

# ELEMENTS PRESENTS ALAN BENNETT'S 'TALKING HEADS'

By Barbara Clark, *Barnstable Patriot*

Elements Theatre Company has a way with words. In fact, “bringing words to life” is a major part of their mission, according to the company’s director, Sr. Danielle Dwyer.

For the past year, the company has been concentrating on the words and works of William Shakespeare, looking toward the 400th anniversary of his death in 2016.

This summer, however, Elements has taken a bit of a side tour to Northern England, albeit with words still uppermost, to produce an uncommon theater event — a selection of three monologues, part of a series of 12 originally written for the BBC by award-winning British playwright, screenwriter, actor and author, Alan Bennett. The series, titled “Alan Bennett’s Talking Heads,” was broadcast on BBC-TV in 1988 and 1998, with segments later shown on the PBS series “Masterpiece Theatre” in America and performed in many locations since.

To tell the truth, said Dwyer in a recent interview, she’s “wanted to do this [series] for a long time,” and she feels it’s an ideal fit for the ensemble, enhancing their mission of “exploring the vitality of the word and the deepest truths present in the text.”

“Language is a huge thing when you’re working with Shakespeare, and (with ‘Talking Heads’) we wanted to focus on this in a different way,” using Alan Bennett’s wordsmithing talents, Dwyer said, adding that Bennett is a master at “finding phrases [that are] true to the characters” portrayed.

Dwyer described “Talking Heads” as “extremely candid and funny, as well as extremely revealing.” The theater group’s press release calls the monologues “snapshots” that are “brilliantly funny, revealing and gritty ... a riveting observation of humanity in all its humor and tragedy.”

It’s the “revealing” part that may stick with theatergoers. The characters are not “who you’d like to be,” said Dwyer, but they often display disturbing similarities to our own inner lives. We can get that frisson of “I’ve been there” in the way that Bennett captures both the characters’ loneliness and their humanity, or as Dwyer said, “the brokenness and how people live through it.”

Each of the three monologues features a different character. In “Bed Among the Lentils,” a weary vicar’s wife; in “A Chip in the Sugar,” a middle-aged man whose aging mother suddenly

connects with an old flame; in “A Lady of Letters,” a busybody who can’t stop interfering with others.

With a monologue, how does a playwright capture and hold audience attention? Dwyer said that Bennett provides “a series of events” using “shifts of time” to maintain momentum. One monologue has four parts, another seven. Each part propels you on, offering “a reflection of what just happened,” as time moves on for the characters. Dwyer recalled that Bennett once said the plays are “full of action, though none of it is on stage.”



## A TRIO OF TALKING HEADS AT ELEMENTS THEATRE COMPANY

By Nancy Grossman, *Broadway World*

### Talking Heads

A Selection of 3 Monologues by Alan Bennett, Directed by Sr. Danielle Dwyer; Production Manager, Chris Kanaga; Stage Managers, Amy Mitchell, Br. Stephen Velie; Costumes, Rebecca Lussier, Anne Swidrak; Make-up/Hair, Sandra Spatzeck-Olsen, Katie Tingley; Set Designer, Peter Haig; Set Construction, Paul Moore, Soren Spatzeck-Olsen; Set Painting, Lexa Hale, Stephanie Haig, Lindsey Kanaga; Properties, Lexa Hale, Sr. Abigail Reid, Sarah Hale; Lighting, Tom Lynch, Scott Stipetic; Sound, Sr. Rosemary Ingwersen, Andrew Mitchell, Br. Tim Pehta; Music, Rachel McKendree; Stage Crew, Br. Stephen Velie, Heather Norman, Sarah Hale, Kyle Norman; Venue Master, Br. Paul Norman

CAST: Brad Lussier (*A Chip in the Sugar*), Rachel McKendree (*Bed Among the Lentils*), Sr. Danielle Dwyer (*A Lady of Letters*)

Presented July 31-August 9 by Elements Theatre Company at Paraclete House, Rock Harbor, Orleans, MA; For information 508-240-2400 or [www.elementstheatre.org](http://www.elementstheatre.org)

Taking a break from their customary intense focus on the works of William Shakespeare, Elements Theatre Company featured another brilliant British playwright this summer with their recent run of *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett. Part of a series of 12 monologues originally written for and broadcast by the BBC in 1988 and 1998, Elements selected three to present before live audiences over the last two weekends at Paraclete House at Rock Harbor in Orleans, introducing a trio of characters who tell their stories from their own egocentric perspectives.

Although Bennett's creations are rather ordinary, albeit quirky, individuals, the performances by Brad Lussier, Rachel McKendree, and Sr. Danielle Dwyer were extraordinary, each totally inhabiting their roles physically and emotionally. "A Chip in the Sugar" had Lussier as Graham, a woeful middle-aged man whose elderly mother reconnects with an old flame, threatening the status quo of their symbiotic relationship. McKendree wore the dour expression of Susan, a dissatisfied vicar's wife who seeks comfort in the bottle and another man's arms in "Bed Among the Lentils." Letter-writing may not be terribly popular anymore, but it is the favorite pastime of Irene, a busybody brought vividly to life by Dwyer in "A Lady of Letters."

