

My Friend Hall Diteman

By Tom Wolfe

In the mid 80's I was hanging around Jackson Hole, Wyoming, finding work with outfitters in the area as a horse wrangler, packer, dog musher and guide. It was an enjoyable life in the wild back country living in tents camps and hanging around with grizzlies. When I needed to go to a town, Jackson Hole filled the bill. Leading a pack string or jingling ponies along high mountain trails in the southern Absaroka and Bridger/Teton country was a good job for a young man trying to figure out how to make his mark on this world. I was having so much fun though, that making my mark just wasn't always in the forefront of my thoughts. However, every now and then I was reminded of the importance of it all because even if chasing a bunch of stampeding horses off a mountain to the tune of a sunrise might be fun, it wasn't exactly handy in the pocket book department if you know what I mean. Such vocations don't lend much lot to a fellow's investment portfolio. They talk about a recession in the early 80's. I didn't even know there was one. In fact, what little money I did manage to put together in my high riding adventures, I generally donated to the restaurants, night lights and music of the little mountain ski town that was so adept at parting the wealth from fellows with inclinations and means like mine. What good was money if you didn't spend it? And if you didn't spend it how were you going to have any fun? Quite often, though, after the lights dimmed and the music died, I would wander across the town square where Christmas tree lights lit up the bronze bronc rider eternally laughing at life from the hurricane seat of a bronze bronc. I would then lose myself for awhile stargazing at the high end art showcased in the frozen winter windows of the galleries Jackson Hole is famous for. I'd never been around so much original art and of such caliber. It was everywhere and I was mesmerized by it. On days I wasn't working you could often find me haunting these same galleries, staying warm and memorizing the work of great painters. Gradually it began to dawn on me that painting top quality art and selling it for thousands and thousands of dollars was just the game for me. I'd dabbled in watercolors before. What could possibly be so hard about being a professional painter? Just in case, though, I limited myself to two years and if I wasn't showing in the Trailside or Legacy Galleries in that time I would find another line of work. Three years later I was living along the Stillwater River here in Montana, and although I was knocking off a watercolor or pencil sketch every now and then, the Galleries of Jackson were no where in sight. By then I had to admit that even though I maintained a somewhat romantic notion of a faith in an ambiguous and ill defined goal, I hadn't the slightest idea as to how to become a working artist of any caliber, let alone a good one. And then I met Hall Diteman.

A wonderful woman by the name of Alice Baron introduced me to the painter. They had been sweethearts in their youth and were still quite fond of each other but when I asked about it years later Hall told me that he never married because he knew early on that if he had the distraction of a wife and family he could not give enough of himself to his craft and if true to his craft, the family would surely suffer. Well, that always sounded kind of cryptic and melodramatic to me but irregardless of what I thought, that kind of thinking was integral to Hall's commitment to who he was and, as he wanted above all to be a painter, I think he can rest assured, and I know many of you who are familiar with his work will agree; he was a painter; a very, very good painter. Whether experiencing his powerful mountain scenes or seascapes with their lofty and ethereal skies, or the gentle and pastoral landscapes, the uncanny lifelike portraits or impossibly creative still lifes, by simply viewing the work that Hall Diteman has left us anyone can find within it his trademark: a sense that all was well with the world where contentment and happiness were intertwined with the pleasure and awe he found there. These senses are conveyed to us by the artist through his art. Whether it was through his painting, his work in the theater, or the roses in his garden, Hall could see such beauty in this world and it was through this beauty in the prism of his vision that he found the meaning in his life and he spent his time sharing it with others. I am confident that as it has been for you and me, future generations who are lucky enough to come into the circle of this man's life work will benefit from the experience in good and positive ways. In this is not only the sign of a very, very good painter, it is the hallmark of a truly great painter.

I won't forget the first time I visited his studio. I don't know what I expected but I still held the notion that a working artist must be some kind of mystical character working aloof in his studio high above the confines of regular society, creating works that could be cashed in for tremendous sums of money as easily

as picking apples off a tree. I climbed the circular stairs up to the studio where I found a diminutive fellow with an intelligent brow in worn out deck shoes and clothes covered in paint hunched over a canvas on the easel. He fit the bill. Perfect. He even had paint on his face and that seemed proper for the occasion. The artist was working on a fairly large painting of a man carrying a newborn calf through a snowstorm, heading toward a warm light emanating from the half open door of an old barn. He was crossing a bridge over a creek, a cow and dog following placidly along. It was a typical Diteman: sort of dream like but friendly somehow. It made you feel good. There were snowflakes everywhere and Hall said he was having trouble making the snowstorm work but I'd have to have been blind not to have known that it was very good. I showed him a few sketches and some watercolors. He nodded politely but instead of raving about what a natural I was and how great my work was he said that if I was serious about learning to paint he would offer his help. I was to come back the following week and we would see how things went. He let me hang around for the next twenty years.

