

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Educating Rita

Willy Russell

Menier Chocolate Factory

(2010)

The first half of a Willy Russell double bill that also features that other feisty Liverpudlian heroine [Shirley Valentine](#), *Educating Rita* is now thirty years old but still has popular appeal.

Indeed, it is strange that the Liverpudlian *My Fair Lady* tale of a modern Galatea and her educated but inconsiderate Pygmalion is not a staple, especially after its success on the silver screen with Julie Walters and Michael Caine.

Russell's story may be predictable but even so, nobody could fail to identify with at least one of the two characters, on this occasion located by designer, Peter McKintosh in a superb evocation of mildly shabby academia.

Fighting off comparisons with the film version, the sparky Laura Dos Santos instantly establishes herself as the character and confidently takes Rita from run of the mill Scouse hairdresser to a sophisticated woman who has made the whole world her oyster.

At the beginning, the actress is the epitome of blowsiness in her micro skirts, spouting uninteresting opinions but soon something else takes over. Despite opposition from a caveman husband, Rita overcomes every obstacle to find herself. Along the way, the husband and job disappear, to be replaced by confidence and the prospect of a fulfilled future.

Miss Dos Santos is assisted by *EastEnders*' Larry Lamb playing lecturer Frank. At the beginning, he seems a perfect role model with his education and individuality. 100 minutes later, Frank has become a figure of pity, though not to the same degree as John, the unfortunate Professor in David Mamet's *Oleanna*, a play with a similar starting point.

Frank wallows in whisky and self pity, watching Rita's development and the freedom that it offers, with jealousy rather than pride. Indeed, by the end of the play, the academic has become the hero in his own mini-tragedy, his fall speeding up at the same time as his protégée's rise.

*Educating Rita* is sentimental but that is part of its charm and in Jeremy Sams' revival looks set to roll back the years and win over a new generation of theatregoers.

Howard Loxton [reviewed](#) this production when it transferred to Trafalgar Studios

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)