

Film Review: 'The Lady in the Van' a Touching Tale of Empathy

Celebrated Playwright and Down-and-Out Pensioner Forge Unlikely Friendship in Bittersweet Docudrama

By Kam Williams
Of The Skanner News

For a half-dozen seasons, Dame Maggie Smith has been delighting television viewers as dowager Violet Crawley on Downton Abbey. Younger fans of the show might be unaware that she's a two-time Oscar-winner (for *California Suite* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) who had already enjoyed an illustrious career prior to appearing on the hit PBS series.

In *The Lady in the Van*, she's been cast as a character practically the polar opposite of the imperious aristocrat we've come to love. For, Margaret Shepherd is a down-and-out homeless wom-

an humbled by having to live out of a van which she parks on the street in the Camden Town section of North London.

At the point of departure in the early 1970s, we learn that Margaret's miserable plight is substantially one of her making. She's been on the run for five years since leaving the scene of a fatal hit-and-run car accident.

And while the devout Catholic has confessed the sin to her priest, she could never quite bring herself to surrender to the authorities. Consequently, she's forever looking over her shoulder, fearful that her arrest might be imminent.

The plot thickens when she can't afford to fix her

misfiring jalopy sorely in need of a tune-up. Most of the owners in the upscale neighborhood where the van is sitting would simply like to see the eyesore towed away from the block once and for all.

But, for some reason, Alan Bennett (Alex Jennings) feels compassion for the ostensibly overwhelmed octogenarian, perhaps because he has a mother also of advanced age. So, against his better judgment, the famous writer allows "Miss Shepherd" to park her disabled car in the driveway on the express understanding that this will be a temporary arrangement.

But Alan proves to be such a soft touch that the



Maggie Smith and Alex Jennings star in 'The Lady in the Van.'

Smith looks oh so relaxed onscreen in the role she originated onstage, whether cadging for alms on the pavement or exhibiting pangs of remorse about the crash which left her in dire straits. Just as effective is Alex Jennings' interpretation of Bennett as a terminally-conflicted soul constantly carrying on an inner dialogue with himself.

A touching tale of empathy blessed by a couple of equally-endearing performances that are nothing short of inspired.

Excellent ★★★★★
Rated PG-13 for a disturbing image
Running time: 104 min.
Distributor: Sony Pictures Classics



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Film Review: 'Requiem for the American Dream' a Rallying Cry

Documentary tells of the demise of the middle-class

By Kam Williams
Of The Skanner News

MIT Professor Noam Chomsky has been an outspoken critic of the Establishment ever since opposing the Vietnam War way back in the 1960s. At 87, the controversial firebrand is now decrying the incredible gulf between the filthy rich and the rest of us.

He is the subject of *Requiem for the American Dream*, a cautionary documentary delineating the consequences lying in wait for a nation where wealth is concentrated in the hands of the top one-tenths of 1 percent at the expense of the rapidly-disappearing middle-class.

Co-directed by Peter D. Hutchison, Kelly Nyks and Jared P. Scott, the movie was culled from interviews conduct-



PHOTO BY PETER D. HUTCHISON (CC BY 2.0) VIA

Noam Chomsky, pictured here at a 2004 anti-war demonstration in Vancouver, B.C., is the subject of a new documentary on the decline of the American middle class.

they have repeatedly attempted to repeal those measures.

from the host of domestic programs implemented by President Roosevelt. However, the affluent have always hated the New Deal, especially Social Security and the Glass-Steagall Act, which explains why

“...wealth is concentrated in the hands of the top one-tenths of 1 percent at the expense of the rapidly-disappearing middle-class

ed with Chomsky over the past four years. Nevertheless, the talented trio managed to edit the footage into a very engaging and enlightening monologue bemoaning the current state of the union. The upshot is a fascinating film featuring a “less-is-more” format reminiscent of the one employed by Errol Morris in his Oscar-winning *Fog of War* (2003).

The picture basically consists of close-ups of Chomsky shot against a black backdrop as he talks about the Machiavellian manipulations employed by the power elite. It also intermittently interweaves illustrative file footage of suffering and decadence into the production to help drive home the aging grass roots activist's salient points.

Chomsky begins by waxing romantic about the “golden age” of the 1950s and 1960s when the American dream was still within the grasp of the average Joe. He says that was the period when the U.S. populace benefited the most

Chomsky states that, in addition, the privileged have deliberately crippled our democracy to such a degree that public opinion no longer has any influence on politicians. Just consider how it has been impossible to get Congress to pass a bill making it harder for the mentally ill to purchase a gun, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of voters support the common sense idea.

Overall, what we have here is vintage Chomsky. He's issuing a rabble-rousing rallying cry intended to rouse the masses before it's too late. America redefined as a civilization in sharp decline and on the verge of collapse because of the very greedy's systematic elimination of class mobility from the society.

Excellent ★★★★★
Unrated
Running time: 73 min.
Studio: PF Pictures
Distributor: Gravitas Ventures

cantankerous old coot ends up squatting on his property for the next 15 years. Can a Tony Award-winning playwright and a feisty pensioner coexist peacefully in such crazy conditions? That is the question

at the heart of *The Lady in the Van*, a heartwarming dramedy inspired by actual events. The film was adapted from Bennett's 1999 theatrical production of the same name which also starred Maggie Smith.

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