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WILLY RUSSELL
EDUCATING RITA

EDITED BY KATIE BESWICK

Educating Rita

One of the most-produced writers of his time, **Willy Russell** (b. Whiston, Liverpool, 23 August 1947) is a playwright and songwriter. He has written a large number of highly successful plays and musicals for stage and TV including *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* (1974), *Breezeblock Park* (1975), *One for the Road* (1976), *Our Day Out* (television 1977; stage musical version 1983), *Stags and Hens* (1978; filmed as *Dancin' thru the Dark*, 1990), *Educating Rita* (1979), *Blood Brothers* (1981; musical version 1983) and *Shirley Valentine* (1986). His novel, *The Wrong Boy*, was published to great acclaim in 2000. Further information can be found at willyrussell.com

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Educating Rita

WILLY RUSSELL

With commentary and notes by

KATIE BESWICK

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Contents

Chronology vii

Introduction xiii

Historical context xvi

Form and genre xxi

Themes xxv

The play in performance xxxi

Notes xxxiii

Further reading xxxiv

EDUCATING RITA 1

Notes 87

Chronology

The timeline below maps an account of national and world events leading up to and following the first performance of *Educating Rita*, which took place in 1980. As we will see in the ‘Historical context’ section of this Introduction, plays might be approached through a socio-historical lens to better understand their cultural significance and enduring relevance within and beyond their contemporary period.

- 1942 The Beveridge Report is published; it comes to lay the foundations for the welfare state, providing social security from ‘cradle to grave’ for all citizens.¹
- 1945 The Second World War officially ends in Europe on 8 May following the surrender of Nazi Germany to allied forces. On 2 September, Imperial Japan surrenders, ending the global conflict. War has ravaged Europe, and much of Britain must be rebuilt, with many cities and towns having sustained terrible bomb damage.
- 1946 Having won the general election of 1945 by a landslide (succeeding Winston Churchill’s Conservative rule), Clement Attlee’s Labour government began to establish a welfare state, implementing many of Beveridge’s recommendations. The National Insurance Act 1946 required everyone of working age to pay a weekly contribution. In return, those who had contributed were eligible, under particular circumstances, to claim benefits and entitlements, such as for unemployment, sickness and pensions. In 1948, the National Assistance Act extended the social security provisions of the 1946 Act, providing social security measures for those unable to make national insurance contributions.
- 1947 On 23 August, William Martin Russell (‘Willy Russell’) is born in Whiston, Lancashire – part of a wider area now known as Merseyside – located about eight miles from Liverpool

city. Aged five, Russell moves to an estate in a village called Knowsley, later attending the Woolfall Secondary school in nearby Huyton for a year, before transferring to a more rural school in Rainford. After leaving school, Russell trains and works as a hairdresser for women. He nurtures writing ambitions, eventually leaving hairdressing to work as a warehouse labourer in order to save money for his education.

- 1948 The National Health Service Act 1946 comes into effect. The NHS is thus established, a response to the recommendation in Beveridge's report for state-funded universal healthcare.

The University of Cambridge finally awards degrees to women. It is the last University to do so, following earlier examples such as University College London (1878), Durham (1895) and Oxford (1920).

The United Nations introduces its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that attempts to reach an international consensus regarding the fundamental rights of all human beings. The document is adopted by the fifty-eight UN member states, who, in agreeing to its principles, aspire to uphold 'the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms'.²

- 1952 King George VI dies on 6 February and is succeeded by his daughter, Queen Elizabeth II.
- 1953 The official coronation of Queen Elizabeth II takes place on 2 June 1953, at London's Westminster Abbey.
- 1961 The contraceptive pill is introduced to the UK, allowing women reliable control over their fertility for the first time. Initially, the pill is only prescribed to married women.
- 1962 The Education Act 1962 effectively abolishes tuition fees for Higher Education in the United Kingdom. Fees for full-time UK resident students are paid by the local authority, along with means-tested maintenance grants for living

expenses. These measures make Higher Education a realistic prospect for broader range of students.

- 1967 Two significant Acts are passed, giving women greater freedoms over their reproductive rights. The NHS Family Planning Act 1967 enables family planning and contraceptive advice to be provided to unmarried women via the NHS. The Abortion Act 1967 legalizes abortion under certain circumstances, if justified by two doctors.
- 1969 The Open University is established. This organization offers access to degree-level education for those who might not have the qualifications required to attend traditional university. Its flexible, distance-learning model means students do not have to be based on campus to attend and can complete work at their own pace, for example around domestic and employment commitments.
- Willy Russell attends the Childwall College of Further Education to obtain O-levels.
- 1970 Willy Russell undertakes teacher training at St Katherine's college in Liverpool.
- 1971 Willy Russell's first play, *Keep Your Eyes Down*, is performed at St Katherine's College. The following year, a triple-bill of his plays called *Blind Scouse* is performed at the Edinburgh Fringe and is seen by the playwright John McGrath, who helps secure Russell's first commission at Liverpool Everyman Theatre.
- 1974 *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* is staged at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre, to critical acclaim, launching Willy Russell's career as a nationally renowned playwright. Numerous plays follow, including *Breezblock Park* (1975), *Our Day Out* (1976) and *Stags and Hens* (1978).
- 1975 The Sex Discrimination Act outlines women's equality in law, making it illegal to discriminate against women in the workplace or education.

x Chronology

- 1976 The Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act is passed, making clearer the unacceptability of violence within marriage and offering greater protections for victims of domestic violence.
- 1979 The Conservative Party wins the general election. Margaret Thatcher becomes the UK's first female Prime Minister, a position she is to hold until 1990.
- 1980 The first performance of *Educating Rita*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, takes place at The Warehouse in London on 10 June 1980.
- 1983 A film adaptation of *Educating Rita*, starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, is released. Russell's play, *Blood Brothers – the Musical*, premieres at the Liverpool playhouse, transferring to London's Lyric Theatre in April.
- 1984 The National Union of Mineworkers call a national strike in an act of major industrial action against the closure of collieries. The strike becomes a battleground between Thatcher's government, who want to quash the power of the unions, and working-class communities fighting for their jobs. The strike ends in 1985, after being ruled illegal, and the closure of pits across the country brings mass unemployment to former mining communities which is to last for decades.
- 1989 Willy Russell's career continues to flourish with the film version of the play *Shirley Valentine* (first performed as a play in 1986) released.
- 1998 Tony Blair's Labour government, in power since 1997, introduces tuition fees of up to £1,000 for undergraduate students. The newly devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland introduce different tuition fee policies to those in England.
- 2002 A revised version of *Educating Rita* is staged at Liverpool Playhouse.
- 2012 Acting on the recommendations of the Browne Report, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government

introduces higher tuition fees at HE level, with the cap raised to £9,000 for undergraduate degree study, a significant increase in student fee contribution.

Notes

- 1 See '1942 Beveridge Report' at <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/coll-9-health1/coll-9-health/>
- 2 United Nations (1958, 2015), *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, UN. 2. https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf

