

Theatre Review: When an eccentric old gal came to stay

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist March 5, 2011

REVIEW

What: The Lady in the Van

Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To March 19

Rating: 3 1/2 stars (out of five)

In 1974, a curious old woman set up camp in Alan Bennett's garden. She was supposed to stay only a few weeks, but -thanks to Bennett's warm heart -it somehow lengthened into a 15-year sojourn.

The Lady in the Van is Bennett's 1999 play chronicling this tremendously peculiar experience. The Victoria Theatre Guild has launched a solid revival of the wry comedy-drama. Superior performances by Sylvia Rhodes as the crotchety Miss Shepherd and Roger Carr as "Alan Bennett 2" (yes, there are two Alan Bennetts) make for an enjoyable -and at times moving -night at the theatre.

Miss Shepherd was essentially homeless when she started parking her home, a Bedford van, on the streets of Bennett's genteel neighbourhood in Camden Town, London. Somehow, she convinced him to allow her to park on his property.

She never left.

It sounds amusing in a heart-warming, when-I-am-old-I-shall-wear-purple kind of way. Yet Miss Shepherd was what the Brits might call a royal pain in the posterior. Intelligent and energetic, she was also cantankerous, rude and, well ... smelly. There are oodles of references to her ghastly body odour, which she variously tried to blame on Bennett's garden manure deliveries and a nearby Greek cookery.

Bennett is unflinchingly unsentimental when it comes to describing the physically unpleasant aspects of their interactions. (Several times, he is seen picking up errant feces that Miss Shepherd -lacking toilet facilities -didn't manage to get into the trash bin.) The playwright is almost as interested in his own reactions to the whole business as in Miss Shepherd. In the play, Bennett is represented by two characters. One (played by Tony Cain) is the younger Alan, interacting directly with the guest who wouldn't leave. The other (Carr) is the present-day Bennett, perched at an electric typewriter. He not only comments on the story from a writer's detached perspective, but occasionally interacts with the young Alan.

This unorthodox division somehow works, perhaps because Bennett was so divided in his reactions to Miss Shepherd's presence. His younger self, naturally, resents this difficult woman as much as he tolerates her. The older Bennett, now relating the story as a memory, is much more bemused. As well, Bennett Sr. questions his own motivations -

often wondering whether his kindness stemmed in part from selfish desires, such as a need to glean raw material for his writing.

Rhodes has offered consistently strong performances over the years at Langham Court Theatre. Her Miss Shepherd is one of her most accomplished roles. On Thursday night, Rhodes – clad in a rag-tag array of Value Village getups – vigorously captured the old gal’s self-righteous contradictions and eccentricities (at one point, Miss Shepherd wonders whether she’ll be allowed to stay in her van once she becomes prime minister).

Miss Shepherd has several key dramatic monologues. Act 1 is capped by her description of nuns shutting the lid on her fingers as she played the piano as a child. These are important scenes, providing a dramatic bedrock for the play. Theatrical yet never over-the-top, Rhodes delivered them convincingly, allowing us to understand the pathos of this sad woman’s life.

While Cain has strengths as an actor, his casting is problematic. As the “young” Bennett, he looks at least as mature as the “old” Bennett played by Carr. As well, Cain had a tendency to make young Bennett overly wheedling and peevish as he complains about Miss Shepherd. It’s true that the playwright intended, in an unsentimental way, to show what an utter nuisance the lady in the van was. However, Cain’s performance too often came off as strident and one-note, making it difficult to engage with the character. Carr, on the other hand, ably conveyed the older Bennett’s humanity and dry British wit. This was a first-rate performance; the character flames warmly into life.

This isn’t the easiest script to pull off. For one thing, it’s very talky. The Lady in the Van is short on conventional plot -essentially it’s a somewhat fragmented collection of scenes. The directing team of Keith Digby and Cynthia Pronick pull things together well. The only thing that fizzles a bit is a final scene, in which Miss Shepherd (now deceased) climbs up something that, rather unfortunately, looks like an oversized wedding dress. The original script calls for a different ending -her van is to be magically lifted in the air. No one expects that in community theatre; nonetheless, the ascension of the wedding dress seemed a misstep.

Still, set designer Bill Adams manages to triumph by getting an actual Bedford van on stage. In fact, it’s a cutaway of the real thing, but it looks terrific, earning spontaneous applause when it first rolled on.

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