The History Boys

By Alan Bennett

Introduction

Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys* is a highly acclaimed two-act play that explores and satirizes the university application process, raising questions as to the purpose of education. Set in the 1980s in Sheffield, England, *The History Boys* follows the lives of a small group of young male students for one semester at an all-boys public school, examining the pressures of trying to be placed at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. The play examines different philosophies of teaching and the meaning of “history” as a concept. At the heart of this play is the relationship between the boys and their eccentric professor Hector, whose inappropriate behavior with them also comes to threaten his life and livelihood. An important subplot revolves around the flirtation between one of the students, Dakin, and a new male instructor, Irwin, who has been brought on to help the boys prepare for their university entrance exams. Although Bennett claims that the play is not autobiographical, he does say that he was partially inspired to write it based on his own experiences preparing for university.

*The History Boys* was first produced at the National Theatre in London in 2004, featuring a cast of young actors, many of whom went on to have successful television and film careers. In 2006 the show transferred to Broadway in New York City, with the original cast intact. In both locations it won a number of significant awards, including the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play, the Tony Award for Best Play, the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Broadway Play, and others. Later in 2006, the play was adapted into a film, significant for once again retaining the full original cast, as well as the play’s director, Nicholas Hytner. Alan Bennett even adapted his own script for the screenplay. The film went on to receive mostly positive reviews, many of which compared it favorably to the original play.

Literary and Historical Context

Margaret Thatcher, as leader of the Conservative Party, was prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 through 1990. Her political agenda of deregulation, increased oversight of trade unions, lower taxes, and higher interest rates favored private business concerns over the individual worker. Thatcher, who also believed that it was not the government’s responsibility to aid individuals, gradually cut public expense to areas such as education, housing, and social welfare, further depressing the economic outlook for those in the lowest income brackets who rely on social services. *The History Boys* addresses the broad issues of Thatcherism as they may have been faced by boys coming of age in the United Kingdom in the 1980s: do they embrace the open-ended search for knowledge as Hector encourages, or do they pursue the success that is sure to follow from attending Oxford or Cambridge? Education, the key to success, was increasingly viewed in the twentieth century and beyond as a tool to be used to achieve a career goal, rather than understood as a method of life-long discovery and personal growth.

In his introduction to *The History Boys*, Bennett reminisces about his final exams at Oxford, admitting that he “cheated, just as I had cheated a few years before to get the scholarship that took me to Oxford in the first place.” Bennett clarifies that “I was not dishonest; I kept to the rules and didn’t crib, and nobody else would have called it cheating, then or now, but it has always seemed so to me. False pretenses, at least.” Bennett spent his weeks before the exam cramming his mind full of facts and quotations that he could use to impress the professors who would judge the test, to convince them that he was devoted to becoming a scholar. The same happened at the end of his university schooling. He describes his time at university as an exercise in coasting, though again he...
rallied himself for good grades in the end, appearing to be passionate about academia although he was not. As he explains, “I began to feel the whole exercise had been a con on my part.”

_The History Boys_ also touches upon homophobia, an important social-historical element from 1980s British history. Thatcher’s government passed a law in 1988 known as Section 28 that made the promotion of homosexuality illegal in education. No one was ever prosecuted under this law, which was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of Great Britain in 2003, but it generated a lot of attention; for example, schools reacted in fear, closing LGBT support groups. Section 28 was passed only 21 years after the decriminalization of homosexuality in the United Kingdom but the negative attention generated by this new law, combined with the stigma of AIDS (then a new and little understood disease known to disproportionately affect gay men), created a social stigma around homosexuality that had not existed in the same way prior to 1967. Because of this stigma and his placement at a boys’ school, Irwin hides his homosexuality from his employer.

**Themes and Style**

The purpose and meaning of education are the major theme of _The History Boys_. This play is a lamentation of how education has transformed into a means of getting ahead in life and is no longer valued as a quest for knowledge for its own sake. Each instructor demonstrates a different interpretation of the meaning of education. The headmaster cares little for education and only about the prestige his school gains when his students are admitted into Oxford and Cambridge. He hires Irwin to prepare his eight A-level students for university entrance exams. Irwin’s approach is to treat education like a game to be won. He tells the boys that when they answer a question about history, truth is unimportant. From his perspective, the professors grading the tests have read the same answer countless times, and so it is important to distinguish oneself from the pack, sometimes by giving a deliberately controversial answer, whether or not one believes it. For Irwin, historical events are to be manipulated for present purposes. There is no stance to be taken, not even for a Jew to denounce Hitler and the Holocaust. Irwin’s