



DISCOVERY GUIDE

*The History Boys*

By Alan Bennett  
Directed by Paul Miller  
Original direction by  
Nicholas Hytner

Nov 7–Dec 9, 2007  
Ahmanson Theatre

# How to Use this Discovery Guide

Eight young men with exceptional intellectual abilities on the threshold of adulthood and university candidacy, three teachers with drastically different ideas of education and a cunning headmaster with his own agenda: these are the characters that populate Alan Bennett's award-winning play about education, history, culture, identity and the value of "passing it on."

**"Pass it on, boys. That's the game I wanted you to learn. Pass it on."**

—Hector in *The History Boys*

This Discovery Guide is your personal tutorial, helping you to keep pace with these three unique teachers and their eight bright graduates as they prepare for the high-pressure stakes of university entrance exams. The readings, exercises and projects will assist you in taking the lessons of the play back to your own classroom. So, gather your wits, sharpen your pencils and prepare to enter the 1980s Yorkshire classroom of *The History Boys*.

## Objectives of this Discovery Guide

Study the story and principal themes of the play

Understand differences between the British and American educational systems

Discuss the various approaches to education represented in the play

Consider varying perspectives on history

Examine the value and purpose of the arts and popular culture in education

Engage in an oral interpretation of poetry

Work as a group to explore ways of preserving history

**VOCABULARY WORDS ARE IN BOLD TYPE.  
DEFINITIONS CAN BE FOUND IN EACH SECTION.**

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**The play cleverly appeals to anyone who’s ever been taught something. Or learnt something ... It’s a living discussion about teaching and learning, which is at the heart of what it means to be human.**

—Paul Miller, director of *The History Boys*

# A British Education

**THE BRITISH EDUCATION SYSTEM VARIES** considerably from its American counterpart. In England, education is only required until age 16. After completing primary school (U.S. grades k-5), students enter secondary education for first through fifth forms (U.S. grades 6-10).

At the secondary level, several different types of schools exist. Comprehensive schools are equivalent to American public schools. Tuition-free grammar schools are privately funded and intended for students going on to university. Few grammar schools exist today, and admission is highly selective, requiring an examination and high grades – as is the case with the fictional boy’s grammar school in *The History Boys*. Unlike comprehensive schools, grammar schools are commonly segregated by gender and require uniforms. For boys, this consists of a blazer, white shirt and tie. Independent or public schools (what Americans would call private school) are another option, but the substantial tuition makes them chiefly the domain of the wealthy.

After each year, students take a test administered by the school before passing on to the next form. At the completion of fifth form (about age 16), students take the required GCSEs, a national test (called O-levels in the 1980s), in a minimum of four subjects. At this point, students may end their education, enroll in a vocational-technical school or continue on to sixth form, a two-year course of study which prepares students for university.

In sixth form, the student specializes in three or four subject areas, with an eye toward the intended university major. At the completion of sixth form (year 13), students take another national exam, A-levels, specific to their courses of study. Those results determine eligibility for university admission and scholarship.

The dream of many sixth-form students was (and still is) to be accepted into one of the older, more prestigious universities: Oxford or Cambridge, collectively called Oxbridge. Competition is fierce, and unless students have received all As, they will likely receive little encouragement from their teachers to apply. In the 1980s, admission to Oxbridge required yet another examination and interview at the university. These examinations are what the students in *The History Boys* are preparing for, in the semester immediately following their completion of sixth form.

**I went to a state comprehensive school (not a grammar school), but it was at the time the play is set. I was entered for Oxbridge and had special classes just like the boys. I was concentrating on theatre by then, and our teachers perhaps didn’t have the knack that Irwin does: I didn’t get in. But the situation in the play is very familiar to me.**

—Paul Miller, director of *The History Boys*

## VOCABULARY

**Furtive:** Secretive; sly



### OXBRIDGE: THE HOLY GRAIL

The University of Oxford and The University of Cambridge are often ranked among the world’s top five universities and have a long history of rivalry with each other. Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world, claims its origins in the late 11th century. Cambridge, the second-oldest, was founded when some of the academics at Oxford fled north east to Cambridge in 1209. Admission to Oxbridge remains the goal of many independent and elite grammar schools, but controversy concerning the under-representation of comprehensive school pupils abounds, raising allegations of class-related bias.

# Synopsis of *The History Boys*

**FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY** of their grammar school, eight sixth-form boys – Akthar, Crowther, Dakin, Lockwood, Posner, Rudge, Scripps and Timms – have distinguished themselves as scholarship candidates for the prestigious Oxford and Cambridge Universities. As they return to their school for a final semester, during which they will prepare for the competitive entrance exams, the boys are greeted with praise by their teachers and the Headmaster.

