

History Boys Workpack

The play

Background	2
Characters	3
Themes	4
History	5
Poetry	6
Hope and Failure	7

Interview

Playwright Alan Bennett	8
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Interview

Director Nicholas Hytner	11
--------------------------	----

Further Activities	12
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The History Boys
by Alan Bennett
photo by Ivan Kyncl,
courtesy of Faber and Faber

Further production details:
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

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National Theatre Board
Reg. No. 1247285
Registered Charity No.
224223

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The play

BACKGROUND

The mid eighties, at a boys' state grammar school in Sheffield. Eight boys who have completed their A' Levels are returning to school to study for their Oxbridge entrance exams. Throughout the course of the term they are subjected to the petty quarrelling and staff-room politics of their teachers. Loyalties are stretched, and challenged.

During all of this, the main concern of the boys is getting out, starting university, and starting life. Those who are on the edge of life are confronted with those who are jaded and remorseful, and to whom life has not been kind.

Jamie Parker, Richard Griffiths,
Andrew Knott, Dominic Cooper
& James Corden

photo Ivan Kyncl



The Play

CHARACTERS

Alan Bennett describes in his preface to the play script and in the interview below, how, for him, characters are more interesting than themes, and are the starting point for his plays. At the heart of *The History Boys* are four characters, each with contrasting outlooks on teaching and school.

HECTOR is an eccentric English teacher, close to retirement. He is described as both 'an original' (by Mrs Lintott) and as 'a loose cannon' (by the Headmaster). His teaching methods do not follow a prescribed path, and are not concerned with analytical techniques. He is not concerned as to whether the boys understand his subject, merely that they will have learnt by heart passages from books, poems and films which they will understand and appreciate in later life. Hector has no interest in exams; his teaching is about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

Whilst Hector is undoubtedly a popular teacher, and one from whom the boys have clearly learnt a vast amount, he allows his personal feelings to interfere with his teaching. His

reluctance to be part of the system means he is in danger of jeopardising the boys' imminent exams, and their potential places at Oxford and Cambridge.

IRWIN, a young History supply teacher, is the antithesis of Hector. To Irwin 'education is not something for when they're old and grey and sitting by the fire. It's for now.'

He has been brought into the school by the Headmaster to give the Oxbridge candidates polish and flair. He teaches with an analytical approach, which is concerned with subverting facts, of taking an argument and proving the opposite. Unlike Hector, Irwin is most interested in presentation, he has no interest in moral truth, and instead sees history 'not as a matter of conviction' but as 'performance' and 'entertainment'.

MRS LINTOTT is a more traditional History teacher. She teaches 'History, not histrionics'. She is interested in plainly-stated and properly-organised facts. Her dry style of teaching, whilst possibly not as inspiring as the other two teachers, produces excellent results we are told.

As the only woman in the school (and in the play) she is often overlooked, and frequently patronised. Unlike Hector and Irwin, she does not allow personal thoughts to impinge on her teaching. This however leads to an outpouring of pent-up anger in the midst of the boys' mock interviews.

THE HEADMASTER has one concern, and one concern only, and it is not the boys. He is interested in 'league tables. Open scholarships. Reports to the governors'. As a geographer, he has no time for art and artists; 'they get away with murder'.

Samuel Anderson, Dominic Cooper,
James Corden, Samuel Barnett,
Sacha Dhawan, Russell Tovey
and Andrew Knott
photo Ivan Kyncl



The Play

THEMES

As with many of Bennett's plays, the themes he explores in *The History Boys* are wide-ranging. Some of the following themes have been briefly highlighted with the purpose of leading towards more in-depth discussion. However, Alan Bennett's style of writing, which is more exploratory than reactionary, a style that asks questions, but provides the audience with few answers, means that any attempt to dissect the numerous themes of his plays is necessarily reductive.

The Play

HISTORY

As the play's title suggests, one of Bennett's main preoccupations in *The History Boys* is the subject of history. The character of Irwin is representative of many modern historians in search of untrodden ground. Irwin teaches his boys to take some hitherto unquestioned historical assumption and prove the opposite. Using this theory Irwin makes the short leap from history teacher to journalist to government spin-doctor, whose job it is to prove that the loss of trial by jury does not impinge on civil liberties, but instead broadens them.

For Irwin, history is not a matter of conviction, and he encourages the boys to be dispassionate, to distance themselves. This is a theory which works well when he is teaching the Reformation, but causes controversy when the class moves on to discuss the Holocaust.

In a key scene Irwin, Hector and the boys argue over whether the Holocaust should be studied, and if so, how. Whilst Hector's approach – to dismiss the Holocaust as an unprecedented horror – may seem typically naive, Posner points out that to put the Holocaust 'in context is a step towards saying that it can be ... explained. And if it can be explained then it can be explained away.'

The History Boys highlights the responsibility of the historian, and asks questions about the approach the historian should take in studying the past.

Jamie Parker, Dominic Cooper
and James Corden
photo Ivan Kyncl



The Play

POETRY

'The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now you have it, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.' Hector

Poetry and literature are often criticised by characters in *The History Boys*. We have already seen how Irwin and Hector's views on life contrast. The Headmaster has no time for poets, or for artists of any description. Timms states in Act One that he doesn't always understand poetry, and Dakin argues, 'Literature is really lowering'.

However, at the end of Act One, Hardy's poem 'Drummer Hodge' is shown to touch both Hector and Posner. Hector can relate to the loneliness of the poem, being around the same age as Hardy was when he wrote it, and feeling a sense of unfulfilled ambition, of a life not lived. For Posner, a teenager dealing with his homosexuality in a school full of heterosexual boys, the loneliness of Drummer Hodge, a boy not much older than himself, is deeply affecting.

For both of them it is Hardy's use of compound adjectives that conjures up the feeling that they had thought special to them. The scene is in stark contrast to Posner's confession to Irwin about his sexuality. The audience are told that Posner, in spotting that Irwin might also be gay basically 'wanted company'. Instead Irwin responds with the comment 'it will pass'. At the heart of the 'Drummer Hodge' scene, which deals with the loneliness of two of the play's central characters, there is a defence of poetry. It is the poem that brings together a teenage boy and a man of 59. The poetry, if only for a moment, has provided the company Posner was craving.

It is Hector who is given the last line in the play. His often-criticised teaching methods are given a defence:

'Take it, feel it and pass it on. Not for me, not for you but for someone, somewhere, one day.'

Dominic Cooper and
Stephen Campbell Moore
photo Ivan Kyncl



The Play

HOPE AND FAILURE

As we have just seen, the theme of hope and failure plays a large part in *The History Boys*. Whilst the boys seem to have everything to live for – the rest of their lives ahead of them – Hector, and to an extent Mrs Lintott, are placed in stark contrast. Theirs is a life of failed ambition.

Mrs Lintott asks the boys if they realise how dispiriting it is to teach ‘five centuries of masculine ineptitude’. She does not think of herself as bold, as she confesses in Act Two. Hector tells Irwin not to teach: ‘It ought to renew... the young mind; warm, eager, trusting; instead comes ... a kind of coarsening. You start to clown. Plus a fatigue that passes for philosophy but is nearer to indifference.’

Even Posner, an exceptionally bright student who is later awarded a scholarship to Cambridge, goes on to drop out of university, and ‘has periodic breakdowns. He haunts the local library and keeps a scrapbook of the achievement of his one – time classmates’.

The theme of loneliness recurs throughout much of Bennett’s writing, and is particularly apparent in his series of monologues *Talking Heads*. The former Director of the National Theatre, Richard Eyre, has described Bennett’s writing as “all about unrealised hope and defeated expectations”.

It could be argued, that just as Hardy’s ‘Drummer Hodge’ reaches out and touches the hands of Posner and Hector, so Bennett’s characters’ feelings of isolation and loneliness, touch his audience.

Frances De La Tour, Richard Griffiths, Clive Merrison and Stephen Campbell Moore

photo Ivan Kyncl



Interview

**PLAYWRIGHT
ALAN BENNETT**

How did you start to write The History Boys? Was there a particular character or theme you wanted to explore? Were you aware of the current challenges in the education system when you started to write the play?

Plays begin with characters-particularly in this one, the character of Hector. I suppose the contrasting methods of Hector and Irwin do say something about the educational system today but that wasn't what I set out to write about. I wanted to put these two characters together in order to see what happened. That Irwin turned out to be (or end up as) a spin doctor rather took me by surprise, but the more history he taught and his particular slant on history made me see that there was a link between that sort of teaching and the sort of presentation that goes on in politics and the media.

