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TheaterWeek

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The Madness of George III

at **BAM**

By Gerard
Raymond

A Brief History of Showbiz

By *Mark O'Donnell*



The Mad World of Alan Bennett

George III's playwright on the crazy King, the reigning Queen, and the bag lady at the bottom of his garden

BY GERARD RAYMOND

If you had the good fortune to see Maggie Smith deliver her monologue about the travails of being a country minister's wife and an alcoholic in the *Talking Heads* series on public television, you need no introduction to Alan Bennett. In the series of six monologues, Bennett presented empathetic, but wickedly funny, richly detailed portraits of ordinary folk, wryly observing their eccentricities and their all too human foibles. This month, audiences in Stamford, New York, Baltimore, and Boston will see another side of Bennett. The subject of his new play is King George III, the British monarch who is best remembered for losing the 13 American colonies in 1783 and for his bouts of insanity.

The Madness of George III, which is presented by the Royal National Theater, takes place during the years 1788-89, during the period when the King suffered the first manifestation of his sickness. Bennett's previous work on historical subjects include the provocatively titled *Kafka's Dick*; *An Englishman Abroad* about the English spy Guy Burgess; and *A Question of Attribution* about another English spy, Sir Anthony Blunt, which included a memorable scene with Queen Elizabeth II. The latter two plays (which were staged as a double bill titled *Single Spies* in London) were both made into television movies that were subsequently aired in the U.S.

Bennett, who turns 60 next year, first became known as a member of the wacky quartet whose satirical revue, *Beyond the Fringe*, enjoyed successful runs in the West End and on Broadway in the early



Playwright/Actor Alan Bennett

'60s. His fellow performers were Jonathan Miller (now a famous director) and the comics Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. Although Bennett still performs, often in his own work, he went on to establish his career as a playwright, a writer for television, and recently the screenwriter of movies such as the Joe Orton bio, *Prick Up Your Ears*.

Born in Leeds, the son of a butcher, Bennett worked his way up the British class system graduating from Oxford, establishing himself as one of England's celebrated playwrights. He still retains his Yorkshire accent and speaks with the rhythms of the North England eccentrics he portrays so masterfully in his work. An oft-told story about a bag lady to whom he gave refuge indicates he is no stranger to peculiarity in his own world. In 1976 he allowed the old woman to move her van into his garden and run electrical wires from

his house. Quite crazy and often abusive, she would stand at the playwright's gateway and terrorize all who came to visit him for the next 15 years. But we will get to the Old Lady in the Van presently. We started our interview talking about *The Madness of George III*.

TheaterWeek: You've always been interested in history, and you studied the subject at Oxford, but why a play about George III specifically?

He seemed to me to be a much more human figure, or I should say a more humane figure than people in England imagined him to be, and I think, certainly more than the people in this country. In America he is an ogre, really. I think it was a kind of unjustified reputation and, in fact, he has been reassessed. People believe that his attitude towards the colonies was more enlightened than most of the politicians at the time.

All the Hanoverians were regarded as rather boorish, very Germanic, whereas George III is the first English king; English in the sense that he didn't have a German accent and he didn't spend any time in Germany. He was almost a caricature of an Englishman because he was a farmer and enjoyed outdoor pursuits. Although he was very formal at court, he was very accessible, and in that sense he is a very modern figure. The term "walk about" is considered to be a somewhat contemporary development, but he actually used the term and would stop and chat to farmers and people who were mending the road.

And there is the actual incident itself about him going mad. If you were simply

going mad and recovering that would in itself be dramatic, but in his case it also precipitates a constitutional crisis and makes it likely that the government will fall. There is one group of politicians that wants him to go mad and another that wants to keep him sane. That is what makes the story a kind of counterpoint in dramatic form.

There was some criticism in London that there is too much history in the play. Did you have any concerns about putting in too many facts?

Well, not really. You are in a difficult situation because you have to furnish the audience with information before you can get any further. Shakespeare got away with putting it all in the exposition, now you have to do it in a slightly more subtle way. I've said in the introduction to the text [published by Faber and Faber] that in some ways it would have been simpler to come in ten minutes before curtain time and give the audience a lecture about politics in the eighteenth century and what made them different from politics today and then get on with the play!

