CURVE

# EDUCATING Rita

## LEARNING RESOURCE PACK

# EDUCATING RITA

# LEARNING RESOURCE PACK GUIDE

*"I wanted to learn and if you want to learn nothing can stop you."*
(Willy Russell, theartsdesk Q&A)

This resource has been created to support students exploring Willy Russell's EDUCATING RITA **through the eyes of an actor**. It combines contextual research, textual analysis, practical exercises and personal reflection to encourage students to move beyond simply understanding the play, towards actively investigating how it can be performed.

The pack is designed to support drama and performing arts students working towards **GCSE**, **BTEC** and **A-Level** qualifications, it can also adapted to be used at HE and FE levels. It explores practical investigation of character, context, performance style and theatrical interpretation.

Through Rita and Frank's relationship, Russell explores education, class, identity, freedom, choice, relationships and self-determination. These themes provide rich opportunities for actors to investigate **character**, **status**, **relationships**, **language** and **transformation**.

Also at the heart of EDUCATING RITA are questions that remain relevant to young performers today: **Who educates us? Who do we become through education? And how much of ourselves are we willing to change?**

The resource also recognises that there is no single correct interpretation of the play. Different actors, directors and audiences will bring different experiences and perspectives to Rita and Frank. The exercises are therefore designed to **encourage curiosity**, **experimentation** and **discussion** rather than prescribe one way of performing the characters.

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

**The pack can be used before, during or after seeing a production**, as part of classroom teaching, rehearsal, workshops or independent actor research. It is not intended to be completed from beginning to end in a single sitting. Teachers and students can select activities according to their needs, experience and the time available.

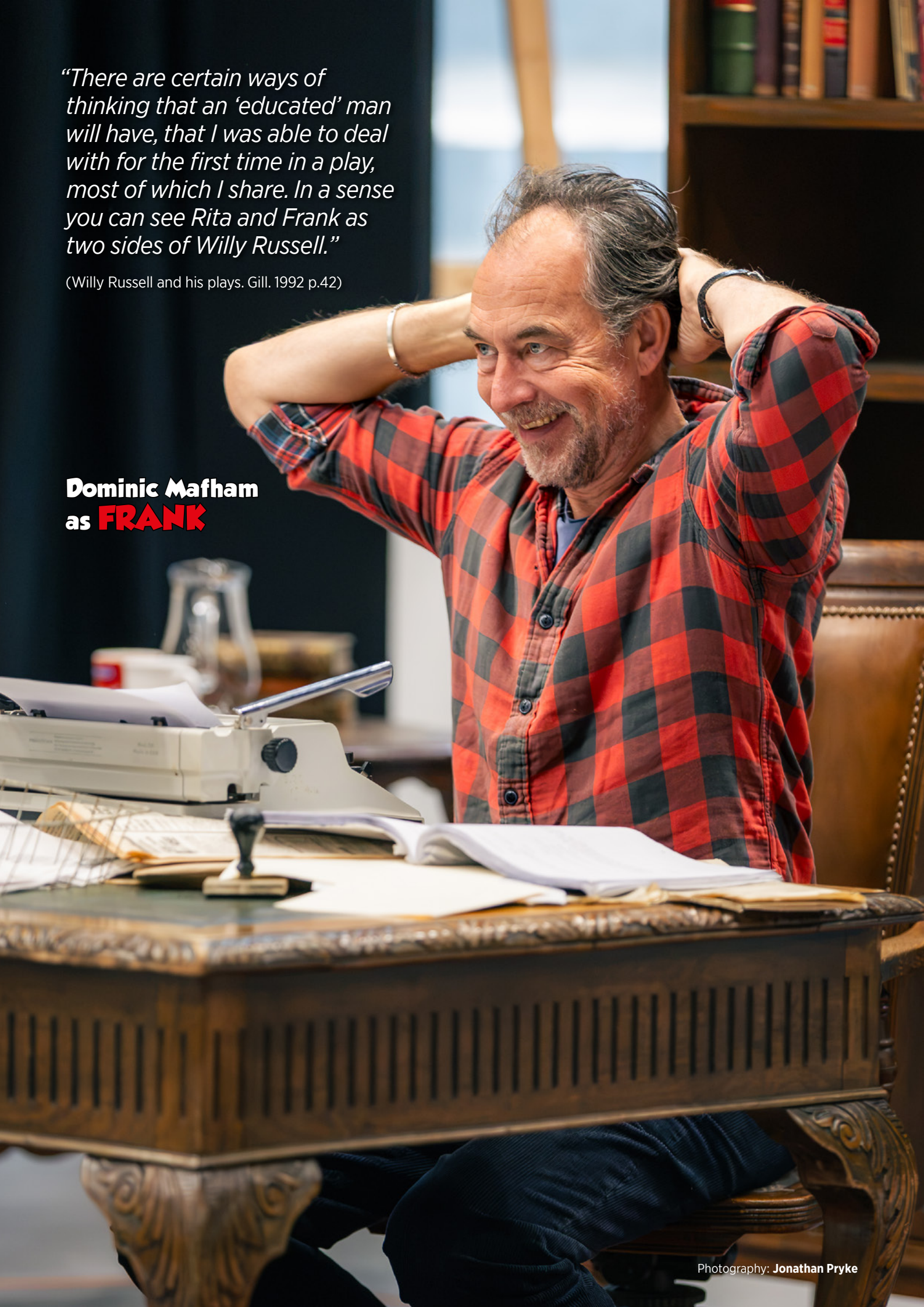
**Keep an Actor Journal** The journal activities are an important part of the resource. Students should use their journals as a place to think, question, experiment and record discoveries, rather than simply produce polished, neatly written answers.