How much do you know before you put pen to paper? Do you have a clear structure in mind, or do you simply see where the writing takes you?

I like to know the end of the play, though with *The History Boys* I didn't quite. I knew the ending of *Wind in the Willows* obviously, and

of *George III* and of *Lady in the Van*. The writing is just (just!) a case of getting there. Sometimes what happens takes me by surprise...for example Hector's death on the motorbike, and I don't think I quite knew that Dakin would seduce Irwin (or nearly, anyway).

You started by writing and performing satirical sketches in Beyond The Fringe, do you think writing sketches has influenced your writing style at all?

I've always tended to write in four-or five-minute bursts. This maybe harks back to my origins in revue or maybe it's just about as much as I can get through in a morning. I always speak the stuff aloud and know how it should be said, which is another reason why I like to go into rehearsals. I find it hard not to correct emphasis – which one should never do as it's no help to the actor – but I do try to steer them in the right direction. Nick is very tolerant of this, which some directors wouldn't be.

This is the second play you have written set in a school (although admittedly the school in Forty Years On is a very different kind, is there something about the setting that interests you?

The school in *The History Boys* is more like the school I went to than Albion House in *Forty Years On*, which was a public school and much more of an allegorical device (as the name implies). Though my own schooling was fifty years or so ago I can see some similarities with the classes of the school in the play. Everybody wants to find similarities with *Forty Years On* but I don't see any.

Is there anything you find particularly special about writing for theatre (as opposed to film and television?)

I find writing for the theatre much the hardest, so I feel that's why I have to do it. Films pay

Members of the company
photo Ivan Kyncl



Interview

much more but you get proportionately mucked around. Television seems to have left me behind and I'm not sure any of the stuff I've written for the small screen would be thought suitable or even adequate today. A few weeks ago BBC2 had its fortieth birthday and mounted a commemorative evening. Ninety percent of the stuff I've done for TV has been for BBC2, including *An Englishman Abroad*, *Talking Heads* and my early films with Stephen Frears. I didn't get a mention, so I suppose that means my BBC2 shelf life has run out.

In The History Boys there are a number of poets and authors who clearly inspire the boys – for example the poem 'Drummer Hodge' seems to touch Posner very deeply. Were there any writers that inspired you when you were at school?

I never did much reading until I started writing. Certainly my education at school was confined to what I needed to pass exams. I started reading plays when I was sixteen or seventeen but with no notion of writing any. I came to Hardy, whom I like very much, via Larkin. As it used to say in the play, Hardy is a good person to read when you're starting to write because he's so directly spoken and ungainly that you feel you can match him (or at least try to).

Frances De La Tour and
Stephen Campbell Moore
photo Ivan Kyncl



The relationship between the director and the writer is often considered to be turbulent. However it would seem that you and Nicholas Hytner have an extremely close relationship. Richard Eyre once commented that you 'love working with Nick, and I sometimes feel like Ratty deserted by Mole for Badger'. What is the secret to a successful writer/director relationship?

I'm tempted to say that the secret of my relationship with Nick is gossip but that's a bit flippant. We don't know each other all that well and seldom see each other socially or between plays. I, in the first instance, like him because he works harder than any other director I have come across (and with pretty constant good humour); no writer, it seems to me, could help but be flattered by the attention he pays to the work. He is also very good with the text, as many directors are not. He makes rehearsing fun and gets more out of his actors in consequence. He takes risks: this play, in the state he first saw it anyway, was a risk. His production ideas, in so far as I understood them (the videos and so on), seemed quite risky but I felt he had taken a risk on me and I ought to return the compliment.

You spent most of the rehearsal period of The History Boys in the rehearsal room with the actors and director. Not all writers choose to do this, however your input to Nick and the cast was invaluable – how do you see the role of the writer in rehearsals?

It depends on the play. The only rehearsals I've attended as regularly as I've done with these were for *The Madness of George III* and for the same reason, namely that the script was still evolving, and needed tightening up and fitting to the actors and the action. I didn't go to rehearsals for *Lady in the Van* nearly as much because it was a less complicated production and since it was also a play in which I was myself represented (twice) I felt if I was there too much it would inhibit the actors. Though I don't like to think so, I'm also quite

Interview

gregarious. It's a treat for me to have come into work every morning rather than just sit at my table, to the extent that now we're coming to the end of rehearsals I'm getting quite melancholy. Rehearsing is a serious business but it's also quite silly and I like being silly. I'm also grateful to the cast that they don't mind having me around and that the boys treat me like a human being.

