

EDUCATING RITA

Education Pack

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This Education Pack was designed & written by **Beth Flintoff** with contributions from John Goode.

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Introduction

This pack has been designed to complement your visit to see *Educating Rita* at The Watermill Theatre.

The pack is aimed primarily at those studying Willy Russell for English, with (I hope) articles of interest for anyone studying Drama, or those simply with an interest in the play. While there are some images, the pack has been deliberately kept simple from a graphic point of view so that most pages can easily be photocopied for use in the classroom.

Your feedback is most welcome, please email any comments you have to outreach@watermill.org.uk.

I hope you find the pack useful.

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A Biography of Willy Russell

'Man is man because madly, possibly stupidly but certainly wonderfully, he kicks against the inevitability of life. He spends his life looking for answers. There probably are no answers but the fact that man asks the questions is the reason I write plays.'

Willy Russell

Willy Russell was born in Whiston near Liverpool in 1947, and he left school at 15 with no qualifications. He spent six years as a not very enthusiastic ladies' hairdresser until he decided, at the age of 20, to change his career. He had begun writing folk songs in his teens - an interest in music had earlier prompted him to bunk off school in favour of the Cavern - and many of his compositions were performed by established artists at folk clubs and concerts. He contributed many songs to local radio stations and he and his group, the Kirby 3, were invited to perform on Granada Television in 1967. It was around this time that he saw John McGrath's play *Unruly Elements* at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre and decided to take the plunge back into education, aiming for 'O' and 'A' levels, then teacher training, partly because he figured that the long school holidays would give him time to do what he really wanted to do - be a writer.

In 1971 the first of his plays which he considered good enough to produce, *Keep Your Eyes Down* was performed as part of a student production. With *Sam O'Shanker*, the two plays were

performed as *Blind Scouse* and taken to the Edinburgh Fringe and, in 1973, a reworked musical version was toured by the Liverpool Everyman. 1972 saw his play *When the Reds* produced at the Everyman, a television play, *King of the Castle* produced for the BBC and a musical play for children.

In 1974 Russell's *John, Paul, George, Ringo...and Bert* transferred from the Everyman to the Lyric Theatre in London's Shaftesbury Avenue, and went on to win the Evening Standard and London's Critics' Awards for Best Musical.

In the next few years came *Breezblock Park* (1975), *Our Day Out* and *One for the Road* (both 1976) and *Stags and Hens* (1978), written while Russell was a fellow in creative writing at Manchester Polytechnic.

The Royal Shakespeare Company's literary manager, Walter Donahue, had been impressed by *Breezblock Park* during its London run, and commissioned Russell to write a play for the RSC at the Donmar Warehouse - a small theatre with an audience capacity of just two hundred. The

resulting piece, *Educating Rita*, was booked in for only 21 performances. The show opened with Julie Walters and Mark Kingston in June 1980, transferring to the Piccadilly, where it became the longest-running play at that theatre for 20 years, and also scooped the 1980 SWET Award for Best Comedy. Russell co-directed a 1981 production at Liverpool Playhouse and it went on a major national tour the following year. By this time Rita was also making her way to the big screen in a major film starring Julie Walters and Michael Caine. Since the original RSC production, *Educating Rita* has never been out of production somewhere in the world.

Next came *Blood Brothers*, starting out as a non-musical play for schools, but soon becoming a blockbusting full-scale musical with both music and lyrics written by Russell himself. It took the by now traditional route from Liverpool to the Lyric, where it won three awards. It was revived at the Albery in 1988 and transferred to the Phoenix; it opened on Broadway in 1993. *Blood Brothers* is now one of the longest-running musicals in the West End.

1987 saw a revival of *One for the Road* starring Russ Abbot, then came another blockbuster - *Shirley Valentine*, which won the Olivier Award for Best Comedy and also won Pauline Collins, in the title role, the award for Best Actress. In 1989 *Shirley Valentine* transferred to New York and was released as a film, again starring Pauline Collins.

