

ALAN BENNETT'S **THE HISTORY BOYS**



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WESTCLIFF THEATRE

What are we educating these boys for? History and education in Bennett's *The History Boys*

The History Boys is set, ostensibly at least, in 1983. An audience will find, however, no reference in it to the Falklands War, the discovery of AIDS, or the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. This lack of historical grounding is not surprising. Bennett initially conceived it as a contemporary play, but in this regard his hand was forced: 1983 was the last year in which Oxbridge candidates were required to complete an extra term, after their A level results, to prepare for the entrance exam. Ultimately, though, it does not matter. This may be a play about the study of History, but in its portrayal of School life, and the political battleground of education, it is essentially timeless.

At its core is a debate about the purpose and nature of education that is as relevant today as it has ever been. Mr Hector is an old fashioned school teacher, eccentric, and provocatively indifferent to the demands of assessment criteria and examination syllabuses. To Hector, the purpose of education is to make his charges 'more rounded human beings.' Literature, for him, is 'medicine, wisdom, elastoplast – everything.' He cannot bear the thought of what he teaches ever being used in an exam: to him, poems are to be 'learned *by heart*... and like the other components of the heart are not to be defiled by being trotted out to order.' It is an attractive notion to be sure – and if it is entirely unsustainable in today's educational climate, that only serves to heighten its appeal – but Bennett does not wish us to accept it uncritically, and nor can we. When the Headmaster suggests that Hector's teaching is selfish, to an extent one must agree with him. As entertaining as Hector's obsession with Gracie Fields and *Brief Encounter* may be, it is only a partial education. He is doing his pupils no favours with his stubborn indifference to their examination chances. Exams are not only what Irwin calls 'a fact of life' – examination success is, for these unprivileged History boys, a passport to the fulfilment that Hector wants them to find.

Irwin, the young supply teacher, may be a character to whom it is hard to warm – his hidden vulnerability notwithstanding – but one suspects that most parents would sooner have their sons in his class than in Hector's. He is a flawed character: meretricious, dissembling, morally flexible. But, after all, there is moral flexibility to Hector (his sexual peccadilloes are humoured by both Bennett and the boys, but any audience must be left feeling at least a little uncomfortable.) Where Hector expresses his moral failings through his sexual antics, Irwin expresses his through his teaching. 'History today is not a matter of conviction. It's performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so.' I do not suppose anyone of moral substance would advocate going to the extremes that Irwin does, but one cannot deny the impact his teaching has on his pupils. If Hector has been teaching them to feel, Irwin now sets about teaching them to think. 'Think the unthinkable', says Dakin, and it is a moment of intellectual awakening that, for anyone who recognises it from their own education, cannot be begrudged. A rather cold and slippery character Irwin may be, but, in keeping with the rest of the play, Bennett does not allow our conclusions about him to be straightforward.

One of the many joys of *The History Boys* is its fearlessness in tackling questions of real educational and philosophical weight. It is a play that is unashamedly expansive in its range of literary and historical reference, and makes no apologies for being a play about language and ideas. On its debut in 2004, it was misinterpreted by some reviewers as being Bennett's *cri de coeur* about the parlous state of modern education, and, through its portrayal of Hector, a nostalgic lament for a better age. I am not so sure. Ultimately, for all the questions he raises, Bennett answers very few: the audience can take from it what they wish (a conclusion that one suspects would please both Irwin and Hector). Appropriately enough, Bennett leaves the most decisive conclusion of the play until the very end, as Hector muses that all any of us can really do is to 'take it, feel it, and pass it on.' It is this, above all things, which is at the moral and intellectual heart of the play – and I cannot think of a better or more beautiful encapsulation of what good teaching should be.

