

# the LADY <sup>IN THE</sup> VAN

BY ALAN BENNETT

'A sparkling and ebullient celebration  
of eccentricity and tolerance'.



# Machbeth



spring 2020



# THE LADY IN THE VAN BY ALAN BENNETT

## Director's Note

I have been a life long fan of *Alan Bennett*. I very much admire his wry sense of humour, his keen sense of observation and his ability to make us look at what is familiar in an unfamiliar way, whether in his plays or his prose writings.

First a book, a play and then a film, **The Lady in the Van** tells the true story of *Alan Bennett's* strained friendship with *Miss Mary Shepherd*, an eccentric homeless woman whom *Bennett* befriended in 1974 before allowing her 'temporarily' to park her *Bedford* van in the driveway of his *Camden* home.

For *Alan Bennett* charity truly began at home but little did he know that she would remain there for fifteen years.

This wonderfully witty play centres on their extraordinary relationship, which for *Bennett* was a source of intrigue, frustration and compassion.

*'One seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation'.*

As *Alan Bennett* very candidly admits, he and *Miss Shepherd* mutually benefitted from her presence; he provided her with a safe haven while she acted as his muse, providing endless humorous material with her rude interactions with the outside world.

The story is funny, poignant and life affirming.

**The Lady in the Van** touches upon a variety of themes: eccentricity, guilt, and attitudes to homelessness. It also bears testimony to what we are prepared to tolerate; the liberal minded intellectuals in *Gloucester Crescent* couldn't pluck up the courage to tell *Miss Shepherd* to leave their street – an action sensed by *Miss Shepherd* who played on the residents' leniency. *Bennett* comments that he struggled to plough on with work at his desk in the window of his house in *Gloucester Crescent* in *Camden* – which faced *Miss Shepherd's* parked van – and often got tangled in the happenings of the lady rather than producing work. Hence his decision to invite her onto his drive.

I have been blessed with not only a great cast but also a great crew. *Dave Borthwick*, our *Set Designer*, chose to build *Miss Shepherd's* van from scratch working from the original *Bedford* specifications. A real feat of ingenuity.

I should also like to thank photographer *Mike Kwasniak* for his time and talent in venturing down to *Camden* with me to take shots in and around *Alan Bennett's* house in *Gloucester Crescent* which have resulted in the slides we are using as a backdrop.

There has been much laughter in rehearsals and a real commitment to making this gem of a play come to life. We hope you enjoy it.

**Steve Wooldridge**



# the LADY IN THE VAN BY ALAN BENNETT



## Creative Team

*Director* Steve Wooldridge  
*Set Design* Dave Borthwick  
*Stage Manager* Spencer Whatling  
*Lighting Design* Dave Gardener  
*Production Photography* Mike Kwasniak  
*Costumes* Angela Whatling  
*Properties* Sue Simmons, Steve Wooldridge  
*Soundscape* Steve Wooldridge, David Gilhooly, Will Dowe  
*Music* Steve Wooldridge  
*Deputy Stage Manager* Will Dowe  
*Assistant Stage Manager* Georgie Beard  
*Director's Assistant* Wade Ablitt  
*Lighting & Sound Operatives* Matt Ramsey, Simon Panayi, Troy Fryer, & Dave Gardener  
*Programme Content* Steve Wooldridge  
*Programme & Leaflet Design* Steve Taplin  
*Rehearsal Photography* Olly Wood & Steve Wooldridge  
*Set & Van Construction* Dave Borthwick, Norman Rutterford, Helen Clarke, Albert Horn and Ian Quickfall  
*Stage Crew* Matt Meyrick, Rachel Doy, Georgie Beard  
*Publicity/Social Media Management* Wade Ablitt  
*Alan Bennett's Hair* Daren Wayland - The Coffee Barber



[www.galleryplayers.co.uk](http://www.galleryplayers.co.uk)

this amateur production of 'The Lady in the Van' is presented by special arrangement with SAMUEL FRENCH Ltd.