Hall shared his studio and skill with quite a few of us. Notable artists Clyde Aspevig and Charlie Fritz studied with Hall for a time. Dick Mouldon, Clark Wilcox, Sue Hammersmark, Jim La Bar and many more were always passing through. Some came for critiques. Some came to paint. And we painted day in and day out as time and our schedules would allow. In the afternoons Hall liked to turn on the little T.V. in the studio so we could listen to the antics of Bob Barker on the Price Is Right while we painted. He liked to bid out loud on whatever the contestants were bidding on and got a kick out of seeing how well he did. A frugal man, Hall would drive halfway across town burning ten dollars worth of gas if he saw a sale that advertised bananas at thirty-three cents a pound.

After a few years we started uncorking a bottle of wine and eating appetizers about this time of day. Bob Barker was more fun after that. I generally brought the wine though, because Hall thought that any time you could get a gallon of wine for under three dollars you shouldn't pass up the deal. (He did make a great artichoke dip, however). After The Price Is Right was over Hall would proclaim that the light was too bad to paint anymore that day and it was time to clean the brushes. Then it was down the circular stairs to play pool. I'm sure he'd have played pool until the light came back the next day if anyone was willing. He loved the game. Most of his students got pretty handy with a pool cue. In fact, once while on a painting trip to Glacier Park, Hall and I holed up in Big Fork where, after a dinner of something washed down with too many martinis we found ourselves in a local pool hall and saloon. A few more drinks and a couple of poorly conceived comments later, I was beginning to worry about the relationship we were cultivating with a couple of hard looking local characters we found ourselves associating with. True to form, though, not only did Hall talk us out of a tight spot but when we left the saloon with him pocketing their money the locals were all smiles and couldn't help but admit that the funny little bald guy in the worn out deck shoes and coveralls was alright after all and a darn good pool player besides.

One of the myriad of jobs Hall held before becoming a full time painter was to teach professionally. He helped many a student in high school and university as well as in classes held in the home he built on Park Lane. By the time I met him, though, he wouldn't take any money for his help. He just told me that if I could help someone else with what I had learned from him I was to pass it on.

One time I asked him if he ever worried about training his competition. He said it didn't bother him. After all, look at how we painted... Besides, what we did with what he had to teach us would manifest itself in our own visions which were as different from him and his work as we were from each other. He felt his job was to give us the tools, show us how to use them and keep them in good order, then let us do whatever it was we needed to do with them. He also taught us never to worry about how a painting might be received or not received by the public. He told us that as painters ours was not to worry about what other people thought, but to paint to the best of our ability. Then, when each work was done, send it out into the world similarly to how parents do with their children; let them go and wish them well. They would make their own way and if we did our jobs right and had any luck at all, our work would enhance the lives of others who came in contact with it and that should be enough. With him as an example we knew this to be true.

Whenever asked as to how he could know with such conviction that he wanted to be a painter Hall would tell about the time he was able to secure a place copying the old masters at the Louvre in Paris. It

was no easy feat to be allowed to do such a thing and it took a special talent to be raised above the masses and given a seat in the great gallery. Other art students would set up his easel and take it down just for the chance to watch a special talent work. All he had to do was show up and paint. Hall chose a Hobama to copy. Many of you have seen it in his home. It is quite a painting. A pastoral scene with a creek, a mill and a bunch of leafy trees of course.