A very English soundtrack

While the backdrop of the 1980s is largely coincidental to Alan Bennett's play, it has enabled theatre production companies to maximise the use of artistic licence from what is arguably the most musically rich decade of the twentieth century. As the psychedelic and punk rock hangovers of 1970s Britain subsided, a 'new wave' of androgynous, technologically-oriented artists which shunned guitars, embraced synthesisers and wore 'guyliner' exploded onto the popular scene. Across the Atlantic, the dawn of MTV ensured the success of what became known as the Second British Invasion. Back home, the social uncertainty of 1980s Britain enabled new wave music to take root just as easily.

Bennett's 1980s grammar school is an image of Thatcherite Britain. Irwin in particular has a meritocratic disdain for tradition, Mrs Lintott is a sceptical feminist element aware that history is a catalogue of 'masculine ineptitude', and Dakin and his peers are a diverse core of young men attempting to better themselves. That the music reflects this is no coincidence. The film soundtrack is a *tour de force*, charting musical diversity from Rachmaninoff through Gracie Fields to The Clash, but it is the music of the 1980s which best captures the mood of the higher aspirations of frustrated youth. The edgy, urban sound of many new wave acts are hallmarks of a very English genre: rock music uprooted from the glamour and dazzle of big city America, and recast as the soundtrack to life in gritty northern suburbs. These kinds of places may be more identifiable to the typical 1980s *Top of the Pops* viewer, but they are still held up as bywords for false hope and limited horizons. Across the pond, Bruce Springsteen may have been successful in glorifying the struggle and hardship of working class life in New Jersey, but life back in Sheffield (the original setting of Bennett's play) was unglorifiable for most, so acts like The Specials, Dexy's Midnight Runners, Madness and The Members would bemoan and backhandedly celebrate their environment in a way which was more accessible to British youth. All of a sudden, teenagers' musical heroes were intimately familiar with their humdrum existence: the drone of Sunday morning lawnmowers, the ennui of disaffected youths

penning anarchy-fuelled musical mediocrity in their bedrooms, or the distant shrieks of a couple arguing at closing time outside a pub on a housing estate were all immortalised in music and lyrics, taking on a slightly mythical aura. New wave had arrived.

While the big screen adaptation of the play uses clips from The Cure, New Order and Echo & the Bunnymen, various stage versions have included excerpts from songs released after 1983, the year in which the play is set, including The Pet Shop Boys, Fiction Factory and The Dream Academy. Production companies were rightly careful in avoiding the more polished synth pop of the New Romantics genre in order to retain a more authentic sound, and such anachronisms can be forgiven when they add value to the production. Tonight's soundtrack is similarly intended to complement the myriad emotions throughout the play without impinging upon Bennett's scripted musical interludes.

Guardian theatre critic Michael Billington wrote on the opening of *The History Boys* in 2004 that 'the English middle classes have a special fondness for plays which take them back to their educated adolescence.' I hope that tonight's Westcliff production will also take many viewers back to their musical adolescence.

Dr A Robertson

Track listing

New Order – *True Faith*
The Human League – *Open Your Heart*
Then Jerico – *Big Area*
Modern English – *I Melt With You*
The Jam – *A Town Called Malice*
The Cure – *Friday I'm In Love*
Eurythmics – *Here Comes The Rain Again*
Pet Shop Boys – *It's A Sin*
Inspiral Carpets – *This Is How It Feels*
Joy Division – *Love Will Tear Us Apart*
Tears For Fears – *Everybody Wants To Rule The World*
Kirsty MacColl – *Days*
Electric Light Orchestra – *Mr Blue Sky*
Kirsty MacColl – *A New England*

Cast list

<i>Hector</i>	Richard Wells
<i>Headmaster</i>	Declan Dillane
<i>Irwin</i>	Joshua Kelly
<i>Mrs Lintott</i>	Caris Young
<i>Akthar</i>	Aniket Bharadwaj
<i>Crowther</i>	Joshua Bunn
<i>Dakin</i>	Henry Madell
<i>Lockwood</i>	Jack Abbott
<i>Posner</i>	Leo Connell
<i>Rudge</i>	Jack Redhead
<i>Scripps</i>	Jonathan Morell
<i>Timms</i>	Joshua Hatcher
<i>Adult Posner</i>	Michael Grace
<i>Irwin's Director</i>	Timi Ariyo
<i>Directed by</i>	Mrs K Robertson
<i>Sound & Lighting</i>	Sam Thomas
<i>Stage Manager</i>	Jacob Cox
<i>Musical Director</i>	Dr A Robertson
<i>Technical support</i>	Zac Turner

