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The History Boys: A Play



Synopsis

"A play of depth as well as dazzle, intensely moving as well as thought-provoking and funny."

—[The Daily Telegraph](#) An unruly bunch of bright, funny sixth-form (or senior) boys in a British boys' school are, as such boys will be, in pursuit of sex, sport, and a place at a good university, generally in that order. In all their efforts, they are helped and hindered, enlightened and bemused, by a maverick English teacher who seeks to broaden their horizons in sometimes undefined ways, and a young history teacher who questions the methods, as well as the aim, of their schooling. In *The History Boys*, Alan Bennett evokes the special period and place that the sixth form represents in an English boy's life. In doing so, he raises with gentle wit and pitch-perfect command of character not only universal questions about the nature of history and how it is taught but also questions about the purpose of education today.

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Customer Reviews

—["Nothing could diminish the incendiary achievement of this subtle, deep-wrought and immensely funny play about the value and meaning of education . . . In short, a superb, life-enhancing play."](#)
—[The Guardian](#) "Brilliantly funny . . . *The History Boys* is moving, disquieting: one follows it with a heart brimful . . . His finest work in decades."
—[Financial Times](#)

Alan Bennett is a renowned playwright and essayist whose screenplay for *The Madness of King*

George was nominated for an Academy Award. He lives in London, England.

First, many thanks to the friend who recommended THE HISTORY BOYS by Alan Bennett; I doubt I would have discovered it on my own. And reading it was a treat. It is a contemporary play (winner of the Tony Award for best play in 2006) that is sophisticated, moderately literary, humanely compassionate, and witty - even, at times, laugh-out-loud funny. It is, however, quite British, but enough survives transport across the ocean to have made it nonetheless rewarding and engaging for this American reader. And more so than most plays, it reads easily and naturally as a work of fiction, as a novella. The plot is relatively simple. A grammar school in the north of England finds itself with eight unusually talented male students in the sixth form (i.e., seniors in high school). The headmaster determines to pull out the stops to get as many as possible admitted to Oxford or Cambridge. So, in September, he hires Irwin, himself only recently awarded a teaching diploma, to teach the boys history and, more importantly, how to succeed on the Oxbridge entrance exams. Irwin teaches the boys to be clever, to stand out, to be learnedly contrarian, to have an angle. Facts and "the truth" are not the desiderata - or, as Irwin tells his charges: "History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a performance. It's entertainment." (And how many popular British historians of the past quarter century does that encapsulate?) As an example, Irwin begins his first lecture by stating, "At the time of the Reformation there were fourteen foreskins of Christ preserved, but it was thought that the church of St John Lateran in Rome had the authentic prepuce." The boys think he perhaps is trying to shock them and then their discussion begins to turn, sophomorically, to which of them have foreskins. But Irwin then confronts them with his pedagogical point: "some silly nonsense on the foreskins of Christ will come in handy" in the event the Church on the eve of the Reformation is one of the subjects of the entrance exams; for a bored examiner reading one hundred and sixty competent papers, "the fourteen foreskins of Christ will come as a real ray of sunshine." Strenuously opposed to the relativistic, sensationalist teaching of Irwin is Hector, the entrenched, elderly teacher of "General Studies" (primarily, English literature). Hector finds Irwin's approach to history to be "flip", "glib", and even worse, "journalism." He believes that the teachers should be educating their charges for life and for death, not for entrance exams. Needless to say, one of the themes of THE HISTORY BOYS is the purpose of education. Broadly perceived, the question is: To cheat or not to cheat? In addition to matters of pedagogy, the history boys also learn about life and making their way in the world. One is Jewish and an outsider. Another is a rugby-player and not quite as intellectually facile as his mates. Some are sexually supercharged, and there is more than an undercurrent of homosexuality. Most of the play takes place in the three

months leading up to the boys' entrance exams. A portion takes place shortly after the exams and three other brief segments are set many years later, so that, eventually, the reader learns the careers of the history boys as well as something about the later lives of Hector and Irwin. The play is sprinkled with references to cultural works and figures - including, notably, Larkin, Auden, Hardy, Wittgenstein, and (yes) The Pet Shop Boys. For the most part THE HISTORY BOYS sparkles, drawing its energy from the high spirits of the eight young men. But it also has its sober moments and the occasional insightful comment, such as this one from Hector: "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 here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours."

Alan Bennett began delighting the theater-going world almost before he needed to shave, being one of the mad troupe of "Beyond the Fringe" that tromped onto Broadway as college smart-alecks and ended up with a Tony. Bennett starts by making us laugh, and ends by making us wonder, in every sense of the word. In "The History Boys" (also a Tony winner) we meet eight English boys who are being groomed for Oxford and Cambridge scholarships. But just how do these young and randy scholars best impress their examiners? Each of the four adults coaching them has a different idea, and the sparks fly in every direction as the boys are readied for their examinations. Language, laughs, love and lust--everything comes up for discussion. "Pass it on, boys; pass it on!" And Bennett certainly passes it on to us, for which this reader is hugely grateful.

THE HISTORY BOYS, Alan Bennett's play (and now also a screenplay) is about a group of eight teenage boys being groomed by their teachers and headmaster to pass the examination that hopefully will admit them to either Oxford or Cambridge University, and from there to who knows what kind of position of privilege and leadership in the larger world. It takes place in the 1980s (a Pet Shop Boys song is the most current cultural reference in the play), and it is clear that the world, like the eight boys themselves, is in a period of transition. The boys, like boys everywhere, are easily distracted by sexual thoughts and are eager to impress one another and rattle their teachers. The two key influencers on their young lives are the English teacher, Hector, and a history teacher, Irwin. Hector plays yin to Irwin's yang. He floods the boys with poetry and literary quotations, encourages them to enact scenes in French, lets them quote movie dialogue in the hopes of stumping him and winning the pool he forces them to contribute to, and fondles them as opportunity

allows on the back of his motorcycle. Irwin, on the other hand, is a more cynical influence. The headmaster has called him in to teach the boys to perform, knowing that the examiners will be looking to be dazzled by memorable eccentricities rather than swayed by the accuteness of their thoughts, breadth of their reading, or depth of their wisdom. "History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so." While everyone seems to be proceeding in earnest, the audience can't help but feel all these efforts are of little use in a world that is rapidly changing. As another teacher, Mrs. Lintott, observes about the boys' futures in the closing scene of the play, "[They are] pillars of a community that no longer has much use for pillars," aptly encapsulating the play's melancholic, post-colonial mood. Readers should be alerted that there are two distinct versions of the script available--one for the play as originally performed in London and New York (2004/2005) and the filmscript for the 2006 BBC/Fox Searchlight Films release. Both are good and both tell essentially the same story. Bennett's dialogue, as always, is witty, honest, and right on the money. His themes broad and important, his characters deeply flawed but lovable nonetheless. If you're a purist, you'll probably want to buy the play script (ISBN 0571224644). It includes a 20+ page introduction by Bennett in which he gives the reader useful background information about the changing face of the British educational system over the past several decades. But the screenplay (ISBN 0865479712) has its merits too. The nice thing about the film is that it was produced using all the principals responsible for the success of the play: Nicholas Hytner directed both, employing the same cast. By the time the film was shot, the actors had internalized their parts and were able to bring them to the screen with apparent ease and confidence. As Hytner's introduction to the filmscript makes clear, the lack of "big-name" stars and his and Bennett's firm commitment to the careful preservation of all the play's best features made financing the picture a real challenge. But it seems they succeeded (a DVD of the film is due out in April 2007). Hytner's introduction in the screenplay is thoughtful and will be of interest to people who like to reflect on film adaptation; Bennett's "Film Diary" is typical Bennett, full of dry wit and bemused reflections on his unanticipated success. The script itself seems to follow the play closely (and includes scenes that ultimately needed to be cut to achieve the desired length, suggesting perhaps that the financiers who ultimately stepped forward weren't exactly always silent partners). The scene directions (totally lacking in the play script) help the reader understand the many time- and scene-shifts that happen over the course of the story. But the real treat in the screenplay edition are the 43 photographs showing the cast and crew at work. This collection of stills and candid shots are clear evidence that everyone involved with this production was fully engaged and loving the experience.

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