

# Educating Rita

by Willy Russell

## About the Author

Willy Russell was born in Whiston, near Liverpool, England, in 1947, to a father who worked in a factory and a mother who worked in a warehouse. At the age of five Willy and his family moved to a housing estate at Knowsley and later he attended school at Huyton and Rainford. He seemed destined for factory work due to his undistinguished academic record but, encouraged by the example of fellow Liverpoolians like the Beatles, he began writing songs. These songs, performed by a group he belonged to, were not immediately successful and at the age of fifteen he began an apprenticeship as a hairdresser.

For six years Russell was a ladies' hairdresser while writing songs, some of which were taken up by established performers, and sketches and poetry. However, he was held back by his lack of formal education and he decided to enrol in night classes. Having gained the necessary qualifications, he started a teacher training course at Childwall College and, while studying, his first play, *Blind Scouse*, was produced at the Edinburgh Festival.

*Keep Your Eyes Down* was staged as part of a student production in Liverpool in 1971 and public recognition came in 1974 with his play about the Beatles, *John, Paul, George, Ringo ... and Bert*. This transferred to London from the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool and his next play, *Breezeblock Park*, followed a similar path. *One for the Road*, first produced as *Painted Veg and Parkinson* in Manchester in 1976, was succeeded by *Stags and Hens* in 1978 and *Blood Brothers* in 1981.

## The Beginnings of Rita

*Educating Rita* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and was first performed at an experimental theatre called The Warehouse in 1979. After ten weeks of sold-out performances it transferred to the Picadilly Theatre, where it played more than 800 performances, was seen by over 400 000 people, and won three major theatre awards. By 1983 it had risen to the rank of fourth most popular play on the British stage.

The film version, with a screenplay by the author, was produced by Columbia Pictures in 1981, and featured Michael Caine and Julie Walters along with many other characters who had not appeared in the original play. The same process occurred with *Shirley Valentine*, where a one-hander was fleshed-out when the play became a

film, with Pauline Collins and Tom Conti playing the main parts.

In addition to these plays, Russell has written extensively for children's television (*King of the Castle*, *Break In*, *Lies* and *Boy with Transistor Radio*). His other television works include *One Summer*, *Daughters of Albion* and *Death of a Young Man*. Of Russell's works for theatre, *Educating Rita* has been performed in many different countries and in Australia there have been notable productions at Sydney's Marian Street Theatre in the 1980s and the Ensemble Theatre in the 1990s.

## Analysis with a Focus on Into the World

## Act One

### The Open University

Note that all references are to the Longman 1985 edition. The setting for Scene One, and indeed for the whole play, is 'a room on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the North of England'. This is quite specific and should be seen in the light of a comment made by Russell in an interview given to *The Independent* newspaper in January 1988 where he said:

Liverpool is often the setting for plays but is never the theme of them. Something like Rita has played all over the world. I like to think that beneath that veneer of dialect there is a universal truth.

In examining the various transitional phases that Rita goes through in the course of the play we must note those aspects such as education, class, sex and age that relate to a particular place, as well as those that relate to a certain time—the time in which *Educating Rita* was written.

The first aspect of purely British concern is that of the Open University. The concept of the Open University evolved from the convergence of three major post-war educational trends: developments in the provision for adult education, the growth of educational broadcasting and the political objective of promoting the spread of egalitarianism in education. The Open University offers courses to people who do not have the formal qualifications for ordinary university entrance. Students

register from their own homes and work for degrees on a cumulative points system, normally over a period of four years. This teaching is provided through specially designed books, television and radio programs, written work on a correspondence basis, residential summer schools and a tutorial service operating through a local network.

### Introducing Rita and Frank

Rita, at the age of twenty-six, has decided to enrol in an Open University course, majoring in literature, because she has become frustrated with what she perceives as the limitations of her life. Her job as a hairdresser is not fulfilling her and her marriage to Denny has not produced the expected child because Rita's priorities have changed.

Our initial impression of Frank is of a man in his early fifties with unkempt hair, a messy room and a dependency on alcohol. This last point is made in an amusing fashion when Frank seems to be searching for a book in an alphabetically arranged shelf. He moves from Eliot (either TS Eliot, the 20th-century poet, or George Eliot, the 19th-century novelist) to Dickens, the Victorian novelist, in his search for a bottle of whisky.

We also learn that Frank's relationship with the woman he lives with is not proceeding smoothly. He dislikes her cooking and being nagged about his drinking and, during a telephone conversation, he facetiously suggests that she put her head in the gas oven.

