

British Theatre Guide

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Educating Rita

Willy Russell

Menier Chocolate Factory and Theatre Royal Bath Production

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford

21–26 May 2012

Tamara Harvey's perfectly cast production of Russell's classic comedy drama is a highly satisfying mixture of laughter, pathos and brilliantly written dialogue, with Claire Sweeney a made-to-measure Rita. She's sharp, outspoken and honest, and so comfortable in her home-grown Scouse accent that she sometimes runs off at the mouth with a speed which needs concentration for southerners to follow, but does that matter when we are as intrigued with her as Frank is? and the audience were so totally engrossed that they applauded every scene—and there are many.

Almost biographical in its content, (Russell has been both a hairdresser and a teacher) this two-hander finds hairdresser Rita, believing that there must be more to life than marriage, babies and new dresses, determined to “find herself” and get an education so that she can be in control of her own destiny and have choices in life. Enrolling in the Open University, she meets her tutor Frank —“a crazy mad piss artist who wants to throw his students through the window”—and the story is their developing relationship, her improving education and his renewed interest in teaching a pupil who is both a challenge and a reward.

Learning has its problems: Rita, finding an excitement and joy in great literature, can no longer relate to those in the life she has left, and neither can she talk knowledgeably in the life she aspires to, but she perseveres and her thrill and joy when she finds she can talk and argue with the other students transmits itself to the audience. We are with her all the way from nervous beginnings to triumphant success and a life full of promise and choice.

The bored and disillusioned Frank is played by Matthew Kelly, also expert at showing his inner feelings. Rita coming back from Summer School has discovered the poet Blake and is now “dead familiar with Chekhov”. This is the first sign that she is not dependent solely on his guidance and his disappointment is obvious.

First produced in 1980 and transferred to screen in 1983 starring Julie Walters and Michael Caine, the play has never been out of production since. Seeing it for the first time in the 80s, I discovered that almost every woman in the audience was saying the same thing: “How does he know?”

Russell has tapped unerringly into the psyche of exactly the feelings and frustrations that women felt at that time and that many still feel today, the feeling of being trapped in a life that they do not want and the difficulty of changing things. His play shows that with determination and effort things can change, however impossible that seems. It is inspirational, as well as being very, very funny with the quick Scouse wit obvious in every line. Sheer genius and a total joy.

The only thing marring this otherwise excellent production is Harvey's rather silly ending, presumably to have us wondering exactly what it is that Rita is going to do to take ten years off Frank's life. So much more could have been made of expressions and body language at that point.

Otherwise the show is well worthy of Russell's classic and the audience showed their appreciation in no uncertain manner.

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)