



# The Habit of Art

*Alan Bennett*

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## The Habit of Art Alan Bennett

*Auden often said that metre and rhyme led him down unexpected paths to thoughts he wouldn't otherwise have had, and in this respect versification and fornication are not so different.*

Benjamin Britten, sailing uncomfortably close to the wind with his new opera, *Death in Venice*, seeks advice from his former collaborator and friend, W H Auden. During this imagined meeting, their first for twenty-five years, they are observed and interrupted by amongst others their future biographer and a young man from the local bus station.

*You are a rent boy. I am a poet. Over the wall lives the Dean of Christ Church. We all have our parts to play.*

Alan Bennett's new play is as much about the theatre as it is about poetry or music. It looks at the unsettling desires of two difficult men, and at the ethics of biography. It reflects on growing old, on creativity and inspiration, and on persisting when all passion's spent: ultimately, on the habit of art.

*'In the end,' said Auden, 'art is small beer. The really serious things in life are earning one's living and loving one's neighbour.'*

## The Habit of Art Details

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# From Reader Review The Habit of Art for online ebook

## Andrew Wiggins says

I was lucky enough to see The Habit of Art in its original run at the National Theatre, the first Bennett play I'd seen live.

The setting, as a play being rehearsed in a fictional setting with fictional stage managers and others, is an extremely clever way to get around the problem of disseminating information that the audience needs, but doesn't fit in the mouths of the main protagonists. Indeed Bennett talks about this conceit in his wonderful introduction to the text, which is as much about the craft of writing as it is about The Habit of Art itself.

The play itself is packed full of Bennett's characteristic humour, and reading it here takes me right back to the performance and literally howling with laughter at some of the jokes.

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## Kam says

Good --(rehearsing a) play-within-a-play. Auden and Britten matched. The actors behind them and what they go through, the stage manager. The author - that was quite enjoyable! Lots of words, near the end, last 10 pages.

Yes, what art is, the real humans behind it.

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## Alyssa Acula says

It wasn't as looooong as I thought it would be. I ket putting reading this one off because I thoughg it was going to be boring but it wasn't. I actually enjoyed it, but I'm going to be rereading it 'cause I didn't really understand it although I quite get what it's trying to say. I haven't read a play in years so the dialogue format confused me especially since this is basically a play within a play. I'll need to do some research about some of the characters since I don't know them all, which contributed considerably in the perplexity I felt while reading this.

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## Elliot Huxtable says

Decent if plodding, saved by the rehearsal room device.

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## Utti says

Questa volta ho peccato di fiducia. Bennet per me è una garanzia, storie brevi e brillanti con un pizzico di sarcasmo o ironia: ero certa di andare sul sicuro.

Forse se avessi fatto più attenzione in libreria mi sarei accorta che, per godermelo appieno, mi mancavano dei pezzi: chi era Auden? E Britten? E Carpenter?

Mi sono persa tra attori, personaggi, nomi, voci e penso di non essere riuscita a leggere tutti i piani della storia. Nonostante tutto questo Bennet si conferma geniale nella sua capacità di dipingere personaggi e raccontare storie brevi senza annoiare mai.

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### **Aaron Thomas says**

I forgot to remember that I think Alan Bennett is a bit too self-important before I read this. Oh well. I've taken an interest in Britten and Auden and their relationship, and this was at least interesting from that angle.

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### **Carlos says**

I remember seeing this on National Theater Live, loving it but knowing that I would had to read it because there was so much to unpack. After reading it, I am similarly amazed at the way Bennett is able to playfully address such heavy subjects as the importance of the personal lives of the people that make art. Bennett's use of humor is a beautiful way to defuse the stuffy feeling that creeps in whenever Art (with a capital A) is being talked about. It was really a phenomenal play and Bennett's introduction was just marvelous at pulling back the curtain to its creation. I definitely recommend it.

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### **Lyle says**

Page 14

May: But Mr Auden's been Professor of Poetry.

Boyle: He's been professor of putting his knob in people's gobs for longer than that.