# THE LADY IN THE VAN

BY ALAN BENNETT

**Alan Bennett** was born on May 9th, 1934, in *Leeds*. He is best known for *The Madness of George III* (1991) and *The History Boys* (2004). His work has fearlessly scrutinised the British class system, propriety, and England's north-south cultural divide with results that have been simultaneously chilling and hilarious.

Bennett attended *Leeds Modern School* and gained a scholarship to *Exeter College, Oxford*, where he received an undergraduate degree in History in 1957. His fledgling career as a junior lecturer in history at *Magdalen College, Oxford*, was cut short after he enjoyed enormous success with the comedy revue *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960. He co-authored and starred in the show with *Peter Cook*, *Jonathan Miller*, and *Dudley Moore*, and the foursome played to packed houses in *Edinburgh*, *London*, and *New York City*.

Bennett's first play, *Forty Years On*, was produced in 1968 and starred *John Gielgud*. It was followed by numerous plays, films, and television serials as well as several pieces for radio. In 1987 *Talking Heads*, a series of monologues for television, made him a household name and earned him the first of six *Olivier Awards*. *The Madness of George III* premiered at the *National Theatre* in 1991, and the 1994 film adaptation, *The Madness of King George*, secured several *Academy Awards* nominations, including one for Bennett's screenplay. Bennett's special talent was his translation of the mundane into tragicomic dramas, and he was able to employ his characteristic light touch even when writing about intellectual heavyweights such as *Ludwig Wittgenstein* or *Franz Kafka*. His gift for creating an authentic dialogue for the 'ordinary people' of his own background sat curiously beside his ability to portray the manners of middle and upper classes. It was Bennett's diversity of talent that delighted audiences and led critics to hail him as one of the premier playwrights of the day.

Bennett's play *The History Boys* garnered both the *Critics Circle Theatre Award* and the *Olivier Award* for *Best New Play*, and Bennett also received the *Olivier Special Award*. Set in *Yorkshire* in the 1980s, the play featured a clash of values between two teachers coaching a class of state-school boys through their university entrance examinations. It succeeded both as a serious-minded critique of Britain's education system - then and now - and as a superbly comic entertainment. A 2006 film version of *The History Boys* followed the play, which won six *Tony Awards* after its debut on *Broadway* in the same year. Bennett's later plays included *The Habit of Art* (2009), which explores issues of ageing and creativity through an imagined encounter between the poet *W H Auden* and the composer *Benjamin Britten*. In *People* (2012) an aristocratic former model whose wealth is gone must decide what to do with her family's dilapidated home. Set in the geriatric ward of an embattled *Yorkshire* hospital, *Allelujah!* (2018) was viewed as a critique on Britain's *National Health Service*.

Bennett also published various books, including several novellas and short-story collections. He adapted the eponymous short story from the collection *The Lady in the Van* (1990) for the stage in 1999 and film in 2015. A best-selling collection of his diaries and reminiscences, titled *Writing Home*, appeared in 1994. In the memoir *Untold Stories* (2005), he looked back affectionately at his parents, poignantly reflected on his mother's descent into senility and her death in a nursing home, and revealed for the first time that he had received treatment for what had been believed to be terminal cancer. *Keep On Keeping On*, a selection of his diary entries from 2005 to 2015, was published in 2016. His latest play 'Allelujah', which premiered at the *Bridge Theatre* last year, was his tenth collaboration with the award winning Director, *Nicholas Hytner*.





# the LADY IN THE VAN

BY ALAN  
BENNETT



Miss Shepherd in her *Rambo Cap*

**Miss Shepherd** first came to *Alan Bennett's* attention in the early 1970s, when he bought a house in *Gloucester Crescent, Camden Town*. She eventually set up residence outside his house in her van when other neighbours (described as '*liberal artsy types of the newly-gentrified neighbourhood*') were keen to move her along.

