

The History Boys

Author	Alan Bennett
Published by	Faber and Faber, London
Published in	2004
Price	€12
Length	109 pages
First staged	at the National Theatre in London, 18 May 2004.
Summary	<p>The play is about eight boys attending a grammar school in the North of England, who have achieved the best A Level results in history in years. The headmaster of the school is very ambitious to achieve excellent results in the next A Levels and wants to see the boys going to Oxford or Cambridge University. This would take his school right up in the league, which is what he is most concerned about.</p> <p>Therefore, he hires Irwin, a very young teacher who pretends to have graduated from Oxford, but in fact only went to Bristol. His task is to fine hone the students' skills and direction so they will get into Oxbridge. Irwin's teaching method, however, clashes with Hector's pedagogy of spontaneous language driven teaching, which he does in an interactive free discovery learning with the purpose to prepare the boys not specifically for exams, but for life.</p> <p>Here the drama begins because Hector's teaching does not stop at school, but continues on occasional lifts home on his motorbike, where he is witnessed groping one of his students. The consequence is that Hector and Irwin need to share lessons.</p> <p>While Irwin teaches them how to create a performance which will be remembered by the bored dons, Hector teaches them cultural grounding and useful quotations, and Mrs Lintott's factual teaching taught the boys the basic knowledge. The students develop educationally and emotionally and achieve admittance into Oxbridge.</p> <p>As a consequence for Hector's inappropriate behaviour, the headmaster asks him to retire early, which Dakin finally prevents, because he knows something about the headmaster he uses to blackmail him.</p> <p>In the end, Hector and Irwin leave on the motorbike. They have an accident which kills Hector and leaves Irwin in a wheelchair.</p> <p><i>The History Boys</i> was awarded 'best new play' in 2005 and won the prize of 'best play' 2006.</p>

Structure	Two act play without designated scenes; however, the play does show features of an exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and dénouement. Dramatic time and space and time are closed.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headmaster: Only interested in gaining a good reputation for the school; lacks pedagogic and social tactfulness; it is not clear whether he is to be taken seriously. • Mrs Lintott: Former history teacher of the boys with a very conservative style of teaching (focused on facts); the boys love her. • Hector: General studies and English teacher; he tries to educate the “whole boy” and has a very “word-centred” style of teaching; he is not focused on the exams, but on the boys’ future; touches the boys intimately on the motorbike, but they love him nevertheless. • Irwin: New, young supply teacher who has to prepare the boys for the exams; different style of teaching than Hector has; wants to be loved by the boys; it is not clear whether he is homosexual. • Dakin: Very self-confident “leader” of the group; first he favours Hector, then Irwin and, in the end, he fights for Hector; tries to seduce Irwin; reflects the boys’ insecurity as to whom to favour. • Posner: Shy, Jewish boy who has not yet grown up very much; has fallen in love with Dakin and is not cagey about it; adores Hector. • Scripps: Calm boy with a strong, but critical faith; is liked by everyone. • Rudge, Akthar, Crowther, Lockwood, Timms: boys. • Fiona: Headmaster’s secretary; has an affair with Dakin.
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clashing views on value and meaning of education and the changing English school system in the 1980s • Sympathy / antipathy and changing relationships due to someone new • Friendship, respect and fighting for friendship • Peer group (pressure) • Paedophile and homosexual feelings • Sexual abuse • Education and knowledge • History • Poetry and literature • Truth • Hope and failure • Identity • Irony • Great Britain in the 1980s

Available Media	<i>The History Boys: History. It's just one thing after another.</i> Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Fox Searchlight, 2006. Film.
Helpful Secondary Literature	<p>Games, Alexander. <i>Backing into the Limelight – The Biography of Alan Bennett.</i> London: Review, 2002.</p> <p>Turner, Daphne. <i>Alan Bennett - In a Manner of Speaking.</i> London: Faber and Faber, 1997.</p> <p>Billington, Michael. <i>Guardian.</i> National Theatre London. 19 May 2004 <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7785&dspl=reviews>.</p> <p>Spencer, Charles. <i>Daily Telegraph.</i> National Theatre London. 19 May 2004 <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7785&dspl=reviews>.</p> <p>Taylor, Paul. <i>The Independent.</i> National Theatre London. 19 May 2004 <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7785&dspl=reviews>.</p>
Language	Alan Bennett uses a very rich language accompanied by a lot of wit, sarcasm, irony, innuendo and many, quotations by various famous artists to fill the play's themes and characters with life. Also, one scene is written entirely in French.
Suitable Age	> 16 (10 th grade) / Kursstufe Gymnasium
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing change of character constellation and structure of the play • Watching the DVD: comparison between stage and film version • Comparison of different educational systems • Discussions about the purpose of education • Role play • Translating the French scene into English • Giving students information about famous artists quoted in the play <p>➔ Groups can focus on different aspects and present them afterwards.</p>
Teachability Pros	<p>Teachable aspects of the play are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The changing relationship and the special friendship between Hector and his boys (character constellation and character analysis) • The two opposing views on education at that time (Cultural Studies) • The rise and fall of the action (formal aspects connected to action)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topicality • Practicability (DVD) • Students can relate to the topics of education, truth, hope and failure • Students may be able to identify themselves with a character within the play <p>Since the play is set in a school and tells stories that are known to them, students can identify very well with the play and it might gain their interest.</p>
<p>Teachability Cons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The topic of encountering one's sexuality and the processes that go on in puberty might be too intimate to talk about in class. However, they make the play understandable for the students when they read or watch it. • The (strong) language of the play and the great variety of citations make it quite hard for students to follow the story when they read it. This problem can be solved by watching the film, which is very easy to understand. • Necessary background knowledge • Time consuming
<p>Overall Evaluation</p>	<p>The language of the play should be quite easily understandable for most students. The play is not very long and easy to follow. Since the story is very close to the students' world and everyday life, it might be interesting for them because they can identify with the persons in the play.</p> <p><i>The History Boys</i> is a highly complex but funny tragicomedy, which offers a vast potential for analysis. It is very well suited for being taught in the classroom.</p>