To give the boys the edge that will hopefully drive them to success, the Headmaster hires on a young, maverick, temporary teacher named Irwin. While the Headmaster is appreciative of the nuts-and-bolts approach of the current history teacher, Mrs. Lintott, who has laid the foundation for the boys' candidacy, he is less tolerant of the eccentric "general studies" teacher, Hector, whose sessions in literature and life have the boys improvising scenes in French, singing decades-old popular songs and acting out cinema classics. The Headmaster considers the lessons a waste of time – more self-serving than student-serving – and requests that Hector surrender some of his class time to Irwin, who will better ensure that the boys are "on stream" for the Oxbridge examinations.

When his influence with the boys is threatened by Irwin's flashy methods, Hector despairs. Echoing Hector's despair, Posner, the late bloomer of the bunch, pines for the self-assured Dakin, who seems most eager to please the new teacher. Posner recognizes that Irwin's **furtive** glances at Dakin mirror his own. Divided as Hector and Irwin are in educational philosophy, both are closeted homosexuals who harbor feelings for the boys. However, Hector's desires take a more demonstrative form: groping the boys as he drives them home on the back of his motorcycle – an "honor" that they accept with pity and amusement. When the Headmaster hears of Hector's fondling, it serves as a convenient excuse to hasten Hector's retirement and clear the way for Irwin's quality time with the boys.

As the Oxbridge examinations draw closer, tensions mount. And then one random, tragic event teaches both students and teachers a final, indelible history lesson.

## **SHOULD THIS BE A BIGGER DEAL?**

**According to director Paul Miller, actually not. While there is just as much concern in England as in the U.S. about pedophilia and sexual abuse, *The History Boys* is not about all of England; it is about a particular group of boys. To them, Hector is both a beloved teacher and a bit of a joke. These boys are fairly sophisticated and view Hector's fondling with tolerance and ridicule. While the Headmaster panics, the boys recognize him as a harmless and sad old man.**



The cast of *History Boys*.  
PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

# Commemorating the Past: Perspectives on History

**HOW DO WE REMEMBER THE PAST?** How do we choose to commemorate the significant people, places and events that eventually become our shared history? We commemorate to remember – to celebrate as well as to mourn – and we do so in a wide variety of ways: holidays, coins, stamps, cemeteries, memorials, museums and presidential libraries. Floods of books and documentaries not only revive and deepen our interest in history, but often provide new points of view on it as well.

The very act of commemorating reveals the values of a culture. What is worthy of being remembered? What is best forgotten? The characters in *The History Boys* offer us alternative ways of thinking about history, particularly about how history happens and how we should regard it. To Irwin, commemoration is a way of letting go of the past, burying disturbing truths and moving on:

“We still don’t like to admit that the war was even partly our fault because so many of our people died. A photograph on every mantelpiece. And all this mourning has veiled the truth. It’s not so much lest we forget, as lest we remember ... there’s no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it.”

By this thinking, burying the dead is both a **literal** and **figurative** act – we bury a body and painful truths. Conversely, that which is not commemorated is also forgotten. Hector discusses the plight of the Unknown Soldier:

“... these were the first campaigns when ... common soldiers ... were commemorated, the names of the dead recorded and inscribed on war memorials. Before this, soldiers ... were all unknown soldiers, and so far from being revered, there was a firm in the nineteenth century ... which swept up their bones from the battlefields of Europe in order to grind them into fertilizer.”

The value and purpose of remembering is not the only question. The characters also disagree on the most basic issue of how events proceed from one to the next. For Dakin, how history happens is clear: “People decide to do stuff. Make moves. Alter things.” History is a link of cause and effect, where one event precipitates another: someone aggresses; someone responds or fails to respond.

But to Rudge, history is a series of arbitrary events without any particular connection: “How do I define history? It’s just one f\*\*\*ing thing after another.” His history teacher, Mrs. Lintott, seems to agree, when she considers the stroke of bad luck that has led to Hector’s dismissal:

“And what if a customer had come in just as Hector had got to the lights and she’d been looking the other way? Or the lights had been green? ... I could spend a lesson dissecting what the Headmaster insists on calling ‘this unfortunate incident’ and it would teach the boys more about history and the utter randomness of things than ... well, than I’ve ever managed to do so far.”



Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C.

