AN EVENING WITH ALAN BENNETT – IN CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL STEWART AND SCRIPT YORKSHIRE – FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2010 – CARRIAGEWORKS THEATRE, LEEDS

MS - As one of the country's most famous living writers he does not need an introduction from me so I will resist that particular convention this time, but I will just say something which I think illustrates how well loved he is as a writer and as a cultural figure.

I was in the pub last night and I was talking to a man I hardly know at all at the bar and he asked, 'What are you doing tomorrow?' and I said, 'I'm meeting Alan Bennett' with a Cheshire Cat grin on my face and he said, 'Are you, really?' He's a HGV driver this bloke. He said, 'Well tell him this. I've never read a book in my life. But when I'm driving and I'm stressed out I've a tape in my car of Winnie the Pooh and I put it on and Alan Bennett's voice calms me down.' And he said, 'You will tell him that won't you?' So I've told you Alan...

I'm delighted and thrilled that Alan is here tonight so please can we give him a big warm welcome?

AB - About my voice calming things down...George Melly who used to live in the same street as I did in London, his Grandchildren, they always put it on if they were at all fractious, but it only lasted a certain length of time until they got to a certain age. What happened was the boy was getting very cross and they put me on and the boy said, 'Oh, not him again!' But I'm glad it works with lorry drivers!

I'm just going to read a thing I wrote and did on radio called 'A Strip of Blue' which is about my childhood in Armley and about names. And then if you could get some questions ready...

Alan Bennett reads 'A Strip of Blue' from 'Telling Tales'(which features references to names).

MS – Someone was saying to me the other day that it wouldn't be long before lollypop men were called Darren. Chilling thought! Thank you very much for that Alan.

I first came across your writing, well I suppose in dribs and drabs, the main thing that had come out in 1988, I was 17 and it was the first series of Talking Heads and what struck me then and what strikes me now, even all those years after is how well you write for women and lots of male writers don't do that. I don't think it's the same for female writers, I think female writers often write well for women and men. I wondered if you agree with that first of all and if so why do you think that is?

AB - Well I do agree with it. I think it's because, without being glib about it, the women did much more of the talking when I was young. We saw much more of my Mother's family than we did of my Dad's and my Mother had two sisters and while my mother didn't talk a lot her two sisters did, they could talk a hind leg off a donkey, they never stopped talking! My dad was a man of few words and he would listen to them talking and my aunties, particularly my aunty Kathleen, would come up after work and tell us everything that had happened in great detail. My aunty Kathleen was the manageress of the shoe shop on Commercial Street and

she'd tell us everything that had happened during the day. And when she'd gone my dad would say, 'I wouldn't care, but you're no further along when she's done!'

I should think a lot of that went in at a very basic subconscious level, as I think it does as a child, you know you sit under the table listening to people talking and you don't know what they're talking about but somehow it gets laid down as a seed in your mind. And the first 10 - 12 years of your life are vital for that.

I mean, I've lived a lot of my life in Camden Town where the language is quite vivid because it's on the edge of a street market but I couldn't reproduce the language of the stall holders because your mind just ceases to absorb it as you get older. So that's why I can write certainly about ordinary women really and I can write the Queen, I can write her dialogue because I'm familiar with what she's like from hearing her on the radio and telly but men I find I have to think much more and they're probably just in drag really...

MS – I think that the function of speech, for men and women, was very different, demarcated. Do you think this is still the case?

AB – I don't know really. It's not in the circles which I move in. I think the men talk more than the women now. Mind you one of those is Jonathan Miller and he talks all the time! I don't know but it always struck me that in the circle that I move in anyway, that the women weren't allowed to make jokes in the way that the men are. Women always seem to be naturally more funny than men but the men make all the jokes.

MS – I think that's still true, isn't it, to a degree? But blokes in the last 20 or 30 years have become chattier.

AB – I come up on the train, I come up every Friday and men just go on all the time on their phones and there's nothing to it most of the time and far worse than my aunties ever were.