Rita literally bursts into the room and immediately comments on a religious painting that has been hanging on Frank's wall for years. She regards it as erotic, which surprises Frank as much as her later admiration of one of his windows. His response to her on this occasion—'I don't often consider it, actually'—is indicative of his general unthinking attitude towards his world. This extends beyond his physical surroundings to his work. When Rita asks what it is about a particular work that distinguishes it from another work, so that one can be labelled literature and the other dismissed as pulp fiction, all Frank can say is 'one's always known really'. This inadequate answer, with its revealing reliance on the impersonal 'one', conveys a great deal about Frank's deficiencies.

### Speech and Background

Rita's speech patterns convey as much about her background as Frank's do. She uses expressions like 'dead surprised' and 'soft get', both typical working-class phrases. Yet this lack of sophistication is more than balanced by her quick-wittedness. When Frank tells her his name she remarks that his parents may have named him after the quality of 'frankness', which is a quality Rita herself most assuredly possesses, and she describes the type of healthy food she imagines Frank would eat in the colourful phrase 'pebble-dashed bread'.

Rita wants to be able to read books and attend ballet and opera and appreciate these art forms. The gap that exists between the world she has lived in all her life and the world she aspires to is brought out in several references to books. Rita mentions a poem she has read about fighting death and Frank jumps to the conclusion that she means Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night', with its refrain 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light'. However, it is a poem by the Liverpool author Roger McGough, a contemporary of Willy Russell, that Rita has in mind. Even her name is derived from a modern writer whose work would not be usually studied at a university, Rita Mae Brown. Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) is an account of a girl called Molly Bolt, raised in the Deep South of America, who discovers her lesbianism at an early age and who spends the remainder of the novel celebrating the joys of this form of sexual expression. There is also probably a nod on Russell's part in the direction of the Beatles in the naming of his main character after 'Lovely Rita', the meter maid in the song of that name on *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). A third reference to a popular author with no academic respectability is the American novelist Harold Robbins, whose work, filled with sex scenes, is quoted by Rita in an essay she writes for Frank.

### Cultural References

Some of the references to contemporary figures illustrate the cultural environment in which Rita exists and hence represent a phase in her life that she is keen to leave behind her. They may require explanation for modern readers and viewers. Most people would probably be familiar with daleks, the robotic creatures from the television series *Dr Who*, who speak in harsh monotones, but the name of Farrah Fawcett-Majors is a quintessentially 1970s one and refers to someone remembered more for her shaggy hairstyle than her acting ability. The joke involving Jane Austen and Tracy Austin only works if it is known that the first figure was a major English novelist of the early 19th century and the second a minor American tennis player of the late 1970s.

One of the reasons why Rita and Frank quickly establish a rapport with each other is that neither has any inhibitions in discussing sex. After Rita's 'erotic' remark about Frank's picture, she makes an obscene joke out of the title of EM Forster's *Howard's End* (1910), a work which is now more widely known due to the Merchant-Ivory film version, and she swears freely because she knows that Frank will not be offended. He in turn corrects her TS Eliot poem, which is 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', not J Arthur, these being the initial and Christian name of the film producer J Arthur Rank whose surname, in rhyming slang, stands for 'wank' or masturbate, as Frank subtly points out.

By the third scene the coarse banter between the two of them has reached the level of Rita exclaiming 'This Forster, honest to God, he doesn't half get on my tits' and Frank responding with 'Good. You must show me the evidence'.

### Reaching for a Richer Life

Rita has divulged that she wants a richer life than those around her are interested in and that the pressures to stay unchanged, **to be content with 'a laugh an' a joke with the girls' no longer concern her.** Frank has talked about his failed marriage and his aborted career as a poet. He goes on to stress how the uninhibited freshness of Rita must be altered if she is to play the education game. Her response to a question about staging Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* with the words 'Do it on the radio' does not fit the accepted academic ritual. To move from expressing opinions to formulating thoughts in a considered fashion will involve such a determined effort that Frank asks Rita whether the 'culture' she has at the moment is not sufficient.

Rita's answer, a series of observations on working-class life which form the bulk of Act One, Scene Four, express a marked sense of disenchantment. She detects in her parents and those of her own age a spiritual vacuum—'there's no meanin' in their lives'. Rita knows that her husband hates her attendance at Frank's tutorials and when, in the following scene, we learn that he has burnt her books on the Russian playwright Chekhov, the news is not surprising.