In 1990 Russell produced a screen version of *Stags and Hens* called *Dancing Thru' the Dark*, and he has continued to write for both television and radio. TV work includes *Break In*, *The Death of a Young Man*, *Our Day Out*, *Daughters of Albion* and the highly acclaimed Channel 4 series *One Summer*.

He is also a founder member and director of Quintet Films and an honorary director of Liverpool Playhouse. In October 2000 his first novel, *The Wrong Boy*, was published. In the 21st century he has released an album of songs, *Hoovering the Moon* and co-created a show with fellow playwright Tim Firth, *The Singing Playwrights*.

He set up the W.R.Foundation Award to stage new writing at the Edinburgh Festival and worked with director Alan Parker on a screenplay for *Blood Brothers*. A long term project is finally realised in Autumn 2009 with the opening of a new, improved, all-singing, all-dancing stage musical version of *Our Day Out*.

In 2008 Liverpool was the European Capital of Culture and Willy Russell contributed to Liverpool University's Lecture Series. He also reworked his 1978 play to create *Stags and Hens – The Remix* and in an interview said that the play's basic theme, whether to stay or leave the city, remains as relevant now as it was thirty years ago. He noted that both Ringo Starr and Phil Redmond had both been given a public 'kicking' because they

left Liverpool. He seems baffled and a little exasperated that what he is constantly praised for, 'and it's nothing to do with my work, is that I always stayed in Liverpool'. He doesn't really see the city itself as his inspiration and admits, 'I just take it completely for granted'.

Having said that, his home city has honoured his considerable contribution in many ways: a doctorate from Liverpool University, a fellowship from John Moores University and in 2006 Russell was made a Companion of Honour of the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts in recognition of his continuing work with its students.

Liverpool: City of Culture

In a celebratory poem written for Liverpool's year in the international cultural limelight, Willy Russell wrote:

See, with the Capital of Culture title
They've acknowledged what we've
always known
That the greatest of civilizations
Wasn't Greece or Egypt or Rome
But here - on the banks of the Mersey
Where even the stupidest fool
Knows Jesus wasn't born in Bethlehem
-
He was born here in Liverpool!
Shakespeare? He was a scouser!
And what about Vincent Van Gough?
Born an' brought up in Bootle -
Like his brother Rogermer..... Gough.

Liverpool has been described in many different ways, from 'a black spot on the Mersey' to 'the centre of consciousness of the human universe'. In the 1960s, when Willy Russell was a teenager, Liverpool was dubbed Europe's Atlantic City. It became famous the world over as the home of the Merseybeat, a hybrid of American rock 'n'roll, R&B and British skiffle.

The early songs of The Beatles, artistes and the music of Gerry and the Pacemakers, Billy J. Kramer and The Searchers heralded a new era but also helped bring Liverpool a new and vibrant identity. This Mersey sound

extended to poetry too and performance poetry, with the publication in 1967 of the seminal volume *The Mersey Sound*, a selection of poems by Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten.

It was in the early 1970s that, after decades of disuse, the great Albert Dock was finally closed but, by 1983 work had begin to regenerate this historic area - which includes the largest concentration of Grade I listed buildings in the country - and in 1988 Prince Charles performed the official reopening ceremony. The complex now houses Tate Liverpool and various museums covering subjects as diverse as maritime history, slavery and The Beatles!

In the early 1970s too a new generation of playwrights was emerging in Liverpool, most notably Russell and Alan Bleasdale. A near contemporary of Russell, Bleasdale worked as a teacher and wrote his first stories about Scully to entertain his pupils. They were broadcast on BBC Radio Merseyside in 1971, read by the author himself, and he subsequently used Scully as the basis for a novel, stage and television plays, and a seven-part television series. His series *Boys from the Black Stuff* in the late 1970s/early 1980s and later in the

decade GBH were hard-hitting pieces set in Liverpool and exploring contemporary political, economic and social situations. The *Scully* series was shown on Channel 4 in 1984 and Bleasdale also wrote a feature film, *No Surrender* (1985), about a chaotic night-out in a Liverpool nightclub.