MS – another question I wanted to ask you as well which is I suppose is to do with your recent work. It's a large body of work but the characters have been, to a degree, defined by their discomfort at sexual intimacy. More recently in your work, the History Boys and your current play, Habit of Art, there seems to be a change, the characters are much more comfortable in their own skin and with their sexuality. Is that true?

AB - Yes it is true but it's partly the times, things are much less bottled up now then they used to be. But it's also to do with the accident of being diagnosed with cancer in 1997 and at that time I had started with an autobiography and I went on with it because it was easier to write than writing plays and I thought that I'd never see it published. I thought it would be published but I didn't think I'd be around to see it! So I suppose I was much franker than I would have been knowing that it would have been published in my lifetime. So I was much less protective of myself. Then of course I did survive and I was around when the book was published and after that there was no reason to be in the least bit cagey. It's not the sexual side of it that interests me really it's the sense of the character hiding themselves.

In ‘A Question of Attribution’ with Anthony Blunt there’s nothing about sex in it but it’s pervaded by the fact that he’s both a spy and he’s also homosexual and he’s with the Queen and so he has to mind his Ps and Qs and it interests me all that, the sort of evasion of it.

MS – Do you think it’s a problem that we are in a more permissive age? As writers do you think it’s harder for us to dramatise things because there are fewer secrets?

AB – I think that in lots of ways it’s harder to write now than it used to be. Before that, going right back to when censorship was abolished, stage censorship in 1967 I think, previous to that, when you were writing or when you were watching a play, you knew when the author was coming up to the dividing line. You knew when he or she, there weren’t many women playwrights then, you knew that they were coming up to a point where the censor would intervene or would have intervened and of course it did wonders for the drama because it made it much more tense.

Edward Bond’s plays were all characterised by this sense of danger which came as much from the fact that he got away with it as with the language itself. And of course when censorship was abolished and you could say more or less what you wanted I think that your armory was decreased and it was harder to create tension on stage. My language is quite decorous really. I mean somebody, like in the latest play by Jez Butterworth, Jerusalem, he gets through in the first 10 minutes more fucks than I go through in whole of my, you know, four or five plays because that’s the times. I’m not used to talking like that or writing like that so I’m rather old fashioned in that way but it’s not that I disapprove of it; it just doesn’t come naturally to me.

MS – It’s been 50 years that you’ve been involved in writing for stage, film, tv, radio, the whole thing really and that’s one change, obviously, the change in censorship laws, the change in a more permissive society etcetera, the change in language, the frankness with which we can speak now, the openness with which we can speak. In those 50 years what do you think are the major changes then, if you were to be a writer starting out now, what do you think the differences would be? And the good things about it?

AB – I think probably if I knew what I know now, as it were, I would try to ignore it all and do what writers always have to do. And that is to be faithful to themselves and to be true to say what you want to say, what you feel you’ve got to say and what you think is both personal to you and which, if you can say it right, then links you with other people because it’s also personal to them. That’s not always easy to do. I’m always pleased if I have achieved that. In the History Boys Hectare says to Pozner, the more curious of the pupils, that the best moments in reading are when you read something and you find that you’re reading someone who you don’t know who may be long dead. And they say something that you yourself have thought and it’s as if their hand has come out and taken yours and that’s what you’ve got to try and do, always really, but how you do it? I’m no nearer knowing now than when I started.

MS – You came into television writing through the single play outlet which doesn’t really exist anymore. And a lot of our members are aspiring TV writers and it seems the only route

now is through the vehicle of soap opera and I wonder what you think about that? Is that something detrimental?

AB - I think it's sad that single plays don't get done though they get done probably easier in the theatre than on the television I think. There are more small theatrical outlets than there ever were when I started writing and more, for instance, as they were, fringe theatres in Edinburgh but at the same time there are so much more that it seems to get harder and harder. I mean, I can't remember, but I think there are two thousand shows on in Edinburgh, whereas when we started there were a dozen. So it's harder in that way but I think things like Coronation Street, well, I don't watch it really now although I've been asked to be in it.

MS - Did you decline the offer?

AB - Yes, I did. They told me the plotline, I couldn't understand it!

