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The Lady in the Van

A play

Alan Bennett

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk



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THE LADY IN THE VAN

First presented at The Queen's Theatre, London, on 19th
November 1999, with the following cast:

Miss Shepherd	Maggie Smith
Alan Bennett	Nicholas Farrell
Alan Bennett 2	Kevin McNally
Mam	Elizabeth Bradley
Rufus	Michael Culkin
Pauline	Geraldine Fitzgerald
Social Worker	Lorraine Brunning
Underwood	Michael Poole
Mam's Doctor/Leo Fairchild	Ben Aris
Lout/Ambulance Driver	William Kettle
Miss Shepherd's Doctor	Stephen Rashbrook
Interviewer	Jennifer Farnon
Council Workmen, Undertakers, etc.	William Kettle, Stephen Rashbrook, Chris Barritt, Alec Linstead

Directed by Nicholas Hytner

Designed by Mark Thompson

Lighting designed by Hugh Vanstone

Sound designed by Scott Myers

Music composed and arranged by Richard Sisson

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(See also page ii)

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CHARACTERS

Miss Shepherd, about 65
Alan Bennett, the author's public persona
Alan Bennett 2, his inner persona
Mam, Alan Bennett's mother, 60s
Rufus, Alan Bennett's neighbour
Pauline, Rufus's wife
Social Worker, female
Underwood, a dilapidated figure
Mam's Doctor
Leo Fairchild, Miss Shepherd's brother
Lout
Ambulance Driver
Miss Shepherd's Doctor
Interviewer
Priest
Council workmen, Undertakers, etc.

The action of the play takes place in Alan Bennett's house and garden and the street outside, in Camden, London

Time — 1974-1989

INTRODUCTION

After Miss Shepherd drove her van into my garden in 1974 friends used to ask me if I was planning to write a play about her. I wasn't, but twenty-five years later I have. There are plenty of reasons for the time-lag, the most obvious being that it would have been very difficult to write about her when she was alive and, as it were, on site.

"How can I write about her?" says one of the Alan Bennetts in the play. "She's *there*." And although the line was later cut it remains true.

Miss Shepherd's presence in the garden didn't, of course, stop me jotting things down, making notes on her activities and chronicling her various comic encounters. Indeed, in my bleaker moments it sometimes seemed that this was all there was to note down since nothing else was happening to me, hence, I suppose, the plaintive denials that make up the last speech in the play.

Still, there was no question of writing or publishing anything about her until she was dead or gone from the garden, and as time passed the two came to seem the same thing. Occasionally newspapers took an interest and tried to blow the situation up into a jolly news item, but again, as is said in the play, the ramparts of privacy were more impregnable in those pre-Murdoch days and she was generally left to herself. Even journalists who came to interview me were often too polite to ask what an (increasingly whiffy) old van was doing parked a few feet from my door. If they did enquire I would explain, while asking them to keep it to themselves, which they invariably did. I can't think that these days there would be similar discretion.

Miss Shepherd helped, of course, lying low if anybody came to my door, and at night straight away switching off her light whenever she heard a footstep. But though she was undoubtedly a recluse ("Is she", a neighbour once asked, "a genuine eccentric?"), Miss Shepherd was not averse to the occasional bout of celebrity. I came back one day to find her posing beside the van for a woman columnist (gender did count with Miss S.) who had somehow sweet-talked her into giving an interview, Miss Shepherd managing in the process to imply that I had over the years systematically stifled her voice. If she has since achieved any fame or notoriety through my having written about her, I suspect that she would think it no more than her due and that her position as writer of pamphlets and political commentator entitled her to public recognition or, as she says in the play, "the freedom of the land".

It was this imaginary celebrity — I think the psychological term for it is "delusion of reference" — that made her assume with every IRA bomb that she was next on the list. A disastrous fire in the Isle of Man meant, she was

certain, that the culprit would now target her, and had she been alive at the time of Princess Diana's death she would have taken it as a personal warning to avoid travelling (in the van as distinct from a high-powered Mercedes) under the Pont d'Alma. In the first (and much longer) draft of the play this obsession was examined in more detail:

Miss Shepherd Mr Bennett. Will you look under the van?

Alan Bennett What for?

Miss Shepherd One of these explosive devices. There was another bomb last night and I think I may be the next on the list.

