

Sections

- today
- opera
- classical
- comedy
- visual arts
- gaming
- Books

Search

- new music
- film
- theatre
- dance
- tv
- CD/DVDs

Search form

Search :

[today](#) | [new music](#) | [opera](#) | [film](#) | [classical](#) | [theatre](#) | [comedy](#) | [dance](#) | [visual arts](#) | [tv](#) | [gaming](#) | [cd/dvds](#) | [books](#)

[reviews](#) | [features](#) | [gallery](#) | [q & a](#) | [proms](#) | [first person](#) | [we recommend](#)

[Home](#) » [Theatre](#) » [The Habit of Art, National Theatre](#)

■ reviews, news & interviews

The Habit of Art, National Theatre

Alan Bennett's new play is ribald, hilarious and secretly sympathetic

by [Ismene Brown](#) | Wednesday, 18 November 2009

[Share](#) [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

the future of arts journalism

You can stop theartsdesk.com closing!

We urgently need financing to survive. Our fundraising drive has thus far raised £33,000 but we need to reach £100,000 or we will be forced to close. Please contribute here:

<https://gofund.me/c3f6033d>

And if you can forward this information to anyone who might assist, we'd be grateful.



Subscribe to theartsdesk.com

Thank you for continuing to read our work on theartsdesk.com. For unlimited access to every article in its entirety, including our archive of more than 15,000 pieces, we're asking for £5 per month or £40 per year. We feel it's a very good deal, and hope you do too.

To take a subscription now [simply click here](#).

And if you're looking for that extra gift for a friend or family member, why not treat them to a [theartsdesk.com gift subscription?](#)

more theatre



Best of 2025: Theatre

From big, bold musicals to solo shows, London theatre landed again on multiple fronts



Paranormal Activity, Ambassadors Theatre review - franchise frightener flops on stage

Good illusions but pacing stymies the shocks



When We Are Married, Donmar Warehouse review - hilarious revival of JB Priestley's anti-marriage comedy

Shearer has assembled a dream cast to channel affluent prudery of Edwardian Bradford



Oh, Mary!, Trafalgar Theatre review - uproarious farce

Rising star Mason Alexander Park excels in this Tony Award-winning comedy



Christmas Day, Almeida Theatre review - lacks cheer

Ambitious but tangled examination of British Jewish identity in troubled times



Twelfth Night, RSC, Barbican review - intelligent, inventive and genuinely funny

The "Shakespearean laugh" has no place in this refreshingly wacky Illyria



Indian Ink, Hampstead Theatre - luminous Felicity Kendal's parting gift to Stoppard

Crammed with wit and knowledge, this 1995 play can't totally disguise its origins as a radio play

Drapapella, Park Theatre review - it's dead good!

Count on laughs at this very silly musical-comedy

The BFG, RSC, Stratford review - Roald Dahl's story brought to life by astonishing puppetry





Richard Griffiths as Auden: deliciously slovenly as Auden, but delightfully dubious as Fitz
Production photographs by Johan Persson/National Theatre

It sounded a dry subject and a dry title for Alan Bennett's first play for five years - a fictional meeting between composer Benjamin Britten and poet W H Auden 25 years after they fell out, two old buggers, one furtive, the other extrovert. But at last night's premiere *The Habit of Art* proved an excruciatingly funny play, ribald, merciless, and as much about the bad habit of Theatre as that of the higher-toned Art. Nicholas Hytner has given it a wildly enjoyable production at the National Theatre that fields some epic comic performances in a bravura script.

Wystan Auden was "in the imperative", as his housemaster said of him at school, an ugly, enchanting, slovenly bully. Early on he and Britten, the golden boys of British poetry and music (pictured below), collaborated on the opera *Paul Bunyan* and the *Ballad of Heroes*, but fell out when the flamboyantly queer Auden criticised Britten for being too clean, too "healthy", too in denial of his nature. A quarter of a century later, Oxford's former Professor of Poetry has nothing to write, is bored with retelling his old successes, has gross lavatory habits, and hires rent-boys - his servants call him Professor of knobs in gobs.

Yet *The Habit of Art* is so onion-layered that it prompts you to question whose Auden this is that we're seeing - Auden's Auden, Britten's Auden? Bennett's Auden, the biographers' Auden? The set-up is that a new play, called "Caliban's Day", is being rehearsed at the National Theatre itself about Britten and Auden's reunion in 1972, and the unimpeachable Alex Jennings and Richard Griffiths play Henry and Fitz, actors cast as the two creative giants. We swiftly gather that deep mistrust exists between the play's Author and the Stage Manager, who is carrying out (so she glibly says) the wishes of the absent Director, who is in Leeds at a conference on Relevant Theatre, but is handily to be blamed for every alteration or indeed altercation.



