

## **The Lady in the Van, Viva Theatre Company, Review**

Alan Bennett's autobiographical play about his fifteen year relationship with Miss Shepherd, the lady in the van, is a cleverly crafted and very demanding piece of theatre. It is written in a series of short scenes presenting a challenge to the Director to keep the action moving and maintain the pace. For Viva Theatre Company director David Moat successfully transformed the Brook at Soham into an intimate studio theatre, with raked seating given the audience a view of the stage and the floor of the auditorium necessary to accommodate the van and make the necessary space for very successful and enjoyable production that totally engaged with a full audience.

Although there were seventeen in the cast, essentially the play is a three hander with two Alan Bennett's and Miss Shepherd. Remarkably Daniel White and David Blyth, identically dressed, managed to capture the accent, intonation and character of Bennett in a totally convincing way. Their body language, timing and essential stillness when necessary, were models of how to state the understated and Daniel White's two moments of uncharacteristic rage were delightfully done. His two selves gave Bennett the chance to question his motives and relationships, not just with Miss Shepherd, but also his mother beautifully captured by Pamela Peters in a quietly, gentle portrayal.

But Bennett is shy, diffident, indecisive so the dramatic pace has to come from Miss Shepherd, a tour-de-force for any actress. From her first appearance to the last Mary Barnes was Miss Shepherd giving her own interpretation of a cantankerous, eccentric, teasing, tormented soul. She drove the action with beautiful timing, an extraordinary mesmerising intensity and a body language that demanded attention. It was also a mature nuanced performance of light and shade, with melancholy and a mystery that was revealed through Frank Crosby's sinister and seedy Underwood.

Emma Moat and Jon Balderson gave strong support as upwardly mobile neighbours, while Sophie Plachcinski made a patronising social worker and Vaughan Moll, Scott Robertson, Geoff Fisher, Sarah Bloor and Lars Carr all contributed nicely observed cameos. (Some of the company Gail Baker, Kate Weekes, Emily Docwra and Danielle Kerry took over the roles on other nights).

Never act with children, animals and a van, as the old theatrical adage goes, but despite some signs of artistic temperament from the van, technically the experienced Nigel Thompson of Blueshed Studios and the back stage crew triumphed.

This was a delightful, clever production that met the challenges and thoroughly absorbed the first night house ultimately lifting the spirit. And how appropriate that there were fireworks at the end for the lady who really was in the van.

Mike Rouse