

"RITA" SPECIAL!

NOISES OFF

"EDUCATING RITA" RAISES THE BAR YET AGAIN!



I first met Martin Williams at an APS social event, shortly after he and Jane Williams joined us in 2016. It was one of those of those evenings where we did our best to entertain each other with favourite comic sketches, pithy poems, moving short-stories and declamatory Shakespearian soliloquies, all of our own choosing. Martin and Jane selected an extract from Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* with which they captivated the audience and stole the evening with an adept, impassioned and memorable performance. Martin made it clear at

the time that this play was one of his all-time favourites, and he looked forward to the time that it could be staged at APS.

Now, APS is blessed with extraordinary talent, on-stage, in the director's chair and behind the scenes. But most of us prefer ensemble productions where we can share the artistic and physical workload across a decent-sized group of bodies. *Educating Rita* has a cast of only two. So, for that reason, it would remain an 'APS

potential production' until the moment that the right director came along and, most importantly, until the actress with the will and the flair to sustain such a demanding role made herself known to us.

The stars aligned during lockdown with our Paddock Garden outdoor performances of *Waiting for Godot* and *Shakespeare in (and out of) Love*. Graham Smith, an excellent actor in his own right, took on key roles in both productions and declared his willingness to direct *Educating Rita*. With Martin already established as the anchor and driving force behind the challenge, keen to take on the role of Frank, there was now just one piece of the jigsaw missing. Sarah Nias joined us for the Shakespeare ensemble piece and immediately won our hearts. She instantly demonstrated that she had extensive acting experience and a prodigious talent, by performing multiple roles, each one complex, challenging and with a distinct character. She delivered each one flawlessly, wringing the maximum entertainment value out of every move and every spoken syllable, accurately remembered and perfectly crafted. Subsequent roles at the Swan Theatre Yeovil showed that she could also master regional accents and sustain them with

total credibility from curtain up until the curtain call.

The die was cast, and rehearsals for *Educating Rita* began.

It was evident from the outset that this was going to be very special. The play has a lot of lines, shared between only two actors, but the success of *Rita* relies on something far more than just learning pages of script. It was important that both became proficient with their lines very early in the process, so that Graham's focus could be on developing the unique troubled personalities of Frank and Rita and, vitally, the evolving interaction between them. The relationship changes sinuously as the play progresses. Rita learns how to critique English literature from Frank in the early scenes, whilst Frank learns from Rita about how he could live a fulfilling life at the end. Each strives to release the full potential of the other in their own way.

Graham could have brought the play up to date but decided wisely to set the play in the 1980s, when it was written. He did this by retaining the dialogue of the time set against a background of 80s décor, clothes and telephone technology, accompanied by a soundscape of 80s music (and not just the obvious number ones of the time) which, I'm sure, triggered fond memories in large sections of the audience. He ensured that we never lost sight of the fact that the themes developed in the play are as relevant today as

they were then. This 40-year-old play hasn't aged a bit; the issues of misogyny, prejudice, barriers to working-class advancement, the obstacles to achieving potential and prevailing academic pomposity all raise questions that still need to be answered to our satisfaction in 2022. "Levelling-up" was a social issue in 1980, and sadly remains one just as prominently today.

grinning silently to themselves, reminiscing about similar absurd situations in their own lives, or roaring with laughter at the finely honed one-liners of Willy Russell's script.

Both Martin and Sarah will, no doubt, be intensely proud of their portrayals in this production, which they will remember for the rest of



Despite Frank and Rita stridently airing their respective demons, the play is packed with humour. Martin and Sarah used perfect comic timing and tone to keep us on their side, willing their characters to make the most of what life could offer in the circumstances. They ensured that, every couple of minutes, the audience were

their lives. Both had *Rita* high on their bucket lists. Having played their roles with such passion, such dedication, such focused energy and such honesty from the depths of their souls, they both deserve all the accolades which we are sure will come their way. The chemistry between them was palpable, and the genuine warmth in their inevitably doomed relationship was made totally believable to an audience hanging on their every word.



The outcome of this commitment and creativity has been a triumphant production which prompted standing ovations. Our capacity audiences will have come to the Sherborne Studio Theatre to see a play that they thought was familiar through the iconic performances of Julie Walters and Michael Caine in the celebrated film. But they will have witnessed a unique pair of performances from two talented actors into which Graham has breathed original new life to make it as fresh, relevant and entertaining as it was when it was first written, perhaps even more so. In fact, one of our audience

“A diamond of a production...”

members wrote that it was an "Absolutely phenomenal production. I pity anyone who couldn't get a ticket; so brilliant in every way. Better than the film".

