

PROSCENIUM

The Lady in the Van

By Alan Bennett

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Wednesday 5th November to Saturday 8th November 2008
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Cast

Miss Shepherd	Anne Gerrard
Alan Bennett.....	Charles Anthony
Alan Bennett 2.....	Mark Sutherland
Mam	Caroline Bronne-Shanbury
Rufus	Colin Hickman
Pauline.....	Crystal Anthony
Social Worker	Hilary McDermott
Mam’s Doctor	Sheila Harvey
Interviewer	
Underwood.....	} Paul Davis
Miss Shepherd’s Doctor.....	
Lout	
Ambulance Driver	} David Pearson
Leo Fairchild.....	

Other parts played by members of the company

Director.....	Linda Hampson
Stage Manager.....	David Pearson
Assisted by.....	Sheila Harvey
Stage Properties.....	Lynette Shanbury
Sound.....	Christina You
Lighting.....	Mac
Powerpoint	David Simmons

With thanks to Robert Ewen, Keith Bayross, Geoff Bailey
and staff of the Compass

The Story

The play was written some twenty-five years after Miss Shepherd drove her van into Alan Bennett’s garden and ten years after her death, but he recorded details of her character, opinions and actions, chronicled her various comic encounters and analysed, in a typically self-deprecating way, his own behaviour and motives in his diary. He first drew together the diary entries relating to Miss Shepherd for an article in the London Review of Books in the early 1990s and followed this up with a more comprehensive account in ‘Writing Home’ in 1994.

First Meeting

“Camden Town: The van, stalled as usual, was at the top of the street. Miss Shepherd was standing by her vehicle in an attitude with which I was to become familiar, left arm extended with the palm flat against the side of the van indicating ownership, the right arm summoning anyone who was fool enough to take notice of her, on this occasion me. She was kitted out in greasy raincoat, orange skirt, Ben Hogan golfing cap and carpet slippers. She would be going on sixty at this time. She must have prevailed on me to push the van as far as Albany Street ...I remember being overtaken by two policemen in a panda car as I trundled the van across Gloucester Bridge; I thought that, as the van was certainly holding up the traffic, they might have lent a hand. They were wiser than I knew.”

Gloucester Crescent

Miss Shepherd first moved into Alan Bennett’s street in the late sixties. It consisted mostly of semi-detached villas which were being gentrified and occupied mainly by young professional, left-leaning couples, aware of the disparity between the style in which they were able to live and their progressive opinions.

“There was a gap between our social position and our social obligations. It was in this gap that Miss Shepherd (in her van) was able to live.”

“January 1974: Charity in Gloucester Crescent takes refined forms. The publishers next door are bringing out some classical volume and to celebrate the event last night held a Roman dinner. This morning the au pair was to be seen knocking at the window of the van with a plate of Roman remains. After twelve last night I saw her striding up the Crescent waving her stick and telling someone to be off. Then I heard a retreating middle-class voice say plaintively, ‘But I only asked if you were all right.’”

The Bennett Garden

The first stage in the process occurred in the early 1970s. Alan Bennett had a lean-to down some steps at the side of his house and ran an electric lead out to this hut so that on cold nights she could keep warm. Inevitably she began to spend the night there on a regular basis, the van becoming part office, part wardrobe.

In April 1974 the old van, still parked on the road outside Bennett's house, was towed away by the council and a benefactor provided her with a new one, which she proudly drove into the front garden.

"This van (and its successor, bought in 1983) now occupied a paved area between my front door and the garden gate, the bonnet of the van hard by my front step, its rear door, which Miss S. always used to get in and out of, a few feet from the gate. Callers at the house had to squeeze past the back of the van and come down the side, and while they waited for my door to be opened they would be scrutinised from behind the murky windscreen by Miss Shepherd... She retired early and would complain if anyone called or left late at night. On one occasion Coral Brown was coming away from the house with her husband, Vincent Price, and they were talking quietly. 'Pipe down,' snapped the voice from the van, 'I'm trying to sleep.' For someone who has brought terror to millions it was an unexpected taste of his own medicine."

Age

Bennett was never quite sure how old Miss Shepherd was until 8 July 1982:

"A drunk comes round shouting at Miss S and trying to get her out of the van. I go to the door and scare him off, saying, 'What sort of man is it who torments old ladies of seventy-five?' This morning I am passing the van when her hand comes out. 'Mr Bennett, I'm not seventy-five. I'm seventy-one.'"

Politics

Miss Shepherd was passionately anti-communist and anti-common market – the 'common' always underlined when she wrote about it on the pavement, as if it were the sheer vulgarity of the economic union she particularly objected to. She felt that 'Enoch', as she invariably called Mr Powell, had got it right and wrote him several letters telling him so.

"21 Feb 1984: Local elections are in progress and I have two posters in the window on behalf of the Alliance candidate. Today is polling day and around eight I am woken by the doorbell. Thinking it's the postman, I go down in my dressing-gown, open the door, and just catch Miss Shepherd scuttling



back into the van. She has left a note on the mat: Mr Bennett. Urgent. It has dawned on me I have not been given the Alliance leaflet. If it should be the second one you have put in the window as my property I demand that it is removed immediately. Please put it through my window so that I can dispose of it as I think best.

Later I see she has stuck a Conservative poster in the back window of the van.

In 1977 at the Queen's Jubilee there was only one flag to be seen in our well-to-do socialist street and that was in the back window of the van where only I could see it."

Clothes

Having recorded what she was wearing when he first saw her, Bennett took great pleasure in noting her many changes of dress:

"Hats were always a feature: a black railwayman's hat with a long neb worn slightly on the skew so that she looked like a drunken signalman of a French guardsman of the 1880s; there was a Charlie Brown pitcher's hat; and in June 1977 an octagonal straw table-mat, tied on with a chiffon scarf and a bit of cardboard for the peak. She also went in for green eyeshades. Her skirts

had a telescopic appearance, as they had often been lengthened many times over by the simple expedient of sewing a strip of extra cloth around the hem, though with no attempt at matching. One skirt was made by sewing several orange dusters together.

June 1980: Miss S has gone into her summer rig: a raincoat turned inside out, with brown canvas panels and a large label declaring it the Emerald Weatherproof. This is topped off with a lavender chiffon scarf tied round a sun visor made from an old cornflakes packet.”

Vehicles

Miss Shepherd was inordinately proud of her driving skills and delighted in vehicles of all kinds. As well as the vans and the car described in the play she acquired a mini for a short while in 1980 “but before she’d managed to have more than a jaunt or two (‘It’s a real goer!’) it was stolen and later found stripped and abandoned in the basement of the council flats in Maiden Lane. I went to collect what was left (‘though the police may require it for evidence, possibly’) and found that even in the short time she’d had the Mini she’d managed to stuff it with the usual quota of plastic bags, kitchen rolls and old blankets doused in talcum powder.”

Shopping

As she became increasingly frail Alan Bennett would do some shopping for her. In 1980 she asks him for “‘a small packet of Eno’s, some milk and some jelly babies. The jelly babies aren’t urgent. Oh and Mr Bennett, could you get me one of those little bottles of whisky? I believe Bell’s is very good. I don’t drink it – I just use it to rub on.’” A bit of information he uses in Jan 1998: “‘I ask Miss S if it was her birthday yesterday. She agrees guardedly. ‘So you’re seventy-seven.’ ‘Yes. How did you know?’ ... I gave her a bottle of whisky, explaining that it’s just to rub on. ‘Oh. Thank you.’ Pause. ‘Mr Bennett. Don’t tell anybody.’ ‘About the whisky?’ ‘No. About my birthday.’ Pause. ‘Mr Bennett.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘About the whisky either.’”

Her wheelchair

Miss S. was thrilled when she persuaded social services to allocate her a wheelchair and in July 1987 Bennett describes how she punts her way out through the gate. “A passer-by takes pity on her, and she is whisked to the market. Except not quite whisked, because the journey is made more difficult than need be by Miss S.’s refusal to take her foot off the ground, so the Good Samaritan finds himself pushing a wheelchair continually slurred and braked by these large, trailing, carpet-slipped feet. The next year Miss S asked him

to stick a notice on the back of her wheelchair. It reads, ‘Please help push me. Sometimes.’”

Her death

Bennett writes most movingly about the day she died:

“It is a beautiful day, with the garden glittering in the sunshine, strong shadows by the nettles, and bluebells out under the wall, and I remember how in her occasional moments of contemplation she would sit in the wheelchair and gaze at the garden. I am filled with remorse at my harsh conduct towards her, though I know at the same time that it was not harsh. But still I never quite believed or chose to believe she was as ill as she was, and I regret too all the questions I never asked her. Not that she would have answered them. I have a strong impulse to stand at the gate and tell anyone who passes.”

The Play

Bennett made two or three unsuccessful attempts to turn the material in his diaries into a play. The problem was not the portrayal of Miss Shepherd, whose character and behaviour are clearly richly dramatic, and the device of using her soliloquies/prayers gives a moving picture of the pain underneath the comedy. The problem was in telling his own story.

“It was only when I had the notion of splitting myself into two that the problem seemed to resolve itself. The device of having two actors playing me isn’t just a bit of theatrical showing off and does, however crudely, correspond to the reality. There was one bit of me (often irritated and resentful) that had to deal with this unwelcome guest camped literally on my doorstep, but there was another bit of me that was amused by how cross this eccentric lodger made me and that took pleasure in Miss Shepherd’s absurdities and her outrageous demands.”

An excellent way, too, to reveal the gap between what is said and what is felt.



Our Next Production

Broken Glass

By Arthur Miller

Brooklyn, 1938: Sylvia Gellburg is stricken by a mysterious paralysis in her legs for which the doctor can find no cause. He soon realises that she is obsessed by the devastating news from Germany, where the government thugs have begun smashing Jewish stores. But this event is coiled around what he learns is her strange relationship with her husband Phillip. When the two seemingly unrelated situations concatenate, a tragic flare of light opens on the age.

Directed by Anne Gerrard

Wednesday 21st January to Saturday 25th January 2008

7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 020 8866 7075

About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, and to join our mailing list, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

Contact us at :
www.proscenium.org.uk

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