

## **TALKING HEADS – ALAN BENNETT**

The text is a transcript of six monologues originally written for performance on television. Bennett created the pieces for specific performers, all of whom are to a certain extent associated with him. It is therefore probable that he “tailored” the material to suit the individual actors’ styles.

Each monologue is spoken on camera by one main character, who is recounting a series of events which are either happening as the monologue unfolds, or have happened shortly beforehand. Each person is associated with several other people; either members of their family or people in some way connected with their profession or their surroundings and in each story there is some sort of crisis, or reckoning.

The language each character uses is appropriate in some way to his or her social background and Bennett combines humour and pathos with a sharp perception of idiom. Since all the pieces were intended for performance, there is a rhythmic quality to the text, which makes it sound most effective when read aloud. In fairness, the text also stands reasonably well as a series of short stories, but the idiomatic language does become rather repetitive, as does the inconsistency of grammatical structure, without the “music” of speech, in performance.

Although none of the characters intend to be funny, Bennett makes each of them speak in ways which cause the audience to laugh either at their situations or their turn of phrase, for example, Graham’s mother’s comment about Tesco on p. 24. or Susan’s account of the flower arranging session with Mrs Shrubsole on p 34. Bennett’s characters are realistic, but he is able to skew the characterisations just enough to achieve caricature while retaining audience sympathy and belief. In fact the humour mostly comes from the seriousness of the characters, all of whom use what they perceive to be appropriate language to recount their stories. The audience, therefore, laughs at their situations and at their pretentious behaviour and often their ignorance within those situations. Bennett says that his characters are “artless” and that they “don’t quite know what they are saying”.

It must also be noted that Bennett’s humour is often at the expense of other people’s suffering. Each of the stories deals with rather serious social issues and our laughter may sometimes be inappropriate. Susan, for example, is an alcoholic, and her behaviour during the flower arranging is caused by her drunkenness and in normal circumstances, we would not find either that, or her adultery with the Indian shopkeeper at all amusing. The fact that we do is because of her biting turn of phrase and Bennett’s talent for delivering his barbs with brilliantly chosen wit.

In his subsidiary characters, vicars and social and community workers, Bennett also seems to draw stereotypical portraits, not only in appearance, but also in the jargon which such people often speak. His gallery of types is drawn partly from observation and partly from actual occurrences in his life. In his introduction, he enlarges on this. One of the consistent features of these stories is that there is an invisible barrier between the main characters and the “real” world. Each person has a secret which is well hidden; perhaps subconsciously known, but never revealed or acknowledged voluntarily. Each person hides his or her weakness – Graham’s possibly homosexuality and real neurosis – Susan’s alcoholism and loss of faith – Miss Ruddock’s vindictive poison pen letters – Lesley’s promiscuity and lack of talent – Muriel’s despair and disgust with her family and her reduced circumstances and finally, Doris’s wish for death. Each character keeps up a pretence of “normality” and Bennett shows us, through the eye of the camera, how each person struggles to maintain a facade. The characters don’t seem to talk to the audience, but at it.

### **A CHIP IN THE SUGAR**

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This story is told by Graham Whittaker, a middle aged bachelor, with a history of nervous trouble, who lives at home with his widowed mother, Vera, and he tells of her involvement with an old flame, Frank Turnbull.

Graham was played by Bennett in the original production and he characterises the man as a “mother’s boy”, with a gossipy, effeminate style of speech; querulous and larded with clichés. Graham, in fact, sounds very much like an old woman as he speaks, giving the audience the impression that he has taken on much of the character of his mother over the years they have lived together. Vera refers to him as her “boyfriend” several times and Graham’s treatment of her varies from resentful son, to little boy, to exasperated husband.

Graham is inadequate in many ways, but he is not presented as an unlikeable man. He is long-suffering and not at all self confident, although he acts in a way which makes us believe he is. His own remarks are largely narrative, most of the humour coming from his account of the late flowering affair between Vera and Frank ( see the vicar episode on p 20) but from time to time there is a flash of genuinely funny Graham comment, like his remark about his mothers bowels being “all over the place”

in Tenerife.