There is a further complication, in that within the fictional play the Author has introduced the figure of Humphrey Carpenter, the biographer of both Britten and Auden, and whose interpreter Donald (a perfectly pitched Adrian Scarborough) is the most hapless person on stage - trying to find his motivation ("My presence speaks! I am imagining you!") but then realising, horrorstruck, "I'm only a device."

This set-up is a masterstroke of creative procrastination, allowing for constant farcical double-takes. First we have the thoroughly enjoyable process of accustoming ourselves to Griffiths settling his vast bulk inside Bob Crowley's gross little set of a room in Christ Church, trying, without great conviction, to learn his lines and to play a grotesque with whom he has very little sympathy.

Foremost in his mind is that after this rehearsal he has a six o'clock voiceover to do for Tesco. He sarcastically enumerates his Auden props, including "my elephant urine-stained trousers, my disgusting handkerchief, my plastic bag. And have you got the mask?" This being a comical rubber Auden mask, as wrinkled as a scrotum, and no more seemly.

Fitz's tolerance is increasingly tested by the toilet humour, a discussion about dicks that he has to have with a rent boy, and finally by an episode when Auden's furniture starts declaiming poetry - at which Fitz quite reasonably snaps: "Do we need the talking furniture?" Oh, but we do, we do. The Talking Furniture is one of

the choice display scenes for the dazzlingly funny Frances de la Tour as the Stage Manager, who is "reading" for Brian, one of the actors missing rehearsal as they are in "a Chekhov matinee". This enables a great moment at the start of Act 2 where a man is just walking off the set ("Brian, you should go"), dressed in full Russian beard and serf costume.



The other masterfully taut spin-off of a first half that focuses so hard on the filthy Auden is that we get to know Jennings (pictured left) in his superbly prissy

Wonder and charm flood the house in a show for all ages

Into the Woods, Bridge Theatre review - Grimm, sometimes grim, but always fast and furious
Sondheim's cornucopia of fairytales proves a box of dreadful delights

The Playboy of the Western World, National Theatre review - bright and breezy, but where's the reality?
Spectacular revival of Synge classic features Nicola Coughlan and Siobhán McSweeney

KENREX, The Other Palace review - terrifying, true crime tale
Dazzling portrayal of a town that was mad as hell and not going to take it any more

newsletter

Get a weekly digest of our critical highlights in your inbox each Thursday!

Simply enter your email address in the box below

Sign up for our newsletter

[View previous newsletters](#)

Follow @theartsdesk

“Bennett suggests that Britten felt much more raw, insistent pain about his condition than the blatant Auden ever could”

rating



related articles

Allelujah!, Bridge Theatre review - hilarious but dark, darker, darkest

Richard Griffiths, 1947-2013

The Moderate Soprano, Duke of York's Theatre review - love and opera with a flinty edge

People, National Theatre

Hymn/Cocktail Sticks, National Theatre

explore topics

Reviews Theatre
playwrights Alan Bennett
National Theatre

share this article

Share | Facebook | Twitter | Email



actorly persona, Henry, and hence have already made up our minds to dislike Britten when the fictional meeting does finally occur. Poor Britten. He's almost a caricature (at first), the effete, sheltered narcissist, with his affectedness, snippy envy of others, and his bragging about his OM and his chauffeur.

And yet Bennett wholly changes the view during the meeting. Britten has come to tell Auden about his new opera *Death in Venice*. Auden thinks joyfully that Britten wants him to write the libretto. But no,

selfish Britten only wants Auden to support his choice of a suggestive opera subject disliked by both his partner Peter Pears and his much inferior chosen librettist, Myfanwy Piper.

Delicately, Bennett suggests in this poignantly imagined scene that Britten, for all his self-absorption, felt much more raw, insistent pain about his condition than the blatant Auden ever could, and when Auden demands that Britten stop being "furtive" about the subject of an older man desiring a boy, the gap between words and music suddenly yawns, unbridgeable. Auden jokes that he rewrites his old poems, to stop himself being embarrassed. But Britten says, with music "I have to write it before I can write it." This is a terrific conclusion, of penetrating seriousness in all the theatrical patisserie. It's a pity that the flavoursome confection is then thoroughly sunk at the end by pouring on a sticky luvvie *hommage* to the noble profession of acting, and the National Theatre in particular. But perhaps that's the Director talking, back from Leeds.

■ Add comment

[Post a comment](#)