

methuen | drama modern classics

1920s

1930s

1940s

1950s

1960s

1970s

1980s

1990s

WILLY RUSSELL

EDUCATING RITA



B L O O M S B U R Y

Methuen Drama Modern Classics

The Methuen Drama Modern Plays series has always been at the forefront of modern playwriting and has reflected the most exciting developments in modern drama since 1959. To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Methuen Drama, the series was relaunched in 2009 as Methuen Drama Modern Classics, and continues to offer readers a choice selection of the best modern plays.

Educating Rita

Educating Rita, about a working-class Liverpool girl's hunger for education, is 'simply a marvellous play, painfully funny and passionately serious; a hilarious social documentary; a fairy-tale with a quizzical, half-happy ending.' *Sunday Times*

'Like *Roots* and *Pygmalion* . . . a touching play about the melancholic ways education often pulls people apart instead of bringing them together.' *Guardian*

'Mr Russell has taken a look at two segments of English society and engineered a collision that is as full of regret as it is of promise . . . the deft moments of its best comedy are splendidly refreshing.' *The Times*

Willy Russell was born in Whiston, near Liverpool. Leaving school at fifteen, he worked variously as a ladies' hairdresser, warehouseman and girder cleaner until, at the age of twenty-one, he returned to education. It was while training to become a teacher that he wrote his first plays for both stage and television. *Playground*, *Keep Your Eyes Down* and *Sam O'Shanker* were premiered at St Katherine's College in 1972. Under the collective title *Blind Scouse* these were presented later the same year at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where they were seen by playwright John McGrath and led to Russell writing *When the Reds*, adapted from an original script by Alan Plater, for the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool (1973). Subsequently he has

written *John Paul George Ringo . . . and Bert* (Everyman and Lyric, London, 1974; winner of the *Evening Standard* and London Theatre Critics' Awards for Best Musical), *Breezeblock Park* (Everyman, 1975; Mermaid and Whitehall, London, 1977), *One for the Road* (Contact Theatre, Manchester, 1976; Lyric, London, 1987), *Stags and Hens* (Everyman, 1978; Young Vic, 1983; revised and presented as *Stags and Hens – The Remix*, Royal Court, Liverpool, 2008), *Educating Rita* (RSC Warehouse and Piccadilly, London, 1980; winner of SWET Best Comedy Award), *Blood Brothers* (play version, Merseyside Young People's Theatre Company, 1981), *Blood Brothers* (musical version, Liverpool Playhouse and Lyric, London, 1983; Albery and Phoenix, London, 1988; Music Box, New York, 1993), *Our Day Out* (play version, Everyman and Young Vic, 1983; musical version, Royal Court, Liverpool, 2009), *Shirley Valentine* (Everyman, 1986; Vaudeville, London, 1988, winner of Olivier Award for Best Comedy; Booth Theatre, New York, 1989).

For television he has written *King of the Castle* (BBC, 1973), *Break-In* (BBC, 1974), *Death of a Young Young Man* (BBC, 1974), *Our Day Out* (BBC, 1976), *Lies* (BBC, 1978), *The Daughters of Albion* (ITV, 1979), *Politics and Terror* (ITV, 1980), *The Boy with the Transistor Radio* (ITV, 1980), the *One Summer* series (Channel 4, 1983), *Terraces* (BBC, 1993). Feature films and screenplays include *Educating Rita* (winner of *Evening Standard* Award for Best Screenplay, 1983), *Shirley Valentine* (1989), *Dancin' Thru the Dark* (1990), *Blood Brothers* (with Alan Parker, 2006). As a composer Russell has written for the TV series *Connie* and the feature film *Mr Love*, as well as for his own films, *Shirley Valentine* and *Dancin' Thru the Dark*. He wrote music and lyrics for *Blood Brothers* and (with Bob Eaton and Chris Mellor) music and lyrics for *Our Day Out*. With the poets Adrian Henri, Brian Patten and Roger McGough, he wrote and performed *Words on the Run* (1995–7), and with playwright Tim Firth he wrote and performed *In Other Words* (2004) and *The Singing Playwrights* (2004). In 2003 he wrote and recorded the CD *Hoovering the Moon*. His novel *The Wrong Boy* was published by Doubleday in 2000.