Performing a monologue presents very different challenges from working with a scene partner. The actor has only himself or herself to rely on, as opposed to receiving cues and support from another actor. The actors (including Bennett) who performed in the original BBC production had to address the camera, but the Elements actors were able to establish a connection with the audience as they spoke across the fourth wall. The people who populate their stories – Graham's "Mam" and her beau, Susan's fellow parishioners, and the many recipients of Irene's letters – are like invisible scene partners evoked by Bennett's rich language, who came alive in the riveting portrayals by Lussier, McKendree, and Dwyer.

Artistic Director and Co-Founder of Elements, Dwyer also served as director of *Talking Heads*, successfully finding ways to keep the audience engaged despite minimal action on the stage. Each monologue had pauses which allowed the actors to reset themselves, sometimes moving from one area of the three-tiered set to another. Lighting faded to black and recorded music (primarily violin or piano) accompanied the pauses, affording the stage crew time to shift props and the actors to make small costume changes.

*Talking Heads* provides a slice of life view of three sad people with diverse circumstances, whose commonality is need. Bennett brilliantly conveys their humanity, capturing the inherent humor and tragedy, but it was the fine work of these three actors that enabled the audience to relate to the existential predicaments of the characters and fully understand their discomfort. In the end, Graham, Susan, and Irene had each learned something about themselves and the Elements Theatre Company production honored their stories.

## REVIEW

# Elements' 'Talking Heads' paints pictures with words

By Gwenn Friss  
gfriss@capecodonline.com

ORLEANS — There's an old saying that you shouldn't believe your own publicity, but this time Elements Theatre Company has every right to do just that.

A press release for the local production of Alan Bennett's "Talking Heads" promises "a rare treat," and that's exactly what the Cape theater troupe delivers.

When Bennett created this series of provocative and thought-provoking monologues for BBC television in 1987, he plucked just the right details to portray the lives of three lonely people.

Each story is separate; there is no interaction among the three other than the fact that they are all about people trying to regain a toehold in humanity, which seems to have left them behind.

"Talking Heads" begins before any of the actors walks through the darkness and takes his or her place on stage. Peter Haig's set design

## If you go

**What:** Alan Bennett's "Talking Heads"

**Who:** Elements Theatre Company  
**Where:** Paraclete House at the Community of Jesus, 5 Bay View Drive, Rock Harbor, Orleans  
**When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, and Aug. 7-9 (Dinner at 6 p.m. before Aug. 1, 7 and 8 performances.)

**Tickets:** \$35 or \$65 with dinner  
**Reservations:** 508-240-2400, [www.elementstheatre.org](http://www.elementstheatre.org)

has three rooms arranged, like a cross-section of a house with the audience forming the fourth wall.

We are peeking in the metaphorical windows, eavesdroppers on the lives of people we might pass on the street without a second glance. Haig's use of what looks like metal piping to not only divide the spaces, but also draw some of the details, works on a visceral level: something is going to happen here; something stark this way comes.

Kudos to the sound crew. Despite the British accents, one never misses a word in this production and that's critical in a play as dependent on words as this one. The lighting is also very well done: Some characters fade away in rapidly declining light while others simply disappear - poof! - into a darkness so deep that it's hard to see the outline of them. This is subtle, but it helps to maintain that mood of stark expectation.

Now, onto the stories.

This is normally where the reviewer recaps the plot, but that presents a problem here. Nobody wants to know what happens next in a story they are hearing at a party (not that these heavily flawed characters would be invited); on a bus; in a confessional. The very nature of a story well told is that it is continuously revealing itself and its teller.

So, bare bones, the three

half-hour or so monologues open with actor Brad Lussier in "A Chip in the Sugar," in which Graham is an emotionally fragile, perhaps mentally ill, middle-aged man living with his mother, who calls him her boyfriend.

Next up is "Bed Among the Lentils," in which actress Rachel McKendree plays a vicar's wife struggling against alcohol and expectations. "I don't know why the vicar's wife is even expected to go to church; the barrister's wife does not go to court," she points out.

Last up is Elements Theatre Company co-founder Sister Danielle Dwyer in "Lady of Letters," playing a lonely but vindictive middle-aged woman set adrift after her mother's death. She finds friends and redemption in a most unusual way.

These performers are so

polished that one actually believes each is telling a story, rather than relating Bennett's dialogue (there were three verbal slips on opening night, so subtle and well-recovered, it's likely they went mostly unnoticed.)

There are some commonalities in the performances, probably attributable to Dwyer's directing: The actors are not afraid to incorporate silent pauses into their storytelling, and the comic timing is perfect because there is a lot of humor mixed in with the pathos in Bennett's exquisitely drawn word

portraits.

The actors also understand their characters, but only as much as the character understands him- or herself. We all have a baseline personality gleaned from our experiences, our faith, our physical quirks, our innate dispositions. Lussier, McKendree and Dwyer capture their characters' baseline so every word they say after that rings true.

As the British critics might say, "Brilliant, just brilliant." Here on the other side of the pond, we agree. Don't miss this one.

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8:45 11:00	1:20 4:00 6:55 9:30
PIXELS PG13	
9:00 11:35	2:15 4:50 7:30 9:50
SOUTHPAW R	
8:50 11:25	2:00 4:35 7:10 9:45
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SUNDAY - TUESDAY - 8:00PM

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