**“How do I define history?  
It’s just one f\*\*\*ing  
thing after another.”**

## VOCABULARY

**Figurative:** Metaphorical; representing something else

**Literal:** In accordance with primary or surface meaning

**Subjunctive:** A verb form that suggests hypothetical action

Her musings resemble Irwin’s technique of projecting the possibilities of history. He suggests that speculating on the effects of what could have happened brings a keener understanding of what did happen. Dakin shrewdly labels Irwin’s perspective “**subjunctive** history.” Dakin explains, “The subjunctive is the mood you use when something might or might not have happened, when it’s imagined.”

But, to Mrs. Lintott, what ultimately gets remembered has much to do with who does the recording. Those who wield the pen wield the power to shape perspective:

“History’s not such a frolic for women as it is for men. Why should it be? They never get round the conference table ... What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket.”

Conquered peoples and minorities the world over would agree. How is our perception of the past shaped by the biased choices of historians and politicians? History books have an impact that reaches farther than just *how* people, places and events are discussed: they dictate whether an event is discussed at all.

**SUBJUNCTIVE HISTORY:  
ON CHURCHILL BECOMING  
PRIME MINISTER**

**“When Chamberlain  
resigned as Prime  
Minister in 1940 Churchill  
wasn’t the first thought;  
Halifax more generally  
acceptable. But on the  
afternoon when the  
decision was taken  
Halifax chose to go to the  
dentist. If Halifax had had  
better teeth we might  
have lost the war.”**

—Dakin in *The History Boys*

**COMMEMORATING AN EVENT**

*The History Boys* contains numerous references to historical events. Your teacher will provide you with list of these events. Research your assigned event, and discover why it is significant in history. Prepare a three-minute oral presentation to teach the class about the event and why it is commemorated.

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## **SUBJUNCTIVE HISTORY**

Subjunctive history asks you to pose a hypothesis based on “what ifs.” It is an opportunity to consider alternatives to historical events. What might be the effects if you change the cause? For example, if Germany had not lost World War I, would there have been a World War II? If America had not gotten involved in World War II, would Hitler have conquered all of Europe?

Choose a historical event: \_\_\_\_\_

What was the principal cause (or causes) of the event?

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What happened as a result of that event?

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Now, employ subjunctive history. Think through possible alternative versions of that event: what might have happened if the cause(s) changed?

If (changed cause) \_\_\_\_\_

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Then (changed event) \_\_\_\_\_

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**OR** If (changed cause) \_\_\_\_\_

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Then (changed event) \_\_\_\_\_

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**OR** If (changed cause) \_\_\_\_\_

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Then (changed event) \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one of your scenarios above to explore further. What will happen as a result? List three ways this change might alter the course of history.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

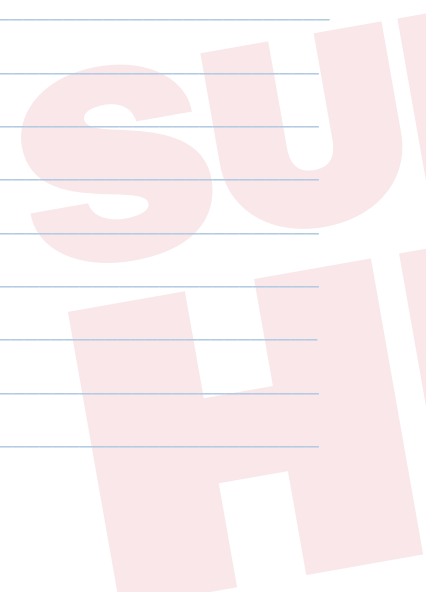
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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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**ESSAY**

Write a well-argued essay in which you pose the “subjunctive history” of that historical event. Discuss your hypothesis by tracing the effects of that particular historical cause: If this would have happened, then these would have been the results.

Lined writing area for the essay response.

BJUNCTIVE  
ISTORY

# Breaking Bread With the Dead: Perspectives on Arts and Literature

**DEBATE OVER THE VALUE OF ARTS** and literature in education ripples through *The History Boys*. Chief among the critics is the Headmaster, who views arts and literature as squandering precious educational time: “After all, it’s not how much literature that they know. What matters is how much they know about literature. Chant the stuff till they’re blue in the face, what good does it do?”