Willy Russell

Educating Rita

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Educating the Author

I was born in Whiston, which is just outside Liverpool. They talk funny in Whiston. To a Liverpudlian everyone else talks funny. Fortunately, when I was five my mum and dad moved to Knowsley, into an estate full of Liverpudlians who taught me how to talk correctly.

My dad worked in a factory (later, having come to hate factory life, he got out and bought a chip shop) and my mother worked in a warehouse; in those days there was a common ritual called employment. I went to school just down the road from my grandma's mobile grocer's (it was in an old charabanc which had long since lost any chance of going anywhere but everyone called it the mobile).

In school I learned how to read very early. Apart from reading books I played football and kick-the-can and quite enjoyed the twice-weekly gardening lessons. We each had a plot and at the end of the summer term we could take home our turnips and lettuces and radish and stuff. We used to eat it on the way. Our headmaster (Pop Chandler) had a war wound in his leg and everyone said it was cos of the shrapnel. When we went to the baths (if he was in a good mood) he'd show us this hole in his leg. It was horrible. It was blue. We loved looking at it.

Other than reading books, gardening, playing football and looking at shrapnel wounds I didn't care much for school. I watched the telly a lot. Never went to any theatres or anything like that. Saw a show at the village hall once but it was all false. They talked funny and got married at the end. I only remember it cos I won the raffle, a box of fruit, with a coconut right in the middle. When we opened it the coconut stank. It was bad.

When I was eleven they sent me to a secondary school in Huyton. Like all the other Knowsley kids I was frightened of Huyton. There were millions of new houses there and flats, and everyone said there were gangs with bike chains and broken bottles and truck spanners. What everyone said was right; playtime was nothing to do with play, it was about survival. Thugs roamed the concrete and casually destroyed

anything that couldn't move fast enough. Dinner time was the same only four times as long.

If you were lucky enough to survive the food itself you then had to get out into the playground world of protection rackets, tobacco hustlers, trainee contract killers and plain no-nonsense sadists. And that's without the teachers!

Anders his name was, the metalwork teacher. All the other kids loved metalwork. First thing we had to do was file a small rectangle of metal so that all the sides were straight; this would then be name-stamped and used as a nameplate to identify each kid's work. I never completed mine. After a matter of weeks other kids had moved from making nameplates to producing anything from guns and daggers to boiler-room engines while it was obvious that I was never going to be able to get the sides of my piece of metal straight. Eventually it was just a sliver, a near-perfect needle, though not straight. I showed it to him, Anders; I couldn't hide it from him any longer. He chucked it in the bin and wordlessly handed me another chunk of metal and indicated that I had to do it again and again and again until I did it *right!* And I did, for a whole school year, every metalwork lesson, tried and failed and with every failure there came a chunk of metal and the instruction to do it again. I started to have terrible nightmares about Anders. It's the only time I can remember feeling real hatred for another human being.

After another year I moved schools, to Rainford where it used to be countryside, where they all talked funny, where the thugs were rather old-fashioned, charming even. Whereas in Huyton you could be bike-chained to bits without warning, in Rainford the thugs observed some sort of manners: "Ey, you, does t' want t' fight wi' me?" You could still get hurt, of course, and some of the teachers were headcases; but there were no sadists, metalwork was not on the curriculum, there were fields and lawns in place of concrete playgrounds and compared to Huyton it was paradise. We even had a long lesson every week called 'silent reading'; just enter the classroom and pick up a book, start reading and as long as you made no noise you were left completely alone with your book. I remember clearly, during one of these lessons, locked into a novel, the sun

streaming through the windows, experiencing the feeling of total peace and security and thinking what a great thing it must be to write books and create in people the sort of feeling the author had created in me. I wanted to be a writer!

It was a wonderful and terrible thought – wonderful because I sensed, I knew, it was the only thing for me. Terrible because how could I, a kid from the ‘D’ stream, a piece of factory fodder, ever change the course that my life was already set upon? How the hell could I ever be the sort of person who could become a writer? It was a shocking and ludicrous thought, one that I hid deep in myself for years, but one that would not go away.

During my last year at school they took us to a bottlemaking factory in St Helens, me and all the other kids who were obviously factory types. I could feel the brutality of the place even before I entered its windowless walls. Inside, the din and the smell were overpowering. Human beings worked in there but the figures I saw, feeding huge and relentlessly hungry machines, seemed not to be a part of humanity but a part of the machinery itself. Those men who were fortunate enough to not have to work directly with the machinery, the supervisors, foremen I suppose, glared, prodded, occasionally shouted. Each one of them looked like Anders from the metalwork class.

