



## EVENTS

# Alan Bennett in conversation

### **A Woman of No Importance**

Director: David Giles  
Production Company: BBC  
Producer: Innes Lloyd  
Music: George Fenton  
Cast:  
Patricia Routledge  
BBC2 tx 19/11/1982  
UK 1982  
50 mins

### **Talking Heads 2: Waiting for the Telegram**

Director: Stuart Burge  
©: Slow Motion Limited  
Production Company: Slow Motion Limited  
Produced for: BBC  
Executive Producer: Alan Bennett  
Producer: Mark Shivas  
Associate Producer: Lorraine Goodman  
Production Co-ordinator: Sarah Atkinson  
Production Accountant: Patrick Isherwood  
Post-production Supervisor: Liz Pearson  
1st Assistant Director: William Campbell  
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr  
Screenplay: Alan Bennett  
Lighting Director: John Treays  
Camera Operator: David Fader  
Gaffer: Joe Ryan  
Graphic Design: Mina Martinez  
Editor: Sue Wyatt  
Production Designer: Stuart Walker  
Art Director: Diane Dancklefsen  
Production Buyer: John Bush  
Property Master: John Hogan  
Costume Designer: Dany Everett  
Make-up/Hair Design: Frances Hannon  
Telecine Grader: Alan Tully  
Music: George Fenton  
Sound Recordist: Tony Jackson  
Dubbing Mixer: Paul Harris  
Cast:  
Thora Hird (*Violet*)  
BBC2 tx 11/11/1998  
UK 1998  
30 mins

## **Alan Bennett**

Born 9 May 1934, Leeds, Yorkshire

All UK unless stated

### **Writer**

1964-65	<b>Not So Much a Programme, More a Way of Life</b> (TV series, BBC1 tx 13/11/64-11/4/65)
1965	<b>My Father Knew Lloyd George</b> (TV fictional documentary, d. Jack Gold, BBC1 tx 18/12/65) writer of additional material + cast as Gladstone
1965-66	<b>BBC-3</b> (TV series, BBC1 tx 2/10/65-16/4/66)
1966	<b>On the Margin</b> (TV series d. Sidney Lotterby, BBC2 tx 9/11/66) + participant
1972	<b>A Day Out</b> (TV play, d. Stephen Frears, BBC2 tx 24/12/72)

Few writers have successfully mined northern culture and specific northern speech patterns as Alan Bennett. Growing up in Leeds, he listened in on the chatter of his relatives, absorbing the patter of domestic conversation, which would emerge across a glittering and much-loved range of plays, particularly those written for television. We are delighted to welcome Alan Bennett back to BFI Southbank, to celebrate the work of one of the UK's finest writers and offering a great opportunity to explore the way northern culture is so integral to his creative process.

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It's hard to pigeonhole Alan Bennett, and correspondingly easy to undervalue his achievements. Although one of the most recognisable writers of his generation, his unassumingly owlsh persona and fondness for self-deprecation has created the impression of a lovably eccentric minor talent, whose amusingly droll plays about elderly Northern women (typically played by Thora Hird) and fustpot secretaries (Patricia Routledge) 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. His prolific output includes individual television plays, television series and cinema films, together with numerous stage works, short stories, assorted journalism and his inimitable diaries. *An Englishman Abroad* and the two *Talking Heads* series are regularly cited amongst British television's greatest achievements, and he is widely recognised as the master of the television monologue.

Furthermore, his work is generally darker, harsher and more satirically barbed than his (deeply resented) 'national treasure' status and peerless ear for the eccentricities of Yorkshire dialect and workplace gossip would suggest. Often, what looks like endearing shyness is closer to full-blown paranoia (Kafka is a character in two plays, and his shadow looms over several more), with family life either fractious or awkwardly silent, his elderly characters often facing a lonely, neglected death. His ability to get under the skin of such withdrawn people and write about them with such empathy, compassion and wry (often gallows) humour makes him not just a great writer but the definitive chronicler of a certain kind of English ordinariness, whose outwardly placid surface conceals inner turmoil as intense as anything displayed by the more emotionally articulate.

Born on 9 May 1934 in Armley, Leeds, the son of a butcher, Bennett grew up surrounded by gossiping Yorkshirewomen, which made an indelible impression on him, as did regular holidays to coastal resorts like Morecambe. His first encounter with comedy was via the radio, but he later said that he disliked popular comedians like Tommy Handley and Tommy Trinder for being 'relentlessly cheerful': more down-to-earth figures like ITMA's appropriately-named charlady Mona Lott were closer to an already melancholic outlook.