Theatre has always been well represented in the city, which boasts two producing theatres, the Everyman and the Playhouse, as well as the smaller Neptune Theatre; two larger touring houses, the Royal Court and the Empire, and a number of fringe venues. It also has a committed 'scouser' in impresario Bill Kenwright, who was Executive Producer at the Playhouse from 1991 to 1997 and also regularly fills up a large percentage of the drama weeks at the Empire.

Kenwright's association with Alan Bleasdale began in the early 80s and includes productions of *Having a Ball*, *It's a Madhouse* and *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* He has also produced extremely successful revivals of Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* and, of course, productions throughout the world of *Blood Brothers*.

Liverpool is also the most filmed city in the UK outside London and has provided locations for films such as *The 51st State*, *The Parole Officer*, Danny 'Trainspotting' Boyle's 2004 release *Millions* and *Letter to Brezhnev*.

Liverpool's years as culture capital of Europe has certainly provided a new

impetus and a springboard for projects in all areas of cultural activity in the city. Its historically rich mix of different cultures and the unique and irrepressible spirit of its sons and daughters, we'll be witnessing and enjoying the voices of Liverpoolians for a long time to come.

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The Open University

'Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.' W B Yeats

As long ago as 1926, educationalist and historian J C Stobart wrote a memo when he was working for the fledgling BBC in which he advocated a 'wireless university'. Nothing concrete happened until the early 1960s, when a number of different proposals were put forward. The BBC and the Ministry of Education discussed plans for a 'College of the Air', and in 1963 a study group presented a report about lower income groups and their ongoing exclusion from higher education.

When the Labour party came to power in 1964, Prime Minister Harold Wilson asked Jennie Lee his Minister for the Arts, to take over the idea of a University of the Air, under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science. She researched educational experiments in other countries, but she had very definite ideas of how such a university should operate in Britain:

'I knew it had to be a university with no concessions, right from the very beginning. After all, I have gone through the mill myself, taking my own degree, even though it was a long time ago. I knew the conservatism and vested interests of the academic world. I didn't believe we could get it through if we lowered our standards.'

A White Paper was published in 1966 and when Labour was returned to power in the 1967 election, the new university was part of the manifesto commitment.

Professor Walter Perry was appointed as the Open University's first Vice-Chancellor. He came from a traditional background himself, but realised that the new venture could have long-term and far-reaching effects on the whole of higher education:

'It suddenly struck me that if you could use the media and devise course materials that would work for students all by themselves, then inevitably you were bound to affect - for good - the standard of teaching in conventional universities. I believed that to be so important that it overrode almost everything else.'

In 1969 the staff moved to their new home in Milton Keynes and from the middle of 1970 applications began to come in from potential students. Of course the idea had its critics, one MP responded to the announcement of its inauguration by calling it 'blithering nonsense'. But in January 1971 the first students began work on their courses. The Open University soon began to prove wrong all those in the academic world who had doubted that it was possible to successfully teach unqualified students at a distance,

subjects such as science at university level.

By 1980 student numbers reached 70,000 with 6000 graduates every year and more courses and subjects were gradually introduced, alongside professional training courses. Higher degrees were also added and, as computers began to come into wider use, new methods of learning became possible.

During the 1990s there was considerable expansion, both in terms of subjects and course offered and in the reach of the university itself to other countries. In 1998 the Open University celebrated the 25th anniversary of its first graduation ceremony.

Ten years later its materials and study methods are used by traditional universities and in some areas the Open University has scored better on the quality of its teaching than Oxford and Cambridge. Most courses still require no previous qualifications and anyone over the age of 16 may apply to be a student. That is not to say that studying with the Open University does not require application and self-discipline, probably more than the dedicated three years of traditional courses. Such is the high profile of the institution that celebrities are happy to share their experience of it. Lenny Henry recently completed a BA in English Literature and says that it attracted him because it seemed manageable:

'Because it's done in bite-sized pieces, it doesn't feel incredibly onerous like

real university does, with everything dumped on you in three years. Because it is passed down carefully over six years, you really do feel like it's do-able.'