I think they're truer to life probably than they used to be, I mean Ena Sharples, it was funny and all that when it started but it was slightly 'ee by gum', you know, and caricatured of the North whereas I think it's probably truer to life as it's lived now though it sometimes gets a bit over dramatic. Emmerdale as well, Emmerdale more so I think.

MS - It still has that element of caricature though.

AB – Oh yes, I can't bear it. Actually though they are better at it than they used to be, they're better at doing the accent. But it's still not great when you occasionally get an actor who can't do a northern accent and says things like, 'I'm going down pub'. They can't see or hear that there's another sound in between it - 'going down't pub' and sometimes in the early days when I'd cast somebody like that you'd be a bit dismayed but I think if you're not from the North you don't hear it because its not so obvious, you can't tell.

MS – You've written for TV, film, stage, radio and also prose. Do you have a preference?

AB – I always think theatre's hardest but I don't write television now partly because my producer who did everything I did, he died, and it's so much more difficult now to get things on, whoever you are really, if I rang up and said, 'I've got a new play' they would say, 'What other plays have you written?' and you'd have to explain yourself! It's partly because people are so young. I always think if you can write dialogue then you can write television, because television doesn't need plot in the way that theatre does. With Talking Heads, although they were told stories, if you got close enough into the characters you could just let them talk and you know, that gave them life, people were just interested in being so close to somebody and hearing them talk. Whereas the theatre you need a framework really and I've always found that very very hard to do and I suppose because I find it hard I always think that that's what I think I should do.

MS – That's interesting because I always thought of Talking Heads as your way of subverting TV in a way because there's that saying that 'one thing you should never do is have a talking head' and you were saying 'I'll show you how you do it' kind of thing.

AB - No, no, that's true, it was. It was and I was told to begin with. they were very much despised at the BBC and we made them and they hung about and didn't find a slot. They kept trying to foist us off with, I think they said, 'Well we've got a very good slot for you after the third repeat of Reginald Perrin and we thought this was a bit shoddy and then [?] took over as Head of the BBC and he liked them and he's always had a lot of time for my stuff and I've always had a soft spot for him.

It was a way of saying that talking heads isn't a synonym for boredom. The reason why I think talking heads was a synonym for boredom was because they believed that every so often you have to widen it out and have a wide shot or a tracking shot, whereas actually to linger on somebody's face and to stay there, that seems to be the most interesting thing you can do.

MS – It's become very restless, the medium, hasn't it? You can't have a reporter just standing there he has to be walking down the street or...

AB – It's partly the camera men and the directors getting bored and they want to do something. They don't always realise that it's self-indulgent if it doesn't tell the story.

MS – I think you're being slightly disingenuous about the idea of Talking Heads not being... I know they're character driven rather than plot driven but they're very well worked out plots I think.

AB – Oh, yes, I tried. But the plots very often came from the character, as they should, but they don't often with me, but with Talking Heads they often came from me getting into the character and then the character deciding to do something.

MS – They're all about revealing secrets aren't they really? The character knows something we don't and we find out.

AB – yes, that's right they are. Bed Amongst The Lentils, the Vicar's Wife one, in which Maggie Smith played the Vicar's Wife; I didn't know when I started writing that she was an alcoholic. And then I sent her into the centre of Leeds on a Sunday night to the only off-licence that was open but I didn't know she was going to sleep with the grocer who kept the off-license.

But that's the way it should happen but it doesn't often happen like that with me. I generally have things mapped out in my head. But the characters did take charge a bit.

MS – With the one with the outside dog – Julie Walters – did you know that she knew he was a killer? Is that something you knew from the outset?

AB – Yes, I did. It's slightly based on the character of the Yorkshire Ripper's wife, it's a bit like that character.

MS – She always maintained that she didn't know didn't she?

AB – Yes, and she was very careful in the house, very very tidy, and very intriguing dramatically. But it's quite ambiguous, the ending's quite ambiguous. And I find it quite troubling, we didn't do it properly really. It's too... a French word would be 'movemente', it's too busy. Sometimes Directors will try to compensate for the fact that there's only one person talking by making it move about a lot to deceive the audience and I think that's happened a bit with that and it's a shame because it's Julia Walters and she's always wonderful. But maybe I saw that and nobody else did...