Winning an Oxford scholarship, he spent the 1950s preparing to become a medieval historian, until his increasing fondness for the stage culminated in a legendary collaboration with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller. Almost single-handedly, *Beyond the Fringe* revolutionised British satire, moving it from Goonish surrealism towards pointed, often controversial political

1975 **Sunset Across the Bay** (from TV series 'Play for Today' BBC1 tx 20/2/75; d. Stephen Frears)

1977 **A Little Outing** (from TV series 'Premiere', d. Brian Tufano, BBC2 tx 20/10/77)

1978-79 **A Visit from Miss Prothero** (from TV series 'Play of the Week', d. Stephen Frears, BBC2 tx 11/1/78)  
**Six Plays by Alan Bennett (Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf, + narrator, d. Stephen Frears, ITV tx 2/12/78; Doris and Doreen, d. Stephen Frears, ITV tx 16/12/78; The Old Crowd, d. Lindsay Anderson, ITV tx 27/1/79; Afternoon Off, + cast as Mr Petty, d. Stephen Frears, ITV tx 3/2/79; One Fine Day, d. Stephen Frears, ITV tx 17/2/79; All Day on the Sands, d. Giles Foster, ITV tx 24/2/79)**

1982 **Intensive Care** (from TV series 'Play for Today', d. Gavin Millar, BBC1 tx 9/11/82)  
**Objects of Affection (Our Winnie d. Malcolm Mowbray, BBC2 tx 12/11/82; A Woman of No Importance d. Giles Foster, BBC2 tx 19/11/82; Rolling Home d. Piers Haggard, BBC2 tx 3/12/82; Marks d. Piers Haggard, BBC2 tx 10/12/82; Say Something Happened d. Giles Foster, BBC2 tx 17/12/82)**

1983 **An Englishman Abroad** (TV film, d. John Schlesinger, BBC1 tx 29/11/83)

1986 **The Insurance Man** (TV film from series 'Screen Two', d. Richard Eyre, BBC2 tx 23/02/86)

1987 **Prick Up Your Ears** (d. Stephen Frears) screenplay

1988 **Talking Heads (A Chip in the Sugar, d. Stuart Burge, BBC1 tx 19/4/88, + cast as Graham Whittaker; A Lady of Letters, d. Giles Foster, BBC1 tx 26/4/88; Bed Among the Lentils, d. Alan Bennett, BBC1 tx 3/5/88; Soldiering On, d. Tristram Powell, BBC1 tx 10/5/88; Her Big Chance d. Giles Foster, BBC1 tx 17/5/88; A Cream Cracker Under the Settee d. Stuart Burge, BBC1 tx 24/5/88)**

1990 **Poetry in Motion (Thomas Hardy (d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 6/6/90; A.E. Housman d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 13/6/90; John Betjeman d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 20/6/90; W H Auden d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 27/6/90; Louis MacNeice, d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 4/7/90; Philip Larkin d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 11/7/90) + presenter**

1991 **102 Boulevard Haussmann** (TV film from series 'Screen Two', d. Udayan Prasad, BBC2 tx 17/2/91)  
**A Life in Death** (short from TV series 'Screenplay Firsts', BBC2 tx 28/8/91) as script adviser  
**A Question of Attribution** (TV film from series 'Screen One', d. John Schlesinger, BBC1 tx 20/10/91)

comment. Post-*Fringe*, Bennett contributed to BBC sketch shows *Not So Much a Programme*, *More a Way of Life* and *BBC-3* and played the Dormouse in Jonathan Miller's imaginative adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, before writing the sketch show *On the Margin*.

His first small-screen play, *A Day Out*, was filmed by Stephen Frears, who would direct and/or produce the majority of Bennett's television work over the next decade. It and *Sunset Across the Bay* were wistful, elegiac pieces, with Bennett drawing on his Yorkshire roots for the first time in his portraits of, respectively, a Halifax cycling club in 1911 and an elderly couple (based on his parents) retiring to Morecambe but feeling desperately homesick for Leeds.

His television breakthrough was with the LWT series of *Six Plays by Alan Bennett*. Although he would publish five of these scripts under the title *The Writer in Disguise*, there was little overt autobiography, but much delving into recurring preoccupations, be they shyness and loneliness (*Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Afternoon Off*), office minutiae (*Doris and Doreen*, *One Fine Day*), the limited appeal of Northern seaside towns (*Afternoon Off*, *All Day on the Sands*), family alienation (*Me! I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *One Fine Day*, *All Day on the Sands*) and a foreboding sense of impending doom (*Doris and Doreen*, *The Old Crowd*). The play that garnered most attention, much of it strongly negative, was *The Old Crowd*, an unusually experimental piece for mainstream British television, though much of its confrontational style came from director and uncredited co-writer Lindsay Anderson.