Alan Bennett Why you?

Miss Shepherd Because of Fidelis Party. The IRA may have got wind of it with a view to thwarting of reconciliation attempts, possibly. Look under the van.

Alan Bennett I can't see anything because of all your plastic bags.

Miss Shepherd Yes and the explosive's plastic so it wouldn't show, possibly. Are there any wires? The wireless tells you to look for wires. Nothing that looks like a timing device?

Alan Bennett There's an old biscuit tin.

Miss Shepherd No. That's not a bomb. It's just something that was on offer at Finefare. I ought to have special protection with being a party leader, increased risk through subverting of democracy, possibly.

Alan Bennett Nobody knows you're leader of a party.

Miss Shepherd Well, it was on an anonymous footing but somebody may have spilled the beans. No organization is watertight.

It's said of Robert Lowell that when he regularly went off his head it took the form of thinking he could rub shoulders with Beethoven, Voltaire and other all-time greats, with whom he considered himself to be on equal terms. (Actually Isaiah Berlin, about whose sanity there was no doubt, made exactly the same assumption but that's by the way). The Virgin Mary excepted, Miss Shepherd's sights were set rather lower. Her assumed equals were Harold Wilson, Mr Heath and (as she always called him) "Enoch" and I was constantly being badgered to find out their private addresses so that they could be sent the latest copy of *True View*. Atypically for someone unbalanced, Miss Shepherd never seemed to take much interest in the Royal Family, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh never thought of as potential readers. This did not mean, though, that she was a disloyal subject and on the occasion of the Queen's jubilee in 1977 there was only one flag to be seen in our well-to-do socialist street and that was in the back window of the van where only I could see it.

To begin with I wrote the play in three acts, knowing, though, that these days this is not a popular format. Still, that's how Miss Shepherd's story

seemed to present itself, the first act consisting of her life in the street and culminating with her driving the van into the garden; the second act was life in the garden (all fifteen years of it), and the third act the events leading to her death and departure. The trouble with this way of telling the story was that whereas there was movement built into the first act (the lead-up to her arrival) and movement in the third (her decline and death), Act Two simply consisted of her being there, parked in the garden and going nowhere, the only movement me occasionally going up the wall. A second draft condensed the material into two acts, and though the passage of time within the play was perhaps not as clear, the passage of time within the theatre was altogether more acceptable, an hour each way quite enough for me. As Churchill said, the mind cannot take in more than the seat will endure.

Telling the truth crops up quite a bit in the play, what Miss Shepherd did or didn't do a subject of some disagreement between "the boys", as I tended to think of the two Alan Bennetts. They call not telling the truth "lying", but "the imagination" would be a kinder way of putting it, with Alan Bennett the writer finally winning through to make Miss Shepherd talk of her past (as she never actually did) and even to bring her back from the dead in order to take her bodily up to heaven (also imaginary). These departures from the facts were genuinely hard-won and took some coming to, causing me to reflect, not for the first time, that the biggest handicap for a writer is to have had a decent upbringing. Brought up not to lie or show off, I was temperamentally inclined to do both, particularly as a small child, and though reining me in perhaps improved my character it was no help in my future profession, where lying, or romancing anyway, is the essence of it. Nor did my education help. One of the difficulties I had in writing *The Madness of George III* was that, having been educated as a historian, I found it hard ever to take leave of the facts. With George III's first bout of madness the facts needed scarcely any alteration to make them dramatic and only a little tweaking was required, but even that I found hard to do. It was still harder to play around with the facts of Miss Shepherd's life, although the only person to know how much I may have doctored her history is me. And actually, while I've obviously had to compress a good deal, I haven't had to alter much at all. It's true, though, that a lengthier account of the events leading up to her moving into the garden with the van would make this development less dramatic, and less of a turning point.