Bennett's observation of people is always accurate and sardonic, and he draws recognisable portraits of both Vera and Frank Turnbull. They are one dimensional, being seen through the biased eyes of the jealous son, Graham, but Bennett does make it clear in his introduction to the pieces that this was always his intent. Part of the fun of Vera and Frank is that Graham resents them and the situation so much that he exaggerates their irritating habits of behaviour, appearance and speech. Although Frank Turnbull is a philanderer, and is "always doing it", he is made to seem more ridiculous than evil. His bizarre clothes and pretentious speech; his choice of food "fresh country beef, mingled with golden fried onions topped off with toasted cheese"; his promises to "give a tinkle" to Vera and the persistent habit of speaking about Graham as though he is invisible, create a picture of a pathetic, exasperating little bore. Vera, also, is presented as an irritating nuisance, by Graham, although she is not quite as feeble minded as he describes her. She obviously knows about Graham's magazines, as we see in her snide remark about "chess men" and when the barriers of propriety almost slip and she accuses him of being "not normal."

Graham himself is entirely believable – a self educated man, who has made an effort to educate his mother although she apes his views with no real understanding of them. He emerges through his narrative as a self-effacing person, who "doesn't say anything" although he has plenty to say to the anonymous camera about his life with Vera and the odious Frank. Although he protests about Vera's irritating habits, when it seems obvious that his mother intends to marry again, he becomes very agitated. Note how he refers to Vera as "Mother" except when he is caught off guard at her announcement about the wedding, and she becomes "Mam" very quickly.

It is tempting to believe that Graham is a "typical" latent homosexual male and Bennett cleverly suggests this by his appearance; his verbal style; the history of nervous trouble and also by oblique references to his reading matter. At no time, though, is it made anything other than implicit and as with all the other characters, we are left to make our own assessment of them, using our own perceptions, and perhaps our prejudices, too.

### **BED AMONG THE LENTILS**

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Susan, the vicar's wife tells the story of her alcoholism and "rehabilitation". Trapped in a sterile marriage to an ambitious Anglican clergyman, she has taken to drink and begun an affair with the proprietor of an Asian grocery store in Leeds.

Susan (played in the TV series by Maggie Smith) is an articulate woman who despises the petty pretensions of her husband and his loyal band of parishioners. She hates the narrow existence which she feels obliged to endure as the vicar's wife and resents the fact that her position is one which is confined to helping with parish duties such as flower arranging and jumble sales. Like all the other characters, she is unaware of the fact that she is living a pretence. She makes no mention of her problem with alcohol, except by allusion, until the final scene when she reveals that she has been to Alcoholics Anonymous. Even her rehabilitation is seen by her as another "religion" and Geoffrey's attitude to it and to her are recounted with scant affection. He is, we are told, more interested in using the experience as a means of acquiring status as an "upwardly mobile parson" and according to Susan, this is what is in store for them both as Geoffrey "brandishes" Susan's hand and tells her story "all over the diocese".

As in all the stories, Bennett deals with issues which are not at all amusing; but are made to seem so. Susan has a sharply observant eye for ridiculous characters around her, and for assessing her situation, and it is this sarcasm, often turned against herself, as well as the people around her, which amuses us. We cannot help but laugh at her description of sex with her husband as a "rare and desiccated conjunction" or at her dismissal of the "frightful collisions" between the Belchers and the "shamefaced fumbings" which are "all right if we offer it to God" between Miss Budd and Miss Bantock. Events also, are sharply amusing, like the lunch with the Bishop, who calls her "Mrs Vicar" and, of course, the disastrous flower arranging episode, with the "throttled" carnations and the "HAZFLO" arrangement. Even her adultery, with Ramesh Ramesh, is made to seem not only natural, but acceptable, Bennett cleverly drawing a comparison between the repression of Christianity and the universality of Hinduism.

