

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Talking Heads

Alan Bennett

Theatre Royal, Bath

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

8–12 September 2015

*Talking Heads* is a series of monologues which goes deeply into the psyche of the narrators, and yet they are talking not of themselves but of the people, admittedly few, who have some bearing on their lives.

Originally written for BBC television, the first series of six episodes was broadcast in 1988 with the second series following ten years later.

Here, three episodes have been chosen as a stage play, the first being *Lady of Letters* with Siobhan Redmond as middle-aged spinster Miss Ruddock. It appears that since her mother died she has no one in her life at all and her only solace is writing letters of complaint trying to put right what she sees is wrong with the world.

“Prison,” she says, “they have it easy. Television, table tennis, art. It’s just a holiday camp, do you wonder there’s crime?” so she writes to her MP—something it seems she does frequently. She also writes to the makers of some pork sausages which had a hair in them (enclosing the hair), to the crematorium about their attitude to mourners and to Westminster Council about the amount of dog dirt in the streets, but her letters become dangerously out of hand when she accuses the people opposite of neglecting their child and she is ‘liberated’ from her lonely life in an unexpected and rather ironic manner.

Redmond emphasises the wit and humour in the narrative with very telling expressions, and this episode has a strangely happy ending.

*A Chip in the Sugar*, one I hadn’t seen previously, has Karl Theobald giving a very convincing performance as a devoted son, still living with his mother, and trying to cope with mental problems. Their life is predictable and comfortable, until his mother takes up with an old flame and everything changes. I hear the rhythm of Alan Bennett’s delivery in everything he has written and I feel that Theobald could slow his just a little to take in all the wry humour in the piece, but it’s a good performance just the same.

Finally comes Stephanie Cole with *A Cream Cracker under the Settee*, an item missed by the cleaning lady. This exceptional and experienced actress brings warmth and humour as well as a certain pathos to the role of ageing widow Doris, fiercely independent and determined not to go into a care home.

Talking over her memories to herself, or to us, it is as if we are dipping into her thoughts and we feel for her lost baby, look at the photo of her wedding day and are shocked when a little ambitious dusting has her on the floor, injured and unable to stand. In this position, she notices the cream

cracker. Meaning to tackle the culprit with it later, it is rather unfortunate that she absent-mindedly eats the evidence.

Francis O'Connor's set uses the same room for each episode with just a little tweaking and changes of the furnishings. Their worlds have shrunk to this one small area, the world outside depicted only by the scudding clouds painted across the walls.

Beautifully written and directed sympathetically by Sarah Esdaile, there is a lot to laugh about in all the plays, but the laughter is tinged with pity and compassion and the general feeling at the end is a deep sadness that life can turn out this way.

**Reviewer:** [Sheila Connor](#)