

Langham Court Theatre's latest offering glides smoothly

By [Vivian Moreau - Victoria News](#)

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REVIEW: *The Lady in the Van*

One strong character can make a play. So it is with Sylvia Rhodes as Miss Shepherd in Langham Court Theatre's production of *The Lady in the Van*.

The odorous Miss Shepherd has parked the van in which she lives in the front yard of playwright Alan Bennett. She continues to do so for the next 15 years. Their interaction, mostly fractious, is the backbone of the play.

Mining the back story of Miss Shepherd, who speaks French fluently but can't manage to bathe, piques Bennett's interest. She inquires after Bennett's ailing mother (Lesley Gibbs), yet accuses Bennett of having too many scruples.

Dressed in black gumboots, grimy tan coat, and carrying a mesh bag in oversized mitts, Rhodes – a Langham stalwart – lights up the stage. She nails the twitchy, shoulder-shrugging, hands-a-twitter character whose first name may be Mary or Margaret.

"How can you have a conversation with someone who has conversations with the Virgin Mary," Bennett asks himself, who is literally another self. Two actors, Tony Cain and Roger Carr, play tweed-jacketed Bennett. One reluctantly allows Miss Shepherd to park her van, a colourful presence on an almost bare stage, while the other, the mercenary playwright, gleefully observes and records the ensuing tensions.

And tension there is: Miss Shepherd is pushy, asking Bennett to write to the pope, and argumentative – sorry is for God to say, she claims.

But she is also fragile. Louts from near and far lurk around her van.

Music sends her into near hysterics. "I didn't say I didn't like it, I said I didn't want to hear it," she says, trembling.

Just why Bennett would allow her to stay in his driveway for 15 years is something the playwright continually asks himself. With Victoria's ubiquitous street population, we could ask ourselves the same question. Is it guilt, knowing the institutional alternative might be worse?

"It's not guilt, it's art," the playwright concludes from his desk, the only other stage prop on Bill Adams' set design.

The Lady in the Van occasionally veers toward the timid, a gradient Bennett admits is his temperament. Scenes with pompous neighbours Pauline and Rufus (Lorene Cammiade and Michael Romano) feel like fill rather than fodder.

Alex Carroll as a "lout," Michael King as a sympathetic ambulance driver and Paul Bertorelli as the doctor are punctuation marks. Rhodes remains the integral plot pivot around which everything and everyone revolves in this thoughtful, timely play.

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