Encourage: **drawings and visual references** | **mind maps** | **quotations** | **rehearsal notes** | **character sketches** | **questions** | **observations** | **responses to performances** | **discoveries from practical work** | **ideas they are not yet sure about**.

**A Note to the Students:** Your job as an actor is to ask questions, investigate possibilities and make informed choices. Just as Rita discovers, education is not simply about collecting knowledge. It can change the way we see ourselves, other people and the world around us.

*"There are certain ways of thinking that an 'educated' man will have, that I was able to deal with for the first time in a play, most of which I share. In a sense you can see Rita and Frank as two sides of Willy Russell."*

(Willy Russell and his plays. Gill. 1992 p.42)



**Dominic Mafham as FRANK**

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# OVERVIEW AND SYNOPSIS

Willy Russell's EDUCATING RITA is a two-character comedy, first performed in 1980. It follows Rita, a 26-year-old hairdresser from Liverpool who is eager to learn, and Frank, an English tutor in his fifties whose disillusionment with life has led him towards alcohol and isolation.

Rita is determined to transform her life through education. She approaches Frank because she wants to study literature and develop herself, bringing an enthusiasm and determination that contrasts with Frank's cynical outlook. Russell describes Frank as someone who provides the "space and the stimulus" in which Rita can learn.



**Alexandra Mardell as RITA**

As Rita develops her knowledge and confidence, her relationship with Frank becomes increasingly complex. She is not simply a passive student receiving knowledge from her tutor; she challenges Frank's assumptions and brings new energy into his life. The play's official synopsis describes their relationship as ultimately giving Frank a new sense of self, as well as giving Rita the knowledge she craves.

Rita's education also creates tension around her identity and sense of belonging. Her development raises questions about class, culture, language and personal choice, rather than presenting education simply as a route to becoming more "academic."

By the end of the play, Rita has become more independent and has greater control over the choices available to her. Russell has explained that the play is not really about someone who simply needs to be "educated", but about someone arriving at a point where she has "more control over her life, more choice." (concordtheatricals.co.uk) (willyrussell.com)




*"I wanted to make a play which engaged, and was relevant to, those who had no great knowledge of literature, those who may even have considered themselves 'uneducated', whose language was not the language of the university or the theatre. In short, I wanted to write a play which would attract and be as valid and meaningful for the Ritas in the audience as the Franks and the Trishes."*

(willyrussell.com)

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# FIRST IMPRESSIONS DISCUSSION

## Learning Aim and Objective

To develop the ability to **observe**, **analyse** and **critically discuss** performance choices, while learning from another actor's interpretation and considering how theatrical choices can shape different audience responses.

