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History Boys Speak Out

19 Oct 2006

Alan Bennett's award winning stage play *The History Boys* has been adapted for the screen by its originator and theatre director Nicholas Hytner. Featuring the original eight boys who debuted at London's National Theatre in 2004, the film version seems destined to follow the same awards path as the play. A huge hit on both sides of the Atlantic, *The History Boys* won a Laurence Olivier Award and six Tonys in the States.

But what lies at the heart of Bennett's insightfully humorous take on education and sexual politics?

Rachael Scott found out when she met with four of the boys: Samuel Barnett, who plays sensitive gay student Posner; Dominic Copper, school heart throbbing Dakin, who finds himself attracted to maverick new teacher Irwin, played Stephen Campbell Moore; trouble-shooter Scripps played by Jamie Parker and Samuel Anderson who plays Crowther.

At the premiere Richard Griffiths (who plays the boys' teacher, Hector) said he was worried about falling asleep because he was so tired.
Jamie Parker: It's been kind of surreal.

Did you fly in the night before the premiere, or on that day?
Jamie: We finished the show and four hours later we were on a plane and landed in London at 11am. We went straight for a fitting because none of us had a DJ. We were supposed to be at drinks at 5.00 and at 5.30 we were still waiting for the suits. We had time to put them on, go to the drinks and then go to the movie.

But not enough time to learn how to shake hands with Prince Charles.
Samuel Barnett: No, we weren't briefed on that.

Was it intimidating meeting Charles?
Samuel B: Well, you're always told that there's some sort of protocol and you're going to be briefed and we just weren't.

Jamie: But Charles is good at that. That's why I quite like them because they take the time to put you at your ease; where as the Queen just wonders around going (pulls fey face) and doesn't have anything to ask you. It's weird.

Have you met the Queen?
Jamie: Once. This is what I said to the Queen. 'Yeah... it's... di di... with the... er... and everything.' That's exactly what I said to her.

What did she say to you?
Jamie: Absolutely nothing. She came into my college with a teacher and we'd just written this Shakespeare thing and she wandered through the class and I thought, 'Oh, no, she's going to talk to me because I'm the twat doing the speech'. That's when I said my immortal line. Knighthood. (clicks fingers) Gone.

"I really hope it doesn't become a film about a groping teacher because that's not what it's about."

This has been a long journey and it's now coming to a close. Are you having withdrawal symptoms?
Dominic Cooper: We had an incredibly emotional time the night we finished. It's been almost three years and it's been a fantastic way to end an incredible journey. Thank God we didn't all go our separate ways at Heathrow. We've now got the movie, which is incredibly exciting, and we'll be able to sit back and watch it with the audience.

Jamie: And it's weird that we carried on doing the play about a year after shooting the film. Suddenly it was no longer in the present tense, it was fixed and there was nothing we could do about it. That was quite frightening, but exciting as well.

Jamie: It's absolutely terrifying.

Samuel Anderson: There's no changing it or explaining it. That's it. Done.

So, looking at the film is there anything that you wish you'd done differently?
Samuel B: For me it all fits together as it was at that time. There are things I would add because it's all about nuance really.

Samuel A: I think though, like Alan (Bennett) said, if you add something it would be hard not to take something away.

Dominic: A lot of the time the easiest stuff was with the new dialogue. All the kind of classroomy stuff and behaving like a bunch of boys who had known each other for seven years came from us knowing each other for so long.

Jamie: There were consistent moments in the play where you knew the audience would react quite strongly, but I think where it gets its longevity from is that every show was different. In a way the audience would tell you what they wanted to watch that night and not having the audience there was a very strange experience.

On the stage you can buy the fact that you're in your 20s and you're playing school kids, but on film



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people expect a higher level of voracity. Did you ever have any worries that you might not be able to pull it off on screen?

Dominic: Well, it would have been wrong if we'd had someone of 18 playing a role and the rest of us were different ages.

Samuel A: Put most people in their twenties in a school uniform and they will look like teenagers.

Samuel B: Did we look old? Could you see the lines? Couldn't you have waxed your chests, you two (pointing at Jamie and Dominic)?

Dominic: It's not hairy. Smooth as a baby's bottom my chest.

"The thing he knows best is his sexuality, he knows how to flirt and that other people are attracted to him and he completely manipulates Irwin by using his sexual prowess."

Why did you all allow Hector to behave the way he did?

Jamie: Because it was so preposterous and unthreatening. Guys just do not take sex seriously and if you've got someone who looks like Hector, being as fumblingly pathetic and clownish as that... If it had ever become genuinely threatening... These are all fully fledged sexual animals, they're all 18, apart from Posner, and that's exactly why he doesn't touch him.