Cast



Richard Wells - *Hector*

Richard has appeared on the Westcliff stage many times since his debut as Henry V in Year 8 House Drama. He has appeared in many School productions since, including *Love on the Dole* and *The Invention of Love*. His most recent venture on the Westcliff stage was as a director in the recent production of *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie. Richard has enjoyed working on *The History Boys* and is sure you will find it as enjoyable to watch as the cast have found putting it on.

Declan Dillane - *Headmaster*
Declan is the Head Boy. A relatively late bloomer on the Westcliff stage, Declan only began his acting career last October, in a Sixth Form production of *Frost/Nixon*, in which he played the defamed American President. Since then, he has appeared in productions of *Look Back in Anger* and *Blackadder*, and is set to take part in *Sweeney Todd*. He wishes to study English Literature at University, and feels that his acting provides a valuable insight into the theatre, as well as being a fantastic way to enjoy himself and release the tension of his busy academic schedule.



Joshua Kelly - *Irwin*

Joshua has had a lot of experience on the Westcliff stage, most notably taking lead roles within *Grease* and *Frost/Nixon*. This part may however prove to be his biggest challenge yet. Commonly referred to as 'the Henry Madell of his year' he certainly enjoys a 'chemistry' with Henry, and their close friendship is sure to allow for a most intimate performance together. Joshua promises to make this his greatest performance yet, and is very excited to play such a challenging role in *The History Boys*.

Caris Young - Mrs Lintott

Caris has been in many plays on the Westcliff stage. She made her debut in *Grease* last year, and when she went on to join the Sixth Form she took part in *Blackadder*, *Look Back in Anger*, and *A Few Good Men*. She will be starring in the next musical *Sweeney Todd* as Mrs Lovett which she is thoroughly looking forward to. Caris also sings and has taken part in many theatrical appearances outside of the school environment. Caris is looking forward to *The History Boys* and thoroughly enjoys her character.



Henry Madell - Dakin

A familiar presence on the Westcliff stage, Henry is back for more. *The History Boys* will be his fifth performance within his many years at the School, and he is really looking forward to the opportunity of playing a character that struck a chord with him, in a play that he is terribly fond of. Henry resembles Dakin in many ways, and to quote Dr. Robertson, 'there was no other ego big enough for the job'. He is relishing the show, and has promised to make this his best performance yet.



Aniket Bharadwaj - Akthar

Aniket is performing for the first time on the Westcliff stage since he joined at the end of Year 9. He has a prominent interest in theatre and acting, and looks forward to contributing further to the Westcliff stage. He has relished playing the role of Akthar in *The History Boys* and hopes you enjoy his performance.



Jack Abbott- Lockwood

Jack is in Year 12. He made his debut appearance in the Year 8 House Drama Festival as King Harry in Harrier House's adaption of the Shakespeare classic *Henry V*. Jack also takes part in acting outside of the school, through the Cally Davis' Drama Group, and has appeared in a few of their productions. *The History Boys*, for him, has been a great experience and Jack has thoroughly enjoyed being part of the cast. He will be appearing in Mr Allan-Smith's *Ghost and Ghouls* evening in December and hopes that there will be plenty more occasions to take to the Westcliff stage in the future.



Joshua Bunn - Crowther

For Joshua, *The History Boys* has been a fantastic play to be involved in. He has very much enjoyed drawing parallels between the life of his character, Crowther, and his own life here at Westcliff. Both seek entrance into Oxbridge and both are key contributors to the everyday classroom banter that inevitably occurs within a Grammar School VI Form. Joshua looks forward to his first appearance on the Westcliff Theatre.



