



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne

Name of Production: EDUCATING RITA

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Date: Saturday 26th March 2022

Adjudicator: Caroline Whitehead

Such an accomplished production

Willy Russell's play, written in 1980 is a clever two hander with a sleek script. It was a good idea to keep it set in the time when it was written. Education has changed such a lot in the intervening years, it would have lost so much to have dropped it into a more contemporary time, which I have seen done elsewhere.

It is a collision of the non-educated world and red brick university life of the late seventies and calls into question whether 'getting an education' is all it was cracked up to be and whether it delivered the transformation that Rita hopes for.

The play has an odd couple at its heart – a jaded university professor disillusioned with academia and a working-class hairdresser in the thrall of his bookish world. Rita's bright-eyed hope of transformation challenges what the academic world really considers valuable and acceptable, and causes us to question whether her direct and honest approach would be better really!

Rita and Frank keep their distance, physically at least, despite the intimacies that build between them and it is this slow transformation in their relationship that makes this such an interesting piece of drama. Both characters played this tension with real poise.

As the comedy calms, the drama sets in and it takes time to develop, Rita's character becoming more complex and Frank's character deteriorating to a point when we just have sympathy for this broken man. The actors build a chemistry that contains more tensions and the play becomes deeper and better with an almost painful tenderness between them by the end. Despite the Willy Russell punchy comedic lines, there was never any doubt that this relationship was so much more complex.

Frank can barely express his emotions and his quiet yearning for Rita and gradually his inadequacies are revealed to us. In contrast, Rita's performance fills out and she becomes more emotionally astute; she resists a romantic ending to become her own liberated woman. And a sudden burst of affection at the end of the play is an exquisite moment, before they peel away into their own separate lives.

Just having these 14 short scenes, all set in the professor's study, can make the production rather staccato and I have seen productions of this play when the transformation, particularly of Rita, comes in rather too abruptly in each scene. I was so delighted that you managed to smooth these subtle changes, so that the confidence that Rita gains and the desperation that Frank feels are both naturally played and happen almost without us noticing.

This very real development of the relationship between the two characters with its ups and downs, is essential to the plot. It needs a really delicate touch and you achieved that perfectly.

The intimacy of this little theatre worked so well for this play and I was very impressed with your set, which was perfect for the time in which this story is set. There was such a lot for these two talented performers to do – 14 scenes which all contain some careful shifts in the relationship between them and tensions that needed great care.

I felt like the entire house was entirely captivated by this performance and we all went on that journey with Rita and Frank and its inevitable conclusion leaving us with questions about the meaning of 'education' and the challenges of the human condition.

Frank

It is this character that I have the biggest problem with and it was in the film with Michael Caine that I enjoyed his initial brusqueness the more gradual realisation of Rita's charms. In the play's script, Frank falls for Rita in the very first scene, calling her marvellous, and for me that seems to make Frank rather more two-dimensional throughout the play. However, I know that you are delivering the lines that Russell wrote so it's not your fault. I was also a little preoccupied with the wig (and knowing that the haircut was coming later) and I felt you also felt a little uncomfortable in it. All that said, this was a well-crafted performance and you managed to use your physicality to create some really powerful tensions with Rita. This is so important because there is only two of you on stage and the audience is made more aware of your gestures around her and those moments when you decide to pull away or draw closer.

Your delivery felt a little clipped and hurried at the start but this really did settle down and you experimented with some nice changes of pace intonation. Frank (I hope) is a professor of his time, living in his study, detached from real life and tied by his academic standards and processes. We have sympathy for him and his gradual deterioration feels inevitable.

I hope that professors like Frank no longer exist in our universities, but I imagine there are a few!

I particularly enjoyed the moments when you were angry with Rita (and by definition also angry with yourself and your inadequacies). This gave the relationship important light and shade. I am sure you felt very privileged to playing alongside Sarah and her brilliant portrayal of the larger than life and inspiring Rita.

Rita

From the minute you walked in with your hips hitched to one side, I felt that we were in for treat. Rita bursts in like a rocket through that door on more than one occasion and I'm sure it's tempting to overplay those moments. You managed to rein in that energy to make your performance a much more complex one. Despite the ebullience of Rita's personality, you brought in some delicacy and subtely that I really enjoyed. Rita has many layers and we were drawn into your life from the start. You have the double challenge of explaining the challenges of your life (outside the study) as well as managing the development of your relationship with Frank and all that this entails. That's quite a task and you accomplished these with effortless ease, which just showed me how much you had worked on this character. As an audience, we were totally with you and felt the slow understanding of Frank and all his idiosyncracies. We were transported into that study and forgot completely that we were sitting in a studio theatre in Sherborne and that is the mark of an excellent piece of theate.

I often think of the Rita-Frank relationship as a seesaw. It tips up several times as the play develops but ultimately Rita is on the ascendant and finishes the stronger person. We conclude, of course that she was always the stronger of the two and that journey needs great care to portray to your audience.

I would guess that most people in the house were familiar with the film and the iconic performance of Michael Caine and Julie Walters. Despite this, I felt that you added a considerable amount to the Rita character and I enjoyed your interpretation of some of the Russell lines.

I was also impressed with your physical movements and gestures. These were well thought through and created some finely balanced tensions with Frank. In the second half, this tension is vital to the shifts in the intimacy between you two and turns up the dial on the dramatic impact of your liberation and Frank's demise.

I was also aware of the subtle shifts in your accent and use of language, as your character becomes more aware of her strengths and possibilities. Many will have missed that, but I could tell that you had worked on it. Well done; this added yet another element to Rita's transformation.

I really enjoyed your performance, as did your audience. This was a really accomplished portrayal and you deserved all of your applause.

I commend you for putting this low-budget production on in these challenging times and I hope that you managed to raise some vital funds for your future shows. Many of the amateur groups that I adjudicate are also turning to pieces of drama that involve fewer performers. This was a good choice and I really enjoyed my evening. Thank you so much for your warm. welcome.

CJW

28/03/22