

To what extent can
we trust, Wilfred, in
Alan Bennett's play,
Playing Sandwich's ...



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The play, *Playing Sandwiches*, is one in a series of dramatic monologues, named *Talking heads*, written and directed by Alan Bennett for the BBC.

There were two series of *Talking Heads* one released in 1988 and the other a decade later in 1999. The series deals with many different subjects, although there are a few recurring themes, such as; death, illness, guilt and isolation.

I believe there to be a lot of guilt in this particular play. The writer/director of *Playing Sandwiches*, Alan Bennett, was born in Leeds on May 9th 1934. He attended Oxford University, studying History and performed with *The Oxford Revue*. Alan taught at the University before going on to write and perform his debut play, *Beyond the Fringe* in 1960, which brought him instant fame. He then turned to writing full time and created; *The Madness of George III*, the monologue series *Talking Heads* and the play *The History Boys*. *Playing Sandwiches* was broadcast in 1999, during this time there was a mass moral panic about paedophiles.

If a man was or seemed a little odd, he would be harassed and attacked by anti-paedophile mobs. Alan Bennett wanted to get the message across that paedophiles are not necessarily freaks of nature or obviously strange people. He wanted the public to realise that paedophiles could be most ordinary people, they could be a friendly neighbour or even a family member, as Wilfred was in the play. Showing the kindest of humans, who have performed monstrous, unforgivable actions! The play begins with Wilfred telling us about his normal everyday life. He first explains how he spends his dinnertime going to the local paper shop to buy liquorice allsorts and the conversations he has with the friendly shop owner, who tells him; ' I wish I was like you. Always buying sweets, never getting fat.'

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‘ Wilfred carries on talking about his wife, who is currently making ‘ the twins’ christening dresses. They seem like a normal married couple, a little snapping over doing favours for the family, while having a reasonable conversation. Mr Kumar is a man who also works in the park, Wilfred speaks of him; his Indian background and how he walks and talks with him as they finish their work. It is revealed that Mr Parlane, Wilfred’s boss, has none of the records needed for Wilfred to work, such as his past occupations.

However, because Wilfred is such a good worker, Mr Parlane gives him more chances while he attempts to track down his history. In the second half of the play, we start to see Wilfred’s darker side. He speaks ill of the condoms left hanging around in parks where children play, and how the bushes are filled with filth; ‘ All stinking of urine and clogged up with every sort of filth... sheaths; jam rags; a shoe; some tights; sick; dog muck. ‘ Wilfred carries on speaking of this and how people just come and lay in the bushes, on top of all that ‘ filth’ and ‘ do it’. It is also revealed, at the twins christening, that Wilfred’s family do not want him to be the godparent of the twins. Finally, after befriending a mother and daughter who walk around the park, Wilfred is left alone with the child.

This is when he strikes, with his darkest action, and takes the young girl ‘ into the bushes’. The play finishes with Wilfred in prison, sobbing. The writer, Alan Bennett, does a fabulous job of manipulating our opinion on Wilfred. Bennett tricks us into thinking that Wilfred is a kind and caring soul.

Our first real opinion on Wilfred develops at the beginning, when the shop keeper is serving Wilfred as he buys his liquorice allsorts. ‘ Man serving me
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said, “ I wish I was like you. Shouted out to the woman, “ I wish I was him. Always buying sweets, never getting fat.

“ I said, “ Yes, I’m lucky. ” At this time, Bennett gives us no reason to doubt the intentions of Wilfred. The job of keeping the park clean, on some level makes us trust Wilfred more. He tidies up other peoples mess to save children from seeing such horrible things.

‘ They come over the wall on a night after The Woodman’s turned out, lie down drunk in all that filth and stench and do it. They do it in the playground too, laid down over one end of the slide where the kiddies slide along with their bottoms, then just chuck the evidence down anywhere. Wilfred is portrayed to care truly for the innocence of children, and shows true hatred for people spoil that innocence in and around where the children play. The audience automatically assume if he is so against people having sex in the bushes, he is a truly good man! Lastly, at the house after the christening. Wilfred is sat outside and notices the very large Alsatian wondering around all of the defenceless children; ‘ There are kiddies all over the place, though, and what with Pete’s Alsatian plunging around, sheer bedlam.

