

PEOPLE

Programme Notes - 2:30 pm Saturday 16th November 2013

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Theatre Royal Plymouth for a new play written by Alan Bennett which is touring England this autumn.

I am Denise your audio describer for the first Act of this brilliantly funny comedy which lasts for two and a half hours including a twenty minute interval.

Before I set the scene and give you descriptions of the cast, their characters and costumes, let me give you some background to the play and the writer.

Alan Bennett first appeared on stage in 1960 with Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller in the revue *Beyond the Fringe*. Since then he has received much acclaim both as a writer and director. Not least for the play *The History Boys* which opened at the National Theatre in 2004. It then went on to tour nationally and internationally and played for two seasons in the West End and Broadway. Also the film *The Madness of King George*, which was nominated for two Oscars, he has also written several books.

Alan Bennett introduces *People* by saying that some plays seem to start with an itch, an irritation, something one cannot solve or a feeling one cannot locate. With *People* it was a sense of unease when going round a National Trust house and being required to buy into the role of reverential visitor.

This fine play which takes a rather comedic swipe at the National Trust - reunites Alan Bennett and Director Nicholas Hytner

following their collaborations on the celebrated *The History Boys* and *The Habit of Art*.

The play is set in a crumbling stately home owned by the rather dysfunctional and impoverished, but aristocratic Stacpoole family. Dorothy, now in her seventies, was once a successful model who faces the choice of auctioning off the house, letting the National Trust open it to visitors, or selling it to a shady consortium.

Her younger sister June is an archdeacon and wants to hand the estate over to the care of the National Trust. However, Dorothy describes the National Trust as a "pretend England" - so decent, so worthy, so dull and favours a more creative solution. Indeed she wonders if she could make a killing by selling the house to a sinister commercial concern, which believes ordinary people spoil things.

Now to the scene, set, cast and costumes.

The curtain rises to reveal a large shabby room in a very run down but obviously at one time a grand stately home. A sheet covers the high ceiling. Doors lead off the wall at the back on either side and there are long white double doors to the right leading off to other rooms where some filming is taking place. The light showing through catches just a glimpse of a tapestry on the wall. Above the double doors is a family crest in white and gold. On the deep red walls hang some ancestral paintings, but there are also some empty spaces where once there were others. Unlit wall lights are on either side of the room. On the left are two long shuttered windows, loosely draped in long red velvet curtains, above which are red pelmets with gold scallop edging.

A tall ladder leans against the back wall where a large sheet covers most of the wall, hiding some other ancestral treasures. Dust sheets cover various pieces of furniture scattered randomly throughout the room.

On the left against the wall is a small mahogany side table with two narrow drawers, beside which is a chair covered in a dust sheet. On the floor in front resting on old newspapers, are four large containers, one of which looks like a discarded period bath. This is to catch any water from the leaky pipes in the bathroom above.

On the right is more furniture covered in dust sheets, but a similar small table against the wall is presently being used as a drinks table.

To the front and centre on a dusty rug are two rather old and tatty armchairs. The one to the left has a hand knitted throw over the back of it with a small low table to the left on which sits a reading lamp. Underneath the table is a knitting basket.

The other chair to the right has a travel rug thrown across the arm, beside it is a similar small table with a glass on it.

There are also two other rugs either side of these chairs. In front is a small old fashioned single bar electric fire. The room is cold.

The opening scene begins with two women both in their seventies sat in armchairs in front of the fire. Dorothy is tall and grand but wears an old long moth eaten fur coat over check pyjamas, dark socks and plimsolls. She also has a long scarf draped around her neck and her white hair is swept back in a bun.

Iris is knitting with fingerless gloves in the chair to the left. She is similarly shabby with shoulder length grey hair. She has on an old

tweed jacket over a blouse and a brown skirt, short striped socks and old slippers.

Dorothy reacts to the sounds coming from the filming in the room next door, but Iris remains impervious to everything that is going on around her.

In the next scene Bevan - a smartly dressed young man in his thirties with an upper-class voice, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase - is taking an itinerary of the house, particularly taking note of the Adam furniture and the Chippendale desk. Also picking up items that he feels would be money making. He is not from the National Trust but from a commercial concern.

Meanwhile June the archdeacon appears, wearing a clerical collar and scarf, green cardigan, brown skirt and flat brown shoes under a white mac and carrying a shoulder bag. June favours The National Trust option and is soon introducing Dorothy to Ralph Lumsden and indeed the benefits of the house in the hands of the National Trust.

Whilst all this is going on, Theodore appears - providing yet another although rather spurious solution to the future of the house. He is a suave figure of a man - slightly younger than Dorothy - elegantly dressed in a suit with a long overcoat draped around his shoulders. He appears wearing dark glasses and surprises Dorothy whom he finds asleep.

The three main characters in Act One are:-

Dorothy Stacpoole - the eldest aristocratic sister of this stately family - played by Sian Phillips. Her extensive acting career includes

many memorable roles and in 2000 Sian was awarded a CBE for her Services to Drama.

June Stacpoole - the younger bossy sister of Dorothy, is played by Selina Cadell. As well as her extensive experience in theatre, television and films, she also directs theatre and teaches acting at RADA, The Royal Opera House and the National Opera Studio. She is also part of the Theatreworks team at the National Theatre.

Iris - Dorothy's long standing but rather downtrodden companion is played by Brigit Forsyth. As well as her many theatre roles, she is probably still remembered for her appearance in the TV series of "Whatever happened to the Likely Lads". Brigit also plays the cello and sings with The Fircones.

So sit back, relax and enjoy what promises to be a richly enjoyable evening with this outrageously funny and at times provocative comedy.

Denise Reeves - Audio Describer

Words 1256 - approximately 8 minutes