You also insert a flash-forward to tell us about the toxic condition porphyria, which is the modern medical explanation for the madness of George III.

Yes, but I have altered that [in the current version of the play.] Quite a lot of doctors wrote to me about the porphyria side of it, saying it wasn't an open and shut case. Many of them expressed doubts about the theory and I have just slightly put that in. In a way that was always a difficult scene, and I am still not sure if it is right, but at the same time I don't think you can leave the finish hanging in the air. From a dramatic point of view it is much better that he wasn't straight-forwardly mad, because it enlists more sympathy for him.

Ultimately how important is it for you to be historically accurate?

I think you have got to try. I think to begin with I err too much on the side of strict accuracy. When we worked on the play in rehearsal the cast would bring things up and I'd say, "No, that's not strictly true." Then we'd talk about it, and I would dig my heels in only if it mattered. For instance, the Prince Regent was a more sympathetic figure than we presented originally, though, in the current version of the play, he probably will be more sympathetic. People in England have a pre-conception of the Prince Regent; he was al-

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Selina Cadell and Nigel Hawthorne in *The Madness of George III*.

ways played by Robert Morley in films as a fool and a fop. But I think he was more of politician than people realized.

He had the unenviable predicament of having to wait so long in the wings—

Exactly. That's why I have every sympathy with Prince Charles; it must be terrible to just wait. In any job, if you were just waiting to take over it is ridiculous, and knowing that everybody knows that you are waiting must make you feel a fool.

On that subject, what do you feel about the Royal Family?

I am more a Royalist than anything else. I have never met the Queen. I don't know, I just wouldn't be able to speak! [He giggles] Mind you, it brings in all kind of things that you have buried—the whole thing about class and your origins and you feel like a boy of sixteen again. I hate the flummery and all that, and all the people who surround the Royal Family, but I am not particularly interested in the gossip about them. I am not being pious or anything, but you get to a point where you just can't be bothered with it, that's all. But I don't think [the monarchy] can be replaced. The only alternative is to have a president, and who is going to be president? It would have to be some eminent figure, and the only eminent figure is Mrs. Thatcher, and that would be a nightmare!

At the same time, you are apparently the first person to present a living British monarch on the stage.

But in *A Question of Attribution* the Queen was actually presented as being very witty and wise. [The Family] were very sporting about it. It was on at the National where she is the patron and they

didn't try and stop it, which they could have probably done if they had wanted to. I thought that was to their credit.

Did you have any qualms when you were writing the part of Queen Elizabeth II?

Well at the time I thought, "I don't know how they are going to do this," but at the same time it was enjoyable to write, it made me laugh as I was writing it. I could see that the Queen was getting the better of the scene. I mean I was in the production [as Sir Anthony Blunt], and Prunella Scales got all the laughs. I thought to myself "I wrote this and she has all the jokes!" I began to resent that I had put myself in this position. Prunella used to look at me when passing and say "you look so bored tonight." I think the Queen may have seen the play. Somebody asked her and she is supposed to have said, "I make all these smart aleck remarks, I don't make smart aleck remarks!"

Well even if the portrait is not a hundred percent accurate, one feels it is as it should be.

I had met Princess Margaret before and I have met Prince Charles since, but in any case you don't want to know them. You really want to play with the impressions that people have of them. I put it together from what I have seen. There was a television series last year where the surveyor of the Queens pictures talked about the Royal collection and there was one scene where he showed the Queen around and she [behaved] just like [the character] in the play. I mean, she would say "Oh this is a frightful daub isn't it?" And he would

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say, "Yes, ma'am, but it is by Rembrandt." [He laughs]. All the business about opening kitchens and all that, she must have a most peculiar view of life, because that is all she does. Everybody, however distinguished they are, are all the same to her, they are her subjects.

Let's turn briefly to your adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, which enjoyed a great success at the National just prior to *The Madness of George III*. You subversively injected a homoerotic undercurrent into the story of Badger, Rat and Mole, hinting that it was about two older men vying for the affections of a young man.

