

Driving Force

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Given our city's ongoing struggle with issues around homelessness, it's not surprising the folks at Langham Court Theatre have opted to stage *The Lady in the Van*, playwright Alan Bennett's (*History Boys*) autobiographical account of his time with Miss Shepherd, an eccentric woman who lived in a van in Bennett's driveway for 15 years. And while this play isn't going to change your life, it is going to provide you with a couple hours of (mostly) lighthearted entertainment.

Tony Cain and Roger Carr both play Alan Bennett, with one mostly acting as narrator and the other as Bennett-of-memory (it makes sense when you see it, trust me). We quickly learn a curmudgeonly tramp named Miss Shepherd (played with panache by Sylvia Rhodes) has been parking her busted-up van in front of houses on Bennett's block. As Miss Shepherd's abode inches closer to Bennett's place — and he notices the harassment the old woman routinely endures — he eventually caves and allows her to park the ramshackle vehicle on his property. Thus began a curious friendship that would last a decade and a half. Eventually, we come to learn more about the cantankerous Miss Shepherd and the motivations behind her unusual personality quirks.

Cain and Carr's Bennetts riff off each other well, pointing out flaws and half-truths in their own narratives — which only makes the seemingly unbelievable story of Miss Shepherd ring that much truer. But while the Bennetts and other side characters — particularly Michael Romano as Bennett's NIMBY neighbour — are entertaining, it's Rhodes that steals this show. She plays Miss Shepherd with a great blend of crankiness, aloofness and the occasional show of vulnerability. Bill Adams has created a very simple, dream-like set that matches the memory-play structure well; indeed, other than Bennett's writing desk and Miss Shepherd's van — which makes a great entrance in the first act — all we really have on stage are the actors and some wispy cloth fragments.

While the situation explored in this play is far from typical, particularly when it comes to the homeless issues Victoria faces, it's still an interesting and entertaining production. If you're looking for a more critical examination of homelessness, you might want to check out *The Middle Place* up at the Belfry Theatre as part of their Spark Festival — but if you're looking for a play that will make you laugh out loud, hitch a ride with *The Lady in the Van*.