

Dr Rosemary J Westwell (PhD, MA Ed, MA TESOL, B Mus, BA Hons)

Tel: (01353) 663918

Email: rjwestwell@hotmail.com; rjwestwell1@yahoo.com

12/02/2016

Review of 'Viva's production of 'Educating Rita' on Thursday 11th February 2016 at the Brook in Soham

With the film of Educating Rita starring Julie Walters and Michael Caine still very much in mind, I expected it was going to be a difficult for Viva to come anywhere near the film's standard. However, these two actors, Kerry Hibbert and Rowan Maulder were even better – for not only did we experience the delightful contrasts between chatty hairdresser and experienced university professor, we also witnessed much more clearly the gradual changes in them as Rita became the confident, informed literature-loving expert and the Professor gradually slid into a disillusioned poet and alcoholic.

At the beginning, he had all the knowledge and understanding that Rita was hungry to acquire; in the end she had grown into an equal adversary.

The play by Willy Russell has many more layers than I had seen in the film. The Director and Producer, Sarah Dowd, explored these more fully and the audience was held in suspense as Rita struggled to perfect the art of literature criticism while the professor was frequently amazed and surprised at her unique wisdom, wit and capacity for affecting those she came into contact with on a personal level.

As the Open University student and the professor grew by learning so much from each other, their relationships with their respective partners diminished and finally ceased. However, unlike all goody-goody movies, Rita and Frank remained friends on an intellectual level with the underlying nuances of potential ever present. The script was not only packed with knowledgeable comments on literature and culture, it carefully created a gradual linear development of each of the two main characters until their crossed paths and they swapped places, ending as they had begun: the once empty-headed chatty hairdresser who saw her tutor as a man needing a haircut, to a much changed person, deciding to use the skills she had when she first arrived and the play finished full circle as she was about to cut the professor's hair. This was not the only symbolism evident.

The acting was superb, the Liverpoolian accent a delight, the professor's seasoned cynicism contrasting beautifully with Rita's youth and vivacity. It was the first ever two-hander presented by Viva and there is no doubt that it was a huge triumph. Exemplary sets, costumes and supporting teams also helped to make this a most memorable evening.

I look forward to Viva's production of Evita next March. contact: www.viva-group.org.uk

Rosemary Westwell