

The History Boys

A brilliant film of Alan Bennett's play about eight post-A level students preparing for Oxbridge



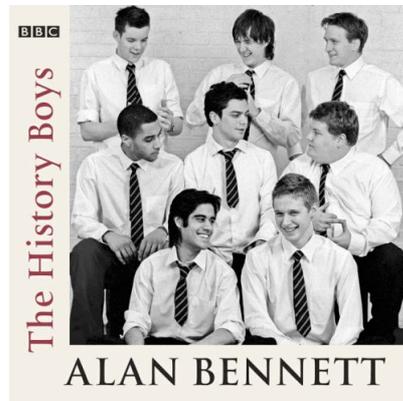
FILM CRITICS are a funny lot. They spend years and mountains of ink complaining about the dumbing down of the cinema, then along comes a film which includes serious discussions of history, poetry, philosophy, art and life itself – and they rubbish it for its implausibility and staginess. Unbelievable? Heavens above! More implausible than, say, *Star Wars* or *If*, or *The Wizard of Oz*? Implausibility is almost obligatory if a film is to succeed. Have these critics never heard of 'willing suspension of disbelief'?

Stagey? Well, *Casablanca* takes place largely in a night club and *Brief Encounter*, which has a delightful moment in *The History Boys*, is set in a train station! This is a movie about education that is situated mostly in the classroom because, for a change, it's actually about its subject. Its 'staginess' is perfectly logical. That's good enough for me.

One of the worst reviews was by Cosmo Landesman in the *Sunday Times* (15th October). He viewed the screenplay as 'nothing more than the decadent fantasy of an ageing homosexual'. True, there is a fair amount of homoeroticism on offer. Posner, one of the eight students (Samuel Barnett), has a crush on cocky lothario Dakin (Dominic Cooper). In one scene he confesses to closet gay teacher Irwin (Stephen Campbell Moore): "I'm a Jew. I'm small. I'm homosexual, And I live in Sheffield. I'm fucked".

Not only is this supply teacher gay but so too is 'Hector' (Richard Griffiths), the boys' adored General Studies teacher, who feels them up during pillion rides on his motorcycle. Even Dakin offers the new teacher sexual favours, all of which leads Landesman to conclude that what we have here is a gay fantasy (of course, it cannot be condemned for being both implausible and a gay fantasy at the same time).

Yet there are undoubtedly many



gay men who will identify with the circumstances of both teachers and pupils in this all-boys' school and, as Hector says, the transmission of knowledge is itself an erotic act. Isn't this why so many pupils, gay or straight, have crushes on their teachers? Here the film's honesty is actually a plea for sexual and emotional liberation.

Anyhow, there is much more to *The History Boys* than the question of sex (there is no observable sex in the film, which has a 15 certificate). First of all, it is very funny and life-affirming, full of wit, charm and memorable set pieces. In one hilarious scene in which Hector gets the boys to improve their French by acting out a visit to a Paris brothel, Dakin has his trousers off when the headmaster suddenly enters, and they pretend that they are acting wounded soldiers at the battle of Ypres.

In other scenes we might be in the music hall as the students perform Edith Piaf and Rodgers and Hart songs. Samuel Barnett's rendition of *Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered* is fantastic. As Philip French noted in his perceptive *Observer* review, Posner is here serenading Dakin, thus restoring the original gay intention of Hart's lyrics. Films themselves also feature in this cultural feast of a movie, as the boys act scenes from *Now, Voyager* and the aforesaid *Brief Encounter*.

So too do philosophers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. And when did you last see a movie that spent about five

minutes analysing a poem, in this case Thomas Hardy's *Drummer Hodge*?

This beautiful scene highlights one of the great strengths of this brilliant film. It is not afraid of discussing ideas. Landesman mocks this in his review. On the contrary, he says, the film is a perfect example of dumbing down because it is so dramatically inept, intellectually vacuous and morally glib.

What hidden gems has he been watching recently? For the truth is quite the opposite: *The History Boys* is both intellectually exciting and morally serious. There are important questions being asked in Bennett's work, especially about education. It is presented as a battle for the hearts and minds of these Oxbridge candidates. Of their three main teachers, Hector believes in truth and knowledge for its own sake and in inspiring the students by encouraging them to express themselves. His is an essentially humanist approach.

Irwin, on the other hand, is an educational Thatcherite/Blairite, believing in pragmatic functionalism, in education as a contribution to GDP – all about image or 'spin' rather than substance. Truth itself is eminently malleable. So, if you want to impress the examiners, think outside the box and tell them that Stalin was really a pussycat or that Hitler was much misunderstood.

Irwin's approach is basically the bluffer's guide to education, yet Landesman suggests that it is 'better' because he is actually encouraging these young men to think for themselves (he refers to these 18-year-olds as 'kids'). How wrong can you get, Cosmo! Don't you know the difference between superficial bluff and depth? Freethought is not as facile as a hen dropping an egg. It requires learning and scholarship to back it up, as Mrs Lintott (Frances de la Tour), the third teacher, knows only too well. Did Cosmo write the bluffer's guide to film reviewing, I wonder?

The History Boys has superb acting, a brilliant script and unobtrusive directing by Nicholas Hytner. You can't ask for more than that. Don't miss it. **BMcC**