

## The Lady in the Van

This film, announced as a “mostly true story,” offers one of those eccentric, idiosyncratic accounts that probably could only happen in England. It concerns the slow invasion by one Mary Shepherd (Smith), homeless but living in a decrepit Bedford van, into the life of British author, playwright, and wit Alan Bennett (Alex Jennings) when her vehicle, on its last gasp, is pushed into Bennett’s driveway at his home in Camden Town, London. This might seem merely inconvenient, but the unimaginable part is that Shepherd squatted in her van for 15 years before she finally passed way, the super-mellow writer tolerating her, assisting her, mildly berating her, and—most usefully—finally writing about her.

While Bennett churns out some of his country’s best writings over this period, he always has Miss Mary as a ready-made subject, with her combination of a sense of entitlement, a stern demand for privacy, gad-about thinking, and the need for a lavatory. Bennett’s first version of the story, done with Maggie Smith, came in a stage play in 1999 (one year after Shepherd died). Ten years later, he wrote an radio adaptation of their arrangement for the BBC.

In his screenplay, Bennett presents a second, brooding version of himself, a tougher conscience in the same wardrobe wandering around his home advising his more benign author self to either give the woman short shrift or to fully tackle her as a subject for creative output. This alter ego allows Bennett to play what likely were two sides to the real Alan Bennett’s attitude as he contemplated his testy squatter: one side perturbed by her troublesome presence and the other side, with the best British sangfroid, simply accepting his peculiar situation.

In his narrative, Bennett raises the stakes a little by giving Miss Mary an intriguing backstory, one that adds a new wrinkle to the plot—and provides a lovely excuse to incorporate Chopin’s sublime First Piano Concerto into the sound track—but this element is small potatoes compared to the core element of the film: the delicate interaction between Bennett and Ms. Shepherd.

Alex Jennings is one of those versatile English character actors in their mid-50’s who Anglophiles will recognize from a miscellany of TV shows and films (perhaps most notably as Prince Charles opposite Helen Mirren in “The Queen”) but whose acting life has essentially been a theatrical one. Here, impeccably displaying the real Bennett’s somewhat prissy delivery, he is spot on, the slightly fuzzy-minded but clear-spoken master of the literate comedy-drama. He makes a charming foil to the hell-hath-no fury of Maggie Smith as Mary.

Smith, of course, is perfect as the troubled Shepherd, the part having been written for her and polished to a shine by her theater and radio performances. Both garrulous and secretive, both truly nutty and surprisingly perceptive, she dominates “The Lady in the Van” as she more or less comes to dominate the serene neighborhood where she stays with both her grotesque sense of privilege combined with a flinty vulnerability. Typical of her demanding yet crass qualities are evident in this exchange:

Miss Shepherd (to Bennett): What with all this to-do, I think I'm about to be taken short. (then making a beeline for Bennett's open front door). Can I use your lavatory?

Alan Bennett: No! Uh... the flush is on the blink.

Miss Shepherd: I don't mind.

Priceless!

*(The film runs 103 mins. and is rated "PG-13.")*

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