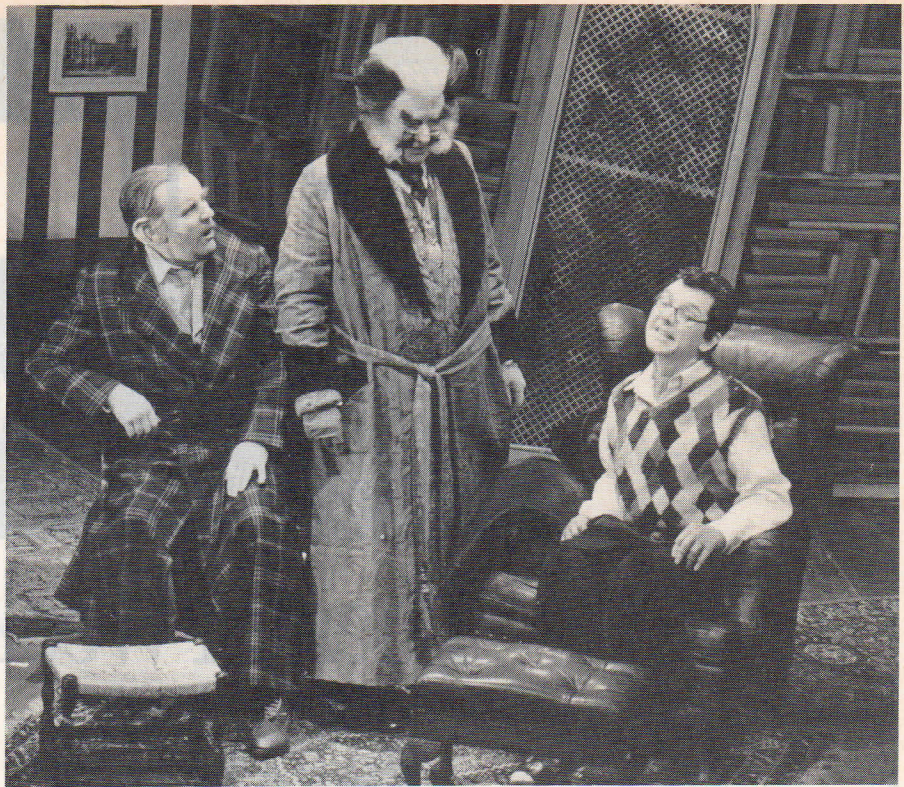
[He laughs] Just reading Grahame's life set me off on that track. He was such a crusty old bachelor before he married and then his marriage was so disastrous. Also if you read the book, [the characters] are so unmitigatedly nice that they are a bit nauseating; they have got to be a bit edgier. I think the actors were a bit nervous about doing it at first, but then they got into it. They were also quite wicked. The boy playing Mole, David Bamber, was very slow in coming to his part. I was there at a lot of rehearsals and then I went away for a week. In that week he turned into me! I mean the voice was mine [Laughs]. He toned it down after that, but he had found his character.

How is it you write about two very diverse groups, the ordinary middle-class folk of Northern England (*Talking Heads*) on the one hand, and historical figures on the other?

I don't know if a writer needs to make sense of his own work, but I think that one side is to do with my upbringing and my background and the other is to do with my education. This play, the one about Kafka, and my first stage play, *Forty Years On*, are about stuff that I have read, really the kind of work that I have moved into. And I don't think of it as range, I think of it as inconsistency, really. I'd be better sticking to one thing, but I wouldn't enjoy it.

How connected are you to your Yorkshire origins, now that you have moved to London?

People in the North of England have a very distinctive way of talking. If you could tap into it, and I think if you have been brought up there you can, the language still has got a lot of vitality, which is what interests me as a writer. You can invent language through that, whereas I find that very difficult to do, as it were, in



Allan Bennett's *The Wind in the Willows* at the National with Richard Briers, Michael Bryant, and David Bamber, whose resemblance to Bennett is not coincidental. Clive Barde



Prunella Scales as Queen Elizabeth and Alan Bennett as Anthony Blunt in *Single Spies: A Question of Tribulation in London*. John Haynes

educated English. People say I have an ear for dialogue, but I can't reproduce Cockney dialogue although I have lived in London for a long time. However, I can remember dialogue from my childhood.

