

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## The Pitmen Painters

Lee Hall, inspired by a book by William Feaver

A Live Theatre Newcastle and National Theatre co-production

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, and touring  
(2011)

If, as a young art student in the seventies, William Feaver had not met, and been impressed by, the surviving members of The Ashington Group, he would never have written his book. If Lee Hall had not come across the book in a second hand bookshop in Charing Cross Road and found the subject for his next play, then the story of these men could have been forgotten and their paintings left to gather dust and cobwebs before being consigned to the rubbish heap (which is where they all thought they would end anyway). If the group had been able to find a tutor in Economics instead of having to make do with Art Appreciation, that too would have been the end of the story. Life is full of ifs.

As it is, this inspirational account of a group of Northumbrian miners, in the depression days of the thirties, has caught the imagination and admiration of the public to the extent that on this their second national tour, four years after the inaugural performance and after productions at the National Theatre and on Broadway, the theatres are still filled to capacity.

Deprived of education at the age of ten, when they had to leave school and go to work, their thirst for learning was so strong that after a ten hour shift of heavy physical work in cramped, suffocating, frightening and noisy conditions they would come home, wash, dress in suit, collar and tie and join others at their hut - all members of the Workers Education Association. How many people today enthusiastically join an adult education class in the Autumn and drop out at the first cold, wet winter evening?

Halls play follows the group from their first meeting with tutor Robert Lyon (a rather prissy David Leonard) and is in turn hilarious, moving, and confrontational. Unimpressed by slides showing Rubens or Michaelangelo the answer, thinks Lyon, is for the men to do their own painting, subjects they know well, and the results show the harsh lives of pitmen, but also dogs, horses, people, streets. Period, location and social history are captured on whatever materials they had to hand, not technically perfect maybe, but raw, real, and immediate, painted with feeling.

Class distinction at the time was important, and the men are firmly working class with a strong sense of family and community, while their patron Helen Sutherland (Joy Brook) has a broken marriage and fills her life with collected paintings and people. The contrast is there too when, on a trip to London to talk on the BBC, the group travel third class and their tutor is in first, but these men are not subservient and they soon discard the stilted script the BBC has planned and give their own opinions knowledgeably and very forcibly.

The thirty or so original men have been condensed into five, most of whom were in the original production - bureaucratic George Brown (Deka Walmsley), jovial Jimmy Floyd (David Whitaker), dogmatic Marxist Harry Wilson (Michael Hodgson) and unemployed Young Lad (Brian Lonsdale).

Lonsdale also takes the part of effete painter Ben Nicholson who happily accepts patronage which the fifth member of the group, and the most talented, Oliver Kilbourn (Trevor Fox) refuses. Viktoria Kay is the nude model introduced by Lyon for a life class, which totally horrifies the men, not only the nakedness but --- a Woman --- in a Mens group! They were not even allowed in pubs at that time. Performances are nicely nuanced, not stereotyped, and all in accessible Geordie.

Max Roberts production sags a little in the second act as expectations are not realised, but the final scene with the whole cast singing *Gresford*, the miners hymn, brings a lump to the throat. A play to enjoy, and to leave you thoughtful about the meaning of art, politics and life and wanting to know more about these remarkable men.

Incidentally - their paintings are now exhibited in the Woodhorn Colliery Museum in Northumberland.

*Touring to Blackpool, Plymouth, Richmond, Darlington, Glasgow, Malvern, Newcastle, Southend, Leeds, Brighton, Tunbridge Wells, Coventry and Bromley*

Steve Burbridge [reviewed](#) this production at Darlington. It was also [reviewed](#) by Ray Brown in Leeds.

**Reviewer:** [Sheila Connor](#)