What happened was that one night several of the van's windows were broken by two drunks, an incident that occurs in the play. This meant that Miss Shepherd was now much more at the mercy of the elements, the faded cretonne curtains which covered one or two of the windows her only protection from the weather and from prying eyes. I had a lean-to down some steps at the side of my house and now ran an electric lead out to this hut, so that on cold nights she could go in there to keep warm. Inevitably she began

to spend the night there on a regular basis, the van becoming part office, part wardrobe, a repository for her pamphlets and her clothes and the place where she would spend what she saw as her working day. As I write I see Michael Frayn walking up the street *en route* from his home to his office nearby, where he writes. Miss Shepherd's routine was not very different, in this instance as in others mentioned in the play her life not as dissimilar from that of her neighbours as they would have liked to think. They had offices to go to and so did she. They had second homes and, having acquired a Robin Reliant, so did she, a parallel which Miss Ferris, the irritatingly patient (and somewhat jargon-ridden) social worker in the play, is not slow to point out. But with Miss Shepherd going to and from her sleeping quarters in the hut to her office in the van it meant that I got used to her crossing the garden in front of my window, so that when she did finally move in, bags and all, it was neither the surprise nor the life-changing decision (for both of us) that the play perhaps implies.

Over the years Miss Shepherd was visited by a succession of social workers, so Miss Ferris is a composite figure. To begin with the social workers got short shrift, their only function in Miss Shepherd's view to procure her concessions from the council: another walking stick, an additional wheelchair "in case this one conks out, possibly" and (a dream she never attained) the electrified chair in which she saw herself moving regally through the streets of Camden Town.

A composite, too, are the neighbours, Pauline and Rufus, though I have made Rufus a publisher in remembrance of my neighbour, the late Colin Haycraft, the proprietor of Duckworth's. Married to the novelist Alice Thomas Ellis, he regarded Miss Shepherd with a sceptical eye, never moderating his (not unpenetrating) voice when he was discussing her, though she might well be in the van only a few feet away. He, I'm sure, thought I was mad to let her stay. Still, he came to her funeral and as the coffin was slid into the hearse he remarked loudly as ever, "Well, it's a cut above her previous vehicle." Like Rufus in the play, Colin had little time for feminism. I once asked him if he was jealous of his wife's literary success. "Good God, no. One couldn't be jealous of a woman, surely?"

Though the character of Underwood is a fiction, invented in order to hint at something unexplained in Miss Shepherd's past (and ultimately to explain it), he had, certainly as regards his appearance, a basis in fact. When the van was still parked in the street the late Nicholas Tomalin and I had been mobilized by Miss Shepherd to push it forward a few yards to a fresh location. I wrote in my diary: "As we are poised for the move another Camden Town eccentric materializes, a tall, elderly figure in a long overcoat and Homburg hat with a distinguished grey moustache and in his buttonhole a flag for the Primrose League. Removing a grubby canary glove he leans a shaking hand against the rear of the van in a token gesture of assistance and when we have

moved it the few statutory feet he puts the glove on again, saying grandly, 'If you should need me in the future I'm just around the corner' — i.e. in Arlington House."

For all the doubts I voice about tramps in the play, when one comes across such a fugitive from *Godot* it's hard not to think that Beckett's role as social observer has been underestimated.

I have allowed myself a little leeway in speculating about Miss Shepherd's concert career, though if, as her brother said, she had studied with Cortot she must have been a pianist of some ability. Cortot was the leading French pianist between the wars, Miss Shepherd presumably studying with him at the height of his fame. Continuing to give concerts throughout the Occupation, he finished the war under a cloud and it was perhaps this that sent him on a concert tour to England, where I remember seeing his photograph on posters sometime in the late forties. Perhaps Miss Shepherd saw it too, though by this time her hopes of a concert career must have been fading, a vocation as a nun already her goal.

Her war had been spent driving ambulances, a job for which she had presumably enlisted and been trained and which marked the beginning of her lifelong fascination with anything on wheels. Comically she figures in my mind alongside the Queen, who as Princess Elizabeth also did war service and as an ATS recruit was filmed in a famous piece of wartime propaganda changing the wheel on an army lorry, a vehicle my mother fondly believed HRH drove for the duration of hostilities.

What with land girls, nurses, Waafs, the ATS and Wrens, these were years of cheerful, confident, seemingly carefree women and I'd like to think of Miss Shepherd as briefly one of them, having the time of her life: accompanying a singsong in the NAAFI perhaps, snatching a meal in a British restaurant, then going to the pictures to see Leslie Howard or Joan Fontaine. It was maybe this taste of wartime independence that later unsuited her for the veil, or it may be, as her brother suggested, that she suffered shellshock after a bomb exploded near her ambulance. At any rate she was invalided out and this was when her troubles began, with, in her brother's view, the call of the convent a part of it.

