

Downton dowager is happy on tramp's pay

Sharon Feinstein

WHAT would the Dowager say? Maggie Smith is working 14-hour days as a tramp for a fraction of the pay she gets for Downton Abbey, the producer of her new film has revealed.

Smith, 79, who plays the waspish Dowager Countess of Grantham in the ITV drama, is filming *The Lady in the Van*, a big-screen adaptation of the hit play about an elderly woman called Mary Shepherd who lived in a battered car on the driveway of the writer Alan Bennett for 15 years.

The producer Kevin Loader said that despite her workload and long hours in make-up, Smith had become an inspiration to the younger British actors, including James Corden, Dominic Cooper and Stephen Fry, who will appear in the low-budget film.

"The whole budget is £4m so Maggie isn't getting a big payday," he said.

"I've no idea what she's paid on Downton, but they won't compare and I don't think the finances are the reason she's doing this.

"She's played the role on stage so she's very committed to it. Alan [Bennett] has rewritten it for the screen and she was dead keen to do it. We wouldn't be making the film without her — she's an essential part of the enterprise.

"I know she's enjoying it and feels it's quality work. Dressing up as Miss Shepherd and shuffling a pushchair around Primrose Hill [in north London] isn't the most exciting thing about it. It's the quality of the work and complexity of that personality that's the interesting thing for her.

"She's in make-up for an hour: a lot is about putting mud under her fingernails and into

her hands, making it look like someone living in a rather unconventional space."

Smith, who was made a dame in 1990, won rave reviews for her stage portrayal of Shepherd in 1999. Like the play, the film will tell the story of Bennett's relationship with Shepherd, a nun who believed she was on the IRA's hitlist and claimed to receive regular visits from the Virgin Mary. She lived on his driveway in north London until her death in 1989.

"Maggie's out of the house well before 7am for a 14-hour day on this shoot," said Loader, whose previous films include Captain Corelli's Mandolin and Nowhere Boy. "It's very long and we're trying to film daylight at the moment so we have to start early.

"For a woman of her age, she is amazing and extremely fit to be coming across London on time every day for the past three weeks, with five more weeks to go."

Smith's career spans more than six decades and has brought her two Oscars and three Emmys. Her role as the matriarch Violet Crawley in Downton Abbey has won her a new generation of fans.

The drama has been sold to more than 100 countries and reports in 2012 suggested its stars, including Smith, had secured a doubling of their salary.

In a television interview last year, she said loneliness, following the death of her playwright husband Beverley Cross in 1998, had kept her working.

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"I think the date for that [retiring] has gone by... I think I'll keep going with Violet and whatever other old biddy comes along," she said.

Five years ago, she hinted at a desire to work with Bennett again. "I don't think I've fulfilled myself, I don't think I've been good enough," she said of her acting, adding that she had "already shouted" at the writer for new roles.

Speaking from the set of the film, Bennett said: "The most marvellous thing about Maggie is that she can go from comedy to tragedy in one sentence. She's very like me in that she thinks things are disastrous and hilarious in equal measure.

"We are both very lugubrious but we both like to have a laugh."

The film is directed by Nicholas Hytner, who also directed the stage production.

Alex Jennings, who portrayed Prince Charles in the 2006 film *The Queen*, is playing Bennett and is joined by Frances de la Tour and Gwen Taylor, as well as Cooper and Corden.

"Stephen Fry came to say hello and Dominic Cooper filmed today," said Loader. "Dominic... plays male totty, basically, a young actor who Alan fancies but who refuses to become one of Alan's lovers and announces very firmly that he has a girlfriend... He is wearing a Seventies big-collared shirt and looks pretty much like something out of *Starsky and Hutch*.

"James Corden did his day last week playing a market trader... and was very convincing. Locals like [the director] Jonathan Miller are still living in the same house they had in 1960 and appear in the film."



Maggie Smith, star of Downton Abbey, above left, plays the lead role in the film *The Lady in a Van*