



'Spectators Returning Home After Port Vale vs. Accrington Stanley'
Arthur Hackney Nat. Football Museum 30x70 cm access no. E857.208 opaque
watercolour on canvas

1.

There's Only One Accrington Stanley

The pin pricks of distant sodium streetlights, strung out across a panorama framed by dark mountains and a blue/black-ink sky hint at the Hollywood hills and the anticipation of an inevitable celebrity encounter. Yet this was a damp Tuesday evening in late February and, through gathering mist, these winking lights announced Accrington, nestling fore square in the Pennine foothills just off junction seven of the M54. The celebrity lure was not that of a movie 'A' lister, it was Robbie Savage filming a soup commercial, oh and maybe Jermaine Jenas if the traffic in Manchester freed up in time.

The film location, advertising folk always call TV commercials films, was the car park of Accrington Stanley FC, to be precise hard up against the 'portacabin' on the edge of the car park that serves as Stanley's social club and entrance to the executive boxes and dining facility at The Crown Ground, home to the club since re-forming after bankruptcy forced it out of the ancestral home Peel Park and the Football League in 1963. At a club who seem to live by their motto 'Industry and Prudence Conquer' the mismatched paint of the entrance doors, the eclectic range of signage and liberal, if random, use of the club's red and white team colours appear of little importance. What matters is that hard-working TV and radio pundit from that there BBC, Robbie Savage, is here, and the beer prices have been held at £2:30 a pint - industry and prudence indeed.

The two ladies serving behind the social's bar, proudly displaying their well-upholstered name badges, knew who Robbie Savage was, 'kept taking his top off on 'Strickly' didn't he', this wasn't a question, not even a rhetorical one (like flat white coffee they haven't reached The Crown Ground just yet), this was a statement of fact, plain and simple. Most of the bubbling pre-match ambience in the members' bar appeared to consist more of statements of fact than conversation, blunt straight talking was the order of the day here in Accrington - this day and every other day as well, one suspects. Robbie sat wide-eyed, cornered on a less than well-upholstered velour banquette waiting for filming to start. With a windblown, moderately startled expression that only a man with more than a passing interest in personal grooming can achieve, he filled the void with a shifting gaze - from his mobile phone to the over-large flat-screen Sky TV showing an obscure Continental Europa Cup game, to the bright-red gloss double doors leading out into the car park, and beyond, one suspects, a hoped-for freedom. A steady stream of insistent requests for a selfie with Robbie were met with a polite nod, followed by a fixed beam from his unfeasibly white teeth and another unspoken nod as he sat back down to check the mobile again. Where was Jenas, why hadn't filming started, will I have to stay to watch a lower league game, is it time to change agents? All questions etched onto his ever so lightly furrowed brow, beneath that equally unfeasibly well-coiffured mane of blond hair.

'Taller than I thought'.

'Mmm and slimmer' came the reply.

'That's tele for you,' the quick fire response, 'puts pounds on you know'.

A rapid, well-upholstered one-two sees a hat-trick for the powerful statement of fact from Chrissie and Pam behind the bar. That they had both stopped serving was noted with a shrug by the blazered old boy waiting patiently for his pint at the bar; that they were both still firmly gripping their foot-long ebony beer pump handles raised an eyebrow but nothing more.

At which point, the red double doors burst open and in waltzed the boyish frame and grin of Jermaine Jenas. 'Now there's someone I'd watch on Strickly' purred pundit Pam as she gave the ebony bar pump a short tug to finish off the blazered chap's pint.