Samuel B: There's probably more outrage around this from the play than there will be from the film, because in the play it's left to your imagination and you see what happens on the back of the bike in the film. It's very important that it's Richard Griffiths playing Hector and not some slim, lithe guy who really could do more than that on a bike. Do you know what I mean?

The play was never set in reality. It was a sort of heightened reality. I remember in rehearsal we had arguments. We were going, 'No way. Maybe when you went to school Alan that was what you put up with, but in the 80s no way would kids or teachers have put up with that'. But in the end you have to treat it as this is how it is in this version of the world.

Dominic: I've spoken to people in school at exactly that time who used to go to their teacher's house and read poetry and the teacher would always have his hand on their knee, but that was it. They knew there was something odd about it and they'd all joke about it.

Samuel B: But it didn't go any further. Hector's trying to have a fiddle and of course that's a lot further, but it's such a difficult thing. In America the word 'paedophile' was banded around and we'd just go, 'No. It is not paedophilia. That's so inflammatory'.

Jamie: It's deeply irresponsible to throw phrases around like that.

Samuel B: And that's no defence of what he's doing because what he's doing is abusive, inappropriate, irresponsible as a teacher.

Dominic: That's why it's so clever because it changes your opinion of him. He's a fantastic, wonderful, inspiring teacher and he's got to have some faults and then suddenly the audience is thinking, 'Maybe I shouldn't like this guy', but they still applaud him in the play.

Do you think that it's going to open up a discussion where an issue like this can be raised between parents and children?

Jamie: I really hope it doesn't become a film about a groping teacher because that's not what it's about. Anyone who's actually listened to it will understand the main point is that anyone who has a genuine connection with a teacher has a personal experience and there is something intimate about it. It doesn't have to be sexual, but it's a very ambiguous area. If all you're after is pecuniary gain, advancement, success, then fine – get a teacher like Irwin. If you want someone to discover their own individuality, learn how to know themselves, and how to find their own peace with the world, then you have to expose yourself - unfortunate phrase - to the rigours of life that Hector puts in your path.



Samuel B: Hopefully you're going to get a teacher who will do both and that's surely the ideal.

Samuel A: On the flipside, Hector being pathetic and saying that education in itself is an erotic act, is something that attracts Dakin to Irwin.

Jamie: It's an intellectual affair.

So, Dominic, what do you think Dakin's agenda was with Irwin?

Dominic: I saw it as Dakin never being as intellectual as this wonderful teacher who comes and inspires him and he wants to prove himself to him. Unfortunately he won't ever do that academically. The thing he knows best is his sexuality, he knows how to flirt and that other people are attracted to him and he completely manipulates Irwin by using his sexual prowess.

Samuel A: I think those feelings are quite fresh because he doesn't understand them and feels like he could do anything for Irwin.

Samuel B: It transcends sexuality and gender. That's the point of the film. It's about love and life and not about 'I'm male and you're female or we're straight and we're gay'. It's so not about that and that's why Alan puts these issues into the story and doesn't make any judgements about them.

Jamie: Exactly. He's not expounding on any particular theory or making any moral judgement calls at all. He's exploring one of the oldest debates there is since human beings learnt how to document arguments.

So much of your own lives and thoughts have been put into your characters for the last three years, but you're not going to be part of the next stage of touring and playing in the West End. How does that feel?

Samuel A: It's time to move on and we feel we've done the best bits. We got to go to Broadway and see Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia; we've done the film, the radio play, the National Theatre. I'm sad about leaving the material behind, but I'm sadder that I won't be able to work with these people on stage again in a company that, across the board, is brilliant. There's no weak link and there's no one who doesn't get on.

Dominic: It's odd having to hand over the role because we were with the characters from the beginning, but you have to.

"It transcends sexuality and gender. That's the point of the film. It's about love and life and not about 'I'm male and you're female or we're straight and we're gay'."

Will you go and see it in the West End?

Samuel B: I don't want to. It feels too close.

Samuel A: I'll wait 30 years until the Americans remake it.

Have you had any crazy fan experiences because you've been in the play for so long?

Samuel A: People would recognise us in New York and often we'd be sitting in a bar and the barman would tell us that the people over there had bought you a drink, which was weird.

Samuel B: At the National I was nominated for an award that I didn't get and this bloke came up and told me I was really wonderful in the play and said he thought I deserved an award. He handed me a bag and I thought, 'What's this?' and I opened it up and it was a big cup, like a sporting trophy that he'd had engraved with my name. I honestly wondered if he was going to be someone who was there all the time, but I never saw him again.



Jamie: I bet there's a camera in it. He's on the internet with electrodes.

Read our review of [The History Boys](#).

The History Boys opened in the UK on 13 October 2006

Find out more about Alan Bennett by buying his autobiography, [Untold Stories](#). Alternatively, why not buy the DVD of [The Complete Talking Heads](#) and marvel at the comic monologues.

Author: Rachael Scott

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