In transporting us to a different place at a different time, credit must go to the brilliant realisation of the chaotic lecturer's study designed by John Crabtree. The musical accompaniment and finely executed Radio 4 interjections were selected and delivered by Mark Lambert, Immi Baxter and William Hollands-Smith, adding to the mood and feel of the time. The pace of the play was very dependent upon the smoothness of the scene changes. These were perfectly achieved through clever lighting design and control by Adrian Hole and Nick Baker, slick furniture and props setting by Gilly Smith and Millie-Anne Hyde and super-quick costume changes by Helen Smith. The play never missed a beat.

All can be justifiably proud of their vital contribution to this fine production, which one member of our audience described as "A diamond of a production! Perfection!"

Adrian Harding

RITA - THE PROFESSIONAL CRITIC'S VIEW:

Educating Rita burst on to the national consciousness nearly 40 years ago in a film which made a star of Julie Walters – but Willy Russell's play was first staged three years previously, and it is as a play that it really works its magic, as it does once again in this production.



Talented Sarah Nias grabs it and runs with it, just as Rita grabs and runs with her discovery of other lives and other realities. She brings energy, boundless charm and a brilliant Liverpool accent to the role. She is mercurial, quick-witted, passionate, instinctive. All the things that Rita is and that Frank sees almost from the moment the improbable new student walks into his messy office, with its bottles of whisky hidden behind books.

She is well matched by Martin Williams who finds real humanity in Frank, a growing sense of the futility of his life, but a surprise at his ability to feel something, not only for the endlessly appealing Rita but also for the books, the poets, the writers from whom he has made his living, but who have become as boring for him as the ordinary students.

Their on-stage relationship has real chemistry. Together they bring out the humour, anger, hurt, poignancy, optimism, alienation, excitement and other emotions that Rita hurtles through as she works for her degree, loses her marriage, finds a new job and new friends, discovers something important about her mother and finally learns, not everything, but how to be joyfully, independently, bravely herself.

It's a terrific production"

Fanny Charles

THE NEW "100 CLUB"

Congratulations to those members who have joined in with this new venture, helping to secure the financial future of the theatre. The first draw will take place on April 9th.

If, reader, you have not done so yet, please do join us. It is a very small outlay of a few pennies a day, it will make a terrific difference to the future of APS and our theatre, and while it is a bit of harmless fun, you could easily end up a lucky winner. Whilst membership is still growing, the prizes are small, but the chances of winning are excellent!

It's not too late to be part of the April draw. See the APS website for details of how to apply, or contact sst100club@gmail.com for further information.

PLAYREADING - A CHANGE

Please note that there has been a change to our planned reading of "Death and the Maiden" on April 27th. The play which we shall share is now to be "The Deep Blue Sea" by Terence Rattigan.

Further details will be emailed out closer to the date.

NEW MEMBERS

We are delighted to welcome these new members: Patrick Naughton, Ian Reade and Roger Gower.

We hope that they will have a long and active association with APS.

BILLY LIAR

Our next production will be *Billy Liar*, to be performed on July 25th - 30th. Interested in taking part? Reading and auditions will take place at 7.30 in the theatre on April 11th and April 13th. We'd love to see you there!

If it is impossible for you to make either the 11th or 13th, please email the Director (Jessica Colson), jessica@ridgewayfarm.co.uk and alternative arrangements will be made.

If any of the roles (below) appeal to you, please feel free to get in touch to register your interest. You may, of course, choose to audition for more than one role.

This is a popular and very funny play, and we very much hope to

recruit a strong cast. Below are some thumbnail sketches of the characters; the ages shown should be regarded as guidelines only - we recognise that considerable flexibility is often required!

Florence Boothroyd: Old lady around 80, mother of Alice, lives in the past, largely ignored by her family. A source of huge irritation to Billy.

Geoffrey Fisher: 40s/50s Billy's father. Blustering character, short temper, but otherwise rarely shows emotion. Relations between Geoffrey and Billy have broken down.

Alice Fisher: 40s/50s Billy's mother. Simple uncomplicated woman but hub of the family She rarely sits down in the play, constantly working hard to keep the house tidy and look after her husband, her mother, and Billy.

Billy Fisher: Teens/20s, living with his parents and grandmother. A compulsive liar who lives in a fantasy world to get himself away from his complacent cliché - ridden background. He is simultaneously engaged to two girls and in love with a third.

Arthur Crabtree: 20s. Billy's best friend, who works at the same undertaker's. Engages in much tomfoolery with Billy.

Barbara: One of Billy's fiancées. Barbara is prudish, always eating oranges, lives in a woman's magazine world and sees life through rose-tinted specs. Harbours romantic illusions of Billy.

Rita: Outspoken, working class, challenges Billy, particularly over her engagement ring (usually worn by Barbara).

Liz: The one who truly understands Billy and the only one in whom he's genuinely interested. (All 3 girls of an age to be of romantic interest for Billy).

For further details, and to register an interest in auditioning, please contact jessica@ridgewayfarm.co.uk