And when Crowther mentions his interest in acting, Irwin warns him that “Most dons ... think the theatre is a waste of time. In their view, any undergraduate keen on acting forfeits all hope of a good degree ... It’s no fun teaching the stage struck.” Beyond being considered a worthless detour, the arts might even mislead students, lulling them with a false sense of their own value. Mrs. Lintott remarks:

“When I was teaching in London in the seventies there was a consoling myth that not very bright children could always become artists ... It’s by the same well-meaning token that it is assumed still that every third person in prison is a potential Van Gogh ... what’s all this learning by heart for, except as some sort of insurance against the boys’ ultimate failure?”

Under Irwin’s the influence, Dakin determines that arts and literature are for the weak: “The more you read, though, the more you see that literature is actually about losers ... It’s consolation. All literature is consolation.”

Does art have a value distinct from history? Can literature teach us things that history cannot? Infused by Hector’s passion, the students are quick to defend the distinctions between the arts and history. Timms remarks, “With a poem or any work of art we can never say ‘in other words.’ If it is a work of art there are no other words.” And Lockwood agrees, “You can’t look at a Rembrandt and say ‘in other words,’ can you, sir?”

Hector’s lesson has stuck. Arts and literature are guideposts for all those future emotional crossroads where history provides little remedy:

“The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.”

Rather than dividing us into “us” and “them,” as history does, the arts connect us to the essential truths of humanity across the boundaries of time, language, race and culture.

## THE FALL OF ICARUS

The Auden poem on the next page references a famous painting by Belgian painter Pieter Brueghel, who lived in the first half of the 16th century. The painting shows the mythological Icarus, whose wax wings melted when he flew too close to the sun. Icarus fell into the sea and drowned. Auden was inspired by the painting when he visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels in 1938, seeing in it an insight on human suffering.



# ARTS+

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### **A BRIEF LESSON FROM THE MASTERS**

Below is one of the many poems that Hector's boys have memorized. Timms quotes a section of it in the play. Read the poem slowly to yourself. See if you can begin to decipher its meaning.

### **“Musee des Beaux Arts”**

BY W.H. AUDEN

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters; how well, they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.  
In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

What is the message of the poem? What lesson is conveyed by the words?

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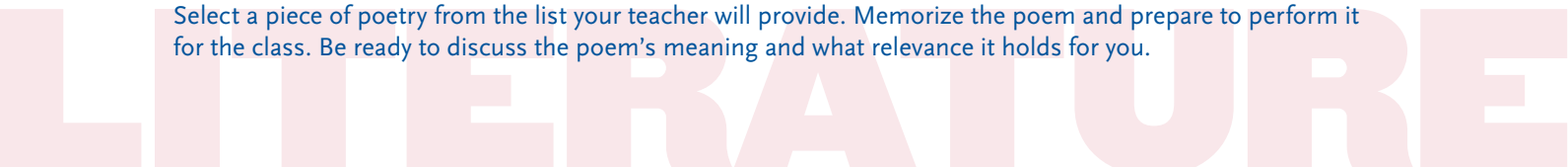
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### **THE POSSIBILITY OF POETRY**

Select a piece of poetry from the list your teacher will provide. Memorize the poem and prepare to perform it for the class. Be ready to discuss the poem's meaning and what relevance it holds for you.



# Evaluating the Teachers of *The History Boys*

**Of the three teachers in the play, I've had experiences with two of them. I'd been taught at my own school in Leeds by somebody like Mrs. Lintott, in a very straightforward, factual way. And then the way I got a scholarship to Oxford and how I got my degree really was via the method the character called Irwin uses in the play ... The only person I have had no experience of at all is Hector ... I only knew teachers like that from talking to other people, and also from reading.**

—Playwright Alan Bennett

**IN *THE HISTORY BOYS***, playwright Alan Bennett introduces us to three teachers with distinctly different personalities, teaching styles and educational philosophies. Through this contrast, the play raises questions about the very purpose of education: What should be taught? How should it be taught? And what role should the teacher's personality play in the teaching?

Near the end of the play, Irwin makes the following remark about Hector: "I do not think there is time for his kind of teaching anymore." Scripps immediately disagrees: "No. Love apart, it is the only education worth having."

The play has often been interpreted as embracing Hector's approach to teaching over the others. Bennett responds: "Temperamentally, I cleave to that kind of teacher and that kind of teaching – while at the same time not thinking it practical. I suppose the three teachers came out of trying to reconcile that."

**"You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it. We are that entity beloved of our Headmaster, a 'team' ..."**

—Hector to Mrs. Lintott in *The History Boys*

## THE IDEAL TEACHER

Who would you prefer to be taught by: Mrs. Lintott, Irwin or Hector? Why?

