

**THE LADY IN THE VAN****2016****104 minutes**Directed by **Nicholas Hytner**

Starring: Maggie Smith, Alex Jennings, Alan Bennet, James Corden, Frances de la Tour, Dominic Cooper

The Lady in the Van tells the true story of Alan Bennett's somewhat strained friendship with Miss Mary Shepherd, a crabby, eccentric and unsanitary homeless woman whom Bennett befriended in the 1970s before allowing her to park her Bedford van in the driveway of his Camden home "for three months". She ended up residing there for 15 years. As the story develops, Bennett learns Miss Shepherd's true identity: Margaret Fairchild, a gifted former pupil of the pianist Alfred Cortot. She had played Chopin at The Proms, attempted to become a nun, was committed to an institution by her brother, escaped, had an accident when her van was hit by a motorcyclist for whose death she believed herself to blame, and thereafter lived in fear of arrest. Much of the dialogue is between two versions of Bennett – his "real self" and his "writer self". During her 15-year stay in his drive, Bennett balances his writing career with watching over Shepherd and providing for his increasingly invalid mother. Though he denies "caring" for anyone, he slowly becomes aware of his growing friendship with Shepherd. After coming home early from a day centre he sent her to, she dies peacefully in her sleep in her van. Alan decides to write a memoir covering the years he has known her. In 2014, the real Bennett is shown observing this film's final scene being filmed: his younger self unveiling a blue plaque on his home dedicated to "The Lady in the Van".

Critics' comments:

-There's no use fending off the force of nature that is Smith. Sensitive and formidable, self-deprecating and brave, she elevates every role she's in, as we know by now.(from *Washington Post*)

-In Ms. Smith's tough, level headed performance, Mary is an irascible termagant full of batty notions clutching on to life as best she can. She is hard to like, and that's good.(from *New York Times*)

-A delicately written, boisterously performed movie about the difficult people who dare us to care about them.(from *Los Angeles Times*)