

# The English Theatre of Hamburg

*Established 1976*

*presents*

# EDUCATING RITA

*A Comedy*

*by*

*Willy Russell*

**Premiere on 18 February, 2016**

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 15, 16 and 17 February

Performances Monday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours

Matinee Performances at 11.00 Hours on Tuesdays and

Fridays beginning 23 February

**The English Theatre of Hamburg**

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# EDUCATING RITA

## The English Theatre of Hamburg

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Dear Friends of The English Theatre of Hamburg,

The English Theatre will premiere EDUCATING RITA by Willy Russell on 18 February, 2016, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 15, 16 and 17 February. The text of the play may be obtained from at [www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk](http://www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Teachers are invited to the dress rehearsal of this play on Sunday, 14 February, 2016 at 19.30 hours. Please contact Britta Schwalba at [schwalba@englishtheatre.de](mailto:schwalba@englishtheatre.de) to make your reservation.

Bookings for the play have already started. See the cover of this publication for dates and times of performances. Our current production, NO DINNER FOR SINNERS by Edward Taylor, runs until 6 February, 2016.

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### **ABOUT THE PLAY:**

First produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London in 1980, this comedy was later transferred to the Piccadilly Theatre where it won three major awards from the critics. It was one of the longest running plays in London's recent theatrical history and was turned into an award winning film starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters.

Rita, a young hairdresser, registers for a literature course offered by the Open University because she wants to enrich and increase her possibilities in life. During her tutorials, she becomes a different person, gradually liberating herself from the limitations of her working class background, family and marriage. She exchanges the small talk of the hair salon for the student chatter about art and literature. Her teacher Frank, like Professor Higgins in Bernard Shaw's PYGMALION, spends months educating Rita and, in a way, falls in love with her; but he is finally shocked by the academic Frankenstein he has created. For Rita has mastered all the terminology for passing exams, but, in the process, has lost the innocence, the spontaneity and the dependence on him that so attracted Frank to her in the first place. Although its background is education, the play is, at its core, an amusing look at the student-teacher relationship—its pains as well as its joys.

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### **ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT:**

Born near Liverpool in 1947, Willy Russell's early life reads like a scenario for the play he would later write, EDUCATING RITA. He left school at the age of fifteen and worked at various unskilled jobs for six years. Then, like Rita in the play, he trained and worked as a hairdresser for a time before turning to education. He, too, felt starved for something he was not getting in his working class environment. Like Rita he wanted to be able to discuss books and art and music and to be spiritually fed. So he completed a teacher's training course in 1970 and was a teacher for eighteen months. But, like Frank in EDUCATING RITA, he became disillusioned with teaching, feeling the impotence of the teacher to effect any real change in the educational system.

In 1972 he took up writing full time and since then has produced numerous successful plays for the stage, film and television. Among them: KING OF THE CASTLE; JOHN, PAUL, GEORGE, RINGO AND BERT; DEATH OF A YOUNG MAN; BREEZEBLOCK PARK; OUR DAY OUT; ONE FOR THE ROAD; DAUGHTERS OF ALBION; EDUCATING RITA; BLOOD BROTHERS; SHIRLEY VALENTINE.

## Summary of EDUCATING RITA

**Time:** The present

**Setting:** All the scenes take place in Frank's office, which is on the first floor of a university in the North of England.

### Act I, Scene 1

Frank, a middle-aged university professor, finds a bottle of whisky he has hidden behind some books on one of his bookshelves and pours himself a drink. Rita, a young hairdresser, enters. She has registered for a literature course offered by the Open University and this evening is her first tutorial with Frank. Rita is uneducated and from the working class. Her husband wants her to stop taking the pill and have a baby, but she wants to discover herself first. She has changed her name from Susan to Rita, after Rita Mae Brown, the author of a popular novel called RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE, which Rita has recently read and loved. She tells Frank that the women who come into the hair salon where she works want to be changed into different persons by a new hairstyle. "But if you want to change," she says, "y' have to do it from the inside, don't y'?"

Frank is impressed by Rita's honesty, innocence and excitement about learning, which is so different from the attitude of most of his students. Over the years Frank has become disillusioned with teaching and depressed over his failure as a poet. He has taken to drink and become, in fact, an alcoholic. In his present state, he feels he cannot give Rita what she really needs and tells her to make arrangements for another teacher. But Rita is determined to take her tutorials with Frank and no one else. She warns him that she is coming back next week and bringing along her scissors to give him a haircut.