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Which student is most influenced by each teacher? How do you see that influence within the play?

Mrs. Lintott: \_\_\_\_\_

Irwin: \_\_\_\_\_

Hector: \_\_\_\_\_

List the traits that represent your ideal teacher:

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Of these traits, which is the most important to you? Why?

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### **DEVELOPING THE HABIT OF CONTRADICTION**

Advice from Irwin: "A question has a front and back door. Go in the back, or better still, the side ... Flee the crowd ... Be perverse ... Take Stalin. Generally agreed to be a monster, and rightly. So dissent. Find something, anything to say in his defense."

List four topics currently in the news:

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Choose one on which the majority of your class shares the same or similar opinion:

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Determine the usual, popular opinion on the topic. What would be the expected stance and accompanying reason(s) for taking that stand?

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\_\_\_\_\_ because

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Now, develop "the habit of contradiction." Turn the argument around by writing a one-sentence thesis that presents the opposing point of view:

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Brainstorm a list of reasons – sensible, ridiculous, far-reaching – why one could take that unusual stance:

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Decide which of those reasons might best persuade your classmates to consider this opposite stance:

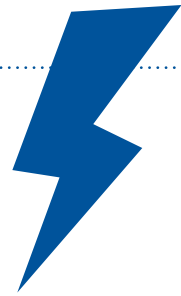
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\_\_\_\_\_ because

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**USING THIS OPINION** as your thesis, develop an idea map with supporting details. Try to anticipate what arguments others might raise against your less usual stance. Research details – statistics, expert testimony or other facts – that will help to make your claim persuasive. Add those to your idea map. Once you are satisfied with your plan, write an essay arguing for the less usual side of your topic.

# Pop is the New Literacy



**IN THE HISTORY BOYS**, the content of Hector’s lessons extends beyond fine arts and literature to include elements of pop culture. Does pop culture have any place in education? What argument could you make for studying the songs of Brittany Spears? Harry Potter films? Paris Hilton’s celebrity?

## BRAINSTORM: POP LITERACY

Make a list of contemporary pop culture references that you think will have historic value 100 years from now. Provide two examples for each of the categories below.

People	_____	_____
Places	_____	_____
Music	_____	_____
Objects	_____	_____
Events	_____	_____
Movies	_____	_____
Television	_____	_____

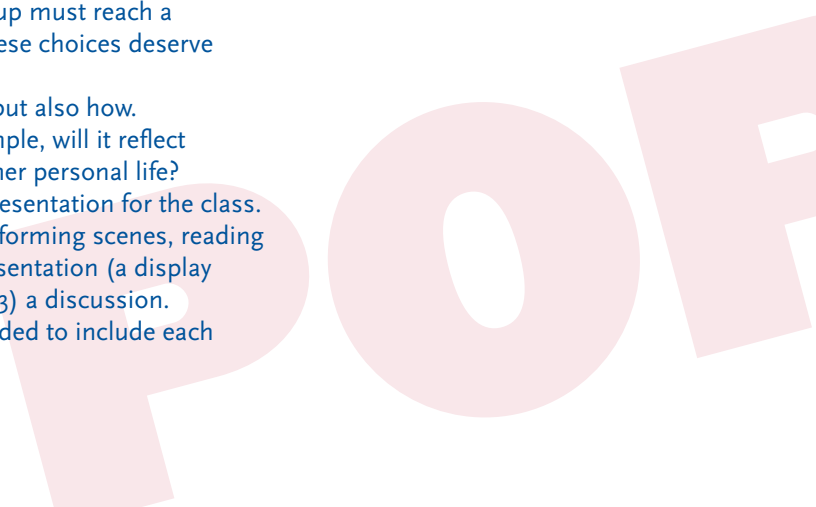
## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: COMMEMORATING THE DECADE

As a group, prepare a Time Capsule for the first decade of the new millennium. What examples of history, the arts and pop culture best represent us for the years 2000–2007? What will these elements reveal to future generations about who we are?

The capsule must include the following components:

2 events	1 book	1 invention or discovery
2 people	1 movie	1 song or piece of music
2 objects	1 television program	1 poem
1 quotation	1 magazine	1 visual artwork (painting, sculpture, etc.)

