

The Van that is purely a vehicle for Dame Maggie



Dame Maggie with Nicholas Farrell (left) and Kevin McNally take their bows at the first night

Picture: DILLON BRYDEN

DAME Maggie Smith returns to the London stage in a little blaze of sensation. She is dressed in a black helmet, green socks, the remnants of a dress and the regalia of a veteran tramp. Her bird-like face is a dirty misfortune. Her eyes shoot glances of fear and confusion. This is some crazed Lady Bracknell reduced to vagrant status, clinging to the wreckage of her dignity, so down on her luck she will never pick it up again. Delusions of importance make her world go round.

No one makes more disturbing fun of the trials of senility than



FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh
The Lady in the Van
Queen's Theatre

Dame Maggie Smith. As the genteel tramp, Miss Shepherd, who parked her van and her problems in the driveway of Alan Bennett's house for 15 years, Dame Maggie displays the trappings of down-at-heel eccentricity with imperious grandeur. Her performance is the evening's saving grace. For sadly, *The Lady in the Van* is more of a

display than a play, a vehicle for Maggie Smith to ride her inventive way to comic triumph. Bennett has concocted a soufflé, all dressed up to resemble the square meal it is not. Miss Shepherd originally occupied about 30 pages of Bennett's Diaries, where she led him a vexing dance with her demands, delusions and foul

body odours. Bennett has tried to develop his diary sketch into a full revealing portrait.

He briefly conjectures how Miss Shepherd's early promise as a brilliant pianist in Paris was snuffed out in the haze of mental breakdown. But Bennett is too interested in giving Dame Maggie chances to be quaintly mad in the service of Miss Shepherd's fantasies.

"I should have the freedom of the land, not to mention free resident's parking," Dame Maggie, grave of face and querulous of tone, complains in a typical alliance of grandeur and canny

self-interest. Miss Shepherd's days are picturesquely full of visions — snakes and Mr Kruschev are sighted in Parkway. Fame won't let her be. They want her hanging out on Petticoat Lane and taking over at 10 Downing Street.

Bennett by insisting he wants to be alone, free from prying journalists, has made himself the Greta Garbo of Gloucester Terrace. His plays and published Diaries, however, keep bringing him into intimate view. So here too. On Mark Thompson's evocative stage set with its facade of both Gloucester Terrace and the author's living room, the figures of two Alan Bennetts appear. Kevin McNally, almost a dead ringer for the author, serves as the withdrawn, ruminative narrator while Nicholas Farrell is the Alan who engages head-on with real-life people. There's not much fun or illumination to be captured in the close encounters from either self. Bennett's confused mother (Elizabeth Bradley) as obsessed by cleanliness as Miss Shepherd is indifferent to it, helps show what guilts and pricks of conscience are stirred in the long-suffering author by elderly women.

THE smooth-flowing production by Nicholas Hytner doesn't disguise the play's revue-style format, with its caricatured cluster of rich neighbours, social workers and doctors. There's a brief, glorious finale, though, when Dame Maggie ceases to sound like a refugee from Pinterland. Face and voice suffused with rapture and elation, she recalls her lost life as a pianist and happiness destroyed by a regiment of nuns. Only then does an emotionally devastating Dame Maggie put *The Lady in the Van* on the right tracks.

Ratings: — O adequate
★ good,
★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
X poor
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I'm your van:
Robbie Williams, pictured left with a companion, offered his acting services; Vic Reeves with Emilia Fox



Big names in theatre flock to the first night

THE combination of Dame Maggie and Alan Bennett has already persuaded theatregoers to part with over £1 million at the box office and it was no surprise to see some of the most influential figures in British theatre at the first night, writes Robin Stringer
Sir Cameron Mackintosh was

there as was Sir David Hare, Almeida Theatre director Jonathan Kent, playwright Patrick Marber and both Dame Maggie's sons, Chris and Toby Stephens.
Dame Maggie, now 64, did appear at the after-show party in the theatre, where among the guests was Robbie Williams,

friend of producer Robert Fox. He said: "It was a great show and everyone in it was amazing," he said, and even offered to be another lady in the van should one be required.
However, comedian Vic Reeves found the evening "quite dreary". No laughs for him then? "No there wasn't," he said.