That’s irresponsible in my view, a dog that size when there are kiddies about. One snap and they’re scarred for life. ‘ Once again Wilfred’s companionate side is shown, as he defends the children and points out that they are not being treated as well as they should be. His caring and warm attitude makes the audience put anormass trust in Wilfred, even though they do not know much about him. The audience may trust Wilfred for large parts of the play; however the trust begins to fade with certain things Wilfred says

and does. For example, Mr Parlane has no record of Wilfred before his job as a worker in the park.

‘ He’s heard from Wakefield but they still can’t trace my records...Well, I’ll try Pontefract, Wilfred, but it’s been six months now. ‘ Our faith in Wilfred begins to shake at this point; it puts a permanent thought in the minds of the reader: ‘ Why can’t they find his files? What is he hiding? ‘ At the christening, is when some of the audience catch on that something is not right with Wilfred. First of all, he is resilient about going to the christening.

‘ I wasn’t particular to go to the christening only Janet wanted to see what her frocks looked like on. ‘ This starts confusion for the audience seen as he’s always trying to protect children from the filth in the park. Bennett carries on make the readers think more, about Wilfred’s past; ‘ Who are Barry and Yvonne to look down their nose, their Martin’s been had up twice for drunken driving. ‘ This creates the thought that Wilfred has been in prison for something, which leads us into not trusting him more. Later, when it is discovered that there is a lack of godparents Rosalie, who is seven, perks up and says; ‘ Why can’t Uncle Wilfred be it. He’s my godfather.

‘ Yvonne’s response was a simple; ‘ No, Wilfred wouldn’t be a possible solution because... because they’re not currently motorised. This is a confusing reason why Wilfred could not be a godparent, this is when things begin to truly unravel and alert the audience that Wilfred is not the good man he appears. We also discover the answer to an early uneasy statement; ‘ Little Rosalie’s playing in the yard, throwing her ball against the wall, clapping her hands and lifting her leg to throw the ball under, all that.

When she stops she comes and sits on the step and I say, “ I think that deserves a sweet, Rosalie” and give her a licorice allsort. ‘ The audience have now discovered and unnerving fact. That Wilfred gains no weight with the sweets he buys because he does not eat them, but uses them to lure children near him. Yvonne’s reaction to this only confirms what the audience are thinking; ‘ Yvonne bursts through the door and gets hold of the kiddy “ I told you, madam.

” Starts laying into her, and clawing the sweet out of her mouth. ‘ By this point most of the audience are convinced that Wilfred is a paedophile.

Finally, a disturbing and truly sickening statement breaks the audiences trust in Wilfred completely. As the man, who at the beginning, everyone believed to be trustworthy and helpful is shown for his real darkness; Her little hands kept pecking away at my hand, like a little bird trying to get in. Only my hand was a fist, honestly.

Tight, she couldn’t get in. “ There’s nothing in there for you” I said, “ I don’t have anything for little girls, My shop’s closed. ” “ No it’s not” she says and slips her little finger in between my fingers and wiggles it about and looks at me and laughs. She laughs again.

She knew what she was doing. She must have known what she was doing. So I took her into the bushes. ‘ It is now clear to all, that Wilfred is a monster. To what extent can we trust the character, Wilfred? In my opinion, I do not believe that we can trust Wilfred about most of what he says in his monologue. We are instantly forced into believing what Wilfred says, this is because it is, in fact, a monologue! We only have the Wilfred’s point of view.

However, once we discover that he is a paedophile, we find it difficult to tell when he is lying or telling the truth. For example, when Wilfred comes into contact with children, are we to believe that it was an innocent act? Or is he pending resuming his wicked, old ways! How much can we honestly trust Wilfred, after it is clear he is a paedophile?