Susan is a changed woman at the end of the story, having, for the time being, given up drinking. It is not clear, though, what she will do next. We assume at the end of Graham's story that he will go on as normal with his mother. Not so with Susan. She is still "Mrs Vicar", but we are left in a state of uncertainty as to whether this state of affairs will last or not. Her attitude has not softened at all. She is still as incisive in her assessment of her own situation as she was at the beginning. She is well aware of her situation but she has not yet decided what to do about it and Bennett once again leaves us unsure as to the future life of a character. Susan remains, despite her reformation, a vicar's wife who has lost her faith and is still dissatisfied

with her marriage and her husband.

## **A LADY OF LETTERS**

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Irene Ruddock, played in the TV original by Patricia Routledge, is a middle aged woman who writes letters. Unfortunately, as we listen to her, we find out that what she regards as moral and civic duty, has in the past turned into libel and malice and she has been bound over to keep the peace by the court for writing poison pen notes to her neighbours.

Bennett draws this character as a deeply lonely and unhappy woman. Frequent references to “mother” lead us to believe that the change in Irene happened when her mother died. She calls her pen “a real friend” and so, in a way, it is. Irene’s life is filled by correspondence, she even writes personal replies to circulars from the opticians and, typically, Bennett lifts this irritating habit to ridiculous heights telling us about her letter to the Queen about dog dirt.

Her second bout of malicious writing is in two stages. The first is directed at the neighbours who move in over the street and have a small child whom Irene believes is being abused. There is no evidence for this other than her own prejudiced opinion of the people opposite “he has a tattoo” and the “kiddy looks filthy”. Irene’s judgements lead her to recognise that she is “getting upset” ( a euphemism for the beginning of a breakdown?) and she visits the doctor, but does not take the pills he gives her. A visit from the vicar (who shoves his cross round the door as identification) is equally unhelpful and eventually, Irene is cautioned by the police and informed that the little child over the road has died of leukaemia. She is prosecuted and given a suspended sentence and assigned two social workers, who try to encourage her to “join the community”. Her response is to write another series of letters about the local community policeman and the lady at No. 56, which land her in prison.

The change in Irene is probably the most startling of all the pieces, for in prison, she finds freedom and acceptance and blossoms into a really fulfilled, busy person. It is ironic that she is forced to associate with the type of people who would have been her victims outside, and her former social conscience is at last given a practical way of expressing itself. In conventional society, Irene was a misfit; in a society of misfits, she becomes conventional.

Bennett creates, in this piece, a reversal of perception, both on the part of the audience and in Irene herself. He does not play the piece for laughs, but concentrates on the element of surprise. We begin by seeing Irene as a busybody, then as a malicious troublemaker and finally as an admirable, liberated woman. Prison, for Irene, is not gaol, but everyday life outside.

## **HER BIG CHANCE**

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In this story of a small time actress, Lesley was played originally by Julie Walters. Bennett bases this character on various types he has seen in theatrical auditions and we must assume that she does have a certain hideous accuracy, even if she is not recognisable to us. Lesley is ludicrous – believing herself to be “professional to her fingertips” when in fact she is almost completely lacking in any talent other than taking off her clothes and sleeping with the stage hands. The parts she has played are minor, although she believes that they are important. She tries desperately to improve herself, but her efforts at “collecting people” result only in more casual bed partners. Bennett makes her language very “luvvie”, and lards her story with theatrical jargon.

She has no sense of humour at all, and displays a certain amount of waspishness when other characters puncture her ego. Her self confidence is immense and in fact she is very difficult to like. Bennett, however, cleverly uses enough humour to prevent us from despising Lesley and we feel at the end rather sorry for her, left alone and determined to “acquire another skill” so that she can “offer more” as a person. She says at the end of her story that “acting is really just giving” but what she has to give is really not worth very much at all. The awful truth is that she is a victim of the fast dollar and doesn’t even know that she is being exploited.

## **SOLDIERING ON**

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Muriel Carpenter is socially the most elevated of Bennett’s characters – a middle class, middle aged woman from an

elegant, affluent background, who is suddenly widowed. Her story is an episodic narrative, and takes the viewer through the events which follow her husband's death, from the day of his funeral to several months later.

