

# PROSCENIUM

## **Habeas Corpus**

By Alan Bennett

Habeas Corpus

Wednesday 8th to Saturday 11th June, 2005  
Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre

# HABEAS CORPUS

By ALAN BENNETT

## Cast

Arthur Wicksteed ..... Duncan Sykes  
Muriel Wicksteed ..... Sheila Harvey  
Dennis Wicksteed ..... Rob Hurcum  
Connie Wicksteed ..... Chrissie Baker  
Mrs Swab ..... Susi Thornton  
Lady Rumpers ..... Evelyn Moutrie  
Mr Shanks ..... Keith Bayross  
Canon Throbbing ..... Charles Anthony  
Sir Percy Shorter ..... Paul Davis  
Mr Purdue ..... Paul Ewen

Directed by ..... Robert Ewen  
Stage Manager ..... Erik Pearson  
Assisted by ..... Crystal Anthony  
Sound and Lighting ..... Barny Daley

The action takes place in and around the Wicksteeds' house in Hove.

Special thanks to East Lane Theatre Club, Wembley.

This production is dedicated to the memory of Louise English.

## ALAN BENNETT

Alan Bennett was born on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1934 in Armley, Leeds, the son of a butcher. He was educated at Leeds Modern School, a state grammar school, from where he won a History Scholarship to Oxford. He grew up surrounded by gossiping, no-nonsense Yorkshirewomen, which made an indelible impression on him, as did regular holidays to coastal resorts such as Morecambe. His first encounter with comedy was via the radio, but he later said that he disliked popular comedians such as Tommy Handley and Tommy Trinder for being 'relentlessly cheerful': more down-to-earth figures like ITMA's Mona Lott were closer to his already ruefully melancholic outlook.

During his National Service he learnt Russian at the Joint Services School for Linguists, and at Exeter College Oxford he was awarded a first class honours degree. He spent some time in the late fifties preparing for a career as a medieval historian, until his increasing fondness for appearing on stage culminated in the legendary collaboration with Jonathon Miller, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. *Beyond the Fringe*, 1960, did more than anything else to revolutionise British satire, moving it from Goonish surrealism towards more pointed political comment.

Post *Fringe*, he contributed to BBC sketch shows *Not So Much a Programme*, *More a Way of Life* and *BBC3* and played the Dormouse in Jonathon Miller's imaginative adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. His first stage play, *Forty Years On*, was produced at the Apollo theatre in 1968.

For the next thirty years he wrote a series of original, innovative, entertaining television and stage plays and film scripts culminating in the second series of *Talking Heads* in 1998. Then came a period where his output was relatively sparse, during which he complained he was suffering from writers' block. But in 2004 his first stage play for several years, *The History Boys* at the National Theatre, won the Critics' Circle, Evening Standard and Olivier Awards for Best Play.

In a critical appreciation of Alan Bennett in 2003, Michael Brook wrote: *It is easy to pigeonhole Alan Bennett, and correspondingly easy to*

undervalue his achievements. Although one of the most recognisable writers of his generation, his unassumingly owlish persona and fondness for self-deprecation has created the impression of a lovably eccentric minor talent, whose amusingly droll plays about elderly Northern women and fussy secretaries are merely one step up from sitcom. The idea that he might be the most important and innovative British television playwright since Dennis Potter initially seems laughable. But it's hard to think of a stronger contender.

## THEATRE PLAYWRIGHT

1960	Beyond the Fringe	Edinburgh Festival & Fortune Theatre
1968	Forty Years On	Apollo Theatre
1969	Sing a Rude Song	Greenwich Theatre
1971	Getting On	Queen's Theatre
1973	Habeas Corpus	Lyric Theatre
1977	The Old Country	Queen's Theatre
1980	Enjoy	Vaudeville Theatre
1986	Kafka's Dick	Royal Court Theatre
1988	Single Spies (An Englishman Abroad and A Question of Attribution)	National Theatre
1990	The Wind in the Willows	National Theatre
1991	The Madness of George III	National Theatre
1998	The Lady in the Van	Queen's Theatre
2004	The History Boys	National Theatre

## FARCE

The OED defines farce as: *a dramatic work intended to excite laughter, often presenting ludicrously improbable events*; and Phyllis Hartnell, from the Olympian heights of the Oxford Companion to the Theatre declares it, a little dismissively: *a dramatic work intended only to incite laughter ... of small literary merit but great entertainment value*. Others link it with *low comedy and slapstick*.

The qualities most commonly associated with farce, as in the works of Feydeau and the Whitehall farces of the 1920s, are incongruity and embarrassment, particularly the embarrassment of respectable bourgeois characters placed in absurd situations, often hinging on extra-marital relations, and behaving wildly out of character. The plays are full of accidents, mistaken identity and inopportune arrivals; set in rooms with a multitude of doors facilitating rapid and unexpected exits and entrances; with characters hiding behind potted ferns, often without their trousers.

Perhaps the most helpful definition: *farce is life turned upside down*.

## HABEAS CORPUS

Alan Bennett describes the play as: *an attempt to write a farce without the paraphernalia of farce – hiding places, multiple exits and umpteen doors. Trousers fall, it is true, but in an instantaneous way as if by divine intervention*. He notes that the play began rehearsal with just four bentwood chairs. *The big revolution occurred after two weeks' rehearsal when the director, Richard Eyre, decided we could manage with three*. The characters are all stock figures of farce: henpecked husband, frustrated wife, lecherous curate, ubiquitous char; *but it's not altogether farce. Death doesn't quite lay down his book*. Many of the characters are indeed all too aware of their own mortality. And as for only exciting laughter – there are moments when the characters touch a human chord and the audience are moved by their situation and feelings.

