Pitmatic dialect [used by the region’s miners].

VR: What do you do in rehearsal?

KMH: I give the actors a packet that has the sound changes and some cultural information about what sort of options they have in terms of pitch, rate, and inflection. It cannot just be a sound they put on, it has to be developed with their character. For example, are you a guy who has been working underground his whole life but has ambitions of being a ballet dancer? How does that change the way something sounds vs. how it comes out of the mouth of the guy who is the pit boss and only ever wants to be the pit boss?

I give them practice sentences so they get used to using sound changes over and over again so the muscles in their mouth start to create a memory of it. I give them pieces of text that are different from their lines so if they make mistakes it doesn’t effect how they say their lines. I also give them notes as I listen to rehearsal. Sometimes I just have to accept that a word is just never going to sound right to me, but I try to help them stay consistent.

VR: Do you want them to watch movies or listen to other sources?

KMH: They need to. I’m not a native source and the best way to access rhythms, the feeling for language, the intention



DAN HIATT, JACKSON DAVIS, PATRICK JONES, & JAMES CARPENTER / PHOTO TRACY MARTIN

“People often ask why we use accents. The answer has to do with the voice of a people...you hear everything that voice represents.”

under the operative words in each sentence, is to watch and listen to real people talking. You want to recreate the sound as closely as you can and the only way to do that is to hear native sources speak it.

VR: If the dialect is in the script why use a dialect coach?

KMH: Authors only have the keyboard with which to transcribe what they hear in their language and it is absolutely inadequate to convey what else is going on. In our script, the word “divin’t”—who knows what that means? [it’s roughly “do not”] You can’t tell unless you have the other sounds that lead into it that help you pull that particular word into the right intention and inflection.

VR: Why do a dialect?

KMH: Part of it is contractual. Rights were given to you to do the story as it is written in the script. However, people often ask why we use accents. The answer has to do with the voice of a people. When you hear the voice of an American you hear everything that voice represents. You hear 250 years of history and if there is a dialect, Southern or New York, you have the cultural frames of reference that go along with that so no matter what we say about it being in Ashington, England, you’re still hearing American sensibilities. *The Pitmen Painters* is set in the Northeast of England in a coal mining community and the dialect is specific to the miners. That sets these people apart in a specific cultural, class, and social way that doesn’t exist in the US and that’s a part of the story.

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