Leo Connell - Posner

Leo has been involved with various aspects of drama at Westcliff. He has performed before in *The Wonder of Shakespeare* and assisted with other productions, such as *And Then There Were None*. Leo is also involved with the Poetry Club within School, and also went through to the regional finals of the Jack Petchey 'Speak Out' Challenge. Tonight, Leo is playing Posner, a shy, retiring individual. Leo is a fan of the play, and looks forward to performing for you tonight.





Jack Redhead - *Rudge*

This is Jack's first appearance on the Westcliff stage; he has thoroughly enjoyed being involved in *The History Boys* and looks towards being involved in more Westcliff productions from now on. Jack's involvement in extra-curricular work previous to *The History Boys* was mainly sporting, so it comes as a surprise that he is taking part in acting. A key reason that Jack became involved was the similarities between Rudge, his character, and his own personality.

Michael Grace - *Adult Posner*

The small, but crucial role which Michael enacts tonight constitutes to his second appearance on the Westcliff stage, the first being his spectacular performance of 'Teen Angel' in the musical *Grease*. Furthermore he is looking forward to playing the role of Pirelli in the next school musical *Sweeney Todd*, which promises to be another spectacle not to be missed, and will also be performing in the production of *Fawlty Towers* by the VI Form drama group.



Jonathan Morell - *Scripps*

This is Jonathan's second appearance on the Westcliff stage and is his most challenging role yet. Whilst he may not be the most experienced actor, Jonathan is no stranger to performing, as he frequents our musical stage, appearing in the Westcliff Sinfonia, the Big Band, and, on many occasions, chamber recitals. Jonathan looks forward to tonight's performance, even if the musical aspect of the play is very daunting!



Timi Ariyo - *Irwin's Director*

This is Timi's second involvement in a Westcliff production. He was involved in directing and producing *And Then There Were None* with fellow cast mate Richard Wells. This however will be his first speaking part, and he looks forward to it.



Joshua Hather - *Timms*

This is Joshua's first appearance on the Westcliff stage. He is looking forward to singing solo in front of a large audience for the first time as well as looking forward to showing his potential as an actor. He hopes to develop his acting skills further, so that he can take part in other productions in the near future.



Technical crew



Jacob Cox - Stage Manager

Jacob has worked backstage for many Westcliff Productions, such as *And Then There Were None* and *The Wonder of Shakespeare*. Tonight, again, he is Stage Manager. Next year he will also be Stage Manager for the School production of *Peter Pan*. Jacob has also helped technically with the Summer Big Bang concert, and has done technical work with a local drama group.

Sam Thomas - Sound and Lighting

Sam is in Year 9 at WHSB. Since joining the Westcliff Boys Technical Crew in 2010, he has participated in many School productions and events, most notably *And Then There Were None* in May 2011. Sam was excited at the prospect of designing the lighting and sound for *The History Boys* and was very grateful to be back in the Westcliff Theatre once more. He hopes that this evening's performance will be relished by all.



With thanks...



... to the many people who have worked hard to bring this play to the Westcliff Stage. The cast have been wonderfully creative and eminently civilised to work with, and have not made it difficult to recreate the energy, and occasional chaos, of the classroom scenes they are portraying. I must thank Sam Thomas and Jacob Cox for their backstage heroics, Zac Turner for apparently knowing how to do just about anything with a computer, and Jonathan Morell, for his talent and initiative at the piano. Dr Robertson was the creative force behind the soundtrack, and is truly a guru of all things 80s. Thanks are also due to Mr Marlow for his work on the set, and to Mr Castleton, for being as patient and efficient as ever in Reprographics. And finally, my thanks to Mr Baker, who has been so supportive of this project from the start.

K H Robertson (Director)

Rehearsal photographs



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Westcliff High School for Boys
29 November - 2 December 2011

Programme by **Zac Turner**