Most of the kids with whom I visited that place accepted that it was their lot to end up in that place. Some even talked of the money they would earn and made out that they couldn’t wait to get inside those walls.

But in truth, I think they all dreaded it as much as I did. Back in school I stared at the geography books I hadn’t read, the history pages and science I hadn’t studied, the maths books (which would still be a mystery today, even if I’d studied them from birth), and I realised that with only six months’ schooling to go, I’d left it all hopelessly too late. Like it or not I’d end up in a factory. There was no point in trying to catch up with years of schoolwork in a mere six months. And so I didn’t. The months I had left were spent sagging school and going to a dark underground club every lunchtime. It was called the Cavern and the smell of sweat in there was as pungent as any

in a factory, the din was louder than any made by machines. But the sweat was mingled with cheap perfume and was produced by dancing and the noise was music, made by a group called the Beatles.

One afternoon in summer I left the Cavern after the lunchtime session and had to go to the Bluecoat Chambers to sit an examination, the result of which would determine how suited I was to become an apprentice printer. I didn't want to be an apprentice printer; I wanted to be back in the Cavern. I did the exam because my dad thought it would be a good thing. I answered the questions on how many men it would take to lift three tons of coal on a rainy day etc. And I wrote the essay of my choice (titled 'A Group Called The Beatles'). And I failed.

At home there were conferences, discussions, rows and slanging matches all on the same subject – me and the job I'd get. Eventually my mother resolved it all. She suggested I become a ladies' hairdresser! I can only think that a desire to have her hair done free must have clouded her normally reasonable mind. It was such a bizarre suggestion that I went along with it. I went to a college for a year or so and pretended to learn all about hairdressing. In reality most of my time was spent at parties or arranging parties. It was a good year but when it ended I had to go to work. Someone was actually prepared to hire me as a hairdresser, to let me loose on the heads of innocent and unsuspecting customers. There were heads scalded during shampooing, heads which should have become blonde but turned out green, heads of Afro frizz (before Afro frizz had been invented) and heads rendered temporarily bald. Somehow, probably from moving from one shop to another before my legendary abilities were known, I survived. For six years I did a job I didn't understand and didn't like. Eventually I even had my own small salon and it was there that on slack days I would retire to the back room and try to do the one and only thing I felt I understood, felt that I could do: write.

I wrote songs mostly but tried, as well, to write sketches and poetry, even a book. But I kept getting interrupted by women

who, reasonably enough on their part, wanted their hair done. It dawned upon me that if ever I was to become a writer I had first to get myself into the sort of world which allowed for, possibly even encouraged, such aspiration. But that would mean a drastic change of course. Could I do it? Could I do something which those around me didn't understand? I would have to break away. People would be puzzled and hurt. I compromised. I sensed that the world in which I would be able to write would be the academic world. Students have long holidays. I'd be able to spend a good part of the year writing and the other part learning to do a job, teaching perhaps, which would pay the rent. I wasn't qualified to train as a teacher but I decided to dip my toe in the water and test the temperature. I enrolled in a night class for O-level English literature and passed it. To go to a college, though, I'd need at least five O levels. Taking them at night school would take too long. I had to find a college which would let me take a full-time course, pack everything into one year. I found a college but no authority was prepared to give me a maintenance grant or even pay my fees. I knew I couldn't let the course go, knew I could survive from day to day – but how was I going to find the money to pay the fees? The hairdressing paid nothing worth talking of.

I heard of a job, a contract job in Fords, cleaning oil from the girders high above the machinery. With no safety equipment whatsoever and with oil on every girder the danger was obvious. But the money was big. I packed up the hairdresser's and joined the night-shift girder cleaners. Some of them fell and were injured, some of them took just one look at the job and walked away. Eventually there were just a few of us desperate or daft enough to take a chance.

I stayed in that factory just long enough to earn the fees I needed; no extras, nothing. Once I'd earned enough for the fees, I came down from the girders, collected my money and walked away. I enrolled at the college and one day in September made my way along the stone-walled drive. The obvious difference in age between me and the sixteen-year-olds pouring down the drive made me feel exposed and