## Task: Watch, Discuss, Reconsider

In the interval and/or after watching the performance, pair up with another student. Share your first impressions and compare your responses to the acting, directing and design.

Discussion should include but not be restricted to:

- What were your first impressions of Rita and Frank?
- How did your view of each character change?
- When did you notice the power shift between them?
- What does each character want from the other?

## Acting Choices

- Which performance choices stood out to you?
- How were voice, movement, space and physicality used?
- Which moments felt particularly truthful, funny or powerful?
- Was there a choice you would have approached differently? Why?

## Interpretation

- What do you think Rita gains and loses through education?
- Who changes more: Rita or Frank?
- Does Frank educate Rita, or do they educate each other?
- Did you interpret a moment differently from your partner?

**Please note:** The aim is not to agree but rather try to understand why you see it differently and recognise that there can be multiple valid interpretations, and that sharing your ideas and listening to another student can develop your own practice.

## Final Reflection

After your end of show discussion, return to your actor journal and complete:

- My initial interpretation was...
- My partner made me reconsider...
- A performance choice I would like to explore is...
- I now understand the character/play differently because...
- One question I am still curious about is...

**Extension Option:** to revisit and share these responses with the class at a later date, reflecting on how your perceptions may have developed or changed.

*"I wrote Rita for £700 for 18 nights' performances in the Warehouse, now the Donmar. I wrote Shirley Valentine for £1500 for a three-week run at the Everyman. I wrote Blood Brothers initially for Merseyside Young People's Theatre Company for £500 to be played in schools in the Liverpool area. You get my point. I don't sit down ever to make money. But if you get it right a play will always make a writer far more money than a movie will."*

(theartsdesk Q&A: Writer Willy Russell The Liverpudlian playwright on John, Paul, Rita, Shirley and Willy by Jasper ReesSaturday, 3 July 2010)

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE



**Cara Nolan**
DIRECTOR

Scan the QR code or click on the image below to hear from EDUCATING RITA Director **Cara Nolan**

YouTube




At its heart, the play is about access: access to education, to culture, to confidence, to the right to change your own story.

Rita's journey, her hunger to learn, to expand her world, to step beyond the limits placed on her still resonates powerfully. In 2026, conversations around class, opportunity, self-improvement and who gets to feel 'at home' in cultural spaces are just as relevant as they were when Willy Russell first wrote the play.

In a city like Leicester which is proudly diverse, working-class at its core, and rich in lived experience Rita's voice feels familiar. She represents so many people who might walk past our theatre and wonder if it's 'for them'. Staging this production at Curve is, in part, about saying, it is. This building belongs to you.

The relationship between Rita and Frank also feels timely. The play doesn't offer simple answers, it explores education not just as empowerment, but as disruption. Who do we become when we change? What do we lose? What do we gain? In an era where identity and self-definition are constant conversations, that tension feels incredibly contemporary.

The plays exploration of the expectations placed on women and the ways in which society categorises, limits, and judges female ambition and identity remains strikingly relevant. Rita's journey towards self-determination continues to resonate in a contemporary landscape where conversations around gender equality are increasingly challenged by the rise of online misogynistic spaces and the influence of the manosphere, which often seeks to reinforce traditional ideas of women's roles and worth. The play's examination of autonomy, education, and the right to define oneself feels as urgent today as it did when it was first written, reminding us of the ongoing need to question the structures and narratives that shape women's lives.

Artistically, the intimacy of the piece is exciting. It's two people in a room, but within that room is an entire social landscape. For a modern audience, there's something refreshing about that simplicity, language, wit, and character doing the heavy lifting. It asks us to lean in and really listen.

Ultimately, doing EDUCATING RITA today isn't about nostalgia. It's about rediscovery. It's about holding up a mirror to ambition, insecurity, class, and transformation, and inviting audiences at Curve to see themselves reflected in that journey.