- Use print and electronic media to research the years 2000 to the present. Continue your list of things to commemorate.
- With your group, narrow the lists to the required elements. Since this Time Capsule commemorates a shared history, the group must reach a consensus on the value of each component. Why do these choices deserve to be commemorated over any others?
- You will need to select not only what will be preserved but also how. What will the choice of documentation reveal? For example, will it reflect a person’s accomplishments or the struggles in his or her personal life?
- Gather the elements of your Time Capsule. Design a presentation for the class. It should include: 1) a performance (reciting poetry, performing scenes, reading passages from articles or books); 2) an audiovisual presentation (a display of objects, slideshow, PowerPoint, CD, DVD, etc.); and 3) a discussion. Be prepared to explain to the class why your group decided to include each element in the Time Capsule.



# Resources

## BOOKS

***The History Boys*** by Alan Bennett (Faber and Faber, 2004)  
Text of the play with a lengthy introduction by the playwright

***The Complete Talking Heads*** by Alan Bennett (Picador, 1998)  
A collection of monologues spoken by quintessential British characters from the playwright of *The History Boys*

***The Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events*** by Bernard Grun (Touchstone, 2005)  
A useful historical overview with index of names and events

***The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*** by E.D. Hirsch et al. (Houghton Mifflin, 2002) An encyclopedia of references on history, literature, arts and other general knowledge

***The Top 500 Poems*** edited by William Harmon (Columbia University Press, 1992) An anthology of poetry

***Untold Stories*** by Alan Bennett (Picador, 2007)  
An autobiographical collection of reminiscences, stories and anecdotes by the playwright

## WEBSITES

**[www.everypoet.com](http://www.everypoet.com)**  
Online archive of poets and poems

**[www.subjunctivehistory.com](http://www.subjunctivehistory.com)**  
Website created by fans of *The History Boys* with postings on various aspects of the play

**[www.telegraph.co.uk/arts](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts)**  
"The Truth Behind *The History Boys*" (June 21, 2004)  
Playwright Alan Bennett and Nicholas Hytner, director of the original UK production, discuss their work on the play.

**[www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)**  
Urban dictionary: a slang dictionary

**[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)**  
"The Instructive Message of the History Boys" by Phillip Kennicott (December 10, 2006: Page N01)  
A critic discusses the sexual themes of *The History Boys*.

## FILM

***The History Boys*** directed by Nicholas Hytner  
(20th Century Fox, 2006)  
Film version of the play with the original London cast and commentary by the playwright and director; also has some special features on the play and film

***Dead Poets Society*** directed by Peter Weir  
(Touchstone Pictures, 1989)  
Story about boys at an American boarding school and their unconventional English teacher

# P.L.A.Y.

**NOW IN ITS 37th YEAR**, Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. (Performing for Los Angeles Youth) has served 25,000 – 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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## DISCOVERY GUIDE CREDITS

**Steve Shade**, Writer  
**Rachel Fain**, Managing Editor  
**Jean Kling**, Proofreader  
**Nishita Doshi**, Graphic Designer

**WRITE TO US: P.L.A.Y./Center Theatre Group**  
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## FUNDER CREDITS

Performing for Los Angeles Youth receives generous support from the Center Theatre Group Affiliates, a volunteer organization dedicated to bringing innovative theatre and creative education to the young people of Los Angeles.

Major support is also provided by the Annenberg Foundation.

Additional support for P.L.A.Y. is provided by the Bloomingdale's Fund of the Macy's Foundation, the Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, The Sascha Brastoff Foundation, the Brotman Foundation of California, The Dana Foundation, the Darden Restaurants Foundation, the James A. Doolittle Foundation, the Lawrence P. Frank Foundation, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Education Endowment, the Walter Lantz Foundation, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the B.C. McCabe Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, the Music Center Fund for the Performing Arts, the Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation, the Weingart Foundation and the Zolla Family Foundation.



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## Target Family Performances

Spend a weekend afternoon with your whole family. See a play and you will have something new to talk about, something new to laugh about, new songs to sing together. These special performances are followed by a post-show discussion in the theatre. Get the most from the experience by brushing up before the show: check out the free Discovery Guides on our website.

AGES 6+

### *My Fair Lady*

April 12, 2008, 2pm

Ahmanson Theatre

The classic musical about Eliza Doolittle's transformation from flower-seller to lady.

### *A Waitress in Yellowstone*

May 31, 2008, 2pm

Kirk Douglas Theatre

A contemporary musical fable about the hazards of doing the right thing.

### *The Drowsy Chaperone*

July 12, 2008, 2pm

Ahmanson Theatre

The madcap musical comedy returns after a run on Broadway.

AGES 11+

### *No Child...*

March 15, 2008, 2pm

Kirk Douglas Theatre

Thirty characters, one actress: a solo performance about the struggle to put on a middle school class play.

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