### Act I, Scene 2

After Rita arrives for her second tutorial, Frank criticizes the essay she has written for him on RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE. It is only an appreciation of the novel, he says, not really literary criticism. Criticism is purely objective, never subjective as Rita's essay is. With that in mind, he wants Rita to give him a more critical response to E.M. Forster's novel HOWARD'S END, which he had given her to read. She again responds very subjectively by calling the novel a piece of "crap" only because Forster was not concerned about the poor in the novel. Frank points out that she will never pass examinations with such sentimental responses.

Bored by talking about E.M. Forster, Rita changes the subject to Frank's personal life. She finds out that his wife left him after 15 years of marriage, that he has not written any poetry since then and that he

now lives with Julia, a former student of his. Although uncomfortable talking about himself, Frank is obviously charmed by Rita. He wonders why she did not walk into his life twenty years ago. "Because I don't think they would have accepted me at the age of six," she replies.

### Act I, Scene 3

Rita is late for her tutorial because she had to work overtime in the hair salon. Frank immediately turns their attention to the essay she has written for him. In response to the question "Suggest how you would resolve the staging difficulties inherent in a production of Henrik Ibsen's PEER GYNT," Rita has written only one sentence: "Do it on the radio." Such a simple statement is not enough, Frank tells her. He requires a longer, more thoughtful essay. She explains that she could not write more because her husband, Denny, does not like her doing school work at home. So she summarized all her ideas in one line. Frank points out that she must learn to answer examination questions with references to other books and quotations from established critics.

He asks Rita to sit down then and there and write a proper essay for him. She begins, but soon starts talking to Frank about her personal life. In her environment, she says, she has only seen people drunk or on Valium, with no purpose except making money. She gets through life now because she looks forward to coming to Frank once a week and discussing art and literature. She suspects that Denny does not like her coming here because it makes her stronger, and that is what frightens him. Frank points out that Rita has been "connecting" the things in her life as E.M. Forster was suggesting in his novel by the words "Only connect," a phrase that has irritated Rita because she has not understood what the author meant by it. She wants to know why Frank did not just tell her what it meant from the start.

Frank: I could have done, but you'll have a much better understanding of something if you discover it on your own terms.

Rita: Aren't you clever?

### Act I, Scene 4

Rita has not brought her essay on the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov because Denny, after finding out she was still taking the pill, burnt it. Frank wonders if Denny thinks he and Rita are having an affair. "You're just me teacher. I've told him," she replies. Then Frank wants to know if she still loves Denny. Rita evades Frank's question, but she realizes that the course is turning her into a different person, and she knows that Denny is painfully aware of the change, too.

Frank suggests that she should perhaps stop the course. Art and literature should not take the place of life, he says. But Rita refuses to stop. The course is giving her more life than she has had in years. She insists that they stop talking about her and Denny and turn to Chekhov. “We’ll talk about Chekhov and pretend this is a pub,” Frank suggests, as he looks for a bottle of whisky behind the books on his bookshelves.

## Act 1, Scene 5

Rita bursts into Frank’s office out of breath. She has been to the theatre to see *MACBETH*, and she is so excited by the experience that she had to leave the hair salon for a few minutes to tell Frank all about it. “Wasn’t his wife a cow, eh?” she says. The Shakespeare play was like a thriller to her.

Rita:     *MACBETH’S* a tragedy, isn’t it?  
 Frank:    Yes, it is.

Rita then remembers the customer she has left unattended in the hair salon. If she does not get back to her soon, there will be another tragedy, she says. Frank quickly takes the opportunity to explain to Rita the difference between a tragedy, such as *MACBETH*, and a tragic event, such as an accident that happens spontaneously. Rita realizes that she is not used to thinking in these terms. She just thought the play was an exciting story.

Frank invites Rita and Denny to a dinner party that he and Julia are giving next Saturday. At first, Rita is suspicious about Frank’s motives for wanting her there. And she is worried about Denny’s reaction to the invitation.

Frank:     Well, ask him!  
 Rita:     All right.  
 Frank:     What’s wrong?  
 Rita:     What shall I wear?

## Act I, Scene 6

Frank is furious with Rita because she did not show up at his dinner party. She explains that she worried all day about what to wear. Then, when she finally told Denny that they had been invited, he refused to go and caused a terrible scene when she decided to go alone. After arriving at Frank’s house, she stood outside for a while, looking through the window at the people inside. Then she left, fearing that she was not dressed properly and had not brought the right kind of wine. Frank tries to assure her that his guests would not have cared about those things. They would have seen her as the funny, delightful, charming person that she is.

Rita replies sharply that she does not want to be funny, delightful or charming. She wants to talk seriously, with knowledge, like the rest of the people. She refuses, she says, to be some stupid woman who gives everybody a laugh because she

thinks she can learn. Frank blows up. “If you believe that’s why you were invited, to be laughed at, then you can get out of here right now,” he says.

