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SINGLE SPIES

An Englishman Abroad
A Question of Attribution

A Double-Bill
by Alan Bennett

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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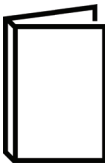
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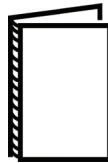


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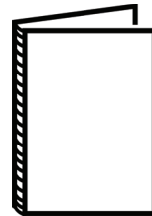
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934. After studying at Oxford University he collaborated as a writer and performer with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook in *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960 at the Edinburgh Festival.

He then turned to writing full time and produced his first stage play *Forty Years On* in 1968. His other plays include *Getting On*, *Habeas Corpus*, *The Old Country*, *The Lady in the Van*, *The Madness of George III* (together with the Oscar-nominated screenplay *The Madness of King George*), an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and *The History Boys*. As well as many television plays such as *A Day Out*, *Sunset Across the Bay*, *A Woman of No Importance* and the series of monologues *Talking Heads* and *Talking Heads II*.

SINGLE SPIES

First performed at the Royal National Theatre, London, on 1st December 1988 with the following cast:

An Englishman Abroad

CORAL	Prunella Scales
BURGESS	Simon Callow
TOLYA	Paul Brightwell
TAILOR	Alan Bennett
SHOP ASSISTANT	Edward Halsted

Directed by Alan Bennett
Designed by Bruno Santini

A Question of Attribution

BLUNT	Alan Bennett
RESTORER	David Terence
CHUBB	Simon Callow
PHILLIPS	Crispin Redman
COLIN	Brett Fancy
HMQ	Prunella Scales

Directed by Simon Callow
Designed by Bruno Santini
Music by Dominic Muldowney

Single Spies, a Royal National Theatre Production, was first produced at the Royal National Theatre in December 1988 and then presented at the Queen's Theatre by Independent Theatrical Productions Ltd and Christopher Malcolm for Viva Productions Ltd.

A QUESTION OF ATTRIBUTION

An inquiry in which the circumstances are
imaginary but the pictures are real.

A NOTE ON THE PAINTINGS

A Question of Attribution is concerned with two paintings, Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* in the National Gallery and the *Triple Portrait*, formerly attributed to Titian, which is in the collection of HM The Queen. The play owes a great deal to two articles in which these paintings are discussed, "Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*" by Erwin Panofsky (in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Peregrine, 1974) and "Five Portraits" by St John Gore (*Burlington Magazine*, vol. 100, 1958).

For understandable reasons we were not permitted to reproduce *Triple Portrait* or its X-ray here or for the stage production. Fortunately there was a copy of it at Hardwick Hall, though this copy only included the original two figures. The "third man", revealed when the royal picture was cleaned, was not in the Hardwick Hall version, which must therefore have been copied after he had been painted out. For the stage production we reproduced the Hardwick Hall paintings by courtesy of the National Trust, and the "third man" was added to the picture by the graphics department at the National Theatre*. This is the figure reproduced here, and though its shortcomings make the comparison with Titian's son, Orazio Vecelli, less than convincing, should anyone be interested enough to compare the two from the actual paintings they would, I think, find that the identification is certainly arguable.

However, such a comparison would be difficult to make as the *Triple Portrait* was taken from public view following the 1986 fire at Hampton Court and may not always be on permanent display. Indeed, I have not seen it myself, knowing it only from the photographs which illustrate Mr St John Gore's article. There is a certain appropriateness about this, though, as one of the criticisms made of Anthony Blunt as an art historian was that he preferred to work from photographs rather than the real thing.

A.B.

* Copies of the National Theatre slides are available on hire from Samuel French Ltd.

CHARACTERS

BLUNT

RESTORER

CHUBB

PHILLIPS

COLIN

HMQ

The action of the play takes place in Anthony Blunt's room at the Courtauld Institute and in a corridor at the Palace

Time - the late 1960s

ANTHONY BLUNT's room at the Courtauld Institute where he is the Director. The time is the late 1960s.

There is a large eighteenth-century double door and a fine ormolu mounted table serving as a desk but in all other respects the room is a functioning office, the bookshelves crowded with reference books and with piles of octavo volumes on the floor. Above the desk and upstage of it is a projection screen with a slide projector on a nearby side table.

BLUNT stands left of the screen and the **RESTORER**, a humbler figure in a dustcoat, to the right. Their positions resemble those of saints or patrons on either side of an altarpiece and some effort should be made in the production to create stage pictures which echo in this way the composition and lighting of Old Masters.

BLUNT Next.

On the screen a slide (Slide 1) of the "Triple Portrait" before cleaning (Figure 1).

RESTORER More of the same, I'm afraid. It's an ex-Titian. Now thought to be by several hands.

BLUNT Called?

The RESTORER consults a catalogue or printed sheet.

RESTORER *Titian and a Venetian Senator.*

BLUNT And this is Titian on the left. He's not by Titian, certainly.

RESTORER No. He's a copy of the Berlin self-portrait.

BLUNT I don't know about the other gentleman.

RESTORER He's been identified as the Chancellor of Venice, Andrea Franceschi.

Pause.

BLUNT (*sitting at the desk*) I should warn you. I don't have an eye. K. Clark was saying the other day (I don't *think* the remark was directed at me) that people who look at Old Masters fall into three groups: those who see what it is without being told; those who see it when you tell them; and those who can't see it whatever you do. I just about make the second category. It means I can't date pictures. Made a terrible hash of the early Poussins. Couldn't tell which came first. For an art historian it's rather humiliating. Like being a wine taster and having no sense of smell. (*After a pause*) People find me cold. I don't gush, I suppose.

RESTORER Not much to gush about, this lot. Mind you, wait till you see Holyrood.

BLUNT I'm not saying painting doesn't affect me. Ravished, sometimes. Well, what do we do? Give it a scrub?

RESTORER Couldn't do any harm.

BLUNT On. (*Turning in his chair to look at the screen*) On.

A slide of a painting of St Lawrence being roasted over a grid comes up on the screen (Slide 2).

What frightful thing is happening here?

RESTORER (*looking at the printed sheet*) *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence.*

BLUNT (*groaning*) Art!

The RESTORER exits as...

BLUNT *steps from the office set to a podium or lectern left and we should have a sense that he is in the middle of a lecture. The lecture is illustrated by slides projected on the screen; these slides include Giovanni Bellini's*

“Agony in the Garden”, an “Annunciation” and other appropriate images, details and martyrdoms.

Were we not inured to its imagery, however, it would seem a curious world, this world of Renaissance art—

Slide 3

—a place of incongruous punishments, where heads come on plates—

Slide 4

—and skulls sport cleavers, and an angel—

Slide 5

—tremulous as a butterfly—waits patiently for the attention of a young girl who is pretending to read. (*He pauses*)
Doomed—

Slide 6

—to various slow and ingenious extinctions the saints brandish the emblems of their suffering—the cross, the gridiron and the wheel—and submit to their fate readily and without fuss, howling agonies gone through without a murmur, the only palliative a vision of God and the assurance of Heaven. Remote though all this is from our sensibility, there is a sense in which one might feel that it is all very British. For, flayed, dismembered, spitted, roasted, these martyrs seldom lose a drop of their sang-froid, so cool about their bizarre torments, the real emblems of their martyrdom a silk dressing-gown and a long cigarette-holder; all of them doing their far, far better thing in a dignified silence. About suffering they were always wrong, the Old Masters.

Slide 7

In Bellini’s *Agony in the Garden*, for instance, the apostles—oblivious to all considerations but those of perspective—are fast asleep on ground as brown and bare as an end-of-the-season

goalmouth, this sleep signifying indifference. Above them on a rocky promontory of convenient geology, Jesus kneels in prayer, an exercise that still goes on in some places though with less agony and less certainty of address, this praying of less interest to the budding art historian or to the social historian or even to someone who has just wandered into the gallery out of the rain (and it is salutary to remind ourselves, here at the Courtauld Institute, that that is what art is for most people) ...this praying, as I say, of less interest to them than the reaper on the edge of a field in a Breughel, say, who has his hand up a woman's dress, another exercise that still goes on in most places, though with no agony but the same certainty of address.