In a short period of **time the roles have been reversed. Whereas in Act One, Scene Two Frank wanted to talk about Forster and Rita wanted to pry into the reasons for his marriage's breakdown, in Act One, Scene Five, Rita wants to talk about Chekhov, while Frank wants to 'go to the pub and drink pots of Guinness'.** They reach a compromise when Frank agrees, reluctantly, to see an amateur production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

### Entering New Worlds

This production has little impact on Rita, but a professional production of *Macbeth* she finds exciting and as gripping as a thriller. Frank is forced to correct her notions of tragedy which, he explains, is a term that should not be applied to ordinary life, even if death is involved. **Rita says that she is 'not used to thinkin' like this' but finds this new stage of experience enjoyable.**

One transition that she refuses to make, however, involves meeting Frank on a social level. He invites her to dinner and although Rita eventually locates his house, she knows that the wine she has brought is inappropriate and that she would have been unable to talk confidently to the dinner party guests. Frank's attempt at reassuring her that his friends 'would have seen someone who's funny, delightful, charming'

strikes Rita as patronising and designed to relegate her to the role of 'court jester'.

She is disturbed by the mindlessness of her relative: singing songs at their local pub, especially when she glimpses her mother's momentary awareness of the situation. Yet two further changes are required if Rita is to fully enter a new world, one physical and one mental.

The physical change occurs when Denny gives her an ultimatum—stop attending classes and taking the pill or else leave home. Rita takes the second option. The mental change requires her to, as Frank expresses it, 'suppress, perhaps even abandon [her] uniqueness', which is a sacrifice that is essential if Rita is to write the sort of essays that will enable her to pass exams.

## Act Two

### Characters and Changes

Several months have elapsed between the end of Act One and the beginning of Act Two. During that time both characters have undergone many changes and, in considering these, we should note that entering new stages of experience need not be restricted to Rita. She has certainly altered drastically. She is dressed in new clothes and has spent a week at a summer school in London talking, seeing plays and buying second-hand articles in markets. She has also stopped smoking and has a flatmate called Trish. Yet Frank has also changed. Julia has left him and his drinking appears to have worsened. He talks in a self-pitying way about Rita's inevitable departure and when he discovers that she has already studied the works of William Blake, the Romantic poet he had planned to introduce to her, he is taken aback.

Frank's hurt feelings are exacerbated in the next scene. Rita, under the influence of Trish, tries to speak with a refined accent and she announces that she has demolished the arguments of a fellow student who preferred one of DH Lawrence's novels to another. She also mentions that she has been invited to 'the South of France in the Christmas holidays'. Acting like a parent, or a jealous husband, Frank tells Rita that she cannot go, even though her exams take place before the holidays.

### Frank Unravelling

The unravelling of Frank continues in Act Two, Scene Three. He has been reported by students for giving a lecture in a drunken state. That his being in this condition is at least partly due to his fear of losing his control over Rita is shown in his quoting her definition of assonance: 'getting the rhyme wrong'. He also resents an interpretation she offers of one of Blake's poems, not because it is wrong but because it is not an interpretation that occurred to him. Rita is forced to

say, 'I can have a mind of my own can't I?' as she tries to loosen Frank's grip on her, which is becoming as oppressive as the hold that was once exerted by her husband and by the members of her family.

Rita is late to Frank's next class because she had been discussing Shakespeare at her new workplace, a bistro. Frank is offended that he had not been informed of Rita's changed occupation and he adopts a martyred tone when he says, 'perhaps you don't want to waste your time coming here any more?'. He acknowledges that Rita has acquired the skills to 'sail through' her exams and he offers her his own poetry on which to practise her literary criticism.

### **Frank and Frankenstein**

This gesture is a purely masochistic one on Frank's part as he wants Rita to reject his poetry as 'worthless, talentless shit'. That Rita finds his work to be witty and profound causes Frank to look at himself as the creator of a monster, alluding to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Gothic tale of a scientist who loses control over the object he creates. But Rita is no object and she confronts Frank with some harsh truths—that he was happier when she was charming and uneducated and now he cannot abide this self-confident person with a mind of her own. Her dropping of the name Rita is symbolic of her transformation.

The final encounter between Frank and Rita takes place while he is packing tea-chests with books to take with him to Australia. He is looking forward to going to a place where 'things are just beginning' and he asks Rita to come with him. She deflects by cracking a joke about the money Frank could make by returning his empty bottles and then lists some possible choices available to her, from going to France with a fellow student to having a baby. She feels that she has simply taken from Frank and has given nothing in return but, when we think she is about to offer her body, Russell ends his play on a comic note with Rita giving Frank a haircut.

### **■ The Film of *Educating Rita***

As many students are likely to see the film of this text, the following provides a summary of the scenes in the film that differ from those in the play.

