Alton Fringe Theatre

Presents

Talking Heads

Alan Bennett
Cast

Lesley (Her Big Chance)  Jo Foulkes
Doris (A Cream Cracker Under the Settee)  Chris Chappell
Graham (A Chip in the Sugar)  Tim Guilding
Muriel (Soldiering On)  Alison de Ledesma
Susan (Bed Among the Lentils)  Barbara Rayner
Miss Ruddock (A Lady of Letters)  Jo Hopkins
Composer/Instrumentalist  Steve Gerlach

Backstage

Lighting  Andy Stickland
Props/stage management  Sarah Castle-Smith
Anita Applegarth

Photographs  Ian Dumelow

Front of House  Morris Hopkins and friends of the Fringe

Publicity/Box Office  David and Lesley Rae

Website/Poster Images/Tickets  James Willis

Tea Party (Sat 14th December)  Lesley Willis, Penny Cushing, Sarah Castle-Smith

Assistant Director  Louise Dilloway

Director  Catherine Gerlach

Special thanks to Owain Lewis (Head of Drama, Amery Hill School) for letting us use the Studio and for all his encouragement during rehearsals and the performances. In addition we are grateful to the site Team of Amery Hill for their helpfulness. We are also indebted to The Gilded Cabinet, 29 Anstey Road, Alton for providing box office support.
Alan Bennett was born in Leeds in 1934 and attended Oxford University, where he studied history and performed with the Oxford Review. He stayed to teach and research Medieval History at the University for several years. His collaboration, as writer and performer, with Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook, in the satirical review” Beyond The Fringe” at the 1960 Edinburgh Festival brought him instant fame.

He gave up academia and turned to writing full time. His first stage play, “Forty Years On”, was produced in 1968. His work includes “The Madness of George 111” and its film adaptation “The Madness of King George”, the series of monologues “Talking Heads”, the play and subsequent film “The History Boys” and popular audio books including his readings of “Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland” and “Winnie The Pooh”.

There are two series of Talking Heads, six monologues in each, along with an earlier 1982 play, “A Woman of No Importance”, which while not released alongside “Talking Heads” generally fits into the canon. Although the plays deal with a variety of subjects, there are certain recurring themes, such as death, illness, guilt and isolation.

Most of the plays give some hint as to where they are set, mostly in Leeds, although not (as Bennett stresses) the “real Leeds”, but rather one that exists in his head. They were written for BBC television and were first broadcast in 1988 and 1998. They have since been broadcast on BBC radio and included on the A-level and GCSE English Literature syllabus.
**Her Big Chance**  (Wednesday and Saturday 2\textsuperscript{nd} performance)

Lesley is an actress. A true professional. She was a Woman in Musquash in *Crossroads*. Now she has the part of Travis after a chance encounter with an electrician called Spud. She is on a deck of a yacht, rubbing in sun tan lotion on a cloudy day in Lee-on-Solent...

**A Cream Cracker Under the Settee**  (Thursday, Friday and Saturday 1\textsuperscript{st} performance)

Doris sits in the chair, a widow in her seventies, alone: She’ll feel better soon. One leg’s numb after the fall. She shouldn’t have climbed on the buffet to do the dusting. Zulema the home help will tell her off, as she always does, but she’s gone home now. Just have to wait...

**A Chip in the Sugar**  (Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday 1\textsuperscript{st} performance)

“*I didn’t say anything*” is the phrase most uttered by Graham, a lonely middle aged bachelor. Chronically dependent upon his mother, Graham finds life difficult enough, but when Mother meets an old flame, and, is there someone watching the house? Graham’s old insecurities rear their ugly head again....
**Soldiering On**  (Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday 2\textsuperscript{nd} Performance)

Muriel has been left “rather well off” after the death of her husband Ralph. Her persistent cheerfulness and optimism masks a self-deception and moral blindness to the motivations of her son Giles as she submits to his financial plans. An icy note strikes concerning her daughter Margaret: “Daddy’s little girl”...

