

HISTORY

never a simple story



JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

Artists Rep's associate artistic director Jon Kretzu, here with a stack of history books, will lead his troupe's rendition of "The History Boys." The play uses staff rivalries and the angst of adolescence to ask questions about history and how to teach it.

New play, educators examine complexities of teaching about past

By BRETT OPPEGAARD
for The Columbian

Herbert Butterfield, a Cambridge University professor, once described history as the study of "one bloody thing after another."

A fuller vision of it, though, extends well beyond a litany of wars, dates and numbers to encompass everything that every person has ever done.

That can't all be taught. Alan Bennett's acclaimed new play "The History Boys" examines what is and why.

This piece, which won six Tony awards in 2006, including best play, will get its regional premiere this weekend at Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre.

It's an intense study of the many facets of history education as well as the gray areas of teacher-student relationships.

"This play is about so many things, just like history is about so many things," the play's director, Jon Kretzu, said. "But it constantly expands the parallels of how history keeps repeating itself and how history is one random event after another tied together in an obscure and bizarre fashion."

"It's absolutely fascinating to me that almost no one seems to learn from anyone's past mistakes," he added. "How abuse of power leads to dictatorships that rise and fall spectacularly, taking millions of lives with them. Yet they rise over and over again. ... No one ever pays attention. So what's the point?"

Taking cues from the play's exploration of his-

tory, The Columbian asked a trio of local history educators to talk about the nature of their field and how they believe an understanding of history is influencing our lives today. Here are excerpts from those interviews, which have been edited for space and clarity:

Laurie Mercier

Associate chair of the history department at Washington State University Vancouver.

What's complicating history education today?

In general, I think there are lots of problems. In terms of K-12 education, not enough is taught. The emphasis is on testing. Teachers are under pressure to teach to the test and also to teach other subjects, especially before middle school. ... It's at our peril as a community and a nation not to be more familiar with the complexities of the past and the many different stories of the past. There isn't just one story about any particular subject. Any aspect of the past is a very multifaceted story. With the decreasing emphasis on teaching history, students don't get the variety of stories and therefore understand little about America's past. And the world.

Why isn't there a public cry for more on this subject?

What makes history problematic is the political nature of it. In the public mind, it's often neces-

HISTORY, Page D9

If you go

■ **What:** Artists Repertory Theatre presents "The History Boys" by Alan Bennett.

■ **When:** Friday through June 8, with performances at 7:30 nightly, except Mondays, plus additional shows at 2 p.m. Sundays and two 11 a.m. matinées, May 21 and 28.

■ **Where:** Portland's Artists Repertory Theatre, 1515 S.W. Alder St.

■ **Cost:** \$20 to \$47.

■ **Information:** 503-241-1278 or www.artistsrep.org.



Artists Repertory Theatre will open the regional premiere Friday of "The History Boys," which won six Tony awards in 2006, tying a nearly 50-year-old record for a nonmusical play, originally set by Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" in 1949.

OWEN CAREY/Artists Repertory Theatre

History:

From Page D1

sary to be celebratory. History often has been the tool of nationalism. Celebration is great, but looking critically at the past and looking at the nation's role in the past is also critical. History is about truth telling and trying to face up to the past.

How do you get others engaged in that idea?

We try to get students to become their own historians. We give them the tools to analyze primary sources and examine newspapers or diaries or oral history or photographs, anything that provides clues about the past. We teach students how to use those materials, how to make sense of them, how to critically think about the source itself and how to make sense of all of these different types of sources and come to some conclusions about what happened. I see my job as much teaching those skills as I do teaching particular content about the past.

What's a historically based incident, widely believed to be true, that you know is false?

Feminist demonstrators at the 1968 Miss America Pageant were called 'bra-burning' feminists. They did put oppressive items in a trash can, including bras and high heels. But they didn't burn them, and they were just one wing of the feminist movement. As so often happens, that moment came to symbolize something so much larger than it was, and that label — 'bra-burning feminists' — stuck. It was intended to be a negative portrayal, and then it became the only major label applied to the entire movement. So then people were hesitant to become involved or associated with it.

Van Forsyth

Chairman of the history department at Clark College

What's your approach to teaching history?

I really like to find what the major myths are, and just present (students) with the data, let them see it and decide. Was the U.S.S. Maddox really attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin (near Vietnam in 1964)? Was that really a crisis? We now know that (President Lyndon) Johnson made up a good portion of that whole event.

