

John Hurt

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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How did Stuart Pearson-Wright approach you?

I was doing 'Krapp's Last Tape' in London at the New Ambassadors Theatre and I was taking a walk with Sarah, my lady, and we were at the sort of junction of Greek Street and Old Compton Street in Soho. And a tall man with a thin face and a long black coat came up to me and said 'Hello, my name is Stuart Pearson-Wright, I am a painter and I'd like to do your portrait'. On occasions of that nature you have your antenna out at full and somehow he just seemed right, like antiques it seemed right, you know. So I said 'well, it could be a little tricky, but we'll see, I mean I'm doing a play at the minute at the New Ambassadors at the minute and he said 'I know, I've seen it' and I thought, 'Ah well, that's a good start'. So I said, 'come round to the dressing room', this isn't a pulling line or anything like that, but I said 'come round to the dressing room and if you've got any transparencies, I'll like to have a look at them'. He did do that, he came round and I had a look at them and they were, I thought, pretty remarkable, to say the least. So we fixed up a time. For the duration of the play I got a little flat in Covent Garden so he came round there and we did that first painting in three one and a half hour sessions. Stuart only paints live so there's nothing tinkered with before or after if you see what I mean or done from photographs.

What do you feel about the portrait?

It's a good painting because I can feel it's a head, it's not a face you know. You can feel what's going on inside it and you can feel at the back of it, it's very painterly in that sense you know, it's much, much, much more than a photograph. It's an understanding, it's a perception isn't it, however he perceived me at that stage it is very recognisable in many ways, somehow. I think it is just so superbly painted, I think he's a fantastic colourist, wonderful draughtsman. I was blown away by the fact that he could manage do that in such a short space of time and not knowing me.

How did the portrait progress?

He's exactly what you would expect a painter to be, the only extraordinary thing is that when you get up and have a look at it each time there's a sort of lull or a little break, it has advanced so incredibly fast and I started as a painter and I know, I mean, I struggled and struggled with portraits and nudes and so on and life-classes and finally managed to get somewhere but his ability is such that that doesn't seem to occur to him as a problem, his problems are so far in advance of any I can conceive of as a painter, that I wouldn't even know what they were really. But he chats and he talks and it doesn't seem to destroy his concentration at all. Every now and then you get a feeling when you're working with somebody, that they would like not to be interrupted, you could do, but I just prefer not to. I can feel definitely when he's in a kind of reverie, when he's actually in a real riff and he's going for a particular area of the painting. In that sense it's quite exciting sitting. I can't say that I find sitting particularly exciting because I'd rather be 'doing' than 'sitting' if you see what I mean. But I very much feel that it is certainly no waste of time, I'm sitting there with a very talented person, it's a kind of a privilege in a sense too.

Were you conscious of posing for the portrait?

You can't have an active ... in the business of it but you can certainly can in your whole attitude, and internally and how you are when you are there, how you're sitting and what you're emotionally offering. But I don't think you actively say 'Right, I'll look like this.' The nearer to real repose you can get is, I think, probably the better, certainly for a portrait painter because it isn't about expression, it's about understanding, it's about perception, the more like a sack of spuds you can be the better really. Just think nothing or just think

of something and drift off into a dream, whatever. It's much easier than a photograph in that sense, because a photograph insists that that is the moment where a painting isn't, a painting is a completely organic thing that goes on for as long as you are going to be painting and there's no way you can present anything anyway.

What did the artist capture within you?

That's so hard for me to say, what he captures of me... I recognise it I don't know what it is, I'd actually leave that to other people to say in a sense but I know I recognise it, I wouldn't be able to be so... I don't know quite how to say that, I don't know what it is.