Page 20

[Auden, Wystan Hugh: City Without Walls] .“without a watch/ he would never know when/ to feel hungry or horny. ”

Page 21

Besides, nothing I ever wrote in the 30s saved one Jew from extinction or shortened the war by five seconds.

Page 23

I was never young, until I was older.

Page 27

Plays, they don't so much go into production as into intensive care.

Page 49 at 20 I tried to vex my elders. Pass 60, it's the young I hope to shock.

Page 54

There are some writers who set their sights on the Nobel Prize before they even pick up the pen. Elias Canetti is like that. And I'm afraid Thomas Mann. Never underestimate the role of the will in the artistic life.

Some writers are all will. Talent you can dispense with but not will. Will is paramount. Not joy, not the light, but grim application.

Page 68

I don't prey on them. They like me only because I... attend to them. I listen. And since many of them are musical we play together... musically. Even the ones I cannot touch I can play with. Maybe one sort of playing is a substitute for another sort of playing, but it means we can do things together and perfectly properly. There is no threat in it a duet or... playing the teacups.

Page 69

Death isn't the payment. Death is just the checkout.

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## **James says**

Reading a play is often more difficult than viewing a play. It is certainly different in many ways. Yesterday I had the opportunity to see the *The Habit of Art* By Alan Bennett as presented via a rebroadcast of National Theatre (of England) Live's 2010 broadcast.

Alan Bennett's acclaimed play *The Habit of Art*, with Richard Griffiths and Alex Jennings, was offered by the Music Box Theater cinema as part of the National Theatre's 50th anniversary celebrations.

The story of the play is simple: Benjamin Britten, sailing uncomfortably close to the wind with his new opera, *Death in Venice*, seeks advice from his former collaborator and friend, W. H. Auden. During this imagined meeting, their first for twenty-five years, they are observed and interrupted by, amongst others, their future biographer and a young man from the local bus station. The actual play as written by Alan Bennett is a bit more complicated. It is actually staged as a play within a play, thus the audience sees the actors and the stage management perform a run-through of the play, late in its preparation for its formal presentation. This was somewhat more complicated in the reading than when viewing the play. In addition to the main story of the Auden/Britten meeting the work of the actors is interrupted from time to time by discussions of changes to the script, questions of appropriate location of certain scenes and other issues that one might naturally encounter while preparing to stage a play. This aspect of the play was rather fascinating as the audience was provided a look inside the world of the theater. It reminded me a bit of the play "Noises Off" by Michael Frayn in this aspect although it was not nearly as anarchic as that wonderful comedy. The poetry of Auden is present in the character and he explains what he does succinctly and simply in the phrase "I have the habit of art." That being said, he has many other very human habits and the play highlights this very human side of Auden, as it does for Britten. The staging is exceptional and the acting superb with Richard Griffiths as Auden, Alex Jennings as Britten, and Frances de la Tour as the Stage Manager. Alan Bennett's play is as much about the theatre as it is about poetry or music. It looks at the unsettling desires of two difficult men, and at the ethics of biography. It reflects on growing old, on creativity and inspiration, and on persisting when all passion's spent: ultimately, on the habit of art

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## **Joshua Ian says**

Maybe I'm high off the rush of having just seen it, but I think this may be Bennett's masterwork. It just felt like all of his themes and stylistic streams came together. At one point Auden tells Britten that you have to write close to the bone (he used a better phrase which I can't remember) for it to be really true and good. And I feel like Bennett followed his own advice here. It felt like his was picking apart his own career, his own

neuroses, his own sentimentality, his own persona as much as he was Auden and Britten. Plus, at times, it was just plain ole fucking funny. I probably laughed out loud more at this than any of his other works. For me it just hit all the right notes.

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## **Cecily says**

This is a multi-layered story within a story, so a little like the film “Synecdoche, New York” by Charlie Kaufman.

It is set during the rehearsal of a rather weak play about a fictitious meeting between WH Auden and Benjamin Britten near the end of their lives. So the actors play actors playing other people, and they argue with the writer and stage manager about how to perform it, fiddle with props and fluff their lines etc. That makes it sound pretentious and obscure, but it's clever, funny and thought-provoking.