*Miss Shepherd* was a promising concert pianist between the wars, drove an ambulance during *World War II*, then was twice rejected from becoming a nun and developed mental health issues. Well-educated, cantankerously articulate and deeply religious, she lived in a succession of vans around *Camden*.

She had regular visions of the *Virgin Mary*, of other saints and some politicians in her local area, and founded a party that was, according to *Bennett*, '*well to the right of UKIP*'. *Miss Shepherd's* complex past only became apparent to her patient but often exasperated neighbour after she died in 1989, 15 years after first having her van moved on to *Bennett's* drive.

Miss Shepherds' Bedford van



# LADY IN THE VAN BY ALAN BENNETT

## Cast

*Miss Shepherd* Jenni Horn  
*Alan Bennett* Steve Taplin  
*Alan Bennett* Darren Nunn  
*Mam* Maggie Mudd  
*Rufus* Phil Cory  
*Pauline* Sam Horsfield  
*Tramp* Mike Cook  
*Social Worker* Petra Risbridger  
*Underwood* James Hayward  
*Mam's Doctor* Ian Quickfall  
*Leo Fairchild* Peter Phillips  
*Miss Shepherd's Doctor* Mike Cook  
*Interviewer, Young Miss Shepherd* Aimée Salmon  
*Louts* Spencer Whatling, Wade Ablitt  
*Convent Housekeeper* Angela Whatling  
*Ambulance Driver* Wade Ablitt

The action of the play takes place in the *London Borough of Camden* between 1971-1989.

*There will be an interval of twenty minutes between Acts.*



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# *the* LADY IN THE VAN

BY ALAN BENNETT

photos by mike kwasniak







# the LADY <sup>IN THE</sup> VAN

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## References in The Lady In The Van

**Mr Khrushchev** was leader of the *Soviet Union* from 1955 until 1964, succeeding *Joseph Stalin*. He presided over the *Cuban Missile Crisis*.

**Dr Beeching** was a *Physicist* and *Engineer* who, for a short but very notable time, was *Chairman* of *British Railways* and an affiliate of the *Conservative Party* in Britain. He was responsible for cutting back on and closing many British railway routes.

**Suzie Wong** is cockney rhyming slang for 'pong', a bad smell. *The World of Suzie Wong* is a 1957 novel by *British Writer Richard Mason*. The main characters are *Robert Lomax*, a young *British Artist* living in *Hong Kong*, and *Suzie Wong*, the title character, a Chinese woman who works as a prostitute. It was later made into a film.

**The Song of St. Bernadette** is a 1943 film about *Bernadette Soubirous* (later canonized *Saint Bernadette*) who, from February to July 1858 in *Lourdes, France*, reported eighteen visions of the *Blessed Virgin Mary*.

**Alfred Cortot** was a famous *French Pianist, Conductor* and *Teacher*. He studied at the *Paris Conservatory* winning first prize in piano in 1896.

**Bertrand Russell** was a *British Philosopher, Logician, Essayist* and *Social Critic* best known for his work in *Mathematical Logic* and *Analytic Philosophy*.

**Bruce Chatwin** was an *English Travel Writer, Novelist* and *Journalist*. His first book, *In Patagonia* (1977), established *Chatwin* as a travel writer, although he considered himself instead a storyteller, interested in bringing to light unusual tales.

**George Balanchine** (1904-1983) is regarded as one of the foremost contemporary choreographers in the world of ballet.

**Galina Sergeyevna Ulanova** was a Russian ballet dancer. She is frequently cited as being one of the greatest ballerinas of the 20th century.

**Vanessa Bell** was an English painter and interior designer, a member of the Bloomsbury Group and the sister of Virginia Woolf.

