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Wednesday, May 14
7 p.m.
180 PLC, 1415 Kincaid St.

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UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

THEater BY SUZI STEFFEN

It's a Sin

Fine acting can't save *History Boys*

Curious: That critics would adore *History Boys*, transparently written to trap its characters in rigid ideological positions and punish them for their passion.

True, the ideologies matter, but they should be background to character. No matter how good the acting at Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre for this show, the lengthy script's problems rise to choke energy from the piece.

Let us ignore the long, often hilarious scene acted completely in French, a scene whose intelligent subtleties will be lost on anyone who doesn't understand the language. Ignore the late, risible attempts to address the neglect of and hostility towards women throughout the play. Even ignore the clumsy epilogue that apes Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* without an iota of Woolf's steely structural integrity. True, any one of those missteps could sink a less complex play. Here, other problems so weigh down Bennett's celebrated success that it rarely finds its desired chance to strut.

Is this really the charming, propulsive, well-reviewed comedy that won a record six Tony awards in 2006? Because from the now-great distance of 2008, it looks more like the kind of tale that used to be fobbed off on gay men and lesbians as all we could hope for: Pathetic older men need the eroticism of young men to turn them on; the only clearly gay character has no idea how to succeed in life or love; and, by the way, Really Bad Things happen to gays. *Please*.

Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* couldn't restrain himself in reviewing the Broadway version: "Pretty much everyone," he wrote, will "fall prey to the charm of *History Boys*." Michael Billington of *The (UK) Guardian* wrote, "Nothing could diminish the incendiary achievement of this subtle, deep-wrought and immensely funny play."

Well, like the *New Statesman* (UK)'s Rosie Millard, I call bullshit. Though often funny, the play's hardly subtle. There's the Man Who Loves Literature For Its Own Sake — that is, the protagonist, Hector (played with generous energy by Michael Kevin) — and the Teacher Who Understands How To Spin History, Irwin (Chris Harder). There's the Dryly Humorous Fact-bound Woman History Teacher, Mrs. Lintott (Sharonlee McLean) and the Snobby Headmaster who thinks only Oxford or Cambridge will do (Gary Powell). They're fighting over the souls of these Sheffield boys.

The boys hardly get to be more than cardboard characters. One, played by the strong Andrew Bray, exists only to play the piano (though the play does come alive with his music). Another, played by Equity actor Cole Cook, barely has a role at all. The Black and Muslim boys (Richard Boyland and Alex Taraghi, respectively) seem like those few kids of color who suddenly pop up in the second Harry Potter movie — a sop to demographic reality without meaning. The more fleshed-out characters are Rudge, the working-class sports boy (Rollie Walsh), and Dakin, the boy so attractive men and women

must have him (Josiah Banya). And then there's Posner (Jaris Schaefer).

Poor Schaefer, the night I went, lost his British accent more often than the others (who, save Walsh, don't seem to know Northern accents at all), but he's also stuck with the clichéd part of a Jewish gay boy who doesn't seem as grown up as his virile classmates. (Posner, we learn, even had to wait extra-long for his balls to drop.)

At least the final boy, Scripps (well played by Tyler Caffall), a constant notebook scribbler and observer whose kindness and quick thinking wins the confidence of the other main boys, demonstrates some sort of complexity.

As of course do Hector and Irwin, those who fight an epic battle between Truth and Truthiness. Or, in this case, between knowledge for its own private sake (Hector's point of view) and knowledge that can be used to get ahead (Irwin). Most critics would have you believe the play's pathos and poignancy lie in the way the boys are seduced away from their love of art for art's sake and into believing Oxbridge means success. Undeniably, many of the classroom scenes contain tension and humor and strength, especially when Hector proves his fidelity to literature or when Irwin wins the boys' loyalty with his willingness to unmask the classism that will hurt them if they don't find some extra edge. But Bennett's manipulation of the plot in order to pull heartstrings backfires, and the play loses its way.

The message? Truthiness may be contemptible, but guess what? The truthiness is all. Believe otherwise, and you won't survive. **EW**

The *History Boys* runs through June 8 in Portland at the Artists Repertory Theatre's Alder Street stage. Tix at www.artistsrep.org or 503-241-1278.

opening nights

Or Not to Be opens at the Lord Leebrick Theatre Friday, May 9

Hamlet so permeates our understanding of lonely poseur boys and of passive girls undone by love that John Schmor, the department chair for UO theater, never wanted to take it on. But **zombies** and *Hamlet*? Booyeah. Where those in the Elizabethan era worried about their souls and hellfire, we worry about the degradation of the body, and so we have a rearranged *Hamlet* that plays with pain and the bloody heart of tragedy. Comedy, tragedy, gorefest, serious look through humor at the near-viral effects of murder — should be quite the evening at the intimate Leebrick. Show dates are May 9-10, 15-18, 22-24 & 29-31 and June 1. Tix at www.lordleebrick.com or 465-1506.

Spin opens at OSU Friday, May 9

John Frohnmayer's musical comedy about the perils of the NEA and the ways government clashes with art hits the boards at OSU, where David Ogden Stiers steps in to provide some kicks as a right-wing senator trying to destroy arts funding while courageous NEA staffers try to proclaim the importance of art. Show dates are May 8-10 & 15-17. Tix at oregonstate.edu/dept/theatre/BoxOfficeInfo.html or 541-737-2784.