MS – Well I think generally this series resisted that impulse didn't it? It was very brave to keep the camera there.

AB – But I can see how, if you say to a director 'I don't want it to move' that can be not insulting quite but it seems to devalue their talents.

MS – Like you don't need them to be there...

MS – Well, I think we should open the questions out to the audience.

Question - Picking up on something you said earlier about knowing you were going to be a writer – when and how did you know you were going to be a writer?

AB – The way I started off writing was when I was at Oxford, doing odd sketches and skits in the Uni common room. I didn't do anything in the University at large. I was in a room half the size of this and we had concerts at the end of every term and they were quite drunken affairs and they didn't make you nervous about performing because everyone was well disposed.

So I started writing odd things for that but I remember I didn't think of myself as a writer, I felt like 'I can write what I perform' and so one of the things I wrote was the parody of an Anglican sermon which I later on did in 'Beyond the Fringe' when we went up to Edinburgh. We were in 'Beyond the Fringe' for three and a half years, but even then I didn't think of myself as a writer because I couldn't write anything other than what I was doing on the stage.

We went to New York with it and I started to write in New York a play about education, about the school and it got nowhere at all and I totally forgot this play. When I finished the History Boys I suddenly remembered I tried to do this fifty years before and I'd only just now managed to do it.

But I think at the end of Beyond the Fringe, Peter and Dudley went off to do their thing and Jonathan Miller went and I really had nothing and I then I went on writing sketches but I started stock-piling them. In the process of stock-piling I then saw how they could be made into a play which was really half a review and half a play which became my first play, Forty Years On, and I was very lucky because it did well but I think that it wasn't until I had done at least two stage plays or more that I started to think I was a writer. And it wasn't modesty it was just that it didn't feel like that to me and even now if I have to put it down I find that I feel like I'm asserting something rather than describing it really.

MS - Were you in the shadow of other writers at that stage? Were you looking to be like a particular writer?

AB – Well, yes. I think what made me think that I wasn't a writer was that I never knew if anything was going to come out of it. But that is the thing about it, that's why it's an art and not a craft. If it's a craft then you start doing it, say making a chair or whatever, and you know that you will be able, after a certain time, to do it, to come up with a reasonable chair. But if it's an art you don't know what's going to happen at the end, you may come up with a play, you may just be wasting your time. You just don't know!

MS – With that sort of job, you were performing at the same time as you were writing, were you tempted to perform? Were you stuck between not knowing which to do?

AB – No, I wasn't desperate to perform. I think you have to be driven to be an actor, you have to be driven to be a writer but in a different way. But I think it was only really when... I didn't write any prose until very late and I think that made me think 'this is proper writing'.

Question – Nostalgia is very important right at the beginning of Forty Years On. I should confess as a teaching historian that I've made use of your trial of Neville Chamberlain every year with students. I wondered if a part of your feeling about talking heads, was because of one great model of a talking head on television around that time in the shape of A J P Taylor – which takes me back to the question about Forty Years On and the trial of Neville Chamberlain – what was it that gave you the bottle to raise the impish questions that the opening cameo of Forty Years On features?

AB – I did go to A J P Taylor's lectures and of course I saw him on television. I've never actually associated with that but it might have something to do with it. Nowadays he would be called a 'contrarian' and there wasn't such a word then. But I think the notion of raising outrageous questions like that, I'd got that from somewhere, but whether it was from him I don't know. It was never a bit that anybody liked really. Geilgud didn't like doing it and I remember one night R A Butler came who was the home secretary at that time. He'd been an appeaser in the first year of the war and so he disliked it much more and wrote to Geilgud and Geilgud said 'I've had this terrible letter'... He didn't like doing it himself. What he liked was the unadulterated nostalgia of the end of the first act which is about going back to an Edwardian country house and all that. He loved that.

Question – So much of what you read was playing with names and nostalgia. The names in that particular sequence just now are so evocative and your account of it tells just how it was. Just how significant for characterisation and in evoking nostalgia have names been?

