

CLASS ACT

'History Boys' proves the play is still the thing

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Playwright Alan Bennett's "The History Boys" has made history all over the world. The drama — a story of a group of young men studying for their college exams — has taken that subject, mixed in songs, a sexually suspect character, a debate on education and a cast filled with talented unknowns and turned it into a genuine sensation. It was a hit in London's West End, traveled the world, then came triumphantly to Broadway, winning six Tony Awards (including Best Play) last spring.

In an amazingly quick transition to the screen, the movie version opens Tuesday, with the complete theatrical cast intact, including acclaimed actors Frances de la Tour and Richard Griffiths. For director Nicholas Hytner, it's all stunning confirmation that the stage remains crucial.

"I do think theater still has a central role" in the arts, says Hytner. In the U.K., he says, "It seems to be regularly part of

the national conversation. It's reported as news. [Discussions of] plays migrate to the editorial pages and the news pages."

When Hytner isn't directing theater hits like "The History Boys," "Miss Saigon" and "The Madness of King George" or movies ("The Crucible"), he's the head of England's National Theatre. There, Hytner launched a program of plays each season offered at rock-bottom prices (less than \$20 for every ticket), which has probably been one inspiration behind similar moves in New York at the Signature Theater Company, the Public Theater and elsewhere.

Perhaps subsidized cheap seats will help theater in America come back toward the center of our culture, he says, the way it was in the 1950s, when plays tackled the big issues and songs from musicals flew onto the pop charts. For young actor Samuel Barnett — who plays sweetly sensitive student Posner — theater in New York already has something London doesn't: A sense of fraternity.



SCHOOL TIES The "History Boys" cast performed it in London and on Broadway.

"To me, you have a theater community here and we don't in London," says Barnett, who also starred last year in the film "Mrs. Henderson Presents," a virtual valentine to stage life. "Our West End community is not a community really — it's a very disparate bunch of people doing plays and musicals. I've never experienced it like in New York, where everyone knows each other. I loved that."

Barnett admits that getting caught up in all the stage-awards frenzy surrounding "The History Boys" earlier this year wasn't always healthy. But if the new movie generates Oscar talk this fall, he says he'll have learned a lesson.

"If you get a nomination, that's the thing to celebrate," says Barnett. "Leave the rest up to whomever, because it's out of your hands." ♦