**Bed Among the Lentils**  (Friday and Saturday 2\textsuperscript{nd} performance)

Susan is a failure when it comes to jam-making and flower-arranging. In addition she is not at all sure about God, which is a pity for her as she is married to Geoffrey a popular, although patronizing vicar. Seeking solace in alcohol, Susan meets the wonderful shopkeeper, Mr Ramesh: “he has lovely teeth”...

**A Lady of Letters**  (Friday and Saturday 1\textsuperscript{st} performance)

Miss Ruddock writes letters: letters of complaint, comment and, occasionally, officious praise for various government departments. There is no subject out of bounds for Miss Irene Ruddock: dog dirt, a hair in a sausage, the local crematorium. Until one day she writes a letter about the child living opposite....
Director’s notes

“Talking Heads 1” Alan Bennett

Welcome to the Alton Fringe Theatre’s production of a series of monologues written originally for television, each a reflection of Alan Bennett’s piercingly observant view of British idiosyncrasy, culture and mentality. They are as remarkable as they are mundane.

In embarking upon this project, it quickly became apparent of how fitting Talking Heads is for an AFT production. We choose ambitious pieces for a small company; demanding the imagination of our audience, always focussing upon the words and expression of language. Our sets are simple (usually!), and we enjoy the intimacy which Amery Hill’s Drama Studio provides for our audience.

Indeed, in the “stripped down version of a short story, the style of its telling is necessarily austere” (Alan Bennett Talking Heads, 1988).

Whichever combination of monologues you witness, you’re assured of a wonderful evening. Thank you all for your continued support of AFT.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this production to the memory of my sister: Veronica Mary Long (nee Duffin), 09/03/1964 – 02/10/2013 “When you go to bed, you will not be afraid, having gone to bed your sleep will be sweet” (Proverbs 3:24).

Catherine Gerlach

There will be a 10 minute interval after each monologue and the company will all come on stage at the end of the performance to receive your appreciation.
An actor’s thoughts:

Thank you for taking the trouble to buy a ticket and give support to our anniversary production of “Talking Heads”. To be honest, it never ceases to amaze me that people are kind enough to watch us indulge in our passion for live performance. Personally, this is my fifty second role in some forty five years of acting and, throughout that time, the most frequently asked question is, “How do you remember all those lines?”

It is, of course, meant as a compliment, but I am afraid, to an actor, it is the exact opposite. During the rehearsal process and continued on into performance the actor is striving to ”make the lines his own”, i.e. give the impression that these words are made up on the spot by the character, not taken from the printed page. Therefore, if an audience still sees them as “lines” I have failed to create the illusion.

When I taught Drama, my students would ask me “How do you learn lines?” as though there was some magic technique that could be acquired. There isn’t. You commit line one to memory, then learn line two, then put line two on the end of line one. Then line three is learnt before adding it to one and two, and so on until you reach your last line.

Perhaps a more pertinent question would be “Why do you learn all those lines?” The answer is simple, we are addicted to performing and the alternative to learning the lines fills us with dread. That feeling of panic when the mind goes blank, the mouth dry, the bowels to water, perspiration in the palms, is not a pleasant one.

So, thank you again for watching. Criticise my diction, take issue with my accent, dispute my physical interpretation and deride my facial expressions, but, please, don’t be impressed by a simple feat of memory. Given long enough, a reasonably articulate parrot could do it!

Tim Guilding
Alton Fringe Theatre

In September 1988 around 20 people, all of whom had been involved in the Alton Arts production of *Murder in the Cathedral* earlier that year, met to discuss the possibility of forming a new drama group in Alton. From that inaugural meeting, Alton Fringe Theatre was created. Their first production, Alan Bennett’s *Habeus Corpus* was staged the following February.

To celebrate 25 years of theatre in Alton “The Fringe” are returning to their spiritual home, Amery Hill Drama Studio (after a highly successful production of *The Tempest* at The Maltings) to revisit Bennett by presenting his *Talking Heads*. Five of the original company are still actively involved with the group, two of them appearing in this production.

If you are interested in joining the Fringe, or would like to receive information about future productions, please fill in the form available at the Studio entrance, or contact Lesley Willis, 37 Curtis Road, Alton, GU34 2SD. Telephone 01420 83416.

For further details of all our activities and how to contact us go to

[www.altonfringe.com](http://www.altonfringe.com)

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