

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

‘The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone’.

This messianic prophecy opens the ninth chapter of the Book of Isaiah; it also neatly summarises the mission of Lee Hall. He has illuminated the lives of people who literally walked – and worked – in darkness; or I should say “waaked” and “wawked” for I’m talking of pitmen, like Lee’s own great Granda, who started work in the Monty Pit at Denton Burn when he was only 12 years old. Spurned and scorned by the very society which depended on them; branded as “the enemy within” and condemned to the dole – this was the lot of the people that wawked in darkness. Yet now their story is up in lights, thanks to Lee Hall: *Billy Elliot –The Musical* has taken the West End and Broadway by storm. *The Pitmen Painters*, which premiered at Live Theatre here in Newcastle, is now packing out the National Theatre in London, and recently won “Best Play” in the *Evening Standard* Awards. Even as I speak, *The Pitmen Painters* is being transferred to Vienna in German translation – though it remains to be seen if the sardonic Geordie humour will survive the transition to a culture in which irony is rarer than stotty-cake. What will survive is the dramatic presentation of how a group of uneducated miners in the world’s largest pit village interacted with a lecturer who was based right here, Dr Robert Lyon of Armstrong College. Together they gave rise to an entire school of artwork, which was to travel the globe in their own lifetimes. Here are a

few lines from the breathtaking, quick-fire finale to Act One of *The Pitmen Painters*:

‘Real art is something shared – power that’s shared. Real art belongs to everyone. ... You can take one set of things ... – and you can make them something else – And that is what is important about art ... You take one thing – and you make one thing into another – and you transform – who you are’.

No more eloquent statement of the cultural engagement ambitions of this institution is ever likely to be written.

Lee Hall’s muse is by no means restricted to coal mining communities. Many others still ‘live in a land of deep shadow’: defenceless children; disabled people; neglected pensioners; the desperate in bereavement; those trapped in poverty, material or spiritual. On all of these people Lee continues to shine his powerful light, giving voices to the unheard, and celebrating their exuberant imaginations and vernacular sophistication.

The strength which Lee expends in his restorative creativity is drawn from many deep sources, not least the loving support of his parents, Sylvia and Peter. The family home in Walkerville enjoyed a very central location in the industrial Tyneside of the sixties: hard by the former pityard of Bigges’ Main, just north of the shipyards, just east of Parsons’ factory, and no great distance from Wallsend’s mighty Rising Sun Colliery. Presciently encouraged to look beyond these possibilities for employment, it wasn’t till Lee was experiencing the exotic charms of

Cambridge University that he was able to fully appreciate all the human values which these heavy and heartbreaking industries had somehow engendered: pride in a hard job well done, and a strong commitment to the ethos of “Each for All and All for Each”. Humility – in its true meaning of being down-to-earth – is one of the most highly prized virtues in Tyneside working-class culture, and Lee Hall has this virtue in spades. Though generous to a fault, when Lee was nominated for an Oscar for *Billy Elliot* he couldn’t bear the thought of joining the designer outfit parade, so he popped round to the nearest Oxfam shop and bought a second-hand evening suit for twenty quid. Lee feels no need to draw attention to himself. If he wants to shout, he can do it through his plays. In person Lee is modest and measured – though he’s never afraid to fight his corner on issues that matter to him, of which there are many.

Lee Hall was born to enter the world of the performing arts. At the age of 11 his parents took him to a concert of traditional music at Walkergate Residents’ Hall. Lee was hooked straight away and soon became an accomplished fiddler, travelling the circuit of festivals with Tony Corcoran and Kathryn Tickell. Music has ever after remained a huge element in Lee’s life and work. He is now a talented multi-instrumentalist. In his plays Lee makes extensive use of both popular and classical music to evoke intense emotions. Who can remain unmoved whilst listening to the singing of Maria Callas in *Spoonface Steinberg*, or watching Jamie Bell’s furious tap dancing to *A Town Called Malice* in *Billy Elliot*?

Lee made his first foray into the genre of musicals while still studying for his O' Levels at Benfield Comprehensive. Working with his inspirational drama teacher Christine Heckles, Lee wrote more than a dozen new songs to re-stage Bill Forsyth's celebrated film *Gregory's Girl* as a musical. The songs were so catchy they were soon echoing round the school corridors. Decades later Lee's still using this first skill of his, most recently collaborating with Elton John to produce the songs for *Billy Elliot – The Musical*.

Lee could have been an actor: his performance in a staging of *Nicholas Nickleby* at Cambridge was hailed by *The Guardian* as a *tour de force*. But Lee was more interested in giving other people a chance to express themselves on stage. After graduating, he led a successful initiative to re-open the old All Saints Church by the Tyne Bridge as a space in which disadvantaged people could try their hand at the performing arts. This required substantial fund-raising, and Lee proved to have a flair for this: he memorably extracted a pile of sponsorship from Baring's Bank before its demise at the hands of the rogue trader Nick Leeson – who is not Lee's son, I hasten to add!

It was during a further staging of *Gregory's Girl* at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield that Lee met the eminent film producer Stephen Daldry, with whom he struck up an enduring friendship. Stephen was inspired by Lee's unusual artistic inclination, as a 'popularist with serious intent'. Following a highly productive period of collaboration in New York in the mid-1990s, Stephen was to play a major role in bringing *Billy Elliot* to the Silver Screen.

Lee was still living in New York when Kate Rowland of the BBC commissioned his first play for Radio 4. *I luv you Jimmy Spud* was the first of an eventual quartet of plays, collectively known as “*God’s Country*”, which examine challenging issues of death, bereavement, love, underage pregnancy and religious faith as experienced by young children. *God’s Country* is vintage Hall, succeeding in Lee’s stated intention of ‘allow(ing) cack-handed lyricism to sit happily with slapstick bathos’. As Lee’s wife, the celebrated director Beeban Kidron, puts it: ‘*God’s Country* captures your heart without leaving your mind behind’. This is amply borne out by the public reaction to the first broadcast of *Spoonface Steinberg*, the fourth of the *God’s Country* plays, on January 27th 1997. This fifty-eight minute monologue of a seven year-old autistic Jewish girl dying of cancer ranges boldly over an array of emotive issues, including: the prejudice suffered by people with special needs; the Holocaust; and the effect of marital strife on children. Within thirty seconds of the end of the broadcast, the phone started to ring in Kate Rowland’s office, and didn’t stop for many hours. Hardened lorry drivers reported pulling over onto the hard shoulder to weep: possibly a unique case of a shoulder to cry on. The BBC duty logs for that day record hundreds of calls from listeners begging an early re-broadcasting of the play. Some emergency re-scheduling ensued, and a CD of *Spoonface Steinberg* was rushed into the shops.

Lee Hall is utterly his own man: independent in thought and passionate in his principles. The confidence which this engenders is manifest not in arrogance, but in courage. Nowhere is this courage more clearly evident than in the fruits of his enduring collaborative relationship with director Max Roberts and numerous talented actors associated with Newcastle’s ground-breaking Live Theatre. If the dual assault on mind

and heart demand it, Lee will deploy a lewd and scatological humour, at once both puerile and grown-up, which somehow manages to shock without seeming gratuitous. Try *Cooking with Elvis*, or giving Wittgenstein 'a b-b-bit of advice', and maybe you'll see what I mean.

I feel I must inform you, however, that Lee Hall suffers from an incurable addiction. All his friends and relatives have noticed it; it's no use pretending otherwise. Lee Hall cannot leave the house without buying a book: he's a biblioholic. His house is arranged around the books, rather than the more usual reverse situation. When fellow playwright and Honorary Doctor of this University Alan Plater first visited Lee's place in London, he exclaimed 'Bloody Hell! This place is like the Lit. and Phil.!'. The resemblance is not coincidental; when Lee was a teenager he used to frequent the tremendous library of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle upon Tyne. He still gets in there when researching for his plays, and often finds time to nip up the A1 to Barter Books at Alnwick. To his credit, Lee is no collector of unopened rare editions; he reads the lot. To Lee, a book is far more than a thing of beauty or a collection of words; it is a vessel containing the essence of another fascinating human being. He relentlessly pursues multiple threads of enquiry in poetry, philosophy, history, politics and drama, and all of these threads are woven into an attractive textile in his plays.

When those closest to Lee are asked to sum him up, they talk of humour, humanity, intelligence, integrity, love, loyalty and passion. These are the hallmarks of Lee Hall's life. And in the words of Lee's own creation Sandra Saint:

‘ ... life’s about what you feel inside, life’s about passions, and caring for people, life’s about creating things and moving on, not stopping them dead ... Life’s wonderful and difficult and complicated’.

Lee Hall has faithfully expressed in his art the human values that shape his life, and which he in turn acquired from his community. For all of his great achievements, and especially for highlighting how the noblest of universal human values can be found at their most vibrant amongst the ordinary people of this region, I now ask you, Mr Vice-Chancellor, to bestow upon Lee Hall the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger