



## Review: *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett, St James Theatre, Wellington, February 24-28 2006

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In February 2006, the New Zealand International Festival of the Arts brought the original cast of Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* to Wellington. Originally staged at London's National Theatre in 2004, this play won *Critics Circle* and *Evening Standard* Awards for Best Actor and Best Play and, the following year, three Olivier Awards for Best New Play, Best Actor (Richard Griffiths) and Best Direction (Nicholas Hytner). Bennett, himself, received an Olivier Award for 'Outstanding Contribution to British Theatre'. Critics hailed the play as 'the finest Alan Bennett has ever written' (Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*) and 'a superb, life-enhancing play' which 'mixes up drama, comedy, poetry, popular song and ancient hymns, anecdote and aphorism, W.H. Auden and Gracie Fields in an eclectically English way' (Michael Billington, *The Guardian*). Alan Bennett has a remarkable list of credits having written for stage, film, television, radio and print for over 40 years.

So it was with much anticipation that I booked my ticket for this show and I was not disappointed. As a drama specialist, teacher and amateur philosopher, I found *The History Boys* exciting on many levels. It is a play epic in its complexity, a combination of satire and tragedy with a dexterity reminiscent of Tom Stoppard at his best, and the quality of performance which produces potent theatre. (I did not have any problem hearing the dialogue, though I believe a previous audience had.) *The History Boys* takes place in an English Grammar School and poses insistent questions about education, history and the class system. Yet, it is very funny – an impressive achievement.

The staging is ingenious, the lighting skilful. Three sliding flats make for seamless set changes, the transitions linked by filmed scenes of school life, involving the same cast, projected on large screens (top centre and both sides of the stage) while one or two of the boys perform short musical items in a spotlight (downstage left).

Set in the eighties, *The History Boys* is about eight bright, sixth form boys studying for their entrance examinations in history for Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Alan Bennett, who sat a similar examination in the fifties, was well on with the play when a friend informed him that scholarship examinations were now a thing of the past. Bennett decided that, like so many other things, it was probably in the eighties that the change had occurred. 'Luckily' he writes in his introduction to the play, 'the eighties were a period with no special sartorial stamp, no wince-making flares, for instance or tie 'n' die'. Besides, he

considered characters more important than theme and saw the play as being 'about two sorts of teaching – or two teachers, anyway, who were teaching more or less in the present'. Bennett reports that rehearsals for the play were unusual in that the young actors playing the sixth form boys had to learn not only their parts but what they meant. The play is 'stiff with literary and historical references' many of which meant little to the actors at first.

The school boys' teacher is Hector, a non-conformist who feels that his role is to give them the 'wherewithal to resist' the education being forced upon them by the school system. He locks the door during his classes, which are a free-wheeling eclectic mix of Socratic dialogue, poetry (learned by heart), song and role-play. He is brilliant and, unfortunately, flawed. The boys take turns to ride home on Hector's pillion where he fondles their testicles while driving his motorbike. The boys are quite tolerant of this foible except Posner who wonders why he has never been asked. Posner is the only gay in the class and the character closest to the author's own experience as a schoolboy. All the boys suffer, in one way or another, the angst of teenage sexuality although this aspect of the play is given surprising little weight.

The headmaster, who has never had a student go to one of the 'proper universities', is ambitious for results and brings in another teacher, Irwin, to help in preparing the students for Oxbridge. Irwin's approach is to 'Find a proposition, invert it, then look around for proofs. That was the technique and it was as formal in its way as the disciplines of the medieval schoolmen'. The idea is to make the students stand out from the crowd and, as such, it works. They succeed in gaining entrance.

The Headmaster tells Mrs Lintott, a history teacher, what he thinks is wrong with Hector as a teacher even though he does produce results. The problem, as he sees it, is that they are 'unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use.... There is inspiration, certainly, but how do I quantify that?' The head would like Hector to retire and when he finds out about Hector's particular weakness, it gives him the opportunity. 'So the upshot is I am glad he handled his pupils' balls because that at least I can categorise'. Irwin is his choice. Irwin is determined to have the boys succeed although, as it turns out, he, too, is not quite as he seems. The headmaster evokes the present situation in education with its emphasis on teacher accountability (and subsequent paperwork) and its comparisons of national school results as a ways of assessing schools' performance.

The only woman in the play, Mrs Lintott, is the consistent voice of reason. She is the teacher who has helped the boys pass their history exams and given them the sound background knowledge. In his introduction, Bennett compares Mrs Lintott's teaching method ('At Oxford a model answer often compared to a Times leader') with Irwin's ('... brisk generalities flavoured with sufficient facts and quotations to engage the examiner's interest and disguise basic ignorance'). Straightforward, intelligent and compassionate, Mrs Lintott is dependable, a 'safe pair of hands'. As she says, 'I have not hitherto been allotted an inner voice, my role a patient and not unamused sufferance of the predilections and preoccupations of men. They kick their particular stone along the street and I watch'. Though she is fond of him she thinks that, ultimately, Hector is deluded in believing that Art is the key.

However, in some ways, Hector is Bennett's voice in the play, for Bennett also believes that 'Art wins in the end'. Alan Bennett's socialist convictions also appear often in his work; many of his characters have been the unfortunate and the downtrodden, and in *The History Boys* class is certainly an issue. Even the attempt to gain entry into Oxbridge is seen as a way to move up the social ladder. One of the boys, Rudge, who defines History as 'One f.....g thing after another', is seen as having slim hope of succeeding in the examination because he is obviously vulgar and thinks more of sport than intellectual pursuits. However, he is accepted immediately at the interview. The headmaster cannot quite believe that he might have had family who had gone to Oxford, to which Rudge's response is, 'My dad. Before he got married he was a college servant there.... they said I was just the kind of candidate they were looking for, college servant's son, now an undergraduate, evidence of how far they had come.... and just what the college rugby team needed'.

In his introduction, Alan Bennett admits that, sadly, there is little chance of state education becoming as effective as private schools, especially not in the present climate. He is also critical of the lack of support for those wishing to attend universities. His generation were happily relieved of the burden of loans; acceptance into a tertiary institution automatically brought with it a grant from the state or local authority. 'The names of recipients of such grants would be printed in the local paper, the underlying assumption being that the names of these students should be known because they had done the country some service and would go on to do more. There was genuine pride in such achievements and in the free education that had made them possible. I am told that I am naïve or unrealistic, but I do not understand why we cannot afford such a system today. As a nation we are poorer for the lack of it'.

In his *Scoop* review of *The History Boys*, Richard Thomson considers how the play, so particular in its Englishness, is accessible to a New Zealand audience. He concludes that we, too, have an obsession with rankings and achievement. 'Hector is a teacher for whom the great love of his life is poetry, and although it's an affair that's far from simple, it's difficult to imagine that his was the kind of pedagogy the New Zealand schools who opted to offer Cambridge International Exams had in mind.' And, while the boys in this play are dealing with the England of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, 'we have parallel experiences of our own'.

*The History Boys* was an experience to remember. I am still pondering the issues. After all, I am a Drama teacher. 'Pass it on', says Hector, 'That was all I ever tried to do'.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Zoe Brooks is Head of Drama at Freyberg High School, Palmerston North. She graduated from the University of Cape Town in 1971 with a Performer's Diploma in Speech and Drama and emigrated to New Zealand in 1974. Zoe received her MA from Massey University in 1998 and is currently working towards her EdD (Doctor of Education) at Massey University College of Education.