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lot." He has nothing but praise for Hytner, with whom he also worked on *George III* and who, in many ways, inspired *History Boys*.

"He'd told me that when he was at Manchester Grammar School, like all Jewish boys, he went to Jewish prayers at a separate assembly. But he had a very nice voice and the master in charge of music hijacked him back to the Anglican gatherings because of it. Whereupon the Jewish master denounced him as a renegade and a heretic, which seemed to me very funny. That linked up with something in my own childhood. I was a very late developer and I had a notion of a boy with an unbroken voice in that situation – though that didn't apply to Nick, whose voice broke early... He'd sung under Barbirolli in Britten's *Spring Symphony*, and I thought he'd talk about this on *Private Passions* with Michael Berkeley. Which he didn't do, but he *did* play a record of Ella Fitzgerald singing 'Bewitched'... She sings it slowly and beautifully and you realise how wonderful the words are and how theatrical it would be if it were sung by a boy with an unbroken voice. That was the genesis, really, of *The History Boys*, but when we came to cast it Nick said I'd never find a boy like that." As luck would have it, they did, and a young lad who could play the piano.

Bennett is full of praise for the time and attention Hytner lavished on the project. "He has all the responsibilities of that place [the National Theatre] ... and yet in rehearsal... you'd no sense that he was carrying responsi-

years and, when he returned, the thick, fluffy towels he'd sent his mam from Bloomingdale's were still proudly in their packaging.

What prompted him to write a book that raised the curtain on aspects of his own life was, at least in part, the publication of Alexander Games' unauthorised biography in 2002. "I didn't read it, and I felt rather sorry for the guy because no one talked to him. But I thought I'd better get my version down... You begin to feel it's more interesting as you get older, and it is more interesting in that it's more remote – you find you're getting to be one of the few people who remember certain things. One of the boys in *Forty Years On* said to me 'I don't see how you can ever be unhappy – you remember steam trains'. A ludicrous sentiment. But at the same time I can see what he means – that you remembered a world that, to young people, was just fabled." Writing – finally – about his parents Bennett realised "how little I knew, and there was nobody to ask... So, in a way, as you get older, you feel the need to write it down. But my parents would be aghast at me talking about my aunts in public in the way they talked about them in private... Still, there's no one alive for it to matter." Anyway, the warmth of feeling triumphs over any implied (or occasionally overt) criticism.

While we feel – correctly, to some extent – that we know Bennett through his work, he has revealed little of himself down the years and has given precious few interviews. "I don't see any

Tony Blair is that what most concerns him is his place in history." He laughs. "But I don't think irony is his strong point."

Something else occurs to him. "I'd forgotten until I re-read my diaries how incensed I was that John Major decreed that the Stone of Scone should go back to Scotland. The Scots weren't particularly interested in having it and he only wanted it there because he thought it would boost the Conservative position in Scotland, which it didn't do, and so you're left with a Coronation Chair which looks like an empty commode... The Chair was built for the stone, and it's gone. It struck me that the Queen shouldn't have allowed that to happen because it's part of her regalia and nothing to do with the government at all."

Though much of his reading, and his peregrinations, is about history, Bennett makes no claims to academia and believes he'd have made a poor teacher, any teaching these days confined to prisons, to which his visits "reveal to you how naïve your assumptions are about society and about prison itself." He is studious, he says, but can't marshal arguments. "I'm vitriolic about historians because I see myself there... People think I identify with Hector [in *The History Boys*], the charismatic schoolmaster. I don't, but I do identify with Irwin, the young master who's teaching them to sideline exams and get in by the back door... I went in for a scholarship at Oxford and the technique I used to get through the examinations, and used again to get through my

g tales at last

lan Bennett talks to Liz Thomson about a 45-year career that has taken him y and beyond, and about the family that has inspired so much of his work

bilities other than the play... And this was Nick: you had to create an atmosphere where it didn't matter if the boys made fools of themselves. It didn't matter how little they knew, how ignorant they might seem to be... I hope some of what they learned in the play was an education in itself. I've never worked quite that way before. In *Forty Years On*... we had no time... they had not the faintest idea who these people were they were talking about, T E Lawrence, Virginia Woolf..." Bennett pauses. "The blackbird's getting agitated about something."

It's forty-five years on next month from Bennett's debut with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum Theatre in *Beyond the Fringe* which, along with *That Was the Week That Was* and the Beatles, could be said to have launched the Sixties and, in many ways, to define them. It was, he agrees, "an extraordinary time" but he and his friends were too young to appreciate their success. "We just assumed that was what the theatre was like, and it isn't, most of the time." After its London run, BTF transferred to Broadway, playing for two years. "JFK came, and Jackie, and the ironic thing was there were all sorts of precautions taken for security." He notes, a tad regretfully, that "the Beatles all happened when we were in America, and *That Was the Week That Was*... In some ways, you were slightly sidelined, because England was much more central then." He was in the States for two

point in talking about your private life for the sake of it. It's Dr Johnson's dictum: you write to enable people to better enjoy life or endure it; and it may be of some help or it may make an interesting read." He keeps the press at arm's length and holds the *Daily Mail* in particular contempt: "ordinary people, the public, are more understanding, more tolerant and more indifferent than it would have us think". He was rightly cross when the *Observer* turned a South Bank Q&A session into an interview in which he said he'd had writer's block. "Things do come more slowly but I've never used the phrase. I don't think of it as writer's block. You just look out the window a bit more."

There is much, specifically and *en passant*, in *Untold Stories* about the way we live now, though Bennett is not sure that age has made him more political. "I was certainly incensed by the Iraq war and went on both the marches. It's still one of the things that gets me worked up and I think Tony Blair should have resigned over it. There was a proposal, dismissed at the time as being by crackpots, that he should be impeached... That seemed to me eminently sensible: if he couldn't be brought to book in Parliament then the only way to do that was in court and the only way to get him in court was by impeaching him. There was precedence for it," Bennett the historian points out, agreeing that scarcely anyone these days seems to have any sense of history. "The ironic thing with

finals in history at the University, was virtually the same as I wish on Irwin in the play. But nobody taught me – it was my own devious ruse." These days, what Bennett terms "the wrong end of the stick approach" is used by everyone, including such tele-historians as Niall Ferguson, Andrew Roberts and Norman Stone, all of whom "came to prominence under Mrs Thatcher and share some of her characteristics". As to education itself, "don't get me started! It should be free at every point," he states, adding that one of the changes to the screen version of *History Boys* partially tackles the issue. "People think that's an impossible ideal, but in France or Germany it's the accepted thing. And it's important that the medical care provided by the NHS should be as good as that provided by the private sector". He's not, though, a crusader. "There's a phrase: play the card next to your thumb. I'll do what I have to do as much as it affects my home life, and it feeds in to your work."

Yorkshire and its people still inspire him, and he and Rupert often go up at weekends. "They *are* quite funny. We had to go and buy some Parmesan from the local supermarket, Booths... The man reeled off this list of about six and then he said 'and now, finally, the Reggiani – the Rolls-Royce of Parmesans'. And I thought: well, you don't get that in Sainsbury's Camden Town."

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