## SEX

Alexander Games in *Backing into the Limelight* 2003, his biography of Bennett, points out: *The entire household are sex-mad. This is Bennett's 'Oh! Calcutta', a play that commemorates the demise of the Lord Chancellor and his blue pencil and dances a prolonged conga on his grave. This makes it in part a play of its period and Bennett admits: The jokes in Habeas Corpus about the permissive society do date it, and some of the other jokes make me wince. Nevertheless it is a play of great energy and the sex is more seaside postcard naughtiness than erotic or sensual.*

## FIRST PRODUCTION

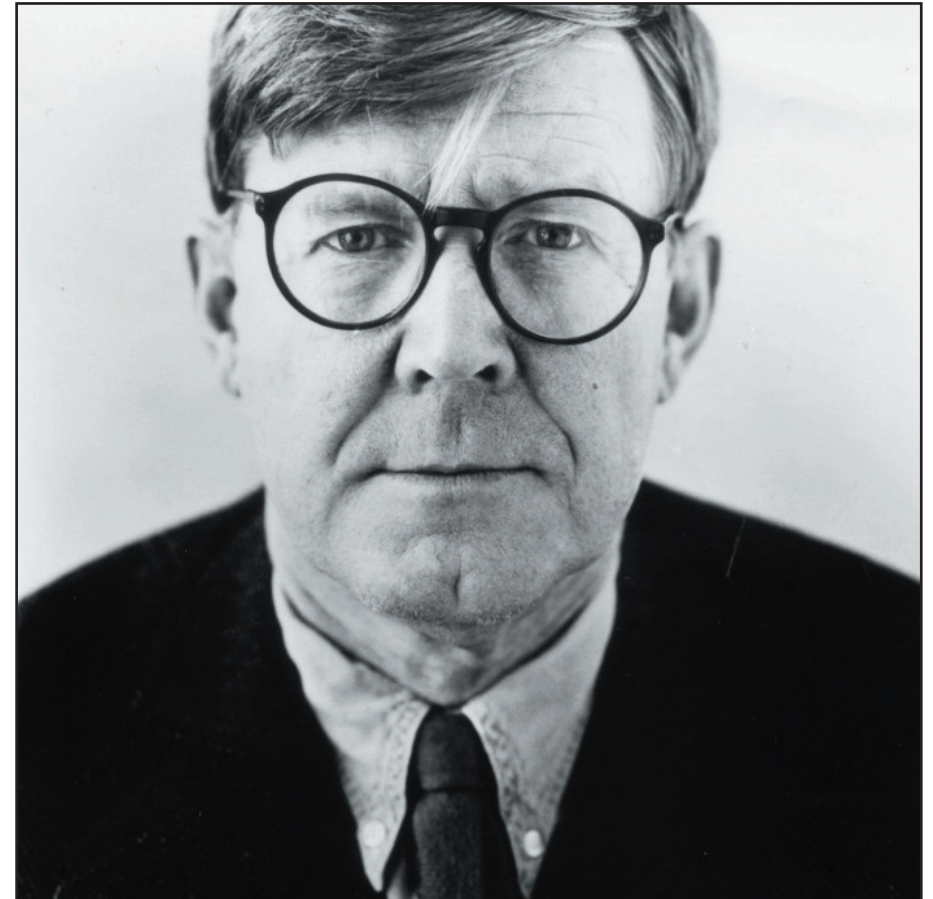
The play opened at the Lyric, Hammersmith in May 1973 with a distinguished cast, which included Alec Guinness, Patricia Hayes, Andrew Sachs and John Bird. Alec Guinness asked the director, Richard Eyre, if he could add a coda of his own to the play: in top hat and tails he performed a solo dance *depicting rapid decline, stiffening joints, decrepitude and the fear of old age and death.* Bennett thought that *it was the idea of this dance that helped him to reconcile the otherwise uncongenial character of Wicksteed to his own.*

The reviews were generally extremely favourable: *To say simply that this is the funniest new play to shake the West End out of its present abysmal lethargy is to do it and its outrageously talented author the disservice of understatement.* (Jack Tinker, Daily Mail), but occasionally a little barbed: *The antics raised hysterical laughter in an audience who did not seem to mind their repetitiousness or the latent spleen.* (John Barber, Daily Telegraph).

Bennett had enjoyed creating and rehearsing the play: *Now the play is on I feel bereft and out of the family – perhaps I should have taken one of the parts myself.* And when the cast changed and Guinness was replaced by Robert Hardy, Bennett took over the role of Mrs Swabb.

'Habeas Corpus' is, he says, one of his favourite plays *because it's one of the few times I've managed not to write a naturalistic play.* And it is one

of the only three plays (in company with 'An Englishman Abroad' and 'A Woman of No Importance') which he could look back on without wanting to change them.



# About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base, since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

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## Our Next Production

A Streetcar Named Desire

By Tennessee Williams

When "fading southern belle" Blanche DuBois comes to stay with her sister, Stella, in New Orleans, she comes up against Stella's brutal husband, Stanley. As their relationship evolves the play's complex themes are revealed and Blanche finds herself in a downward spiral she can't escape. First performed in 1946, the play cemented Williams' reputation as one of the greatest American playwrights, winning him a New York's Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

Whether you are a current or potential Proscenium member and would like to be involved in this production, either on or off stage, come to the workshops on Sunday 19th and 26th June (1pm-4pm) at Harrow Arts Centre.

Contact Lynette on 07967 732 098 or [lynette.shanbury@AandB.org.uk](mailto:lynette.shanbury@AandB.org.uk) for more details, or see her in the bar after tonight's performance!

Directed by Lynette Shanbury  
Wednesday 19th to Saturday 22nd October, 2005  
7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham