The Pitmen Painters at Oldham Coliseum

Reviewed by John Waterhouse February 2016

This play might at first glance appear to be another take on how to escape depressing times in Northern collieries, a la ‘Brassed Off’, but it’s actually a funny show that works on a number of levels. There have been many satires in past decades about what or who defines art and what in essence is an artist. A personal favourite is the 1961 Tony Hancock film ‘The Rebel’ where an office bean-counter makes a bid to escape his existence of a wage-slave by becoming ‘an artist’ in Paris.

The Pitmen Painters starts on a more positive premise; a group of colliery workers simply want to broaden their horizons by trying to appreciate art and the teacher they hire quickly decides that the best way they can achieve this is to become artists, or least to try painting, themselves.

It is perhaps no surprise that each member of the group soon shows remarkable promise as the miners start to create art in various dimensions. There are elements of ‘The Fully Monty’ in how five miners, each with different agendas and viewpoints, express themselves through their paintings and Robert, their very middle-class teacher played by **Cliff Burnett** as a passionate academic, finds meaning and purpose in almost every brush stroke.

There are great characterisations from all the cast, each of whom has a particular slant on life; **James Quinn**
as Harry, somehow sees everything as part of a class struggle,
Jim Barclay
is George who tries to bring even the ownership of the paintings within confines of his Union rule book,
Mickey Cochrane
as Jimmy who has an uncomplicated view of most things,
Luke Morris
as a young lad who would be happy for the group just to paint nude models whilst
Simon Truby
as Oliver, really does just want art for arts’ sake. It’s an excellent mix, in many ways reminiscent of the main character blend in ‘Auf wiedersehen pet’.

Events unfold that take the miners into uncharted territory as their very identities as both miners and members of a community are called into question. Set in the mainly in the 1930’s and 1940’s, ***The Pitmen Painters*** provides interesting observations of how class and education played an important part on how art was both created and appreciated at the time, with the posh socialite and art aficionado *Helen Sutherland*, elegantly played by **Helen Kay**
, providing the perfect alternative viewpoint to the miners, a world apart from them in her life of leisure and wealth.

It’s fair to say that the play starts off a pure comedy but progressively becomes more politicised as the story develops, ending with statements about the pit closures of the 1980s and the Labour Party rejection of Clause 4. Personally, I thought this was a shame because there is almost a suggestion that it was viewed as incongruous for miners to pick up a paintbrush. The play starts just after the First World War ended and if soldiers in the hell of trench warfare could famously both paint and write poems, why not miners? However, the plays does raise some interesting questions as to whether can be viewed just as art or necessarily contained political and social statements.

Overall, **The Pitmen Painters** is a very entertaining play that never slacks in pace and alternates between light and dark, whilst raising a number of questions about aspirations and society that very much remain valid for today.

The Pitmen Painters runs until the 27th February 2016