



Bennett: "I thought I'd better get my version down"

A sweltering summer afternoon in London. Alan Bennett sits outside his front door under a Virginia creeper, trained especially to provide some shade, dressed in grey serge trousers, grey shirt and grey-blue woollen tie – a look reminiscent of 1960s schoolboy uniform. Cream suede shoes, obviously well-loved, add a contemporary touch – indeed, they could be described, though not by Bennett, as “cool”. He has just returned from a casting session for the touring version of *The History Boys*, which was such a hit for the National Theatre, and is relaxing with a crossword. “Would you like tea?” he asks, running through the various options, though anything other than real tea, *Yorkshire* tea, perhaps, would seem inappropriate. He returns from the kitchen carrying a tray, with a teapot and two blue-and-white striped mugs and a plate of biscuits. “Do you mind sitting here?” he asks, explaining that he has no back garden and that when Miss Shepherd was in residence in her van, our current spot was unavailable to him.

Though not all plain sailing, the last decade has been a satisfying one for Bennett, a decade bookended by *Writing Home*, his first best-selling collection of writings and diaries and – come this autumn – *Untold Stories*. In between, there’s been *The Madness of George III*, translated in to film as (for the benefit of

Telling

In an exclusive interview, Alan Bennett goes from Edinburgh to Broadway

our American cousins) *The Madness of King George*, and *The Lady in the Van*, as well as two series of *Talking Heads*, three novellas, each based on “ideas that never made it into plays”, and *The History Boys*, which National Theatre Director Nicholas Hytner is filming almost as we speak. *Untold Stories*, like *Writing Home*, is a collection of published and unpublished writings, including a number of poignant and very personal pieces about his parents and the two formidable aunts who live on in his plays and monologues, as well as about himself, as schoolboy, adolescent and adult, and about Rupert, with whom he has lately found contentment. Here, too, are reviews and criticism, pen portraits of friends and associates and, in the diaries, thoughts on people, places, politics and the way we live now. A *pot-pourri*, then – though you can’t help but suspect he disapproves of the word – and quintessential Alan Bennett.

“I’ve finished proof-reading it, so now it’s just all the traipsing round you’ve got to do,” he remarks between sips of tea. “It’s fine, but I don’t want to do too much of it.” He doesn’t care for eating in public and likes to get home to his own bed. The final draft of *The History Boys* screenplay is also done and dusted. “I’ve re-written some of it... You have to cut so much you feel you’re losing the essence of it and you have to try and hang on to what you feel are the particular virtues... Nick does a