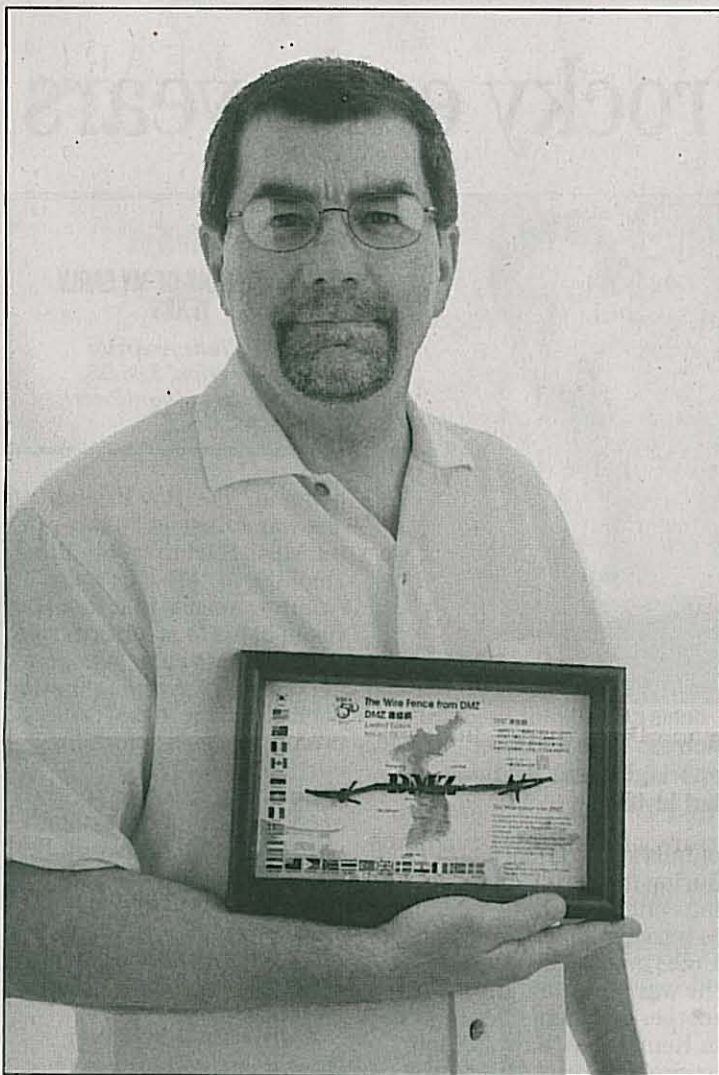
Is a lack of history education the key enabler for those in power?

The American public has the worst voting turnout among Western democracies. How much do (Americans) really know about what candidates are saying? How much are they really watching the debates? I don't think it's really about history. I read a book entitled, 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers,' which examines the past empires, such as Greece and Rome, Great Britain and France. When did Roman citizens realize that they were no longer a republic and had become an empire? I'm wondering if it's a time period like now in America, a decadent period, when there's a disconnect between citizens and those who make decisions, particularly in the federal government. A time when people are happy to keep their jobs, as long as we can



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Laurie Mercier, associate chair of the history department at Washington State University Vancouver, shows a range of the artifacts of her craft, from an atlas of the Pacific Northwest to a folk art smokestack, an example of how ordinary people fashion imagery in celebration of their accomplishments.



N. SCOTT TRIMBLE/The Columbian

Van Forsyth, chairman of the history department at Clark College, exhibits a piece of evidence from the past that's not so glorious: a link of barbed wire from the demilitarized zone of the Korean war.

get to the Hollywood Video on Friday nights for some DVD escapism.

So we don't seem to be paying attention?

Most historians would agree, it's our responsibility to inform. If you want to let things be done again, if you don't want to question 'weapons of mass destruction' (claims), what presidents say, that's fine. ... We're just

letting things happen. When something does happen, our response is reactionary. We're not being proactive. How about the mass of people help form the agenda, not elected officials?

How is history education changing?

The catch phrase is collaborative learning, in which the teacher acts as a facilitator to clarify things. ... Many people will say that history was not their favorite subject in school. It wasn't presented in a way that was relevant to them. I think we are correcting some of this by making the study of the past relevant to the present. When we have 70 percent of the population that doesn't support this (Iraq) war, why don't we see the same kind of activism that we saw in the '60s and '70s? We need to have something at stake for (students). I think it's my job to show them the patterns and do that in an empirical way.

How would history education then mobilize those masses?

I really try to be as objective as possible. I'm trying to let people know what really happened, by showing them the evidence. Then saying, "What do you want to do about it?"

Patti McMaster

History teacher at Evergreen High School in Vancouver

Is there any particular topic that you think doesn't get stressed enough today?

The U.S. Constitution. I always spend more time on that unit than what normally would be allotted. It's supposed to take two weeks, and I usually spend three.

What gets covered too much?

Lewis and Clark. Students spend time on that in fourth grade, fifth grade and eighth grade. Sometimes, I feel we can be counterproductive when we're just continually teaching the same thing. We have to look at moving forward and getting the whole picture, not just a partial picture.

How does that hurt history education?

Sometimes, we run out of time at the end, and we never get all of the way to the present. The present continues to grow, but we still seem so focused on the previous rather than the current. For a lot of kids, it's more relevant to look at the modern things. They can certainly relate to that a little better. At the same time, that's hard to do when they don't understand where it all comes from.

How would you change the way history is taught?

We all tend to start at the beginning and go to the end. Instead of a chronological approach, I prefer a more thematic approach. ... I try to make it fun. And interesting. I always try to have some sort of hands-on activity with most of the major units.

What's the biggest challenge to the field?

When you don't make contemporary ties to history, you lose the kids. They aren't terribly interested in learning about a bunch of old dead people. I'm constantly trying to make connections between something that happened then versus today. I truly believe that (information gap) is why so many people hate history and think, "Why do I need to know this? It's never going to help me."