In the early stages of the work he struggled and it was hard not to be distracted by the throngs of art lovers visiting the very place he was set up to work. If that wasn't bad enough, the throngs would constantly compare the young artists in residence with the greatest masters of the western world that surrounded them. One such critic must have thought Hall was deaf or couldn't understand English for some reason, because when she got to his work she let her companion know, in no uncertain terms and in a voice loud enough for Hall and everybody else in the Louvre to hear that here was a pretty sorry case of an artist and what in the world did he think he was doing trying to paint anyway? Hall was shaken to the core. He left the surprised art student to clean up and headed out onto the streets of Paris for a come to Jesus meeting with himself. Then and there he had to decide if it was worth spending the rest of his life in pursuit of a goal where he might very well end up being just mediocre. Maybe his step dad old Bard Kesselheim was right. Maybe he should play it safe and find a vocation that was more secure; a "real" job. However, would it then be alright to come to the end of his days not having even attempted that which he feared to fail? He would never know unless he tried. Win, lose, or draw Hall needed to know if he could commit enough to his art to at least make a go of it. He said he knew he made the right decision when, after gathering what was left of his pride and going back to the Hobama a man came up to him as he was cleaning up one day and asked if Hall knew how long the man had been watching him paint. Hall hadn't a clue. The man told him he had been there a couple of hours, drawn to the artist by the intensity of his determination to complete the piece. Hall had been oblivious to the world around him and from this experience gleaned the lesson that he tried to instill in all his students: it was of no importance what anyone might think of what we do or how the world judges it. It is enough that we should paint for the pure sake of painting and if we do so to the best of our ability that in itself is the end. For the rest of his life Hall would work diligently for weeks, sometimes months to finish a piece. He would become completely absorbed in his work, oblivious to the world. When it was done though, after all the concentration, thought, and work it took to create such incredible images was over, he would simply set the thing aside and start another. It was in the bare, clean canvas, full of such potential and possibility, that Hall found the excitement and the fulfillment. There, in the creating of it all, was where he was happy. It was where the fun was. That lesson aside, however, (and back at the Louvre), before he was allowed to take the copy of the Hobama out of the great gallery it had to be critiqued by a panel of their judges. When they gave him his painting they told him that it was the best they ever had the privilege to judge.

It never was a very good idea to let Hall drive if you could help it. He would stop anytime the little spark (as he called it) drew his attention to a possible scene to paint. It didn't matter if the road was icy or you were on a blind corner or anything. Surprised traffic would come upon us, slam on the brakes and pass by while dodging oncoming traffic, honking and saluting us with a single finger all at one time. Hall might get a little irritated at this and would often observe that people now days were just in too much of a hurry.

We put a lot of miles on his old blue van. He loved that wreck. While I was with him we traveled on painting adventures to the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico. We painted seascapes from the coasts of California to Washington's Olympic Peninsula. We painted in Glacier Park often and in Yellowstone Park, Jackson Hole and the Tetons. We wandered countless back roads in the Beartooths. The Beartooth highway could always be counted on to ignite "the little spark". Around Billings and the local area I got used to prowling back alleys and side roads, stopping for reasons that only God and Hall knew. I learned not to question though and would watch as the sorry creek, a broken down fence, or a dead tree turn into a perfectly poetic and beautiful scene on his canvas. Sometimes he would tweak a scene because he said he could remember how it was years ago. Other times it just seemed like the thing to do. This was his world and he was at peace in it. He had a childlike excitement and reverence for it. All he wanted to do was paint it.

The last time I saw Hall he was bed ridden with an oxygen tube up his nose. He looked dapper, sporting a new mustache. I think it made the oxygen tube more comfortable. He had good caregivers and I know he

appreciated them. They told me the oxygen helped keep him lucid but he still drifted in and out some. I happened to have a painting with me at the time and when I told him I had been fighting it for weeks and couldn't figure out what it was that I was having trouble with he looked at it and stated matter of factly that my brights were too bright and to remember the adjacent colors. He told me this as if it were the first time and not the ten thousandth time. Even at the end he was careful to give criticism with regard to the other person's feelings. I never heard him say a bad thing about a student's work, and I heard a lot of good and positive things said instead.

When the phone rang and Pam told me Hall had passed it was fitting that I should be standing at my easel. I live in my cabin in the mountains now and I make a good portion of my living as a working artist, using the tools honed by my years with this good man. I, like so many of his students, am able to spend quality time pursuing this craft that I truly love. I still think that maybe someday I'll take my work down to those galleries in Jackson Hole. Maybe they'll even like it enough to display it in the frozen midnight winter windows I used to look through so long ago. It doesn't seem to matter so much now, though. It is the act of painting that actually matters. That is what it's all about. There is where it is all comes together.

It didn't really register that Hall was gone until the other day I hit a snag. I couldn't make something look right and it dawned on me that he wouldn't be there to help. It was sad to think that I had received my last critique from the Master. It's getting better now though. I still find myself asking him what to do and so far he hasn't let me down. Why, just yesterday I was sitting down to the easel. I had brushes in my hand and a painting well along but was distracted. I never have been very keen on funerals but I knew I wanted to say something at this memorial today. I thought for a moment about how I wasn't sure about what to say here any more than I knew where to start fixing the painting. I surprised myself when I asked out loud "O.K., Hall, now what am I supposed to do?" As quick as a wink and as sure as the sun on the mountains I heard the painter reply "Clean your palette. How do expect to accomplish anything working with a mess like that?..." Of course, he was right. And of course I did. Thank you, Maestro.