Bennett returned to the BBC for his second cycle of plays, given the unofficial collective title *Objects of Affection*. These showed a deepening concern for the lives of ordinary people, whether the dying fathers in *Intensive Care* and *Rolling Home*, the slow-witted *Our Winnie*, the unemployed teenager and his mother in *Marks*, or the elderly couple and naïve social worker in *Say Something Happened*. As before, one piece stood out for stylistic innovation, the monologue *A Woman of No Importance*, with Patricia Routledge inaugurating what may be Bennett's most lasting television monument.

The mid-1980s saw several one-off scripts, often about real-life figures such as Guy Burgess (*An Englishman Abroad*), Franz Kafka (*The Insurance Man*) and Joe Orton (*Prick Up Your Ears*). The last of these was Bennett's second cinema screenplay: his first, *A Private Function* (directed by Malcolm Mowbray) revisited the postwar Yorkshire of his boyhood in a story of food rationing and unlicensed pig smuggling.

But it was *Talking Heads* which lifted Bennett's television writing onto a higher plane. The title was inspired by the adage that 'talking heads' made bad television, but Thora Hird, Maggie Smith, Stephanie Cole, Julie Walters, Patricia Routledge and Bennett himself comprehensively countered it, painting unforgettable portraits of damaged lives and thwarted expectations. It took less than a decade for them to appear on the A-level syllabus, cementing their modern classic status. A second, equally acclaimed series followed in 1998.

A few months after the first *Talking Heads* series, the BBC broadcast *Dinner at Noon*, a documentary that was Bennett's most autobiographical piece to date. Although wary of the media (fuelled by horror at the way the tabloids hounded his friend Russell Harty as he lay dying in hospital), he would gradually reveal more personal information via carefully-selected diary extracts, published first in the *London Review of Books* and then collated in the surprise best-seller *Writing Home* (1994). He also made a reflection on art and portraiture (*Portrait or Bust*), a personal tribute to Westminster Abbey (*The Abbey*) and two series of short television monologues, *Telling Tales* and *Bennett on Bennett*, which collectively offered the most vivid reminiscences of his childhood and parents to date.

1991 **Julie Walters and Friends** (TV comedy sketches, d. Alasdair MacMillan, ITV tx 29/12/91) + on-screen participant.

1992 **Childhood** (from 2nd TV series **Poetry in Motion**, d. Tony Cash tx 25/12/95; + presenter

1994 **The Madness of King George** (UK/US, d. Nicholas Hytner) screenplay + based on play by AB + 2nd MP

1995 **The Abbey** (three-part TV documentary, d. Jonathan Stedall; **A Royal Peculiar**, BBC2 tx 25/12/95; **Whom Would You Like To Be Seen Dead With?**, BBC2 tx 26/12/95; **A Mirror of England**, BBC2 tx 27/12/95) + presenter

1998 **Talking Heads 2 (Miss Fozzard Finds Her Feet**, d. Patrick Garland, BBC2 tx 6/10/98; **The Hand of God**, d. Stuart Burge, BBC2 tx 13/10/98; **Playing Sandwiches**, d. Udayan Prasad, BBC2 tx 20/10/98; **The Outside Dog**, d. Gavin Millar, BBC2 tx 27/10/98; **Nights in the Garden of Spain** d. Tristram Powell, BBC2 tx 3/11/98; **Waiting for the Telegram**, d. Stuart Burge, BBC2 tx 11/11/98)

2000 **Telling Tales (A Strip of Blue and Our War** BBC2 tx 4/11/2000; **An Ideal Home** BBC2 tx 12/11/2000; **A Shy Butcher** BBC2 tx 15/11/2000; **Days Out** BBC2 tx 18/11/2000; **Proper Names** BBC2 tx 22/11/2000; **Eating Out** BBC2 tx 25/11/2000, all d. Patrick Garland; **Aunt Eveline** BBC2 tx 29/11/2000; **Unsaid Prayers** BBC2 tx 2/12/2000; **No Mean City** BBC2 tx 6/12/2000, all d. Tristram Powell) + reader

2006 **The History Boys** (UK/US, d. Nicholas Hytner) screenplay + based on play by AB