She is left apparently wealthy, but loses her money when her son, Giles, mismanages his accounts and effectively wipes out her assets. He and his wife, Pippa, abandon Muriel, and she also finds out that her daughter, Margaret's mental breakdowns appear to have been the result of abuse by her father, Ralph. The large house and the furniture are sold to pay off creditors and Muriel moves into a holiday flatlet on the coast.

Once again, Bennett creates a character whose story is tragic, but believable. Muriel is one of the "old school" – a "mehsahib" type of woman whose life is run almost on military lines. She is confident and organised, refusing to let the side down by "blubbing" at the funeral. Bennett uses rather "horsy" language for this character, with a great deal of public school slang and she emerges as a rather overbearing woman at first. As her story progresses we see, however, that she is maintaining a facade, as are all the other characters in the collection. She glosses over what she probably doesn't want to see, refusing to "pander" to Margaret and indulgently pretending that Giles, whom she calls "a scamp" is only a big overgrown schoolboy. It is "naughty" of him to take away the best antiques, for example. She is rather patronising, too, and faced with the prospect of putting her daughter into State care she decides to "plug the hospital into the coffee morning circuit" to raise funds. The fact that she is good at basket weaving is also a clever indicator of the type of woman who is the backbone of the Women's Institute. In terms of dealing with the reality of her daughter's condition, she is, however, completely at a loss. She blames the psychiatrist for telling her the truth about the situation between her husband and her daughter and "doesn't know what to think" of the situation. "Sorry for him, I suppose".

In fact her type of woman would not probably even think about finding out about what she would regard as "men's business", either sexually, or financially. She is a product of her class and her generation in that respect. She says that she is "not a tragic woman", but her situation, alone, penniless and abandoned by the children and grandchildren she loves and all the affluent "friends" she once knew is actually very tragic. Bennett does not over play the horrible details of her situation, but again lets us see, through the character's words, that the real tragedies in life come not from huge disasters, but from insensitivity, greed and intolerance.

### **A CREAM CRACKER UNDER THE SETTEE**

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Doris, played by Thora Hird in the original production, is an old woman who is fiercely independent. She falls while trying to dust and injures herself badly. We watch as she tries to attract attention to her plight and fails to do so, although at the end of the episode, she deliberately chooses not to involve the policeman who knocks on the door and we assume, decides not to attempt to get help at all. There is a threat of "a home" hanging over her at the beginning of the story and as the piece progresses we see that she is adamantly opposed to ending her days in an old folks home where everyone "smells of pee". As a character, Doris is not particularly likeable. She is insensitive and obsessed with cleanliness and propriety, but like Muriel and several other people in this collection of stories, she is a product of her class and her generation. Bennett talks about his parents in the introduction and we can see that his upbringing has given him a fund of impressions of people and attitudes. One of the things he talks about with regard to his parents is the business of what is and what is not "common". He also mentions his father's "crazes" which were intended to be profitable, like the fretwork toys. We assume that the values held by women like Doris are those he would have experienced in his own home from his mother, too. Doris's husband Wilfrid had a series of schemes which came to nothing, and Bennett makes her talk about them as though they made Wilfrid pathetic and insignificant. We must not, though, assume that Bennett's parents thought or acted in exactly the same way, but merely that they gave him the basic motifs, which he then embroidered to create his characters.

This monologue, and the revelations about Doris and Wilfrid – the baby which "wasn't fit to be called anything" and which was wrapped up in newspaper "as if it was dirty" – is probably the most starkly shocking of the six. There is little humour in the situation of an old woman alone and in pain, condemning herself to death, nor is her language witty. Her situation is too desperate for Bennett to attempt to lighten it by making us laugh at her. What he gives Doris to say is an indictment of today's careless society. The boy who comes into the garden in fact comes in to have a pee against the fence, the home help is officious, the couple with the Bible shout through the letter box, the neighbours don't communicate and the community policeman comes round "sometimes". Doris remembers a world which was ordered and simple and mourns its passing. She does what she has always done – keeps things "nice" and respectable. It may not be an admirable, sensible, or enlightened way of living, but it is the only way she knows and she is determined not to let go of what she recognises as right. Ironically the only way she can get out is by

Mega Lecture