

# A history lesson from Britain fails to shed much light

Kaye Tucker, Peter Daniels  
16 May 2006

The *History Boys* first premiered in London in 2004 and won a host of awards. It has since traveled to Australia and the US. Reviewers from the WSWs saw the play in Sydney and in its current production in New York.

Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* has now played on three continents to sold-out houses and great acclaim. A screen version will be released later this year. We found it over-praised, however. There is food for thought here, as well as wit and insight, but *The History Boys* falls short in its treatment of the important questions it raises: What is the purpose of education? How should history be taught?

The play, staged by Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of Britain's National Theatre, is set in a public secondary school for boys in the north of England in the mid-1980s. The cast consists essentially of the headmaster of the school, three teachers and eight pupils. The plot revolves around the obsessive efforts of the headmaster to see that all of his bright students are admitted to the elite Oxford or Cambridge universities.

The cast is certainly not to blame for the play's limitations. It includes some of Britain's finest actors. Richard Griffiths (*Harry Potter*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Gorky Park* and many other theatre, television and film credits) takes the pivotal role of Hector, as the English teacher. He has little time for the constraints of the curriculum. He allows the boys to decide the form and format of their classes, and views examinations and the memorization of facts as the enemy of learning and creativity. Hector's methods are displayed to lively and often beautiful, as well as comic, effect. The students in campy fashion reenact dialogue from such classic films as *Now, Voyager* and *Brief Encounter*. They perform songs by Edith Piaf and Rodgers and Hart. There is a *joie de vivre* displayed here that surely must be a part of learning.

Others in the company include Stephen Campbell Moore, who plays Irwin, a young teacher hired to help the boys impress interviewers and get into the elite Oxford and Cambridge universities, and Frances de la Tour as Mrs. Lintott (Maggie Steed taking the role in Australia), a veteran

teacher whose droll and slightly cynical world-weariness contrasts humorously with the methods of her colleagues. Clive Merrison ably portrays the headmaster, who is concerned with his own professional standing and the image of the school, not with helping his students.

Irwin represents the new brand of teacher. In his arrogant claims that technique is more important than truth, he is meant to symbolize an obsession with material success and the bottom line in Britain during the period when right-wing Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's name became synonymous with social and economic policies that lifted all restraints on profit-making and ripped up much of what remained of the welfare state in the process.

Irwin tells the boys that getting attention is the main concern these days in academia. "The wrong end of the stick is the right one," he proclaims, meaning that turning what might be called the conventional historical view on its head is a good career move (and may also impress the Oxbridge authorities). This has been interpreted as a poke at some of the fashionable "new historians." Irwin goes so far as to suggest that rewriting the Holocaust might not be such a bad idea.

Hector and Irwin are caricatures, and Mrs. Lintott acts as a foil for their extreme positions. There is no problem with using caricatures, but the problem with *The History Boys* is that the ideas expressed are not really explored.

In an interview with Britain's *Daily Telegraph* Bennett claims that those who think he's simply taking sides with one or another of these teaching methods are oversimplifying. He also explains that there is an autobiographical element involved. He was taught by both a Lintott and an Irwin type—but not by Hector, whom he bases on what others have told him. Bennett has said the play was "both a confession and an expiation" for what he felt were the false pretenses under which he won his own scholarship to Oxford.

There is much of Bennett in Hector, however. Bennett acknowledges that he "cleaves to that [Hector] kind of teacher and that kind of teaching—while at the same time not

thinking it practical. I suppose that the three teachers came out of trying to reconcile that.”

What we see on stage is Bennett’s own uncertainty. The playwright, who first became famous as a star and writer in the *Beyond the Fringe* comedy troupe 45 years ago, is renowned for his “ironic self-deprecation.” He sees both sides of most questions. On the issue of education, as on many other aspects of modern life, Bennett clearly identifies retrograde developments, such as the substitution of testing for learning. However, he sees the decline of quality education, of seriousness, as to some extent inevitable; he certainly does not see any clear alternative. There is an element of protest in what he writes, but it is slight.

In the play Hector is the exponent of the life of the mind, and Irwin is his “practical” opposite. Director Hytner has quoted British poet A.E. Housman as the inspiration for Hector’s outlook: “All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use.” It does not occur to Bennett that Housman’s statement could profitably be rephrased to give it a meaning that is very different: “All knowledge is precious and serves a human purpose whether or not its usefulness is immediately apparent.”

Bennett sees changes that have taken place in the past century, and half century in particular, as disturbingly disruptive of what he cherishes about the past. He knows that we can’t simply turn the clock back, but he also doesn’t see any way forward. Thus we have the one-sided and sterile alternatives of *The History Boys*—knowledge for its own sake or cynical spin—with Mrs. Lintott providing some comic relief but no worked out conceptions of her own. Bennett clearly doesn’t like Thatcherism, but his inability to present anything but nostalgic memories of the past easily becomes a way of accepting Thatcherism. As he has Irwin say about Hector at the end of the play: “He was a good man but I do not think there is time for his kind of teaching any more.”

It is no secret that this play is supposed to be an allegorical look at British society as a whole, but here too certain weaknesses are apparent. We learn nothing about what is going on in society at large. Some of the students are clearly from the working class, but there is just the briefest mention of this background. The attacks under Thatcher’s government on basic rights that workers had fought for over many decades find no expression in the play. It is not a matter of demanding a didactic history lesson, but of presenting the issues for the audience to think about.

Instead of exploring these subjects, Bennett explores the private lives of his characters. Since the boys don’t lend themselves to this as much, we learn little about them, except for the sensitive Posner and the class Lothario, Dakin, on whom Posner has a crush.

However, we do learn about Hector’s bisexuality—he uses

his motorcycle to drive the boys home from class and takes the opportunity to fondle them—and of Irwin’s closeted homosexuality. It’s hard to see what this has to do with the main themes of the play.

It is not, of course, an issue of prudery or of taking offense at the portrayal of homosexuality. The way the subject is treated, however, becomes a distraction, and perhaps a way of avoiding other issues.

Bennett is quoted as agreeing with the words he gives to Hector: “The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act.” He’s not interested in groping Posner, however, but only the more attractive boys. Does that mean that he is not transmitting knowledge to Posner? And what if his students were female?

On the issue of history itself, *The History Boys* is wanting. In the abovementioned interview, Bennett makes another very revealing comment. When Hytner asks him, “do you think there is such a thing as absolute historical truth?” Bennett replies, “I don’t know.” He then refers to the comment of one of the “history boys” that “History is just one fucking thing after another.” And Bennett goes on to end his thought on the subject, “...I don’t get much further than that. History is one bloody thing after another.”

With this outlook it is perhaps a wonder that Bennett has written as lively and provocative a play as he has, at least in spots. His confession of skepticism and complete befuddlement is typical of a certain type of liberalism. One of his colleagues has referred to his “gloomy optimism.” He looks at history and humanity with a certain ironic detachment. He doesn’t turn his back on the world, and he does have occasional insights to offer. He is not a cynic or a misanthrope, but he has no idea what any of it means. That is why he has Hector tell the boys that they are “Magnificently unprepared/For the long littleness of life.” Bennett is said to have taken this wording from his mother, who often used to say, “It’s a little life.” This stresses the inconsequentiality of the individual life. It suggests that we shouldn’t try too hard to understand life, and above all not try too hard to change it.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**