I would have liked her concert career to have outlasted the war or to have resumed after the duration, when the notion of a woman playing the piano against psychological odds was the theme of the film *The Seventh Veil* (1945), with Ann Todd as the pianist Francesca and James Mason her tyrannical stick-wielding Svengali. Enormously popular at the time (and with it the Grieg Piano Concerto), the film set the tone for a generation of glamorous pianists, best known of whom was Eileen Joyce, who was reputed to change her frock between movements.

The Seventh Veil was subsequently adapted for the stage and I still have the programme of the matinee I saw at the Grand Theatre in Leeds in March

1951. The Grieg concerto had by this time been replaced by Rachmaninov Number 2 and James Mason by Leo Genn, but it was still Ann Todd, her guardian as ever bringing his stick down across her fingers as she cowered at the keyboard.

If Miss Shepherd had ever made it to the concert circuit this would be when I might have seen her, as I was by now going every week to symphony concerts in Leeds Town Hall where Miss Shepherd would have taken her place alongside Daphne Spottiswoode or Phyllis Sellick, Moura Lympany, Valda Aveling and Gina Bachauer — artistes with their *décolletée*, shawl-collared gowns as glamorous and imposing in my fourteen-year-old eyes as fashion models, Barbara Goalens of the keyboard, brought to their feet by the conductor to acknowledge the applause then sinking in a curtsy to receive the obligatory flowers, just as, in memory anyway, Miss Shepherd does in the play.

When I wrote the original account I glossed over the fact that Miss Shepherd's death occurred the same night that, washed and in clean things, she returned from the day centre. I chose not to make this plain because for Miss Shepherd to die then seemed so handy and convenient, just when a writer would (if a little obviously) have chosen for her to die. So I note that I was nervous not only of altering the facts to suit the drama but of even seeming to have altered them. But that night or in the early hours of the morning was when she did die, the nurse who took her to the day centre (who wasn't the social worker) saying that she had come across several cases when someone who had lived rough had seemed somehow to know that death was imminent and had made preparations accordingly, in Miss Shepherd's case not merely seeing that she was washed and made more presentable but the previous week struggling to confession and Mass.

A year or so earlier when Miss Shepherd had been ill I'd tried to get some help from what remained of the convent at the top of the street. I got nowhere but the visit confirmed me in my low opinion of nuns, or this particular order anyway. Another cut:

Alan Bennett 2 Nuns, it seems to me, took the wrong turning at the same time as British Rail. Around the time that porters were forced to forsake their black serge waistcoats, monkey jackets and oilcloth caps, so some monastic Dr Beeching decreed that nuns lose their billowing wimpled innocence and come on like prison wardresses in grey tricel twinsets.

Woman Yes?

Alan Bennett I live down the street.

Woman You do. I've seen you. It's you that has the van.

Alan Bennett Yes.

Woman Difficult woman.

Alan Bennett A Catholic.

Woman One of the sisters remembers her. You're not? Catholic.

Alan Bennett No.

Woman A novice. It may have been twice. Had two stabs at it. It takes a special type.

Alan Bennett 2 Cold brown lino on the floor, dimpled from being so often polished. Room spotless and uncomfoting, the only ornament a crucifix.

Woman It's not an ornament at all.

Alan Bennett I've been told she was very argumentative.

Woman Disputatious she was. I've had her pointed out to me on that account. Chalking on the pavement and so on.

Alan Bennett That's all in the past. Did she play the piano?

Woman She did not. This is a house of God. There is no piano here. Anyway what is it you want?

Alan Bennett She's ill.

Woman Who? The woman?

Alan Bennett I wondered if there was a nun available who could talk to her, do her some shopping.

Woman We don't have shopping nuns. It's a strict order.

Alan Bennett I've seen them shopping. I saw one yesterday in Marks and Spencer. She was buying meringues.

Woman The Bishop may have been coming.

Alan Bennett Does he like meringues?

Woman What business is it of yours what the Monsignor likes? Who are you, coming round asking if the Bishop likes meringues? Are you a communist?

Alan Bennett I just thought there must be nuns with time on their hands.

Woman They don't have time on their hands. That's what prayer is for.

Alan Bennett But she's ill. She's a Catholic. I think she may be dying.

Woman They can pray for her, only you'll have to fill in a form. She'll probably pull her socks up once your back is turned. That's been my experience where invalids are concerned.

I make no apology for the fact that Miss Shepherd makes great play with place names: St Albans, Bodmin, Hounslow, Staines. Since the oddity of place names is a staple of English comedy I might be accused of introducing Dunstable, say, for an easy laugh. I was once taken to task by a critic for using Burgess Hill in a play, a name devoid of comic overtones for me but thought by the critic to be a sure indicator of my triviality of mind. I'd actually just been hard put to think of a place and asked the actor who had the line (it was Valentine Dyll) where he lived, hence Burgess Hill. But with Miss Shepherd the extended landscape of places she had known was very real to this now largely stationary wanderer and they were still vivid in her mind as the objects of journeys she was always planning (and sometimes threatening) to make.

When our paths first crossed in the late sixties there was much less dereliction on the streets of London than there is today. Camden Town had its resident company of tramps and eccentrics, it's true, by no means all of them homeless or beggars, but they were as an aristocracy compared with the dozens of young poor and homeless that nowadays sleep in its doorways and beg on the streets. Several of these ancient archetypal figures were long-time residents of Arlington House, among the last of the Rowton Houses that provided cheap accommodation for working men in London, the one in Camden Town still happily functioning today. Nowadays, though, the windows of its individual cubicles look across to spacious executive apartments and over the restaurants, clubs and all the tawdry chaos of Camden Lock, which to my mind is far more offensive and destructive of the area than the beggars have ever been.

Another speech cut from the play:

There is a community in dereliction even though it may not amount to much more than passing round a bottle. This seems especially apparent in Camden Town, where the doorway of the periodically defunct Odeon or the steps of the drop-in centre opposite are home to a band of social dysfunct notable for their indiscriminate conviviality and sudden antipathies. Itinerant in that they periodically move on, or are made to do so, they do not go far, the premises of any enterprise that shows signs of faltering ("Shocking Discounts", "Everything Must Go") likely to be immediately roosted by this crew of slurred and contentious intoxicates.

Miss Shepherd, though, never thought of herself as a tramp. As a potential Prime Minister, how could she?

Alan Bennett 2 Our neighbourhood is peopled by several commanding widows and wives: there is Lady Pritchett, the wife of Sir Victor; there is Mrs Vaughan Williams, the widow of the composer, and occasionally to be seen is Elizabeth Jane Howard, the novelist and sometime wife of Kingsley Amis. All tall, grand roost-ruling women possessed of great self-confidence and assured of their position in the world. It is of this substantial sisterhood that Miss Shepherd sees herself as a natural member.

After Miss Shepherd died in April 1989 I had no immediate plans to write about her or any idea of the kind of thing I wanted to write but it was coming up to the tenth anniversary of the London Review of Books and I had promised Mary-Kay Wilmers that I would contribute something. So I put together an account of Miss Shepherd, using some of the material from my diaries and quoting from the pamphlets of hers that I had saved or rescued from the van. After this account had been published I had one or two stabs

at turning it into a play but without success. Miss Shepherd's story was not difficult to tell; it was my own story over the same period that defeated me. Not that there was a great deal to be said, but somehow the two stories had to interconnect. It was only when I had the notion of splitting myself into two that the problem seemed to solve itself.

Still, very little of my own life is revealed, too little for one of the Alan Bennetts, who, having brought the play to a conclusion, breaks back to speak directly to the audience (a function he's previously left to his partner): "Look. This has been one path through my life — me and Miss Shepherd. Just one track. I wrote things; people used to come and stay the night, and of both sexes. What I mean to say is, it's not as if it's the whole picture. Lots of other stuff happened. No end of things."

The device of having two actors playing me isn't just a bit of theatrical showing off and does, however crudely, correspond to the reality. There was one bit of me (often irritated and resentful) that had to deal with this unwelcome guest camped literally on my doorstep, but there was another bit of me that was amused by how cross this eccentric lodger made me and that took pleasure in Miss Shepherd's absurdities and her outrageous demands.

There is no satisfactory way of dubbing these two parts (I would not call them halves) of my personality, and even if "the writer" would do for one, what is the other? The person? The householder? Or (a phrase from the courts) "the responsible adult"? As I wrote them first they were like an old married couple, complaining and finding fault with one another, nothing one thought or said a surprise to the other. I then started to find more fun in their relationship, made it teasing and even flirtatious, a line that the actors Nicholas Farrell and Kevin McNally made more of in rehearsal.

