

## HISTORY BOYS

Playwrights are luckier than screenwriters in at least one respect: their only limits are the limits of the audience's imagination. How they must pity the poor screenwriter, who writes knowing that if he writes about an office, his story will look like an office. In the film adaptation of the wildly successful play HISTORY BOYS, Alan Bennett the screenwriter never quite figures out how to deal with the location selected by Alan Bennett the playwright.

HISTORY BOYS is about a group of male students studying for the entrance exam to Oxford and Cambridge at a second-rate British high school in Margaret Thatcher's England. Hector, the general studies teacher, teaches the boys bits of poetry, movies and music, little pieces of knowledge he thinks they should know for their intrinsic value, not because they will be on any exam. The boys mock Hector's pederast tendencies, but they also oblige him by volunteering for a ride home on the back of his motorcycle, a ride that inevitably includes a grope or two.

Convinced that Hector will get none of the boys into Oxford, the Headmaster hires a young teacher named Irwin. Irwin teaches the boys to write cleverly rather than truthfully, at one point advocating that they approach the Holocaust with distance rather than horror, a suggestion Hector finds morally reprehensible. Despite their differences, Irwin and Hector are essentially different sides of the same coin. Irwin struggles with his attraction to one of his students, the arrogant Dankin, already loved by Posner, the weakest of the boys.

The drama of whether or not the boys will get into Oxford takes a backseat to Hector and Irwin's debates over the meaning of education, an argument supplemented by the witty feminist observations of a third teacher, Mrs. Lintott (a marvelous performance both on stage and screen by Frances de la Tour) who advises Irwin that it is never safe to let the boys know that a teacher is a human.

A black box theater is an ideal place to fall in love with Hector; Richard Griffiths looms larger than life, his voice echoes through the auditorium. His immediacy reminds you of that one high school teacher you remember, the one who really taught you something. But in the grey light of an actual classroom, Hector is more like an actual high school teacher, one whose outsize ideas have very little meaning in the context of an institution that was built to churn out boys (this is made worse by the fact that the movie is lit more drearily than the average episode of *SAVED BY THE BELL*).

HISTORY BOYS has one really cinematic moment: the boys go to Oxford for an interview, and the audience sees the place that has inspired generations of British students. And in that moment, we understand what Oxford, a place that had only recently opened its doors to boys like them, must have looked like to these boys. And for that brief moment, HISTORY BOYS became a slightly better movie. One can only imagine what it would have been if Bennett had expanded his vision for Hector and the boys beyond the stage.