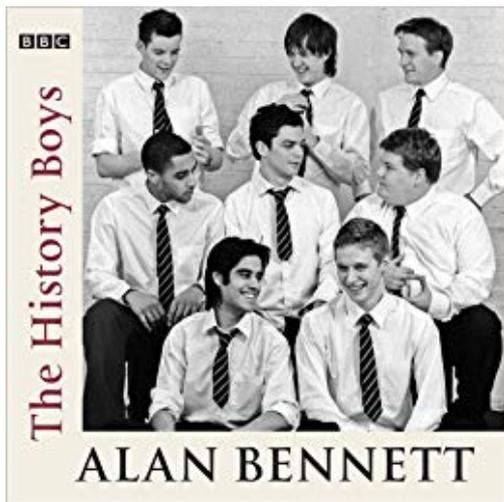


## **The History Boys (dramatization) by Richard Griffiths, Clive Merrison, Frances de la Tour and a Full Cast, Alan Bennett**



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After a sell out national tour and an extended stage run, Alan Bennetts phenomenally successful play transfers to BBC Radio 3. Richard Griffiths, Clive Merrison and Frances de la Tour star as part of the National Theater cast. At a boys grammar school in Sheffield, eight boys are being coached for the Oxbridge entrance exams. It is the mid-eighties, and the main concern of the unruly bunch of bright sixth formers is getting out, starting university and starting life. At the heart of The History Boys are four characters, each with contrasting outlooks on teaching and school: Hector, an eccentric English teacher with no interest in exams; Irwin, a young supply teacher who sees history as entertainment; Mrs. Lintott, a traditionalist, who teaches history, not histrionics; and, a Headmaster obsessed with results. Staff room rivalry and the anarchy of adolescence collide in an intensely moving and thought provoking play.



# Reviews of the **The History Boys (dramatization)** by Richard Griffiths, Clive Merrison, Frances de la Tour and a Full Cast, Alan Bennett

## Malalrajas

First, many thanks to the Amazon 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."

### **Morad**

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.

### **Thetahuginn**

According to an ancient Chinese proverb, the route to wisdom starts when you select words with the proper meaning. Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* is all about the use of words. The situation is a classroom filled with working class boys all of whom want to break with tradition and pass entry tests that will make them some of the first non-Elites to ever get into Oxbridge---for the uninitiated that's short for Oxford or Cambridge. Even for the best of them, chances are slim. First, there's the little matter of class; at Oxbridge, students and faculty are either highbred or rich, mostly both; a working class resident is most likely to be there as janitor or cook. Then there's the matter of competition; only the best of the best need apply; there are many more applicants than slots. Not to be deterred, the ambitious school administrators have a plan: Use two very different types of tutors. One gives the boys facts, figures, poems, stories, and an appreciation of culture. The other gives them something seemingly more valuable: presentation skills. Together, the teachers hone students who know how to choose words that surprise, stir emotions, and impress. The strategy works, sort of. Through the benefit of hindsight, we learn that the boys do get into Oxbridge; but, Bennett also lets you know that he knows the difference between a "proper" schoolboy who can carefully mouth words to impress and the wise man who makes an impression by choosing his words properly.

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