2009 **Bennett on Bennett (Mixing**, BBC 46/12/2009; **Shy**, BBC4 7/12/2009; **Writing** BBC4 8/12/2009; **Star Gazing**, BBC4 9/12/2009; **Postscript** BBC4 10/12/2009) uncredited writer + presenter

2010 **The Habit of Art** (stage d. Nicholas Hytner, screen d. Robin Lough) play by AB

2015 **The Lady in the Van** (d. Nicholas Hytner) screenplay + based on memoirs by AB

2022 **Allelujah** (d. Richard Eyre) play by AB + executive producer

**Actor/Presenter/Narrator**

1965 **Augustus Hare** (from TV series 'Famous Gossips', BBC2 tx 19/9/65) as Augustus Hare

**The Drinking Party** (from TV series 'Sunday Night', d. Jonathan Miller, BBC1 tx 14/11/65) as Eryximachus

1966 **Alice in Wonderland** (TV film, d. Jonathan Miller, BBC1 tx 28/12/66) as Mouse

Bennett's previously prolific output slowed noticeably in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He initially complained that he had been suffering from writer's block before finally admitting that he had undergone treatment for cancer in 1997. This was revealed in his 2005 collection of confessional essays, *Untold Stories* originally written in the expectation that they would appear posthumously: they also dealt frankly with his homosexuality, a family history of mental illness, and his motives for refusing a knighthood.

Throughout his career, Bennett also wrote extensively for the stage, his greatest success being *The Madness of George III* (1992). Bennett himself adapted it for the cinema, and, scenting its American backers' preference for a major star, made it a contractual condition that both original star Nigel Hawthorne and director Nicholas Hytner be retained. The slightly retitled *The Madness of King George* was a critical and commercial triumph, with Hawthorne and Bennett receiving Oscar nominations. Of the later plays, *The History Boys* (2004) was subsequently filmed, again by Hytner. *The Lady in the Van* (2015) chronicled Bennett's 15-year relationship with Miss Shepherd, who resided in a Bedford camper on his Gloucester Crescent drive. 2022 saw the release of *Allelujah*, Richard Eyre's all-star adaptation of Bennett's acclaimed play about a hospital for the elderly under threat of closure.

Michael Brooke, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

1970 **Hamlet** (US/UK, from TV series 'Hallmark Hall of Fame', d. Peter Wood, NBC tx 17/11/70) as Osric

**Every Home Should Have One** (d. Jim Clark) as counsel in court

1978 **Long Shot** (d. Maurice Hatton) as Neville's doctor

1982 **Intensive Care** (from TV series 'Play for Today', d. Gavin Millar, d. David Jones, BBC1 tx 9/11/82) as Denis Midgeley

**The Merry Wives of Windsor** (from TV series 'The BBC Television Shakespeare', d. David Jones, BBC2 tx 28/12/82) as Justice Shallow

1990 **The Secret Policeman's Other Ball** (d. Julien Temple) as participant

1983 **Difficult Customers** (from video series 'So You Want To Be a Success at Selling?', d. Charles Crichton)

1984 **A Private Function** (d. Malcolm Mowbray) screenplay + co-story with Malcolm Mowbray

**The Elastic Church** (TV documentary, d. Hugh Newsam, Channel 4 tx 2/9/84) narrator

1985 **The End of the Line** (documentary, from TV series 'First Tuesday', d. Ian McFarlane, ITV tx 4/6/85) presenter

**Dreamchild** (d. Gavin Millar) as voice of Mock Turtle

1986 **Man and Music** (series of 4 TV documentaries, d. Tony Cash, Channel 4 tx 26/1-23/2/86) presenter

**Breaking Up** (TV drama series, d. Stuart Burge, tx BBC2, 19/11-10/12/86) as Mr Posner

1987 **Fortunes of War** (7-part TV serial, d. James Cellan Jones, BBC1 tx 11/10-20/11/87) as Lord Pinkrose

**Little Dorrit** (d. Christine Edzard) as the Bishop

1988 **Dinner at Noon** (from TV series 'Byline', BBC1 tx 8/8/88) narrator

**A Chip in the Sugar** (episode of TV series 'Talking Heads', d. Stuart Burge, BBC1 tx 19/8/88) as middle-aged man

1990 **Coral Browne – Caviar to the General** (TV documentary, d. Christopher O'Hare, C4 tx 23/12/90) narrator

1991 **The Walrus and the Carpenter** (from TV series 'The Poetry Book'; Channel 4 tx 11/4/91) narrator