AB – They are important and I often spend a day or so trying to think of a character and a name for a character where as other times they come suddenly to you. In, for instance, The Habit of Art the stage manager is called Kay and Kay has always seemed to me to be the name of somebody who is pretty business like. But of course if there are other people who have known other Kays it won't seem like that to them. But once you've hit on it and know you've got it right, that's fine, but very often you don't quite get it right. I always have

difficulty thinking of the name of the new master in the History Boys, Irwin, because somehow it doesn't say what he's about really.

MS – Hector does, doesn't it!

AB – Yes, Hector is absolutely right but Irwin doesn't say anything really. So it is, I've always found it difficult.

Question – Leeds is so vivid in your writing – I just wondered what is your relationship with Leeds in 2010? How do you see it now?

AB – I come through it every other Friday. We don't see much of it because we go from the Station to La Grillade, which is the restaurant on Wellington Street and we go there which is lovely. People often stop and talk to me. I like Leeds in that way, people have no inhibitions. You don't get that in London in quite the same way. In Camden Town people do speak... If I'm meeting my partner off the train people often come and sit next to me and ask me what I'm doing there. And I like all that. I can just about cope with that sort of level.

Question – I just wondered, those of us, mine was a different Northern city and there is almost a sense grief and for me loss in the change... mine was Manchester. I just wondered if you feel any of that?

AB – Oh yes, absolutely! Things infuriate me in Leeds. I still remember the buildings that stood where the buildings stand now. And I can remember the buildings before the buildings! They knock them down so quickly. It breaks your heart! Park Row was a wonderful street which I remember and things which they would never think of knocking down now. My own school which was a decent building, Leeds Modern School, which became Lawnswood School, was a product of the Leeds City Architecture department in the thirties and it was one of the leading departments in the country. The facade of that should have been kept. They could have built behind it. And if it had happened another twenty years down the line and it probably would've survived. But there are so many things that have saddened me about it but on the other hand now I think 'Oh it makes no difference now' I can't be bothered with it. It's the people... the people are what counts.

Question – A few weeks ago I watched a masterclass with Daniel Barrimore and he asked the pianist who was playing 'What do you imagine your audience is thinking at this point?' What do you imagine your audience is thinking? Do you think like that?

AB – Yes, but very often it's when I'm at the point where I think 'Oh, people won't like this' and when I'm needing a bit of courage really. Or 'do I dare say this?' I'm getting more courageous, foolhardy probably as I get older. It's fear of making a fool of yourself really. That's always there.

MS – Do you have an ideal audience in mind when you're writing then? Is that just you? Are you writing for yourself?

AB – No. The latest thing I've written is something that's in the most recent edition of the London Review of Books. It's a short story and it's become slightly pornographic. And again, it was partly something that happened as I was writing. I didn't start off to write it like that but then the character took charge and this is what happened. And that made me very nervous and I sat on it for a long time before I gave it to the paper and they were a bit dubious about it as well! With me it was an additional level in the sense of thinking 'It's not what people will expect you to write', or 'What will they expect me to write?' and that's dangerous I think. One shouldn't be constrained in that way.

MS – Because there is a very definite sense of you in the public's mind, of what kind of writer you are...

AB – Yes, and they want you to do what you've done before and of course that's death really. You should try to do something...not *try* and do something...but if there's something else that you want to do you should do it and not be bothered by what people think. If you get the London Review of Books you can tell.

MS – Is it the next issue?

AB – It's out now. There aren't many London Review of Books readers in Leeds. Again somebody stopped me, a lad on the station and said 'Oh I read your piece in the London Review of Books', not this piece, a year or two ago about something else I'd written. And I said 'Oh, do you read the London Review of Books?' and he said 'Oh yes, but in Leeds I'm ploughing a lonely furrow.'

Question – If you go to see your own work at a theatre? Do you watch the audience rather than play?

AB – I don't often go to the theatre, that's the awful thing.

MS – Do you avoid seeing your work?

