

Reviews

Theatre

Epitome of a hermit

The Lady in the Van

Queen's Theatre, London

★★★

We've met her in book, magazine and radio form. What can the stage add to Alan Bennett's now famous saga of Miss Shepherd, who lived in a van in his front garden for the best part of 15 years? Principally it can add Maggie Smith who plays this cantankerous eccentric with an honesty and truth that makes it her best and most disciplined performance in many years.

Bennett also gives a familiar story new form by neatly bifurcating his own narrative presence. Bennett One (Nicholas Farrell) is the actively solicitous helper who guards, protects, shops for and cleans up after his unsought garden occupant. Bennett Two (Kevin McNally) is his watchful, critical writerly self who questions his better half's motives and who turns his derelict van lady into copy. It's a clever device in that it embodies the division that has struck anyone who has read the original Bennett journal: that his saintly forbearance with Miss Shepherd was matched by a gimlet-eyed awareness of her future literary potential.

Miss Shepherd, with her peremptoriness, her pong and her crazed piety, is the evening's ostensible protagonist. But the play becomes a public self-examination in which Bennett, simultaneously coping with his increas-

ingly incapacitated mother, asks why his life is dominated by elderly women. But while the double narration embodies Bennett's own condition of existing permanently in two minds, it is not quite enough to give the evening a strong dramatic dynamic.

If the play exists below the level of Bennett's vintage best, it is largely because the questions its prompts are all inherent in the original journal.

But there is still great pleasure to be had from watching Smith's performance. With her peaked cap, scarfed head, rag-bag clothes and splayed feet she is the epitome of the curmudgeonly hermit. She also is careful not to sentimentalise the character. When her van is banned from the public highway, she glares balefully at Bennett and cries "What I need is off-street parking" knowing that his nerve will crack first.

Constantly biting the hand that houses her, Smith displays the unforgiving quality of those to whom charity is extended. Yet when she emerges from a day centre scrubbed and cleaned, she also suggests the old woman's fragile beauty. Making you like and dislike the character much as Bennett himself did, it is a performance that arouses a complex compassion.

In Nicholas Hytner's well-ordered production the two Bennetts are also well played. Michael Culkin and Geraldine Fitzgerald do all they can with a pair of variably sympathetic neighbours but the evening chiefly leaves you admiring Maggie Smith's inhabitation of Miss Shepherd and Bennett's own self-questioning spirit.

Michael Billington



Maggie Smith: Her best and most disciplined performance in years Photograph: Neil Libbert

Pop

Tomorrow's rock heroes today

Yo La Tengo

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

★★★★

In the world of rock clichés, a band strutting off stage to an

interminable drone of squealing feedback is as irritating and irrelevant as it gets. It is typical of Yo La Tengo's contrary approach that they amble on stage and open with a huge, 15-minute song (Night Falls on Hoboken, from the yet-to-be-released album And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside-Out), whose whisper of tender melodies, brush drums and fragile vocals drifts into the

most incandescent feedback of the night.

Watching Ira Kaplan thoughtfully press his guitar towards his two amps and lay threads of wire across its frets is to comprehend the difference between feedback as egotistical over-indulgence and the considered manipulation of the unpredictable. Like a musical Jackson Pollock, Kaplan splatters sounds to create something haphazard

Van Billington Guardian

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