

An unruly bunch of bright, funny sixth-form boys in pursuit of sex, sport and a place at university. A maverick English teacher at odds with the young and shrewd supply teacher. A headmaster obsessed with results; a history teacher who thinks he's a fool.

In Alan Bennett's new play, staff-room rivalry and the anarchy of adolescence provoke insistent questions about history and how you teach it; about education and its purpose.

'Nothing could diminish the incendiary achievement of this subtle, deep-wrought and immensely funny play about the value and meaning of education.... In short, a superb, life-enhancing play.' *Guardian*

'A play that strikes me as one of the finest Bennett has ever written, packed with superb one-liners that are surely destined to enter the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*... But this is a play of depth as well as dazzle, intensely moving as well as thought-provoking and funny.' *Daily Telegraph*

'Brilliantly funny, with lines that we will, I hope, be quoting for years to come and several show-stopping vignettes. Bennett is still naughty, impish, endlessly ironic. But by the end tears are as near as laughter. *The History Boys* is moving, disquieting: one follows it with a heart brimful... This is Bennett's first play this millennium, and it more than repays the wait; I think it his finest work in decades.'

*Financial Times*

*The History Boys* premiered at the National Theatre in May 2004.

ff  
PLAYS



Alan Bennett

*The History Boys*

Cover photograph © Ivan Kymel

[www.faber.co.uk](http://www.faber.co.uk)

ISBN 0-571-22464-4



UK £9.99 RRP

9 780571 224647

ff

## Act One

*Irwin is in a wheelchair, in his forties, addressing three or four unidentified MPs.*

Irwin This is the tricky one.

The effect of the bill will be to abolish trial by jury in at least half the cases that currently come before the courts and will to a significant extent abolish the presumption of innocence.

Our strategy should therefore be to insist that the bill does not diminish the liberty of the subject but amplifies it; that the true liberty of the subject consists in the freedom to walk the streets unmolested etc., etc., secure in the knowledge that if a crime is committed it will be promptly and sufficiently punished and that far from circumscribing the liberty of the subject this will enlarge it.

I would try not to be shrill or earnest. An amused tolerance always comes over best, particularly on television. Paradox works well and mists up the windows, which is handy. 'The loss of liberty is the price we pay for freedom' type thing.

School. That's all it is. In my case anyway. Back to school.

*Though the general setting is a sixth-form classroom in a boys' school in the eighties in the north of England, when Hector first comes in, a figure in motor-cycle leathers and helmet, the stage is empty.*

*His sixth-formers, eight boys of seventeen or eighteen, come briskly on and take Hector out of his motor-cycle*

gear, each boy removing an item and as he does so presenting it to the audience with a flourish.

**Lockwood** (with gauntlets) Les gants.

**Akthar** (with a scarf) L'écharpe.

**Rudge** Le blouson d'aviateur.

*Finally the helmet is removed.*

**Timms** Le casque.

*The taking-off of the helmet reveals Hector (which is both his surname and his nickname) as a schoolmaster of fifty or so.*

*Dakin, a handsome boy, holds out a jacket.*

**Dakin** Permettez-moi, monsieur.

*Hector puts on the jacket.*

**Hector** Bien fait, mes enfants. Bien fait.

*Hector is a man of studied eccentricity. He wears a bow tie.*

**Classroom.**

Now fades the thunder of the youth of England clearing summer's obligatory hurdles.

Felicitations to you all. Well done, Scripps! Bravo, Dakin! Crowther, congratulations. And Rudge, too.

Remarkable. All, all deserve prizes. All, all have done that noble and necessary thing, you have satisfied the examiners of the Joint Matriculation Board, and now, proudly jingling your A Levels, those longed-for emblems of your conformity, you come before me once again to resume your education.

**Rudge** What were A Levels, then?

**Hector** Boys, boys, boys.

A Levels, Rudge are credentials, qualifications, the footings of your CV. Your Chear's Visa. Time now for the bits in between. You will see from the timetable that our esteemed Headmaster has given these periods the euphemistic title –

*Posner looks up the word in the dictionary.*

– of General Studies.