AB – With plays I go to see all the previews until the first night. Then I see the first night and then I tend not to go after that. Only because you want to get on, you see, you want to leave it. They came up fairly acutely with a play I wrote in 1981, Enjoy, which was about Leeds which was a disaster when it was first put on and then they revived it four or five years ago and it was a great success. I did eventually go to see it but I didn't want to go because I knew what I would feel, which is that I would see what I would now do. I could see that there was one character who I got wrong. Nobody else had spotted it really but I knew that she hadn't gone on a proper journey which you need to do. You need to go from A to B, you need to move, and I'd not done that. And had I been involved in the production, I had said I that I didn't want to be, I would have felt that I'd have to re-write and that's not a good thing to do anyway. You shouldn't. It's what Orton did with all his stuff. He would censor and re-write and you should just leave it alone.

Question – Could you tell us about your writing day and do you write every day? What's the best time of the day for you?

AB – Well, there's a theoretical writing day and an actual writing day. The theoretical writing day I start at about quarter past ten and go on until one with, you know, I get a cup of coffee in the middle of it and things like that, and then I'll have a nap and start again at three. It used to be that the best time was in the morning but as I've got older the best time is between about four and six, I don't know why. Then I'll normally stop about seven and won't do anymore after that. But, I'll often try and leave it at a point where I think I'm getting somewhere and where I can go back to it in the morning and think 'Oh yes, I know what I've got to do now' but because very often, you know, you don't reach that point and you have a really wearisome day, and you've worked but nothing's happened and I find that quite hard to take. More so as I get older because I think 'I've no need to do this really' but I don't go to the theatre much because I tend to get discouraged if it's good and I get discouraged if it's bad really. It's nice when I've done some at The National Theatre you can go down and sit in the producer's box at the back of the stalls and sit, say, you know, see about half an hour or three quarters of an hour of a play and come away. And I like that.

MS – Short is better?

AB – Well, you know, I think, I've got the idea about this, I know what this is about, and that may seem unfair but it's partly at the central core of things protecting your own endeavour really... I mentioned Jerusalem earlier on, I didn't see Jerusalem but I read it and I read it and I thought 'I couldn't possibly do this, this is far better than anything I could do.' and it put me off for weeks. But of course you haven't got to be and it's better not to see it or to read it and to feel discouraged.

Question – I saw a documentary about you and the history boys. You made a comment that that was the first play where you'd ended up writing, or at least re-writing, with an actor in mind. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?

AB – Well, I don't think it was quite the first play because I think quite a bit of Madness of George the Third was written in rehearsal when it became clear what Nigel Hawthorn could do and so I then wrote, in a way, madder dialogue for it really, because he was so convincing doing it and I found that working in that way, which I was never able to do until I went to the National Theatre, I found it enjoyable which I never thought I would. I always thought, perhaps I had to have everything straight and have it all done before hand, and cut and dry, whereas I'm more prepared now to go into a rehearsal not quite knowing what's going to happen, partly because I always work with Nicholas Hytner and he's used to me and he trusts me and I trust him. The Habit of Art had to be slightly re-written to accommodate Richard Griffiths who wasn't originally going to do it, it was going to be Michael Gambon and that I suppose, doing that it's a kind of, you get pleasure out of the technical skill of it and you enjoy the fruit of experience.

Question – Saying that seeing and reading other plays is discouraging. When you have writers block or want to be encouraged – where do you go for inspiration?

AB – No, not, quite like that. Some writers do, somehow their work contains things that encourage you, other writers discourage you somehow. It may be that you feel one is more a

rival. Some writers clear your mind and they're often writers that you don't read much of. I mean I don't read much of Virginia Woolfe for instance but, nevertheless, she rinses my mind clear of things, and I think that part is what you're asking. She herself said it that when she had been working all day she used to read Shakespeare at night because Shakespeare had that effect on her. But I sometimes do go to the theatre and think of you can do that now, you see technical things and also the skills of actors, that helps you, I don't know, I don't suppose there's a hard and fast rule but it doesn't have to be the theatre, TV does it as well sometimes.

MS – There was a spell where you weren't very prolific were you?

