

Turning a stage play into a film is like letting a bird out of a cage. Will it escape? Will it be happy merely to fly round the room, or be freaked out by the challenge of freedom? Will it head straight back to its cage?

In extreme adverse circumstances, it may just drop dead. *The History Boys*, scripted by Alan Bennett from his prizewinning National Theatre play and directed by the NT's Nicholas Hytner, does all four things at different times.

In its clumsier screen moments Bennett's witty, compassionate comedy-drama about an inspirational schoolmaster in 1980s northern England – Richard Griffiths as the roly-poly general studies teacher for whom song, poetry, movie charades and creative larking about are all part of education – seemed to me a fled bird or a deceased bird. At one point, I scribbled “Dead Parrots Society”. I remembered Robin Williams doing this perfect-teacher stuff for Disney-Touchstone and I wondered if that was Bennett and Hytner's model for cine-simplification.

At other times, *The History Boys* takes off in just the right way. When the best dialogue is allowed to play out uninterrupted, freshened by the reality of an actual schoolroom but not enslaved by the mandate to “open out”, the tale of eccentric idealism (Griffiths) martyred by the new age of clinical competitiveness and exam-oriented spin (Stephen Campbell Moore's hired Oxbridge crammer) has warmth, élan and a beaky, satirical bite. The original stage actors, including all the boys, miss no beat of wit or wing as they take their theatre performances into real space.

Yet we still sense, in the final appraising, that the bird would prefer not to have left its cage at all. Exposure to reality, even this limited, has made the play's always-suspect 1980s setting seem more so. Surely Bennett is writing about the 1950s? About his own schooldays? The frames of reference in the history classes

(Nazism, Churchill, Chamberlain) are nearly all mid-century. The movies invoked in the charade games are *Brief Encounter* and *Now, Voyager*. The 1960s and 1970s might never have happened.

Bennett could no doubt answer: if truths are truths, they are truths for all time. But then again, as the new teacher says: “What's truth got to do with anything?” Sometimes life, in film or art, is more to the point. And life depends, more than truth, on the ring of the real, the particular, even the pernicky, in time, space and allusion.

The Guardian is mile-high tosh from Tinseltown. I seemed to feel every wave on which US Coast Guard rescue swimmers Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher were tossed, doing what heroes gotta do in times of peril on the sea. The only difference was that my waves were internal: I was trying to keep my breakfast down.

I felt the first schmalz-induced queasiness at an early line of Kevin Costner's girlfriend – “It's time for me to rescue myself” – and when we reached the climactic scene of a retired Costner redonning his rubber suit to save a sea-swept protégé (Kutcher), as music swells, homilies multiply and lumps gather in on-screen throats, the corn-rich storytelling is enough to make you look about for a brown paper bag.

Bad enough to be good? Almost. Yet the action scenes are good

FINANCIAL TIMES October 12 2006



NIGEL ANDREWS
FILM

enough to be good. The ocean is a giant expanse of boiling water into which the winched heroes descend like human teabags. The same rule applies in sea rescue as in tea-making. Five minutes and they must come out: otherwise the helicopter will ditch, the audience will gasp, the music will re-swell and we will have a further session of manly tears for a character written out of the script.

No wonder so many seasoned actors look dazed (John Heard, Clancy Brown) – they fear the excising pen – although Costner could do this role sleepwalking and is no less charismatic in the scenes where he seems to do just that.

Language, Flaubert said, is a cracked kettle on which we tap

tunes to make a bear dance. If that is so, *A Pervert's Guide to Cinema* is a unique and wonderful combination: a cracked pot deploying a cracked kettle. This 2½-hour illustrated lecture on the cinema is written and delivered by a bearded Slovenian philosopher-critic whom you could mistake for a madman (or a dancing bear), deploying an accent so crackpot you could send it to a kitchenware repair shop.

His name is Slavoj Zizek. He has written books and articles for niche cinephiles. Here he descants on Chaplin, Hitchcock, Lang, Tarkovsky, Lynch and others, arguing that cinema is all about the libido (by which he doesn't just mean sex), that it manifests psychic forces that secretly, or not so secretly, control our lives, and that it is a reality beyond, and possibly better than, reality.

As a film critic, am I expected to disagree? Speaking as if from the very films he talks about – now sitting in a replica of Norman Bates's fruit cellar, now in a back-projected boat similar to that in *The Birds* – he is like an ancient mariner possessed by moviemania. He can sometimes be carried away by an idea from the Lacanian ocean. (“Are we basically not peering into a toilet bowl... watching shit as it were?”) But you forgive the follies for the *coups de foudre*. His belief that the coming of sound was an Edenic fall, both corrupting cinema and enabling it to grow up,

is brilliantly argued and illustrated. Who, before Zizek, saw such depth in Chaplin's *City Lights* or such design in the mazy mysteries of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*?

Zizek might even find something to say, which is more than I plan to do, about *Open Season* and *Shut Up (Tais-toi)*: two antiphonal titles denoting respectively a digimation feature about woodland animals – a subgenre now threatening to become a global virus – and a French pratfall exercise starring Gérard Depardieu. The silly season is still with us. Ne'er shed a doubt till October's out.

Zizek is right. Cinema can be a toilet bowl. But at least *Idlewild* is finest porcelain scrubbed to a gleam, allowing a disposable script to take the scenic route to oblivion. A jazz-age musical, whose Afro-American characters dance, sing and strut in high-coloured settings photographed by Pascal Rabaud (who bestowed the Edward Hopperish glow on Wim Wenders's *The End of Violence*), its tale of ill-starred love and nightclub feuding has the dramatic oomph of a set of *Cotton Club* out-takes. But the *look* is sensational. Not just the cinematography but also the sets and costumes. I kept myself awake by counting the knockout suits and ties. Did the actors get to keep them? If so, can I be in the next musical melodrama set in period Harlem?

THE HISTORY BOYS (15)

★★★★☆
Nicholas Hytner

THE GUARDIAN (12A)

★★★★☆
Andrew Davis

A PERVERT'S GUIDE TO CINEMA (no certificate)

★★★★★
Sophie Fiennes

IDLEWILD (15)

★★★★☆
Bryan Barber