The Open University itself puts its success down to its excellence in scholarship, teaching and research, but above all in its methods which encourage and support those with no qualifications but plenty of aspiration to fulfill their potential. Its nearly forty years of teaching has produced remarkable and life-changing results for both individuals and society, while looking forward a recent report from The Economic and Social Research Council praises the Open University for offering a 'vision for the future'.

'Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.'
B F Skinner

'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'
Nelson Mandela

'The job of an educator is to teach students to see vitality in themselves.'
Joseph Campbell

'A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary.'
Thomas Carruthers

'The beautiful thing about learning is that no-one can take it away from you.'
B B King

What is 'Literature'?

FRANK: You seem to be under the impression that all books are literature.

RITA: Aren't they?

FRANK: No.

RITA: Well – well how d'y'tell?

FRANK: I – erm – erm – one's always known really.

When Rita arrives in Frank's office, she is approaching the subject of English Literature with fresh eyes. So she doesn't know what constitutes 'literature'. By 'literature' of course, Frank means 'worthy of study in the eyes of the educational establishment'. Rita only knows what she *likes*. Russell uses Rita's educational innocence to challenge the perceived notions of what makes a piece of writing worthy of the term 'literature'.

From the moment that Chaucer was buried in Westminster Abbey, thereby creating a 'Poets' Corner', to the creation of Hollywood's Hall of Fame, the human race has been making judgments about its artists. And such judgments, no matter what they pretend, can never be purely aesthetic. However objective we try to be, we cannot help but be influenced by our own moral, spiritual, intellectual, and political heritage. Lord Byron, for example, was excluded from Poet's Corner until 1969, because he was condemned by the Dean of Westminster as 'immoral' – a concern that most 21st Century

observers would not have. Transient fashions influence our aesthetic judgments.

Over the years, the 'Canon' has developed: a list of written works and/or authors who are generally considered 'great' by literary critics and academic institutions: Dickens, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and so on. Popular opinion is often ignored or even specifically opposed – I suspect that an official contemporary selection of authors would not include Dan Brown, despite his mass appeal.

So what makes up the canon? In certain places you'll find a version of the canon written down, such as The National Curriculum. The Curriculum describes authors belonging to its category of 'English Literary Heritage' as 'authors with an enduring appeal ... who have played a significant role in the development of literature in English.' But by its nature the list of authors for inclusion can seem arbitrary. For Key Stage 3 English, for example, the list includes Charlotte Bronte but not Emily or Anne; and Keats but not Shelley nor, as it happens, Byron.

Of course we have to make choices at some point. We cannot study *everything* within the finite limitations of our own lives. Some choices can seem relatively straightforward. Imagine, for example, that we wish to study Willy Russell's work; but we

would probably not be interested in *everything* he has written. We might start by ruling out anything not intended for public reading, such as letters and emails. But then suppose you have time to see just one of his plays, which one should it be, and performed by whom? Russell seems to have his own opinion on this sort of choice too:

FRANK: (*aghast*) An amateur production?

RITA: What?

FRANK: Are you suggesting I miss a night at the pub to watch *The Importance* played by amateurs in a church hall?

RITA: Yeh. It doesn't matter who's doin' it, does it? It's the same play, isn't it? ... Jus cos they're amateurs? Y've gorra give them a chance.

The irony, of course, is that Willy Russell himself has now made the canon. He is firmly ensconced in the National Curriculum (Key Stage 4, to be precise), loved by educational establishments as well as the entertainment-seeking public. So is his point still valid? After all, would we even know what his point *was* if his work was not considered 'good'. For that matter, would you have bothered to read or see his plays, if they were not on The National Curriculum?