**Selling Hitler** (parts 4 and 5 of TV series, d. Alastair Reid, ITV tx 2/7/91 & 9/7/91) as Hugh Trevor-Roper

**The Traitor** (episode of TV series 'Ashenden', d. Christopher Morahan, BBC1 tx 24/11/91) as Grantly Caypor

1992 **Wind on the Willows** (TV documentary, BBC2 tx 24/1/92) narrator

**Looks Like a Chair, Actually It's a Lavatory** (TV documentary, d. David Jeffcock, BBC2 tx 5/7/92) presenter

1993 **Sickert's London** (TV documentary, d. Jake Auerbach, BBC2 tx 2/1/93) reader

**The Long Summer** (series of 6 TV documentaries, various directors, Channel 4 16/5-20/5/93) narrator

- 1994 **Portrait or Bust** (TV documentary, d. Jonathan Stedall, BBC2 tx 4/4/94) presenter  
**Breaking Glass** (5-part TV series, BBC1, 29/5-10/7/94) narrator
- 1995 **Thank God It's Sunday** (from TV series 'Everyman', d. Jonathan Stedall, BBC2 tx 28/5/95) introduction by AB  
**The Story Store** (TV animated series, ITV 27/7-6/12/1995) narrator
- 1996 **The Willows in Winter** (animated TV film, d. David Unwin, ITV tx 26/12/96) as voice of Mole  
**The House at Pooh Corner** (from TV series 'Jackanory', BBC1 tx 24/3/96) reader  
**In Love and War** (d. Richard Attenborough) as a porter
- 1997 **Heavenly Stories – An Easter Miscellany** (episode of TV series, BBC2, 27/3/97) presenter  
**Mouse and Mole** (d. Alison De Vere, BBC1 tx 4/4/97) as voice of Mole  
**A Dance to the Music of Time** (4-part TV drama, d. Alvin Rakoff, Channel 4 tx 9-30/10/97) as Professor Sillery
- 2002 **Christmas Under Fire** (TV documentary, BBC2 tx 24/12/02) narrator

#### About AB

- 1964 **Beyond the Fringe** (d. Duncan Wood, BBC2 tx 12/12/64) on-screen participant
- 1976 **Pleasure at Her Majesty's** (from TV series 'Omnibus', BBC1 tx 29/12/76) on-screen participant
- 1980 **Quartet** (TV review, d. Jeremy Swan, BBC2 tx 12/6/80) on-screen participant
- 1984 **Alan Bennett** (from TV series 'The South Bank Show', d. David Hinton, ITV tx 7/10/84)
- 1991 **County Arcade, Leeds** (episode of TV series 'Building Sightings', d. David Hinton, BBC2 tx 9/4/91) on-screen participant
- 2002 **Beyond the Fringe** (from TV series 'Fame Set & Match', d. Karen Blumenfeld, BBC2 tx 23/11/2002)
- 2005 **Alan Bennett** (from TV series 'The South Bank Show', d. Archie Powell, ITV tx 9/10/2005)
- 2006 **Alan Bennett** (from TV series 'A Taste of My Life', BBC2 tx 2/9/2006)
- 2016 **Alan Bennett's Diaries** (TV documentary, d. Adam Low) BBC2 tx 24/12/2016

## NORTHERN VOICES

- In Celebration**  
 Mon 27 Mar 20:30; Sun 23 Apr 18:10
- Northern Soul**  
 Thu 30 Mar 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 20:40
- The Wednesday Play: No Trams to Lime Street + Armchair Theatre: The Hard Knock**  
 Fri 31 Mar 18:20
- Of Time and the City**  
 Sat 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 18 Apr 18:20
- Saturday Night Theatre: Roll On Four O'Clock + Play for Today: Kisses at 50**  
 Tue 4 Apr 18:10
- Billy Liar**  
 Thu 6 Apr 20:30; Fri 14 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 20:50
- Letter to Brezhnev**  
 Fri 7 Apr 18:20; Thu 20 Apr 20:50
- Priest**  
 Sat 8 Apr 20:40
- The Arbor**  
 Tue 11 Apr 20:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:30
- Play for Today: Comedians**  
 Sat 15 Apr 15:15
- Play for Today: The Land of Green Ginger + Armchair Theatre: The Pity of it All**  
 Sun 16 Apr 15:20
- Rita, Sue and Bob Too**  
 Sun 16 Apr 18:30; Sun 30 Apr 12:10
- Northern Voices Forum**  
 Sun 23 Apr 15:00
- Laughter from Liverpool + intro**  
 Sat 29 Apr 14:50
- My Son the Fanatic**  
 Sun 30 Apr 16:35

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