You began your career as an actor and you recently performed the *Talking Heads* monologues on the West End stage. How interested are you in performing?

I like it, but I am not an actor proper. I could have been in this American tour of *George III*—they asked if I wanted to play one of the doctors—but I get so nervous. I think actors are desperate to get on the stage, they really live for an audience; I don't.

Finally, are you writing something now?

I am trying. . . it's very difficult to explain. . . I wrote a little book about an old lady. . .

Is that Miss Shepherd, who lived in a van on your property?

Oh, you know about this. I am trying to turn that story into a play. John Schlesinger [who made the film versions of *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution*] said he would like to do it as a film, but I want someone to do it on the stage—with her story being told and me (not necessarily played by myself) telling another story. That is the bit I have got to do.

Didn't she live there until she died in 1989?

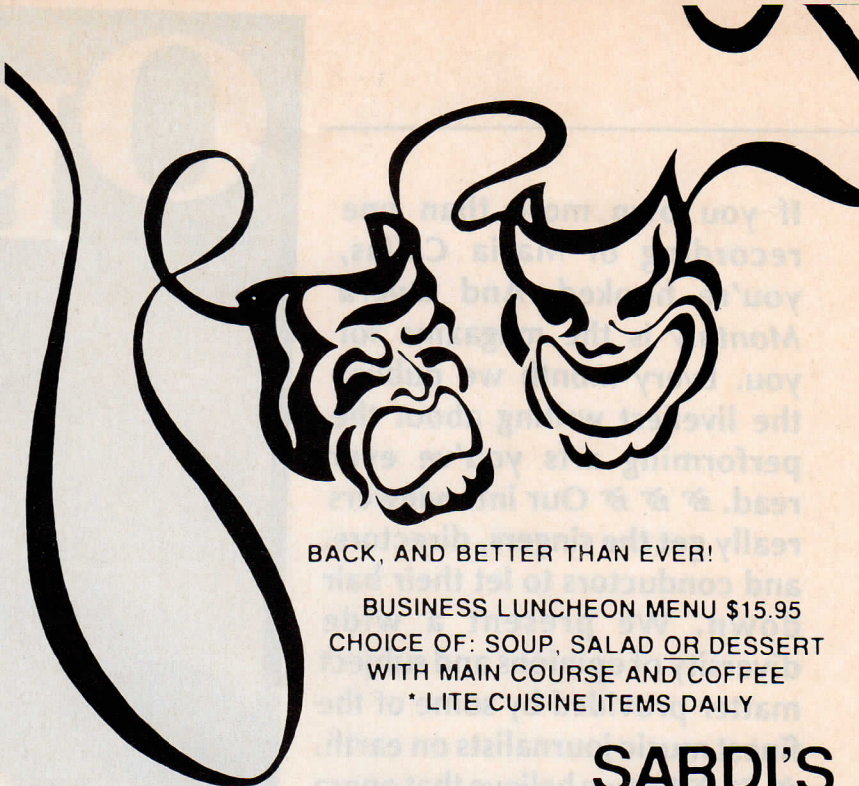
Yes, I thought she was only coming in for three months. . .

Well other people have fairies at the bottom of their garden!

[Laughs] She was no fairy, but I miss her in a way. Once she was there it was easier to have her there than to kick her out, really. It wasn't Christian charity on my part, it was just inertia.

The Madness of George III is directed by Nicholas Hytner, best known for Miss Saigon and the forthcoming revival of Carousel, and stars Tony award-winner Nigel Hawthorne as the king. The Royal National Theater production plays at the Rich Forum in Stamford, Connecticut (September 11-25), the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York (September 28-October 10), The Morris A. Mechanic Theater in Baltimore (October 12-31) and The Colonial Theatre in Boston (November 2-14).

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