- The opening shot is of Michael Caine as Frank, walking through the university grounds until he reaches his rooms. We see him next, in an inebriated state, giving a tutorial and afterwards meeting Julia, a tutor at the university with whom he is living.
- Julie Walters, as Rita, is shown making her way across the university cobblestones wearing high-heeled shoes. She is next seen working at the hairdressers' salon and then trying to study at home while her husband demolishes a wall.
- Julia is shown embracing Brian, a fellow academic, who threatens to leave his wife in a later scene.
- Denny, Rita's husband, burns her books and Rita travels to Frank's house but is unable to enter. Afterwards, she goes to a pub for a sing-a-long with Denny and her parents.
- The wedding and reception of Rita's sister are depressing occasions for Rita.
- These scenes are interspersed with views that convey the changing seasons and the changes in Rita's clothing and hairstyle, from brassy to subdued.
- Frank is shown in southern France with a group of people at a chateau. He is reading letters from Rita.
- Rita meets her new flatmate, Trish, who listens to Mahler played at deafening volume. We also see Rita working at a bistro, where she corrects some students who are dining there. Later, she talks to students gathered on the grass at the university.
- A drunken Frank is late for a lecture. The enraged bursar watches him from the auditorium as Frank falls from the rostrum. Frank is then warned by the university council about his behaviour.
- Frank visits Rita at the bistro and when he returns to his house he meets Brian, who announces that he is going to leave his wife for Julia.
- Rita returns to her flat to find Trish, who has taken a drug overdose. She then visits Trish in hospital.
- Frank visits a dance hall, hoping to find Rita. Later that night he shouts outside the bursar's house, before falling into a drunken sleep.
- Rita meets Tiger Tyson, a fellow student, who reminds her of the time when her exam will commence.
- Rita encounters Denny and his pregnant girlfriend, both of whom seem quite content.
- A disconsolate Rita looks at the exam paper and notices that it includes the question about staging Ibsen that she had answered so briefly in her early days as a student.
- The final scene takes place at an airport. Frank, having received a haircut from Rita, looks far more respectable than at any other stage in the film. He reads Rita's excellent exam results before heading through the boarding gate. Rita turns and walks away.

## Key Issues

- Consider the reasons why Rita wants to change her life. Before Rita meets Frank she has attempted to explain to her husband that she wants a better way of life, which he can only see in terms of having children or moving to a more respectable area. When she sees Frank's room at the university Rita is impressed not simply by the number of books it contains but also by the mess, which she describes as being a 'perfect mess'. After spending some time attending tutorials, Rita comes to the realisation that there is an absence of meaning in the lives of her family and friends. She knows that such people have material possessions, but she is conscious of the apathetic way they accept things like vandalism and violence.
- Think about some of the obstacles Rita encounters in her quest to enter a new world. While Rita announces to Frank that she is delighted at the idea of 'finding herself' she is aware that her husband wants her old self to return. Part of this change involves thinking about concepts like tragedy in a way she has never previously had to do. Her sense of discomfort when she visits Frank but is unable to enter his house is exacerbated when Rita talks to him afterwards. Rita becomes indignant at the thought that she would have been dismissed by Frank's guests as a freak who was good for a laugh.
- Consider how Rita will be required to change in order to enter the world she wants to be a part of. Frank explains to Rita that in order to obtain the sorts of marks she wants she will have to change the way she approaches literature and that this will necessitate a loss of her uniqueness. Rita's ability to change is shown by the way in which she responds to the new experiences of visiting London and attending a summer school, which requires much more than merely talking to one person who finds her fascinating.
- Think about some of the changes that Rita and Frank choose or choose not to make and the changing opinions and emotions they must deal with. One change that Rita soon abandons is the attempt to alter her speech in favour of a more genteel manner of speaking. A further change that is permanent is her decision to no longer call herself Rita, but to revert to her given name of Susan. A vital step in Rita's progression involves her rejecting Frank, for as she points out she must be allowed to express her own opinions and not have to defer to his views. This rejection also means that she declines the offer to accompany him to Australia. At the outset, Frank is seemingly content with his existence. His current girlfriend is a poor cook and he drinks too much, but he is comfortable with his surroundings and he is confident that he knows what is of value in literary terms.

Rita forces Frank to examine the artwork and the general condition of his university room, which has windows that have not been opened for years. Rita's views on particular works, such as her reading of a poem by Blake, are not what Frank would have expected but, even though he resents her thinking for herself, he is forced to acknowledge that Rita's views are not actually wrong. Frank's obsession with the notion of Rita as his creation leads him to behave like a jealous partner or possessive parent when she becomes friendly with other students and when she travels to London and France.

A superior attitude towards certain authors undergoes a change as Frank praises a book such as *Rubyfruit Jungle* that, formerly, he would have dismissed with contempt. The freshness and vitality of Rita have such an impact on Frank that he suggests that she come with him to Australia after he has been compelled to leave his position at the northern England campus. By giving up alcohol and allowing Rita to cut his hair, Frank undergoes further changes that result in him bearing little resemblance, physically or emotionally, to the man we met at the start of the play.