It seems to me that the one thing Russell convincingly argues for is independent thinking. He is critical of Frank not because of Frank's choices, but because they're not his *own*

choices, he has blindly followed an authoritarian educational establishment's decision. Rita, who starts out with such a free independence of mind, begins to follow suit – which Frank notices with withering disdain when she enjoys his own poetry ('you recognise the hallmark of literature now, don't you?'). He has educated Rita, and he hates himself for it.

BETH FLINTOFF

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What do you think makes a work worthy of being called 'Literature'?

Here are some things to think about ...

In today's multi-media culture, **does 'literature' have to be a novel, poem, or play?** For example, could the script of a brilliant TV drama series count?

Does it have to be in traditional 'book' format? For example, does an article in a magazine count? (N.B. many of Dicken's novels were originally published by monthly instalments in popular journals).

Does a work have to be fictional to be considered 'literature'? Can a science essay or biography be in the canon? How, for example, can you judge the aesthetic value of something as important as Darwin's *On The Origin of Species*?

Ten Great Works of Literature

In the opinion of

Write your name on the dotted line above. Then consider the questions posed on the previous page, and create your own personal Literary Canon.

TITLE	AUTHOR	WHY?

Literary References In *Educating Rita*

The following are authors or works that are mentioned by Rita and/or Frank:

HENRY JAMES	A well known American novelist (1843 – 1916)
DYLAN THOMAS	A welsh poet who was famous for ‘Under Milk Wood’ – a ‘play for voices’ (1914 – 53)
ROGER MCGOUGH	A contemporary poet still prolific today. His work is known for its popular and accessible style, not critically considered as ‘great’ as Dylan Thomas, above.
E.M.FORSTER	An English novelist (1879 – 1970) who was highly respected for writing about class and social ambition, though primarily focussed on a wealthy upper clas or aspirant middle class. <i>Howards End</i> was written in 1910.
RITA MAE BROWN	A contemporary American novelist. <i>Rubyfruit Jungle</i> was her first novel, exploring issues of lesbianism.
T.S.ELIOT	An English poet, playwright and literary critic (1888 – 65) <i>The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock</i> was one of his first poems (1915).
HAROLD ROBBINS	An American author (1916 – 97). <i>A Stone for Danny Fisher</i> was about the effects of The Great Depression.
SOMERSET MAUGHAM	A popular English playwright, novelist and short story writer. <i>Of Human Bondage</i> was written in 1915 and is generally considered to be his masterpiece, containing autobiographical elements.
D H LAWRENCE	An English poet, novelist and short story writer (1885 – 1930). Some of his more controversial works, such as <i>Lady Chatterley’s Lover</i> , were censored and even

banned at the time. *Sons and Lovers*(1913) tells the story of a young artist.

IBSEN

A major 19th Century Norwegian playwright and theatre director. His exploration of the place of women in Victorian society was considered scandalous. *Peer Gynt* was a verse play that broke all the traditional views of what constitutes theatre.

WILDE

An enduringly popular English playwright, novelist and occasional poet. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is his most famous work, still performed constantly today.

SHAKESPEARE

Macbeth was a five-act tragedy written sometime at the beginning of the 17th Century and based on historical sources.

FERLINGHETTI

A contemporary American painter and poet born in 1919.

WILLIAM BLAKE

An English poet, painter and printmaker who is now considered one of the major figures of the Romantic age (1757 – 1827). *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was a collection of poems printed on blocks with detailed paintings all around, drawn by Blake himself.

MARY SHELLEY

English author who wrote 'Frankenstein'. Dr Frankenstein created a human being who turned into a monster that he could not control.

Interview with the Designer

The designer Andrew Edwards talks about his work on Educating Rita.

How do you approach creating Frank's world?

I wanted to create a space that was homely to Frank, but also somewhere he'd never really settled. It was a world he moved into, but he's never quite unpacked, and we resolved that in the last scene he'd have some boxes he'd never quite got round to unpacking.

What kind of research did you undertake for the design?