**Posner** 'Euphemism . . . substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for a harsh or direct one.'

**Hector** A verbal fig-leaf. The mild or vague expression being General Studies. The harsh or direct one, Useless Knowledge. The otiose – (*Points at Posner.*) – the trash, the department of why bother?

**Posner** 'Otiose: serving no practical purpose, without function.'

**Hector** If, heaven forbid, I was ever entrusted with the timetable, I would call these lessons A Waste of Time.

Nothing that happens here has anything to do with getting on, but remember, open quotation marks, 'All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use,' close quotation marks.

Who said? Lockwood? Crowther? Timms? Akthar?

*Pause.*

'Loveliest of trees the cherry now.'

**Akthar** A. E. Housman, sir.

**Hector** 'A. E. Housman, sir.'

**Timms** Wasn't he a nancy, sir?

**Hector** Foul, festering grubby-minded little trollop. Do not use that word. (*He hits him on the head with an exercise book.*)

Timms You use it, sir.

Hector I do, sir, I know, but I am far gone in age and decrepitude.

Crowther You're not supposed to hit us, sir.  
We could report you, sir.

Hector (*despair*) I know, I know. (*an elaborate pantomime, all this*)

Dakin You should treat us with more respect. We're scholarship candidates now.  
We're all going in for Oxford and Cambridge.

*There is a silence and Hector sits down at his table, seemingly stunned.*

Hector 'Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire.'  
I thought all that silliness was finished with.  
I thought that after last year we were settling for the less lustrous institutions . . . Derby, Leicester, Nottingham. Even my own dear Sheffield. Scripps. You believe in God. Believe also in me: forget Oxford and Cambridge.  
Why do you want to go there?

Lockwood Old, sir. Tried and tested.

Hector No, it's because other boys want to go there. It's the hot ticket, standing room only. So I'll thank you (*hitting him*) if nobody mentions Oxford (*hit*) or Cambridge (*hit*) in my lessons. There is a world elsewhere.

Dakin You're hitting us again, sir.

Hector Child, I am your teacher.

Whatever I do in this room is a token of my trust.  
I am in your hands.

It is a pact. Bread eaten in secret.

'I have put before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.' Oxford and Cambridge!

*He sits with his head on the desk, a parody of despair.*

Posner (*Edgar*) 'Look up, My Lord.'

Timms (*Kent*)

'Vex not his ghost. O let him pass. He hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.'

Posner (*Edgar*)

'O, he is gone indeed.'

Timms (*Kent*)

'The wonder is he hath endured so long.  
He but usurped this life.'

*Bell goes. Hector sits up.*

Hector

'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me, I must not say no.'

Posner (*Edgar*)

'The weight of this sad time we must obey  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.'

Timms The hitting never hurt. It was a joke. None of us cared. We lapped it up.

Crowther He goes mad.

Lockwood He hit me. He never hits me.

Rudge He hits you if he likes you. He never touches me.

Dakin (*happily*) I'm black and blue.

Scripps It's true what he said. I did believe in God.

Nobody else does. Like stamp collecting, it seems to have gone out and I suspect even the vicar thinks I am a freak.  
But the big man is glad.

'The Prayer Book. *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Lucky boy!'



*Staff room.*

Headmaster Mrs Lintott, Dorothy.

Mrs Lintott Headmaster?

Headmaster These Oxbridge boys. Your historians. Any special plans?

Mrs Lintott Their A Levels are very good.

Headmaster Their A Levels are *very* good. And that is thanks to you, Dorothy. We've never had so many. Remarkable! But what now – in teaching terms?

Mrs Lintott More of the same?

Headmaster Oh. Do you think so?

Mrs Lintott It's what we've done before.

Headmaster Quite. Without much success. No one last year. None the year before. When did we last have anyone in history at Oxford and Cambridge?

Mrs Lintott I tend not to distinguish.

Headmaster Between Oxford and Cambridge?

Mrs Lintott Between centres of higher learning. Last year two at Bristol, one at York. The year before . . .

Headmaster Yes, yes. I know that, Dorothy. But I am thinking league tables. Open scholarships. Reports to the Governors. I want them to do themselves justice. I want them to do you justice. Factually tip-top as your boys always are, something more is required.

Mrs Lintott More?

Headmaster Different.

I would call it grooming did not that have overtones of the monkey house.

