

EDUCATING RITA by Willy Russell
Viva! at The Brook Soham
Directed by Sarah Dowd.

This was the first time I had seen the stage version of *Educating Rita* and, on this showing, I think I prefer it to the film.

Although set in 1983, realistically, the play could be set in almost any decade anyway, as the storyline resonates with a timeless message about the quest for self-improvement.

The play is a two hander with **Rowan Maulder** as Frank, the professor and **Kerry Hibbert** as Rita who both successfully filled the large shoes of various skilled actors who have played the roles of Frank and Rita before. They both rose to the challenge admirably, instilling their own originality into the well-drawn roles.

Rowan encapsulated the life of the alcoholic academic rising above his disillusionment with his students to teach Rita against his better judgement. Kerry captured Rita's nervous energy - her effervescence and enthusiasm and, above all, convincingly showed the character's determination to succeed, all the while maintaining a very believable Liverpool accent. Obviously much credit for the play's success lies with Willy Russell and his clever and funny script; none of which works without talented actors such as these.

The open stage depicted Frank's study in which the entire play is set. This was an excellent set. Lots of bookcases - and books - with various seating areas with excellent props. A real academic fellow's set, every bit of it was well-used by the actors. Although the stage was built out into hall, in a strange way it created a feeling of intimacy. In the interval there was a cameo appearance of **Jacki Kennedy** who, under the guise of a cleaner, reset the props.

On the technical side, the aforementioned set and props were excellent. The choice of music between scenes was suitably apposite and complimented the whole production. I would liked to have seen some variation in the lighting to depict time of day/year as it was, to my mind, rather over-bright and the sound effects rather loud but that is nit-picking as everything was perfectly on cue. Costumes were appropriate, and plentiful. Well done **Jenny Surridge** on the fast changes too. Given so much attention was paid to detail, maybe Rita would have worn a wedding ring - particularly before the breakup of her marriage.

Sarah Dowd directed this production with great skill ensuring we appreciated each scene as it developed both in time and in Rita's metaphorical journey.

Viva lifts the bar higher and higher with their non-musical productions and this was no exception providing a very strong production which was hugely entertaining from a duo who did excellent justice to Willy Russell's time-honoured script treating us to a real tour de force.

Thank you to all involved for an excellent evening of theatre.

Julie Petrucci
Regional Representative NODA East District Four South