I explored libraries and offices – we were trying to find out how those creative spaces evolve for people. *Educating Rita* is set in a red brick university that's itself a mixture of old and new, which we wanted to achieve with the bookshelves and the fire place.

I researched libraries and studies and noticed that bookcases always designed to fit around the room. So we've tried get the same look in The Watermill – for instance there's a wooden beam running through the stage, which we've incorporated into the design. We wanted to bring the audience into the set, creating something that runs from the space to the world onstage, and back out to the audience.

You've designed the set so that the window is the 'fourth wall' – i.e. it looks out onto the audience. Why did you decide on that?

The window was a very practical decision. By having the window downstage, it pulls that actors downstage towards the audience, which makes life easier.

But also there are so many jokes about the door, that we needed to see the door onstage, and architecturally it doesn't make sense to have a door and a window on the same wall.

And there is something nice about having the window out towards the audience, because it highlights the fact that Rita always looks out onto a better way of life outside the window. She looks out at 'them down there', and we're the people on the lawn that she wants to come and join. I think a lot of theatre audiences are quite sophisticated culturally, so Rita is looking enviously at who the audience represent. And the way the set is designed is partly to help Jamie give a lot of movement around the space. In a two-hander you can't be too static, so I wanted to give a focus for Rita to move around from the door to the window, to the bookshelf, and so on.

Frank's World: The Study

When creating the world of Frank's study, the themes that are embedded in the play come to the fore. As often happens onstage, the physical world that the audience sees when they walk into the theatre embodies a series of metaphors about Frank and Rita. The external space mirrors the internal.

The study – Frank's world, into which Rita unexpectedly bursts. The books are everywhere, they tower over and surround him. His world has badly concealed secrets – such as the drink hidden behind the books. Rita loves his world, and starts by wanting to emulate it.

RITA: How d'y' make a room like this?
FRANK: I didn't make it. I just moved in. The rest sort of happened.

The study is also Frank's self-imposed prison; he doesn't want to leave it, unless he can go to the pub (an alternative, also self-imposed, prison). In terms of physical movement, Frank moves little in the study, preferring to swing pointlessly on his swivel chair; whereas Rita prowls around restlessly.

The door handle – if the study is a form of prison, the door handle represents Frank's mode of escape. It

is, of course, rusty, and one of Rita's first actions is to 'oil' it for him. She will help his means of escape.

The window – often in drama, windows are a metaphor – they are the character's view of the outside world. Frank and Rita often comment on what they see outside. In particular Rita is interested in the lawn, which seems to represent to her the world of the 'real' students. She tries to persuade Frank to sit on the lawn with her, but he is anxious to keep her for himself, unchanged and individual. As so often happens with something longed for, when Rita does finally sit on the lawn with the other students, it is a disappointment.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What do you notice about the way Andrew Edwards, the designer, has created the set to fit on The Watermill's stage?

How would you design the set of *Educating Rita*?

What themes do think are the most important in *Educating Rita*? How would you underline those themes if you were directing the play?

The Pygmalion Myth

The legend of Pygmalion is an ancient story most familiar from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a collection of human stories about mythical changes between animal and human form.

Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with a statue he has made. In Ovid's narrative, Pygmalion is a Cypriot sculptor who carved a woman out of ivory. His statue is so realistic that he falls in love with it. He offers the statue gifts and eventually prays to Venus, the Goddess of love. She takes pity on him and brings the statue to life. They marry and have a son, Paphos.

The story of Pygmalion has inspired countless writers, fascinated by the idea of a human creating another human using art instead of biological reproduction. Mary Shelley took the idea into its darkest extremities with *Frankenstein*, in which the creation becomes an uncontrollable monster. George Bernard Shaw, in his play *Pygmalion*, demonstrated how social engineering can 'create' someone: Eliza is fashioned into a new person fit for high society when she has the 'correct' accent and body language.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Write down in the box below any references you can find in the text that draw parallels between the story of Frank and Rita and the Pygmalion story.

