

Educating Rita Review

Viva, The Brook, Soham, 11 February 2016

It is 36 years since Willy Russell introduced the world weary alcoholic academic, Frank, to the sassy Rita, the working class girl who wants to 'know everything'. *Educating Rita* is a play about class, choice and the belief that education can set people free. It is also essentially a play about relationships, not just the relationship of the fictional characters, but the two actors who have to sustain the drama.

Any amateur group must count itself lucky if it is able to cast this play, but in Kerry Hibbert as Rita and Rowan Maulder as Frank, Viva has been more than lucky, but blessed with two outstanding performances. This production transcends 'performance' and they become Rita and Frank.

The masterstroke of Sarah Dowd's production is to dispense with the proscenium arch and bring the set and actors as close to the audience as possible. There are no intrusive gimmicks. Here we can observe every flutter and flicker, note every nuance and become totally absorbed in the relationship on stage. They are not performing to us, we are looking in on them. Willy Russell's dialogue comes up as fresh as ever and they are simply engrossing in their focus on each other and we care about their Pygmalion like story.

The energy and drive for the play in the first half must come from Rita and Kerry Hibbert utterly convinces with her Liverpool accent and expressive body language, giving us by turns a funny, spirited, nervous, deeply moving and calmly self-assured, mesmerising Rita. In the second half as Frank self destructs on alcohol and self pity then it is Rowan Maulder who magnificently commands the stage.

This is a theatrical tour de force that utterly convinces in its untheatricality and a triumph for everyone at Viva.

Mike Rouse