Rita realizes that she does not belong to either world at the moment, Frank’s or Denny’s. She tells Frank how, after she had left his house, she went to the pub where Denny and her relatives were. They were drinking and singing, and she joined in too, thinking that she would stop the course. But then she noticed that her mother had stopped singing and was crying. On the way home from the pub Rita asked her mother why she had been crying. “Because – because we could sing better songs than those,” her mother answered. That is why Rita came back to the course and why she is staying, she tells Frank. She wants to sing a better song.

## Act I, Scene 7

Frank is reading Rita’s essay on *MACBETH* when she enters carrying a large holdall. Denny gave her an ultimatum, she explains. Either stop the course and have a baby, or get out altogether. She feels that she has really betrayed Denny in a way, but, as she says, she could not betray herself. So she is going to stay with her mother until she can find a flat of her own.

Under the circumstances Frank prefers not to discuss her essay on *MACBETH*. She quickly senses that he is trying to avoid telling her the hard truth about what she has written. “Was it rubbish?” she asks. Frank assures her that her essay is not rubbish. It is her honest, passionate reaction to the play, he says. But in terms of what she is asking him to teach her – how to pass examinations – it is worthless. Rita confronts Frank. If her essay is worthless, she demands that he tell her so and show her how to do it properly.

Frank, however, is not sure he wants to teach Rita how to write like the other students, because he knows he will have to change her fundamentally. Up to now he has fed on her need for him. She has filled a vacuum in his life and he has, in a way, fallen in love with her. If he teaches her to express herself like the other students, she will lose her own uniqueness, which Frank finds so valuable and attractive.

Rita:     But don’t you realize, I want to change! ... If I do somethin’ that’s crap, I don’t want pity. You just tell me, that’s crap. Here, it’s crap. Right. So we dump it in the bin, an’ we start again.

## Act II, Scene 1

The summer break is over. Frank is working at his desk when Rita rushes in. She has just returned from summer school in London where she had a great time writing essays and attending lectures.

She even got up enough courage to stand up and ask questions during the lectures. Frank reports that he and Julia were in France during the summer. While there, Julia left him; but they are together again and everything is normal.

Rita is now living in a flat with Trish, a young woman whom she finds “dead classy.” She seems younger and happier, and feels much more confident that she can talk seriously about literature, like the other students. Frank sees a big change in Rita and begins to fear that she will leave him, his influence on her gone forever. He decides to introduce her to the poetry of William Blake during the new course and is taken aback when she is able to quote from memory a long passage from Blake’s poetry. Rita informs Frank that she already knows all about Blake. He was one of the poets she studied in summer school, she announces proudly.

## Act II, Scene 2

Frank is marking Rita’s essay when she enters. She begins speaking to him in a posh voice and explains that she has decided to learn to talk properly, not in her usual way. Frank is irritated by the pretentious change and insists that she talk to him as she normally does.

Before her tutorial today, Rita was talking to some students outside on the lawn. She now boasts to Frank about how easily she was able to discredit an opinion of one of the students concerning the novels of D.H. Lawrence. Frank is obviously uncomfortable with Rita’s self-satisfied, arrogant tone. She is beginning to sound like so many of the students he cannot stand. She also brags to Frank about getting to know another student. His name is Tyson, but Rita calls him “Tiger.” He has asked her to go with him and a group of students to the South of France during the Christmas holidays. Frank jealously over-reacts to this piece of news.

Frank: Is there much point in working towards an examination if you’re going to fall in love and set off for the South of...  
 Rita: (shocked) What! Fall in love? With who? My God, Frank, I’ve just been talkin’ to some students...

He impatiently returns to her essay, commenting sarcastically on how similar it is to all the other essays on his desk.

## Act II, Scene 3

Rita is alone in Frank’s office waiting for him to appear for her tutorial. After a while he staggers in with his briefcase. He is very drunk. He curses his students for reporting him to the university authorities because of his drunken state in a recent lecture. Rita suggests that they cancel the lesson, but Frank wants to discuss her essay on William Blake. He criticizes her for simply going along with

the fashionable trend of over-complicating Blake. There is nothing of her in the essay, he complains. Rita replies that he must stop treating her as though she were the same person as when she first came to him.

## Act II, Scene 4

Rita did not show up for her last tutorial and she is late for today’s lesson. Worried about her, Frank phones the hairdresser’s shop and finds out that she no longer works there but in a bistro now. When Rita arrives, Frank, feeling neglected, wants to know why she never told him about working in the bistro and suggests that she might prefer to stop coming to his tutorials altogether. Rita lashes out at Frank, who by now has found a bottle of whisky and poured himself a drink. “If you could stop pouring that junk down your throat in the hope it’ll make you feel like a poet,” she says, “you might be able to talk about things that matter instead of where I do or do not work, an’ then it might be worth comin’ here.” She reminds him that they are supposed to be dealing with literary criticism in the tutorials. “You want literary criticism?” he asks. He then gives her two small volumes of his own poetry. “I want an essay on that lot by next week,” he says.