Alan Bennett the author then became definitely more mischievous, more amoral than the Alan Bennett who goes out dutifully in his Marigold gloves in order to scoop his unsavoury lodger's poop, so that in some sense the division between them illustrates Kafka's remark that to write is to do the devil's work. Of course Kafka doesn't imply the converse, that scooping the poop (or fetching Miss Shepherd her sherbet lemons) is God's work. I never felt it so and resented neighbours or well-wishers who cast me in the saintly role, preferring to be thought of as a fool. Still, there was no way of ducking these attributions of goodness, as the more I rebutted them the more selfless I seemed. "Kind is so tame," says Kevin McNally in the play and that at least comes from the heart.

In one particular instance, I wish the part of me Kevin McNally plays had in life been more venturesome. The cheap commercialization of Camden High Street was just getting into its stride in 1989 when Miss Shepherd died but it was already far enough advanced for fliers about new boutiques and cafés to be put regularly through my door. At that time I let slip several opportunities that someone of a more mischievous temper than mine might

well have taken up. Being on the electoral roll, Miss Shepherd was sent as many circulars as I was, including several from restaurants offering a free dinner (generally candlelit) to potential customers. I didn't avail myself of any of these offers but I regret now that I didn't pass on her vouchers to Miss Shepherd, as I would quite like to have seen the scene in such a restaurant with Miss Shepherd scowling and slurping (and smelling), surrounded by the appalled residents of Primrose Hill.

We were fortunate with the play to have a long rehearsal period (five and a half weeks) plus two weeks of previews, a time in which the anticipated difficulties of getting the van on to the stage and hoisting it off could be dealt with. In the event there were few problems with the van or the Robin Reliant, which also does a tour of the stage. What took up the time was the text, in particular the presentation of the two selves. Should they be dressed alike, for instance, in sports coat, M&S corduroys, suede shoes, the clothes I like to think I just happened to be wearing when the designer, Mark Thompson, paid me a visit, but near enough, I suppose, to what I wear every day? But are these the proper garments of my inner voice? Should the other self be put into something more sophisticated and metropolitan, black trousers, perhaps, a black polo neck?

In the end we decided that would be simplistic and so the two selves were dressed alike, and though this means that some of the audience are a bit slow to understand what is going on, it is probably better and sillier (which I like) to make them Tweedledum and Tweedledee. They were luckier than Maggie Smith, who as Miss Shepherd had to deck herself out in a variety of outfits, many of them quick changes, which had to be achieved in the cramped interior of the van.

Over the years Miss Shepherd had four or five vans, of which in the stage production we see two: the one (donated by Lady Wiggin) which she drives on to the stage half-way through the first act, and another, supposedly the same, on which the curtain rises for Act II, but since this is several years later now transformed by Miss Shepherd's usual coat of scrambled egg or badly made custard. Miss Shepherd's fascination with any aid to locomotion meant that she over-supplied herself not only with vans but even with walking sticks, of which she had many, one of which Maggie Smith uses in the play. It still bears traces of Miss Shepherd's characteristic yellow paint, evidence of her last painting job done on the three-wheeler which she parked outside my gate, where (another relic) the kerb still shows a few tell-tale yellow spots.

The three-wheeler had a predecessor, a battered Mini, but this was stolen only a month or two after Miss Shepherd acquired it and it was later found abandoned in the basement of the council flats in Maiden Lane near King's Cross. Like the Reliant, its chief function had been as a supplementary wardrobe and it was thus heavily pervaded by Miss Shepherd's characteristic odour. I felt slightly sorry for the thieves (who were never, of course, caught),

imagining them making off with the vehicle and only as they sped illicitly through Camden Town being hit by the awfulness of what it contained, this realization signalled by expressions of vernacular fastidiousness such as “Do me a favour!”, “Cor, strike a light!” or, as the scent took hold, “Jesus wept!” So that when, having gone to Maiden Lane to recover some of her papers from the car, I found it bearing a Police Aware notice, I felt that it had, in this case, a heightened significance.