'Presentation' might be the word.

Mrs Lintott They know their stuff. Plainly stated and properly organised facts need no presentation, surely.

Headmaster Oh, Dorothy. I think they do.

'The facts: serving suggestion.'

Mrs Lintott A sprig of parsley, you mean? Or an umbrella in the cocktail? Are dons so naive?

Headmaster Naive, Dorothy? Or human?

I am thinking of the boys. Clever, yes, remarkably so. Well taught, indubitably. But a little . . . *ordinaire*?

Think charm. Think polish. Think Renaissance Man.

Mrs Lintott Yes, Headmaster.

Headmaster Hector.

*The Headmaster leaves as Hector comes in.*

Hector Headmaster.

Mrs Lintott Didn't you try for Cambridge?

Hector Oxford.

I was brought up in the West Riding. I wanted somewhere new. That is to say old. So long as it was old I didn't mind where I went.

Mrs Lintott Durham was good in that respect.

Hector Sheffield wasn't.

Cloisters, ancient libraries . . . I was confusing learning with the smell of cold stone. If I had gone to Oxford I'd probably never have worked out the difference.

Mrs Lintott Durham was very good for history, it's where I had my first pizza. Other things, too, of course, but it's the pizza that stands out.

And fog, would you believe, one morning inside the cathedral. I loved it.

I wish some of them were trying to go there.

Hector No chance.

Mrs Lintott No. Our fearless leader has made up his mind.

And they are bright, brighter than last year's. But that's not enough apparently.

Hector It never was, even in my day.

Mrs Lintott Poor sods.

Scripps I'd been on playground duty, so I saw him on what must have been his first morning waiting outside the study. I thought he was a new boy, which of course he was, so I smiled.

Then Felix turned up.

*Irwin is a young man, about twenty-five or so.*

Headmaster You are?

Irwin Irwin.

Headmaster Irwin?

Irwin The supply teacher.

Headmaster Quite so.

*He beckons Irwin capily into the study.*

Scripps Hector had said that if I wanted to write I should keep a notebook, and there must have been something furtive about Irwin's arrival because I wrote it down. I called it clandestine, a word I'd just learnt and wasn't sure how to pronounce.

Headmaster The examinations are in December, which gives us three months at the outside . . . Well, you were at Cambridge, you know the form.

Irwin Oxford, Jesus.

Headmaster I thought of going, but this was the fifties. Change was in the air. A spirit of adventure.

Irwin So, where did you go?

Headmaster I was a geographer. I went to Hull.

Irwin Oh. Larkin.

Headmaster Everybody says that. 'Hull? Oh, Larkin.' I don't know about the poetry . . . as I say, I was a geographer . . . but as a librarian he was pitiless. The Himmler of the Accessions Desk. And now, we're told, women in droves.

Art. They get away with murder.

They are a likely lot, the boys. All keen. One oddity.

Rudge. Determined to try for Oxford and Christ

Church of all places. No hope. Might get in at Loughborough in a bad year. Otherwise all bright. But they need polish. Edge. Your job. We are low in the league. I want to see us up there with Manchester Grammar School, Haberdashers' Aske's. Leighton Park. Or is that an open prison? No matter.

*Pause.*

There is a vacancy in history.

Irwin (*thoughtfully*) That's very true.

Headmaster In the school.

Irwin Ah.

Headmaster Get me scholarships, Irwin, pull us up the table, and it is yours. I am corseted by the curriculum, but I can find you three lessons a week.

Irwin Not enough.

Headmaster I agree. However, Mr Hector, our long-time English master, is General Studies. There is passion there.

Or, as I prefer to call it, commitment. But not curriculum-directed. Not curriculum-directed at all.

In the circumstances we may be able to filch an hour. (going) You are very young.

Grow a moustache.

I am thinking classroom control.

*Classroom. Music. Posner sings some Piaf.*

Hector Où voudriez-vous travailler cet après-midi?

Rudge Dans un garage.

Boys Non, non.

Scripps Pas encore. Ayez pitié de nous.

Hector Dakin. Où voudriez-vous travailler aujourd'hui?

Dakin Je voudrais travailler . . . dans une maison de passe.

Hector Oo-la-la.

