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The Lady in the Van – Review

Maggie Smith (Downton Abby) manages to be rude, defiant, oddly **charming** - and for much of the film a mystery - in The Lady in the Van, the “mostly true” biopic by Nicholas Hytner.

Smith plays Miss Shepherd, a **homeless** woman living in a parked **van** next to a playwright's home in London's Camden Town neighborhood. Despite her attitude and **foul** smell, she establishes a strange **bond** with the **playwright** (Alan Bennett, played by Alex Jennings), who is too **timid** to kick her out of his parking space. Eventually, she ends up living at his **doorstep** for the next 15 years.



As seen through Bennett's eyes, Miss Shepherd is both a **comical** figure and a tragic one, **shabbily** dressed, **reeking** to high heaven and driving slowly and erratically in her Bedford van. She is **ferocious**, especially when the neighbours' children are practicing their musical instruments (something she cannot stand), or when Bennett is being **nosy** and trying to peer into her van. She lacks any gratitude and won't reward the do-gooders who



give her Christmas presents and plates of crème brûlée with so much as a **nod**, let alone a thank you. At the same time, Smith conveys her character's strange **guilt**, fearfulness and obstinacy. She is **obnoxious** in the extreme but you half admire her anyway.

It is a very British comedy, which throws in references to Radio 4, Margaret Thatcher (Miss Shepherd bears a passing resemblance) and elements of **slapstick**. The screenplay touches on guilt, **atonement** and how nastily **nuns** can behave. It is sad and funny at the same time and a tribute to British **eccentricity**. Nobody could possibly play this role better than Maggie Smith, one of Britain's great acting treasures.



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