**Isobel, Lady Barnett**, popularly known as Lady Isobel Barnett, was a Scottish radio and television personality, who had her highest profile during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Petticoat Line** was an all-woman panel show on the BBC Home Service chaired by Anona Winn which discussed listeners' letters and problems.

John Kingsley Orton, known under the pen name of **Joe Orton**, was an English playwright, author and diarist. His public career - from 1964 until his death in 1967 - was short but highly influential.

*'The story told by the play and film took place forty and more years ago and Miss Shepherd is long since dead. She was difficult and eccentric but above all she was poor. And these days, particularly the poor don't get much of a look in. Poverty is considered a moral failing today as it was under the Tudors. If the film and play have a point, it's about fairness, tolerance and however grudgingly, helping the less fortunate.'*

*Alan Bennett at the Hay Festival, 27th May 2015*



# the LADY IN THE VAN BY ALAN DENNETT

## Acknowledgements

*Alan Ayres and Co-op Juniors*

*Stephen Foster, BBC Radio Suffolk*

*Chris and Maggie Finbow, Museum Street Methodist Church*

*Jamie Procter landlord of The Case Is Altered Public House, Woodbridge Road*

*Mike Kwasniak Photography*

*Performing Rights Society*

*All the staff at the New Wolsey Theatre both Technical and Front of House for their support*

*Ipswich Transport Museum*

*Felixstowe Museum*

*New Wolsey Theatre Properties Store*

*David George, Tea and Antiques, Felixstowe*

*Daren Wayland, The Coffee Barber*

*Trimley Saints*

*Cancer Research Shop, Felixstowe*

*In memory of Miss Iris Smith for her donation of material for the wardrobe*

*Herbert Mason's photograph of St Paul's Cathedral in the Blitz by courtesy of The Daily Mail*

*Dan Scarlett and the Regent Theatre*

*Craig Evans*

*Jon Fitton*

*Rayners Garage*

*Coes for their help with suits*







**Gallery Players** were formed in 1985 by Pat Taplin to produce rarely performed plays and musicals that larger companies would find uneconomic or which only use a few actors. The company quickly established a reputation for quality and excellence. Our aims are broadly speaking:

**To exploit a niche for staging productions that are progressive and exciting in both content and execution.**

**To embrace both new and established works.**

**To act as vehicle for engaging new talent as well as established members.**

**To foster a group of actors and technicians that are truly a community.**

**To foster links with schools and colleges.**

We generally stage three productions a year.

Performing lesser known shows is always difficult, particularly when it comes to building an audience and balancing the books, but by sticking to our aims we have grown an audience, that, hopefully, trust us to produce interesting work.

Although we have a strong pool of performers new blood and talent is always welcome as are people who want to work on the technical side.

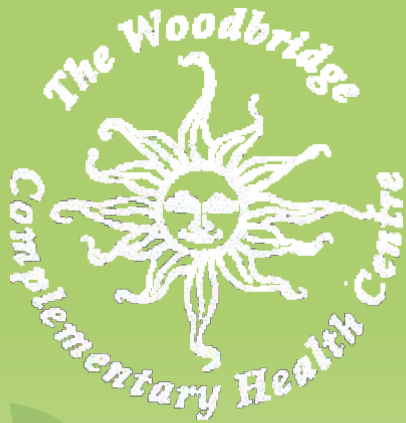
The company is run by a small steering group: Wade Ablitt, Dave Borthwick, Helen Clarke, Steve Taplin and Steve Wooldridge .

We encourage other directors to take the reins of their own pet projects, allowing them to cast freely and create individual shows with the backing of our excellent technical and production crew. Our only insistence is that the final show should entertain and stimulate our discerning audience and should exude that sense of professionalism we strive for.

Please visit our website at **[www.galleryplayers.co.uk](http://www.galleryplayers.co.uk)** for details of all our shows past and future. Please sign up with your email address if you would like us to keep you informed of what we are doing and receive our 'newsletters' which will give details of any workshops/auditions we may be holding.

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