2. To what extent is Frank a 'Pygmalion' figure? Do you think he 'creates' Rita using art, or does Rita create herself?

Interview with the Cast

Beth Flintoff spoke to Claire Lams, who plays Rita, and Tim Bentink, who plays Frank.

How does Rita change during the course of the play?

Claire: I think she does change, but her hunger for knowledge is always there, because of the way she's responded to her background. I didn't have a background like hers, but I went to a state school, and I remember getting to the end of school and thinking, 'Oh, I was meant to be learning!' and I think she's done that.

She's very strong, to leave her family to pursue knowledge. She changes because she wants it so much that she ignores any kind of warning. She doesn't realise there are negative things in this new world. And I think she develops some self-knowledge. It's about being able to have the choice – she says that a lot, she wants the choice to answer questions, not just make people laugh with the stupid answer. And by the end she has achieved that, she chooses to do the exam, and to get a good mark.

And what about Frank?

Tim: He's an alcoholic really! He's had a failed marriage and he's at the end of his career, facing the sack for being drunk. He says he's a bad teacher, but really he's rather a good teacher but because of his attitude to authority

and drinking, he's never become a high flyer. He does love English and literature, but his cynicism gets in the way. With his 'proper' students he takes them through a kind of factory process, so they can pass exams, rather than become people who are free and original thinkers. So when he gets this girl who doesn't conform to what students are meant to be, who hasn't had a classical education, but someone who is incredibly intelligent, he falls in love with that. He is intellectually seduced by her. And then when he has to make her conform to pass her exams, he finds he doesn't want to do it, he doesn't want to take away the bit about her that he loves. In order to do what she wants, he has to remove the 'fresh air'. She is losing part of her innate brightness and original thought and he hates doing that.

You say that Frank is intellectually in love with Rita – do you think Rita is intellectually in love with Frank?

Claire: Yes, in a way. I think she's in love with the whole academic world, she's in love with literature and with everything that she's discovering. And her source of learning is Frank, and so she loves that.

Tim: I say that Frank's intellectually in love, but of course at the end of the play he asks Rita to go to Australia with him. So at the back of his mind, despite the huge age discrepancy, he

really fancies her as well. If Rita suddenly asked him out, he'd say 'yes!'

Claire: She loves the learning part of it. But then she meets other people she can learn from and stops relying on Frank.

Tim: And then Frank starts to get jealous about the fact that she's off with her contemporaries. And he feels a bit humiliated. He's too old, too raddled, too alcoholic. Particularly when all the things that Rita was attracted to Frank by in the first place – the learning – she doesn't need anymore. She tries to be polite about it, but ultimately what she's found friends who are young and just as bright.

How are you finding being at The Watermill?

Claire: Very nice!

Tim: It's lovely. The best thing is that, for the last 26 years, I've been commuting to Birmingham to do *The Archers* and it takes two hours to get to work. And here, I get to work in a minute and a half!

Claire: It's so lovely here. I'm a city girl normally, and I saw some deer and was very excited!

Tim: I love waking up to hear the ducks quacking – it reminds me of our cottage in Norfolk.

Are there challenges in having a cast of just two?

Tim: It's the most intense work I've ever done. It's terrifying!

Claire: We go 'home' and there's just Tim and me, so we spend all our time learning lines. We can't really switch off, we're always thinking about it.

Tim, how are you managing to juggle your rehearsals here with playing David Archer in *The Archers*?

Tim: Well, David's not very busy at the moment! But the thing about 'The Archers' is that you can still be in it without being actually there. Other characters will say 'Oh, there's David on his tractor' and that can go on for months. There are in fact a whole load of characters who never speak, and some who've been talked about in the village for years, without ever actually being heard themselves. But I'm doing two episodes on Saturday. And I volunteered years ago to read The Ambridge Newsletter for the Blind, and it always takes ages, so that's due and I need to do that. Once we've started the performances (and we know all our lines!) I'll be doing more.