Boys Qu'est ce que c'est?

Qu'est-ce qu'une maison de passe?

Posner A brothel.

Hector Très bien. Mais une maison de passe où tous les clients utilisent le subjonctif ou le conditionnel, oui?

*He motions to Dakin, who goes off.*

*Dakin knocks on door.*

Voilà. Déjà un client!

Qui est la femme de chambre?

Posner Moi. Je suis la femme de chambre.

Hector Comment appelez-vous?

Posner Je m'appelle Simone.

*Dakin knocks again.*

Akthar Simone, le monsieur ne peut pas attendre.

*Posner opens the door and curtsseys.*

Posner Bonjour, monsieur.

Dakin Bonjour, chérie.

Posner Entrez, s'il vous plaît.

Voilà votre lit et voici votre prostituée.

Hector Oh. Ici on appelle un chat un chat.

Dakin Merci, madame.

Posner Mademoiselle.

Dakin Je veux m'étendre sur le lit.

Hector Je voudrais . . . I would like to stretch out on the bed in the conditional or the subjunctive.

*Dakin makes to lie down.*

Posner Mais les chaussures, monsieur, pas sur le lit.

Et vos pantalons, s'il vous plaît.

Dakin Excusez-moi, mademoiselle.

Posner Oh! Quelles belles jambes!

Dakin Watch it.

Posner Et maintenant . . . Claudine (Timms).

Dakin Oui, la prostituée, s'il vous plaît.

*Scripps plays piano accompaniment, a version of 'La Vie en Rose'.*

Crowther Monsieur, je pensais que vous voudriez des préliminaires?

Dakin Quels préliminaires?  
 Posner Claudine. Quels préliminaires sont sur le menu?  
 Timms (Claudine) A quel prix?  
 Dakin Dix francs.  
 Timms (Claudine) Dix francs? Pour dix francs je peux vous montrer ma prodigieuse poitrine.  
 Dakin Et maintenant, pourrais-je caresser la poitrine?  
 Timms (Claudine) Ça vous couvrirait quinze francs.  
 Pour vingt francs vous pouvez poser votre bouche sur ma poitrine en agitant . . .  
 Lockwood En agitant quoi?  
*There is a knock at the door.*  
 Posner Un autre client. (*He lets them in.*)  
 Hector Ah, cher Monsieur le Directeur.  
*The Headmaster comes in with Irwin.*  
 Headmaster Mr Hector, I hope I'm not . . .  
*Hector holds up an admonitory finger.*  
 Hector L'Anglais, c'est interdit. Ici on ne parle que français, en accordant une importance particulière au subjonctif.  
 Headmaster Oh, ah.  
 Et qu'est ce-que ce passe ici?  
 Pourquoi cet garçon . . . Dakin, isn't it? . . . est sans ses . . . trousers?  
 Hector Quelqu'un? Ne soit pas timide. Dites à cher Monsieur le Directeur ce que nous faisons.  
*The boys are frozen.*

Dakin Je suis un homme qui . . .  
 Hector Vous n'êtes pas un homme. Vous êtes un soldat . . . un soldat blessé; vous comprenez, cher Monsieur le Directeur . . . soldat blessé?  
 Headmaster Wounded soldier, of course, yes.  
 Hector Ici c'est un hôpital en Belgique.  
 Headmaster Belgique? Pourquoi Belgique?  
 Akthar À Ypres, sir. Ypres. Pendant la Guerre Mondiale Numéro Une.  
 Hector C'est ça. Dakin est un soldat blessé, un mutilé de guerre et les autres sont des médecins, infirmières et tout le personnel d'un grand établissement médical et thérapeutique.  
 Continuez, mes enfants.  
 Headmaster Mais . . .  
*A boy begins to moan.*  
 Akthar Qu'il souffre!  
 Lockwood Ma mère! Ma mère!  
 Akthar Il appelle sa mère.  
 Lockwood Mon père!  
 Akthar Il appelle son père.  
 Lockwood Ma tante!  
 Headmaster Sa tante?  
 Timms La famille entière.  
 Hector Il est distrait. Il est distrait.  
 Irwin Il est commotionné, peut-être?  
*The classroom falls silent at this unexpected intrusion.*