

Thursday, September 20, 2007

The Lady In The Van, People's Theatre, Newcastle, until Saturday

THIS tells the true story of the playwright Alan Bennett's relationship with Miss Margaret Shepherd – an eccentric former nun who lived in a van on his street.

When the council threaten to move Miss Shepherd on, Bennett allows her to park the beaten-up van in his garden, but the old lady (and her more than questionable personal hygiene) become a fixture in the writer's life not for a few days, but for the next 15 years.

Bennett is infuriated, not just by Miss Shepherd's stubborn and manipulative ways and her van's pungent odour, but by his own perceived weakness for refusing to confront her and allowing her to occupy such a dominant place in his life (and garden).

He is also torn between genuine altruism and fascination, as a writer, with Miss Shepherd's history before she arrived in his street and her potential as a subject for one of his plays. This split between man and writer is represented on stage by Peter Harrison as Alan Bennett and Christopher Goulding as his inner self.

Harrison looks uncannily like Bennett and does a great job of emulating the mannerisms and speech patterns of the socially awkward writer while Goulding gets to say out loud what the playwright would never have the nerve to.

Subsequently, it's Goulding who gets many of the best one-liners (and this being a Bennett play, there are many). Although Harrison gets a few of his own too, the best being a comparison of Miss Shepherd's application of her handbrake with King Arthur's sword Excalibur being jammed into a stone.

But it's Anne Cater's startlingly good performance as Miss Shepherd which really made me sit up. Tragic and comic in equal measure, Cater brings this complex character to life with a funny, moving and believable performance.

The rest of the cast give solid support. Roger Liddle and Karen Elliott provide a number of laughs as Bennett's posh neighbours, Val Elliott impresses as the writer's mother, and Sarah McLane is good as the old lady's social worker.

There's even a cameo by playwright (and People's Play winner) Alison Carr as a journalist.

Director Kevin Gibson and the production team also deserve credit for the interesting staging of the play – particularly the way the infamous van is used and the depiction of Bennett's inner self.

Bennett's insightful play is hysterically funny at times and almost heartbreaking in others.

The parallels between his relationship with Miss Shepherd and his own mother are particularly touching, as are the moments when the character of Bennett sees his own social awkwardness and idiosyncrasies reflected in the old lady living in his garden. When I met Alan Bennett recently, he was every bit as intelligent and dryly humorous as I had imagined. The People's Theatre has done a great job of bringing that unique wit and imagination to the stage.

Daniel Thomson