## Act II, Scene 5

Rita enters and immediately asks Frank if he has been drinking alcohol. She wants him to hear what she thinks about his poems when he is sober, she says. They are brilliant, she announces. Witty, profound, full of style. She and her flat mate Trish stayed up all night reading and discussing them, she says.

Disappointed by Rita’s positive opinion of his poetry, Frank bitterly observes what a good job he has done on her. He compares himself to the novelist Mary Shelley, who created the character Frankenstein. How fortunate it is, he continues, that he did not let Rita see his poetry when she first came to him. For then she would have recognized it for what it really is: clever, self-conscious, worthless shit. He rips the poems up and tells Rita to go away because he cannot bear her or the situation any longer. Rita explodes. What he really cannot bear, she tells him, is that she is educated now. She has got what he has got and he does not like it!

## Act II, Scene 6

It has been some time since Frank has seen Rita. In his drunken state he phones and leaves a message for her. He has entered her for her examination and he asks Trish, Rita’s flat mate, to pass on this information to her.

## Act II, Scene 7

Rita enters. Seeing that Frank is not there, she places a Christmas card on the filing cabinet, and

then opens the door to leave. Frank is standing there in the corridor with two large boxes. Without speaking to her, he enters the room and begins packing his books into one of the boxes. Rita watches him in silence for a while before asking why he is packing. "Australia," he replies. He is being transferred by the university to Australia because of being caught drunk again on the job. Julia is not going with him, he says sadly.

Frank: For God's sake, why did you come back?  
 Rita: I came to tell you you're a good teacher. Thanks for enterin' me for the exam.

Rita has passed her examination and wants to assure Frank that, contrary to his opinion, he really did give her something. He might think that she, like the other students, has ended up with just a lot of quotes and empty phrases; and she agrees she has to a certain extent. But that is not Frank's fault, she points out. It happened because she was so hungry for education. She admits that it might all be worthless in the end. But at least she now has more

choice in life, more possibilities. And for that reason, she says, Frank is a good teacher.

He tries to persuade her to go to Australia with him. She is evasive, not having decided yet what to do with her future. He finds a package behind some books and gives it to Rita, telling her that he bought it some time ago for an "educated woman". She opens the package and takes out a sexy dress with a low-cut neckline.

Rita: An educated woman, Frank? And this is what you call a scholarly neckline?  
 Frank: When choosing it I put rather more emphasis on the word woman than the word educated.

Rita regrets that she has only taken from Frank and never given him anything. Suddenly realizing that here is something she can do for him, she orders him to sit down. Confused, he does so. She gets a pair of scissors from the desk and begins cutting his hair.

Rita: I'm gonna take ten years off you...

### Multiple-Choice Exercise

1. Rita comes from the (a. upper class, b. middle class, c. working class).
2. Rita takes the literature course to (a. increase her possibilities in life, b. become a teacher, c. find a husband).
3. At first Frank refuses to accept Rita as a student because he (a. is too busy, b. thinks he cannot give her what she wants, c. does not like her personality).
4. Rita's early behaviour during the course shows us that she is (a. uneducated, b. unable to learn, c. uninterested in literature).
5. Frank insists that Rita must be (a. sentimental, b. subjective, c. objective) when she writes essays.
6. Rita did not go to Frank's party because she (a. preferred to go to the pub, b. did not like his guests, c. was afraid she had brought the wrong kind of wine).
7. Denny wants Rita to (a. get an education, b. have a baby, c. work more at the hairdresser's shop).
8. Rita decided to continue the course because she (a. is in love with Frank, b. hopes to see "Tiger" on campus, c. wants to sing a better song than her relatives).
9. Frank does not like what Rita has become during the course because she (a. talks and behaves like all the other students now, b. is more educated than he is, c. intends to continue her education elsewhere).
10. Rita thinks Frank is a good teacher because he (a. has given her more choice in life, b. is being promoted to a better position in Australia, c. is also a successful poet).

Answer Key:

1. c, 2. a, 3. b, 4. a, 5. c, 6. c, 7. b, 8. c, 9. a, 10. a.

### Interpretative Exercise

1. Compare Frank and Rita. Comment on their backgrounds, education and attitudes towards life and literature.
2. Describe the positive and negative effects of education on Rita. Do you think she really has more choice now than she did before taking the course? Do you believe that education today gives people more choices in the way they live their lives?