Slide 8

Here is threshing, which we now do mechanically.

Slide 9

Here is sex, which we do mechanically also.

Slide 10

And here is crucifixion, which we do not do. Or do differently. Or do indifferently. It is a world in which time means nothing, the present overlaps the future—

Slide 11

—and did the saint but turn his head he would see his own martyrdom through the window.

CHUBB *opens the double doors and stands framed in them, wearing a trilby and raincoat and carrying a briefcase. He crosses to the desk, takes off his hat and coat, sits down right of the desk and opens his briefcase.*

Judas takes the pieces of silver in the Temple the same moment as in the next field he hangs himself. Christ—

Slide 12

—begs God in the garden to free himself from a fate that is already happening higher up the hill.

Slide 13

As the lectern or podium disappears BLUNT steps back into the office where CHUBB is waiting. CHUBB is seemingly vague, seemingly amiable. Socially he is not in the same class as BLUNT, who is sophisticated and metropolitan; CHUBB, while not naive is definitely suburban. The slides on the screen have changed to photographs of various young men, taken singly or enlarged from group photographs of colleges and teams; all date from the thirties and are in black and white. Following each denial by BLUNT a new photograph comes up on the screen. CHUBB operates the slide control on the desk.

Slide 14

No.

Slide 15

No.

Slide 16

No. *(He seems uncertain)*

CHUBB *(pausing)* Sure?

BLUNT It's the neck. *(He sits at the desk)* The *neck* could be Piero della Francesca.

CHUBB Who's he?

BLUNT Well, he was many things, but he wasn't a member of the Communist Party.

Pause.

And in answer to your earlier question, the larger question, I would only say...again...it seemed the right thing to do at the time.

CHUBB One more?

BLUNT Do I have a choice?

CHUBB *turns off the slide control.*

CHUBB You're probably tired.

BLUNT Not particularly.

CHUBB All these functions.

BLUNT I don't go to what you call "functions".

CHUBB If you're in charge of the Queen's pictures you must often have to be in attendance.

BLUNT Yes. On the pictures.

CHUBB I'm disappointed. Don't you see the Queen?

BLUNT The Crown is a large organization. To ask me if I see the Queen is like asking a shopgirl if she sees Freeman, Hardy or Willis.

CHUBB My wife saw her the other day. When she was visiting Surrey.

BLUNT Your wife?

CHUBB The Queen. She was up at six o'clock and secured an excellent vantage point outside Bentall's. Her Majesty was heard to say "What a splendid shopping centre". I wonder what she's really like.

BLUNT Look her up. You must have a file on her.

CHUBB Yes, we probably do. I meant, to chat to. Hob-nob with. As a person. You can't, of course, say. I appreciate that.

BLUNT Why can't I say?

CHUBB Royal servants can't, can they? Keeping mum is part of the job. It's like the Official Secrets Act.

BLUNT *looks sharply at CHUBB. Pause.*

I'm sorry. That was unkind. More snaps? *(He goes for the slide control but does not press)*

BLUNT *says nothing.*

Some people do this for pleasure, you know. Holidays. Trips abroad. "This is a delightful couple we ran into on the boat. He's in the Foreign Office and he's a lorry driver." You must get asked round to watch people's slides.

BLUNT Never.

CHUBB You don't live in Purley.

BLUNT No.

CHUBB *switches on the screen with another photograph (Slide 17).*

(rising and crossing to the filing cabinet) How many more times. There is no-one else that I know.

CHUBB *(switching off)* This morning I got up, cup of tea, read the *Telegraph*, the usual routine. Nothing on the agenda for today, I thought, why not toddle up to town and wander round the British Museum, sure to come across something of interest. Just turning into Great Russell Street when I remember there is something on the agenda. Your good self! What's more, I'm due at the Courtauld Institute in five minutes. So I about turn and head for Portman Square.

Pause.

BLUNT And? I was under the impression this narrative was leading somewhere.

CHUBB The point is, we sometimes know things we don't know. A bit of me, you see, must have known that I was coming

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