I have always spelled her name Shepherd but I think the correct spelling, if an assumed name can have a correct spelling, was Sheppard, the difference, I suppose, distinguishing between the character whom I knew and the one I have written about. At one early stage, out of a courtesy which was probably even then old-fashioned, I called her Mrs Shepherd, a designation which she did not immediately correct. Nowadays, of course, such delicacy seems misplaced, and also fanciful, because if she was Mrs Shepherd there must have been a Mr Shepherd and he would be very hard to imagine.

Miss Shepherd was solipsistic to a degree, and in her persistent refusal to take into account the concerns or feelings of anyone else except herself and her inability to see the world and what happened in it except as it affected her, she behaved more like a man than a woman. I took this undeviating selfishness to have something to do with staying alive. Gratitude, humility, forgiveness or fellow feelings were foreign to her nature or had become so over the years, but had she been otherwise she might not have survived as long as she did. She hated noise, though she made plenty, particularly when sitting in her three-wheeler on a Sunday morning revving the engine to recharge the battery. She hated children. Reluctant to have the police called when the van’s window had been broken and herself hurt, she would want the law summoning if there were children playing in the street and making what she considered too much noise or indeed any noise at all.

She inhabited a different world from ordinary humanity, a world in which the Virgin Mary could be encountered outside the Post Office in Parkway and Mr Khrushchev higher up the street; a world in which her advice was welcomed by world leaders and the College of Cardinals took note of her opinion. Seeing herself as the centre of this world, she had great faith in the power of the individual voice, even though it could only be heard through pamphlets photocopied at Prontaprint or read on the pavement outside Williams and Glyn’s Bank.

Though I never questioned Miss Shepherd on the subject, what intrigued me about the regular appearances put in by the Virgin Mary was that she seldom turned up in her traditional habiliments; no sky-blue veil for her, still less a halo. Before leaving heaven for earth the BVM always seemed to go through the dressing-up box so that she could come down as Queen Victoria, say, or dressed in what sounded very much like a sari. And not only her. One of my father’s posthumous appearances was as a Victorian statesman and an

old tramp, grey-haired and not undistinguished, was confidently identified as St Joseph (though minus his donkey), just as I was taken briefly for St John.

With their fancy dress and a good deal of gliding about, it was hard not to find Miss Shepherd's visions comic, but they were evidence of a faith that manifestly sustained her and a component of her daily and difficult life. In one of her pamphlets she mentions the poet Francis Thompson, who was as Catholic as she was (and who lived in similar squalor). Her vision of the intermingling of this world and the next was not unlike his:

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
 Cry: — and upon thy so sore loss
 Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
 Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.
 Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
 Cry, — clinging Heaven by the hems;
 And lo, Christ walking on the water
 Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

It's now ten years since Miss Shepherd died, but hearing a van door slide shut will still take me back to the time when she was in the garden. For Marcel, the narrator in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the sound that took him back was that of the gate of his aunt's idyllic garden; with me it's the door of a broken-down Commer van. The discrepancy is depressing but then most writers discover quite early on that they're not going to be Proust. Besides, I couldn't have heard my own garden gate because in order to deaden the (to her) irritating noise Miss Shepherd had insisted on me putting a piece of chewing gum on the latch.

This is the third of my plays to have been directed by Nicholas Hytner and designed by Mark Thompson and I am, as ever, greatly in their debt. Without Nicholas Hytner's encouragement and his help with the text the play could not have been staged; he is an ideal collaborator and all any playwright could want in a director.

I would like to thank the cast, too, for their help in shaping and animating the text, particularly, of course, Maggie Smith, who brought Miss Shepherd to the stage and whose wit, perception and sheer fun made the play a joy to do.

A. B.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Music

The hymn sung by the novices at the start of the play should be familiar and common to both Catholic and Anglican congregations and, if possible, Nonconformist congregations too, thus giving it the widest possible appeal. In this production we used *As Pants the Hart* (Tune: All Saints) partly because it was familiar but also because the notion of a chase seemed apt.

The piano music which is repeated at various points in the play was originally intended to be Schubert's Andante in B Flat Major but this was perhaps too lyrical and we ended up using Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 27, Opus 90 in E Minor. The piano climax which ends Act I was also Beethoven, the end of Piano Sonata No. 23, Opus 57, the "Apassionata".

When Miss Shepherd is praying and the van takes on its unearthly aspect it was accompanied by faint spectral bells and when it gloriously ascends into heaven at the end of Act II it does so to Richard Sisson's celestial choir.

The Vehicles

I am not sure how many vans Miss Shepherd had in the time that I knew her, but it was at least three and possibly five. In the play there are three vans, only two of which are actually seen. The first unseen vehicle is the one Miss Shepherd asks Alan Bennett to push down Albany Street at the start of the play and which she subsequently parks in his street. For the purposes of the action this is taken to be off stage left. Half-way through Act I this van is removed by the council and it is its replacement, still in its original trim, that is driven on to the stage by Miss Shepherd and parked, as it were, in Alan Bennett's garden.

It is still there when the curtain rises on Act II, but by now it is painted Miss Shepherd's favourite scrambled-egg yellow. This in practical terms means that during the interval the first-act van has to be switched for an identical one painted in yellow. It is this switch which necessitates the use of a front cloth, because otherwise some element of surprise would be lost. And, of course, it's not only that the van has been painted yellow; it's also been festooned with odd bits of carpet and the underneath stuffed with bulging plastic bags, all of which have accumulated over the years.

Not long into Act II, Miss Shepherd drives her Robin Reliant on to the stage. This too is in its original trim and when she reverses it off stage it's again notionally parked in the street off stage left, where she spends a good deal of time painting it and revving it up. This revving up, which was generally done on a Sunday morning, was intended to recharge the battery. I thought it useless as I was under the impression the wheels had to go round

Author's Notes

before the battery was charged. I said as much in the book of *The Lady in the Van*, and then had shoals of letters pointing out what a fool I was. So Miss Shepherd had the last laugh there too.

The van was parked laterally across the stage with the bonnet stage centre so that facing the audience was the sliding door through which the audience got a glimpse of its festering interior. However, in the interludes when we see Miss Shepherd at prayer, which if not magical are at least unearthly, the van slowly revolved so that the bonnet was upstage and the rear doors faced the audience. These double doors then magically (and silently) opened to reveal Miss Shepherd at her devotions. I had hoped that we could have taken this magical element even further and split the van to form some kind of diptych, but if it could have been done it would have been ruinously expensive and (I tell myself) might not have worked.

Staging

Scenes are generally quite short and flow into one another. Scenes occasionally begin with a slight pause (as in the social worker's first meeting with Alan Bennett), the pause indicating that a question (which the audience knows is coming) has already been asked. One critic complained that this was a revue-style format, as if it were something I had overlooked rather than made a feature of the play's construction. One sighs but goes on: a critic made exactly the same criticism of my first play more than thirty years ago.

There are no doors or doorbells, so that when Miss Shepherd comes into the house or over to the desk she does not waste time by ringing the bell but walks straight in. This is a stage convention but it is not unlike Miss Shepherd's usual behaviour when, though she had to ring the bell, she would try if she could not to linger on the doorstep ("I can't stand the noise. I'm a sick woman.") but slip past me into the hall and sit on the stairs.

Alan Bennett is played by two actors, Alan Bennett, who takes part in the action, and Alan Bennett 2, who describes and comments on it. They are dressed identically (sports coat, shirt, plain coloured tie, grey pullover and corduroy trousers with suede shoes) and though the play covers a period of twenty years during which there were some startling changes in fashion (flares, for instance), these changes are not reflected in the Alan Bennetts, who remain the same throughout. This too, I have to admit, is not just a production device but a fair reflection of the facts.

To establish the difference in their roles Alan Bennett 2 should, to begin with at any rate, remain tethered to his desk so that his function as writer and observer is made plain. He is taken to be invisible to the other characters, nor does he talk, except to himself, as it were, and to the audience. It's only after Miss Shepherd dies that he becomes visible to her and available for conversation, whereupon, true to form, she plays him off against his other self.

A.B.

Other plays by Alan Bennett published by Samuel French Ltd:

Enjoy

Getting On

Habeas Corpus

Kafka's Dick (revised)

Office Suite:

Green Forms *and* A Visit from Miss Protheroe

The Old Country

Say Something Happened

Single Spies:

An Englishman Abroad *and* A Question of Attribution

Talking Heads:

Bed Among the Lentils

A Chip in the Sugar

A Cream Cracker Under the Settee

Her Big Chance

A Lady of Letters

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