What would you hope audiences would come away with, having watched

The History Boys?

I'd like the audience to come away wanting to spend more time in the company of the characters in the play. I'd like them to come away having understood and forgiven Hector and even Irwin. I wish I was Dakin or even Scripps but I fear the character closest to mine is Posner. As Nick stated the other day in rehearsals – I fear many of us are closest to Posner.

Richard Griffiths
photo Ivan Kyncl



Interview

**DIRECTOR
NICHOLAS HYTNER**

You stated on the first day of rehearsals that you'd been badgering Alan for a play since you were appointed Director of the National. This is your fourth collaboration with him. What makes his writing special for you?

I share his sensibility and his sense of humour. He can't write a dull line. Actors fight to be in his plays, so casting them is no problem.

What are the challenges a director is likely to encounter with an Alan Bennett play?

The first draft is never the play he wants to see on stage. He invites the director to help him discover what the play is, and what it's about. He enjoys collaboration on the structure of the play before it goes into rehearsal. There's a mass of brilliant material that often needs a bit of knocking into shape.

Since we first worked together on the adaptation of *The Wind in the Willows*, I've encouraged him to give no attention at all to the business of staging his plays. So he writes what he likes and leaves me to sort out how to do it, to move from place to place, how to stitch it all together on stage. There are very few stage directions. I like it that way!

He is a stylist as recognisable, in his way, as Oscar Wilde. People don't actually talk the way they do in his plays. In *The History Boys*, everyone is far wittier and more articulate than their real life equivalents would be. So actors in his plays have to work hard to make their brilliant talk natural and effortless.

In rehearsals you used improvisation with the actors on two or three occasions. What were you hoping to achieve with this exercise?

It's sometimes a good idea to encourage the actors to find the concrete reality behind a scene for themselves, so that Alan's text can

then spring from something that's already inside them.

What is your thinking behind the video projections?

1. I can't stand boring scene changes; I wanted the play never to stop and for the audience always to have something to look at.
2. They add a physical context to the play.
3. I'm very interested in exploring ways in which film and theatre can feed each other.
4. It's a long time since I was behind a camera and I fancied a day out on location.

What would you hope audiences would come away with, having watched The History Boys?

I hope they'll be stimulated by what it has to say about the transmission of knowledge and culture, about history and the nature of historical truth, and about the purpose of education. I hope they'll have got to know twelve people in depth. I hope they'll have laughed a lot, maybe cried a little, and have had a really good night out.

Further Activities

DISCUSSION

1. Consider Richard Eyre's comment that Alan Bennett's writing is 'all about unrealised hope and defeated expectations'. Do the last scenes of each act agree with this statement, and if so what techniques does Bennett use to conjure this mood?

2. Alan Bennett described Hardy's writing as being 'directly spoken and ungainly'. Does Hardy's poem 'Drummer Hodge' demonstrate this statement?

The History Boys script, published by Faber and Faber, will be available from 11 June and can be purchased from the National's Bookshop.
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E: bookshop@nationaltheatre.org.uk
W: nationaltheatre.org.uk

WRITING

1. The Headmaster's eulogy of Hector in the last scene betrays his own character as much as it commemorates Hector's. Take another character from the play, and write a eulogy to Hector from their point of view.

2. Compare Act 1 scene 8 and Act 1 scene 10. Discuss how Hector and Irwin's views of literature differ – how do they both use quotations to illustrate a point?

PRACTICAL

1. Take the following lines from the last scene of the play:

IRWIN: He was a good man but I do not think there is time for his kind of teaching anymore.

SCRIPPS: No. Love apart it is the only kind of education worth having.

Split the class into two, one part takes on Irwin's point of view the other Scripps'. Using the facts of the play, discuss which of the characters has the right approach to education.

2. Nicholas Hytner used improvisation to conjure the atmosphere of the school. Allocating the characters of the boys to the class, improvise one of the offstage scenes in the play. How might this help a production in rehearsal?