The play they are performing echoes “The Tempest” and hence a poem that Auden wrote about it. In the period covered, Brittan was writing an opera based on Thomas Mann’s “Death in Venice”, which, with its pederastic undertones, has uncomfortable parallels with his own life. Because he is struggling with it, he is considering reviving his earlier collaboration with Auden. Humphrey Carpenter (who once interviewed Auden and was eventually biographer of both) is also a character in it.

Because of its structure, its plot has a less obvious trajectory than his other works; in some ways it is a miscellany of musings, loosely held together in concentric contexts. But somehow Bennett makes it work.

My favourite line is, "Style is the sum of one's imperfections" (words Alan Bennett ascribes to WH Auden). I think that means I can claim to be stylish, whilst remaining modest.

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## **Candy Wood says**

This is a play about W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten (and Humphrey Carpenter, who wrote biographies of both), but it's also a play about actors and writing and plays, with plenty to think about. The title comes from Auden's repeated response to questions about whether he is working on anything now that he has retired to Oxford; if art is mere "habit," there's nothing elevated or mysterious about it. And the man himself is all too worldly, with habits ranging from annoying to disgusting. Through the framing device of actors playing the characters (rehearsing for a play whose author is also onstage), Bennett can show the unpleasant habits while suggesting that there is something more going on, not least the pleasure that playgoers will take in the finished product. The reading can be confusing because each real-life actor assumes so many different roles, but savoring Bennett's humor makes it worthwhile. I'm looking forward to seeing this one in performance.

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## **notgettingenough says**

Alan Bennett. Or, as my sister more forthrightly puts it 'Alan fucking Bennett.'

We drove to another country to see this last night, which I say as an Australian would say that. Let me use a

kids' word...it was a cool thing to do.

But I have to admit as time goes on and I age and Alan F. Bennett does too, he no longer does it for me. Maybe he never did. Maybe if people didn't act like he was important I'd like him more. To me he's like David Williamson. Entertaining, deals with safe issues that WERE controversial but aren't now. Polished, slick. But his plays will die with him.

And, yes, I've done the talking heads thing and I still think that. Sorry.

Alan fucking Bennett. I just want you to know that me and my sister (sic) are a bit sick of it. Well, no. My sister, to be perfectly frank 'can't fucking stand it, can't be in the same fucking room as it'.

Okay...those of you who know me will be wanting to ask this? Did I sleep through it? My friend Harry was impressed that I got up to double figures. That's measured in minutes, in case you are wondering. So, I have to confess that this review is based on the impressions of a sleeping person and a slightly grumpy one at that because WH Auden kept shouting all the time. I was right up the front. Why did he have to do that? I kept waking up thinking maybe something was happening, but it wasn't. Did Auden really shout like that? I can't believe a person could talk in a manner so different from his poetry. But don't you have dramatic license, AFB? Could you not have made him quietly spoken even if that weren't the case? Or was it that Benjamin Britten was quiet and therefore Auden had to shout?

Has anybody else seen this? If so, please explain what I missed. Please.

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## **Yersinia Pestis says**

The Habit of Art (2009)

Mi piace molto Bennett, adoro il teatro nel teatro, testo visto rappresentato magistralmente all'Elfo, che altro dire

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## **Cody Melcher says**

Ah, what can I say about m'lord Alan Bennett? I have a baseline of loving his work, and while this wasn't his best, that's still saying it's a fantastic play. This felt, at times, a bit like he was resting on his laurels, but what shiny laurels they are indeed. I say it was not his best, only because his best is so damned good. I know people don't like Alan Bennett, that's fine. I don't like Adam Sandler, Chris Farley, or Will Ferrell. If you're the type of person who enjoys Bennett's style of humour, his take on art, his thought processes and ideas, then this will be right up your alley. If you're not, then it won't. It's a simple concept, quite often lost on people. Alan Bennett does not write for everyone, in the same way that trees do not grow for everyone. They grow because they do, and Alan Bennett writes because he does. And oh, how beautiful it all is.

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