

John Caine

<http://www.johncaine.net> — John Caine, writer and journalist – Review

Bristol: Mr Lowry

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THE WORLD premiere of John Caine's gentle but incisive portrait of the painter L S Lowry proved an inspired choice as the alternative to the knockabout world of Christmas panto at the Bristol Old Vic.

Presented as a one-man show by actor Malcolm Tierney at the New Vic Studio, the 90-minute monologue said as much about the trials, traumas and quiet triumphs of the North Country artist as any full-blown biography. Lowry has been seen by many as *A Simple Man* — the title of the highly acclaimed Northern Theatre Ballet version of his life.

He lived at home with his mother, never married, worked in a Manchester office, and took his annual holiday at Lytham St Anne's and later at Seaburn, near Sunderland.

Caine, a former television newscaster and presenter before he became a writer, brings out all these elements in a cleverly-crafted narrative that switches between Lowry aged 52 at the start of the Second World War to his death at 89.

His relationship with his parents — a stiff and starchy father who did not encourage him but plainly was as proud as Punch of his work, and a talented but invalid mother who Lowry adored — is a strong thread throughout, with his mother standing as substitute for the only love of Lowry's life, a fellow student at Manchester's School of Art.

But the darker side of Lowry's complex character is also given full rein...his contempt for the critics who for most of his life considered him only to be a 'Sunday painter', his hatred for the view that he could only paint matchstick men and women, his periods of depression at his loneliness, and his suppressed sexuality.

It is plainly significant that the only theatrical play he really liked — and saw again and again — was Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

The evening is by no means heavy or oppressive, though. Malcolm Tierney, who is himself a keen fan of Lowry and has played him before, brings out the loneliness of the artist but also combines just the right touch of self-mockery with a wicked sense of humour.

Director Ian Hastings makes sure the painter's restless energy is strongly conveyed in the performance, while designer Terry Brown's famous Salford mill scenes appear so authentic that the artist's trustees have only given permission for them to be used in the production as long as they are destroyed afterwards.

Jeremy Brien