AB –Yes, no, I think with writers it's more like that most of the time I think. With me anyway, I'm so lucky in the sense that people have liked what I've done all the way through. A writer like Peter Nichols for instance who wrote wonderful plays and somehow the public went off him and he's now 83/84 and his plays will come back but somehow the time is wrong for him.

MS – You mentioned Bond earlier, the same thing happened with Bond...

AB – Yes, that's right.

Question – You mentioned about the importance of a character going on a journey in a play. If you're looking at a scene that you've written at the end of the day and thinking, is that working? Is there a particular question or test that you apply to something you've written or is it instinctive?

AB - Only time I suppose. I'll leave it and go back to it and read it when, as it were, I've forgotten writing it and see if it works. And I tend to, I think it's important probably, the first time, the first draft, is not to be too finicky about it and not to be too, thinking it all of it has to be cut and dry. You don't always have to know everything about the character in that stage. My first drafts are enormously long and over-written because I just put everything in and then when I go back to it it then begins to slim down but you can tell after a bit, after a lapse of time, whether it's turgid or whether it works and then when you get it to a director he tells you even more...

Question – How do you know when you've finished one of your plays or one of your stories or one of your books? Is it you who makes the decision or does someone help you make that decision?

AB – I just know. I mean the ending, for instance, of the History Boys when Hector comes back, as it were, from the dead and says, 'Pass it on, that's what I was trying to tell you, pass the parcel', I knew he came back from the dead, I knew he had some message to deliver, I didn't know what it was but I knew that was the end and then I found what he had to say. But it varies. This current story I ended it in two or three different ways and it's in the story, about two pages from the end it says 'the story could well end here if you wanted it to' and incorporated my own doubts into the story.

MS – I mean you've worked with Stephen Frears, Nicholas Hytner and Lindsay Anderson, great directors. How much do you think it is a collaboration? Do you change your work when you take what you think is a finished draft to someone like Stephen Frears... what happens next?

AB – I don't think Stephen Frears changed very much. In my experience film directors are different from theatre directors. Film directors are more likely to have a notion of the kind of film they want to make irrespective of the script in a way, so that they often have a... John Schlesinger was like that. You go along with something, and I think even with The Englishman Abroad which was the first thing I did with him, he had a notion of it that was slightly different from mine and fortunately we came to some sort of compromise but film directors are quite... It's not good for the character I don't think, meeting film directors, they can be used to getting their own way. Theatre directors are more malleable, are more, you know, somehow... well certainly with Nicholas Hytner, they're more open to discussion.

MS – Certainly film directors seem to get more of the credit. Do you think that's fair?

AB – It depends. I think what happens is people don't care whether it's fair because they get paid much better. You get paid much more for a script on films than you do in the theatre but it all depends what sort of a director it is. Lindsay Anderson, who I worked with only once really, Lindsay would absolutely knew what he wanted and made no bones and told you that he was just using your script as grist to his mill which was fine as I enjoyed working with him and thought he was a great man so it didn't matter really. But it could be heart breaking. Particularly if you're just starting out and found yourself fed into the mill of directors.

MS – Did he change quite a bit?

AB – Yes, he did. All sorts of little bits. He wanted to put in music that had significance for him but that had none for me. I would say, 'That doesn't mean anything to me.' I can't remember the song he wanted to put in but when I said it didn't mean anything he then would start humming it at odd moments, singing it, hoping that it became significant...

MS – Crafty then really?

Question – You seem to know your audience with spooky detail. I'd like to know would or could you think of writing for today's modern, short concentration span? Not for the Ednas but for the Darrens and the Sharons and the Lucretias. Or is it that you write for one specific generation or would you think of or imagine Walter passing little Shiraz or whatever on the street?

AB – I think I would be very nervous. I feel, you know, that the generation has left one behind and if I tried to write in an up-to-date way or specifically for young people that I'd make a fool of myself. I don't know the language, I don't know their concerns. On the other hand in the History Boys, they were all young and the script was slightly unfinished and they finished it off. They brought some of their own language to it, very often it was just swearing but, nevertheless, they made it their own and then they put a music track on it which

somehow made it more contemporary. But, you know, particularly at my age you have to be careful to be seeming to want to be trendy which I don't want to do anyway.

MS – You've almost done the opposite thing. You've started off writing for older characters and then with The History Boys you've written for younger characters.

AB – Yes, that's right. I haven't got anywhere with it yet but I'm writing about somebody very very old at the moment, or trying to do... that's no easy task.

Question – I saw you once in Leeds Station looking around and I thought, 'My god if I could look around like that, I could be a writer too' and I imagined that you were having all these wonderful ideas though maybe you were just wondering if Marks and Spencer was still open. When you do get ideas how do you capture them? Do you have a voice recorder? Or the back of an envelope?

AB – A notebook, I used to have. Right through from 1962 probably I think the first one, until about 1995 I kept notebooks and I know because I transcribed them. I wrote them all out because they were just scrawl and I thought 'Well nobody else could read these' but then I found that, in the process of transcribing them, I found that I had used almost nothing of the stuff I'd written down. And I think it's very important that writer's should keep a notebook. I always say to anybody who asks me 'Keep a notebook' that's the first thing and the second thing is 'Don't start at the beginning'. But as I said that very very little of what I've got in my notebooks ever found its way into my plays. But I presume it's doing some good. I don't know. But also, it's relevant because of Leeds Station, I thought 'Anyone who saw me sat here writing in a notebook would think I was mad' and so I stopped doing it really.

And the other thing about not starting at the beginning, that I only found out really quite late on. But it's much better just to write the bits that you know and you like and you know that you want to get down and then pick up the beginning later on. Start in the middle and it's often useful dramatically as well to write like that.

Question – Melvin Bragg has just given his archive to Leeds University. Where do you think of bestowing your archive?

AB – Oh, I've done it already. I gave it to Oxford. Then Leeds were a bit... well, they weren't miffed but they wrote me a slightly pained note asking 'Is there nothing else that you've got?' I've said I would send something. I don't approve really of writers selling it to Austin, Texas and places like that. Maybe it isn't so inaccessible these days but I don't know it seems to me... Philip Larkin was opposed to writers exporting their work often from economic necessity but I think its best if you can keep it here.

MS – Can I ask for a last question please.

Question – To take you back to nostalgia. You've been asked about writing as an older writer for a younger audience yet one of the remarkable things about you is right from the beginning nostalgia mattered in your writing. Could you say something about what the power and importance of nostalgia has been in your work.

AB – Well, in a way I regret it as I have been nostalgic in the sense that I felt my youth was over before it had scarcely started. The most vivid period of my life was in my thirties and forties and I never experienced youth it never seemed to me. I was in the army with Michael Frayn and I've talked with him about it and he says exactly the same about his life so maybe it's a fairly common assumption. I used to get accused of nostalgia. Forty Years On was criticised of being nostalgic and people would try to find nostalgia in what I wrote when I was unaware of it... I find it difficult not to be nostalgic in the world today really...

MS – Do you feel comfortable in the modern world?

AB – Well, I don't but there are so many ways in which I'm not up to speed. I have a mobile telephone but I don't like – I was saying about this from before I started – I don't like using it in the presence of other people, very much a feature of coming up from London on the train when everyone is at it. I don't have email. My partner has a computer at work but we don't have one at home and all these things kind of condemn you to being in the past. But yet on the other hand, this is slightly by the way, but yesterday I had to go to a do for the launch of a book by Deborah Devonshire – the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire – which is a very very good book, and she's ninety and she emails and she's had all that at her fingertips. She's blind virtually but she's still indomitable and I just thought it was wonderful. She's ninety, she can't see and she got up on a chair – people were holding her – to make a speech, and it wasn't a wooden chair, it was an upholstered chair. I mean it was a real nightmare to stand up. There she was at ninety, not able to see, making them howl with laughter and I thought 'this is what I want to be like.'

MS – That's a good place to end I think... Alan, thank you very very much for coming to speak to us today.

AB – It's been very nice. Nice questions, I usually get asked the same questions over and over again and I didn't get asked the same questions!