Interview with the Director

Beth Flintoff caught up with the Director, Jamie Glover, during the last week of rehearsals.

Jamie, can you talk us through your process as a director?

Well, for this play I couldn't expect the actors to be 'off the book' [*i.e. learn all their lines*] before we start. It's easy for actors to learn big chunks, but they need each other's energy to bounce off each other in this play. So we chatted for an afternoon, then we started blocking. We went through it quite swiftly, giving it a rough shape, and then went back to the beginning again. And each time they're getting more familiar with their lines. It doesn't really start to live until they know what they're saying – it's just beginning to crackle now. We're problem solving really – there's not much talking outside of the process. We just discuss things as they come up.

You're an actor as well as a director – does that inform your decisions?

I guess it does, yes. I love directing, and used to find myself frustrated with directors sometimes as an actor. You need to understand the rhythms of an actor's journey. I think I approach directing as an actor – they're the ones telling the story. If the actors don't have a sense of ownership of the play, I don't think it

ever entirely works. Having a designer and lighting designer and lovely costumes are terrific, but finally it's the actors you *really* need. Certainly the director should be ultimately dispensable – I think the best ones are.

What are the challenges you've found in *Educating Rita*?

Well, it's just the most beautiful play. Everytime I see it I love it more and more.

For the actors, what's tricky about it is that they have no break. They're on all the time, and that assimilation is quite a big part of the rehearsal process. You have to let the ideas ferment and get it into your bones. That's been a problem for us. I've had to give them time to go away and work on their own for a little bit.

The more I read it, the more I realised what a wonderful writer he is. All the literary references, of which there are quite a few in the play, are placed very very delicately. For example, the first professional play Rita goes to see is *Macbeth*. And Frank talks about the differences between a tragic event, which is something you might read about in the newspaper, and a tragedy

like *Macbeth* - the fact that Macbeth's fate is pre-ordained. I think you could argue that Frank knows from the moment Rita walks through the door that she's going to leave him, but he embarks on that journey nonetheless. It's not a tragedy in every sense of the word, because Rita gives Frank so much. But there is something pre-ordained about that relationship.

Another reference is to a Yeats poem called 'The Wild Swans at Coole.' about the musings of a middle aged man. It's a poem that springs to his mind because he's a man in his middle years, who's drinking too much, he's lost the appetite for being a poet and he's left with nothing except the slightly acrid taste of whisky in his mouth. So that poem is rather beautifully placed.

The other big reference of course is to Forster's *Howards End* - 'only connect' - asking how people connect across the class divide. Which is what this play is about.

I think *Educating Rita* is one of those frustratingly rare beasts which has

very profound and weighty themes within an extremely entertaining, sugar-coated form. It's about what we're on this planet for. And you leave the theatre, I hope, thinking quite deeply about these things, and about what sacrifices are worth making for an education. A lot of dramatists strive and fail to achieve that. It's entertaining and educating, which is rare.

How did you become a director?

Well I was working as an actor, for example I was in Edward Hall's early production of *Henry V* here at The Watermill. I've always been very interested in directing - I suppose I'm quite bossy! And then Michael Grandage was directing me about nine years ago, and he said he recognised in me the signs of frustration that he'd had when he was working as an actor, and he asked me if I wanted to direct. And he encouraged me, so I gave it a go. I directed a few things at RADA, and then Thelma Holt asked me to direct for her, and things have begun to fall into place. I still love acting, but I hope there'll be more!

Credits

Director Jamie Glover
Designer Andrew Edwards
Lighting Designer Mike Robertson

Rita Claire Lams
Frank Tim Bentinck

Production Manager Lawrence T. Doyle
Company Stage Manager Ami-Jayne Steele-Childe
Assistant Production Manager Nelly Chauvet
Deputy Stage Manager Neil Wilder
Assistant Stage Manager Samantha Drew-Griffiths
Wardrobe Supervisor Debbie Macgregor
Press and Publicity Tei Williams
Production Photographer Mike Eddowes