

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

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.