

Why a dirty look from Dame Maggie is worth £1m to the West End

By Nigel Reynolds, Arts Correspondent

TYPECASTING is the enemy of actors. And though Dame Maggie Smith has a record second to none for portraying imperious English aristocrats, she has also played drunks, a notable school ma'am (in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) and won an Oscar as a neurotic actress in *California Suite*.

But even admirers of her versatility will be taken a little aback when she appears in the West End next week as a grime-stained tramp begging for coppers.

Her jaw-dropping appearance — she resembles a miner — is not achieved by prosthetic skin but by assiduous use of make-up.

The 64-year-old actress takes the lead role in *The Lady in the Van*, one of the most eagerly awaited plays of the year. It is the stage adaptation of Alan Bennett's extraordinary true story of a bag lady, Mary Shepherd, whom he allowed to live at the bottom of his garden in a succession of rusting vans for 15 years before she died there in 1986.

"She [Dame Maggie] has been completely game about looking so dirty," said Mark Thompson, the play's designer. "I was worried that she would be reticent but she has thrown herself into being Mary Shepherd completely.

"When you are close to



Wonderful: Dame Maggie as we know her

her she looks even dirtier than she seems on stage. The dirt is ingrained under her fingernails but she always manages to get clean to go home."

Her performances in previews this week have been described as *tours de force*. The paucity of quality straight dramas in the West End and the combination of Dame Maggie and Bennett, one of the country's best-loved writers, will almost certainly make the play a candidate for a hatful of awards next year.

Costing £400,000, the production at the Queen's Theatre opens on Tuesday and has already taken more than £1 million, an astonishing sum for a non-musical. Dame Maggie wears a mixture of clothes bought from charity shops

and items — notably a skirt of dusters sewn together — made for her.

But even the cast-offs did not breathe the right calibre of grime. Mr Thompson said: "As the previews have gone on, we have had to break them down more and more. Alan [Bennett] kept saying Miss Shepherd was quite tidy but filthy.

"Each day we have put more grease, soup, varnish, dust and paint on her costumes. We have torn them and even rubbed them with a cheese-grater and we feel they are about right now."

The play is directed by Nicholas Hytner, who was responsible for two of Bennett's biggest hits at the National Theatre, *The Madness of George III* and *The Wind in the Willows*. Hytner also went on to direct the hit film version of the former.

But the mixture of Hytner and Dame Maggie is potentially explosive. The only time they have worked together was in *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the West End in 1993. There were backstage tensions, to put it mildly.

Dame Maggie, a perfectionist, was reported to be dissatisfied.

Hytner was diplomatic in his explanation of the difficult chemistry. "I think she's absolutely wonderful," he said. "I just feel I did not measure up to her."