**Cara Nolan**

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**



# WILLY RUSSELL BIOGRAPHY

William Martin Russell, known professionally as Willy Russell, was born in Whiston (about 8 miles east of Liverpool city centre) on 23 August 1947 into a working-class family. His father was employed in a factory before owning a chip shop, while his mother, a former nurse, worked in a local warehouse. After leaving school in 1962 with one O-Level and failing an apprenticeship as a printer, Russell followed his mother's suggestion to train as a ladies' hairdresser in Kirkby, eventually opening his own salon on Admin Road. Alongside hairdressing, he wrote songs and stories and performed in Liverpool's folk scene, where he met his future wife, Ann Seagrott, in 1966.
(willyrussell.com) (EDUCATING RITA, Methuen Drama, 2007)

Russell was 22 when he returned to education. Spurred on by Ann's family connections to literacy circles, he left hairdressing and got a job as a labourer to fund his studies. He married Ann in 1969 whilst studying O-Levels at Childwall College, before progressing to St Katharine's College to train as a teacher. Whilst there, he began writing plays. In 1972, three of his early one-act plays were performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, where they caught the attention of playwright John McGrath. Impressed by Russell's work, McGrath recommended him to Liverpool Everyman, which commissioned WHEN THE REDS..., his first professional theatre work.
(willyrussell.com)

# RUSSELL'S BIG BREAK !

Russell's breakthrough came in 1974 with JOHN, PAUL, GEORGE, RINGO...AND BERT, which opened at the Liverpool Everyman before transferring to London's West End. The musical won major awards, including the Evening Standard and London Theatre Critics' Awards for Best Musical. Further successes followed with works including BREEZEBLOCK PARK, ONE FOR THE ROAD, STAGS AND HENS and OUR DAY OUT. As his writing career developed, Russell left teaching, after around 12 months, to become a full-time writer.
(willyrussell.com)

Arguably, Russell's most significant breakthrough came in 1980 when the Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned EDUCATING RITA, (starring Julie Walters and Mark Kingston and directed by Mike Ockrent.) The production transferred to the West End, where it enjoyed a long run and won the Society of West End Theatres' award for Best Comedy. Its 1983 film adaptation, starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, received an Academy Award nomination and won the BAFTA for Best Film. Russell's official website describes the play as having been "translated and produced in almost every part of the globe."
(willyrussell.com)

Russell has subsequently established himself as one of Britain's leading playwrights with works including BLOOD BROTHERS, SHIRLEY VALENTINE and DANCING THRU THE DARK (STAGS AND HENS). BLOOD BROTHERS, which was developed from an earlier one-act play written for young people, opened as a musical in Liverpool in 1983 before transferring to the West End, where it became one of the longest-running musicals in British theatre. SHIRLEY VALENTINE opened at the Liverpool Everyman in 1986 and went on to achieve success in London and New York, followed by its 1989 award winning film adaptation, starring Pauline Collins.
(willyrussell.com)

Continuing to work across theatre, television, film, music and literature, Russell published his first novel, THE WRONG BOY, in 2000 and released HOOVERING THE MOON, a collection of his songs, in 2004. His contribution to literature and theatre has been recognised through honorary degrees and fellowships from institutions including the Open University, the University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University and educational institutions abroad.

Russell's career is particularly notable for its journey from working-class Liverpool to international theatrical success. His writing frequently explores education, class, opportunity, identity and working-class life, while retaining the distinctive humour and voice associated with his Liverpool background. His major plays, particularly EDUCATING RITA, BLOOD BROTHERS and SHIRLEY VALENTINE, continue to be performed widely in Britain and internationally.
(willyrussell.com)

*Willy Russell was deeply unimpressed when a Cabinet minister started quoting Educating Rita as an example of how learning could raise people out of poverty. "Michael Gove was always touting EDUCATING RITA as a great example of what can be achieved, but he never once acknowledged that under his control as Education Secretary, Frank wouldn't even exist... He wouldn't have the time to spend on one Open University student. He would be responsible for 300 students, which is why so many kids go to university and barely see a lecturer. It's an appalling situation now."*

(Willy Russell Goes Back to School – Daily Mail,

By COLE MORETON – WRITER AND INTERVIEWER
PUBLISHED: 22:01, 11 November 2017
UPDATED: 22:01, 11 November 2017)

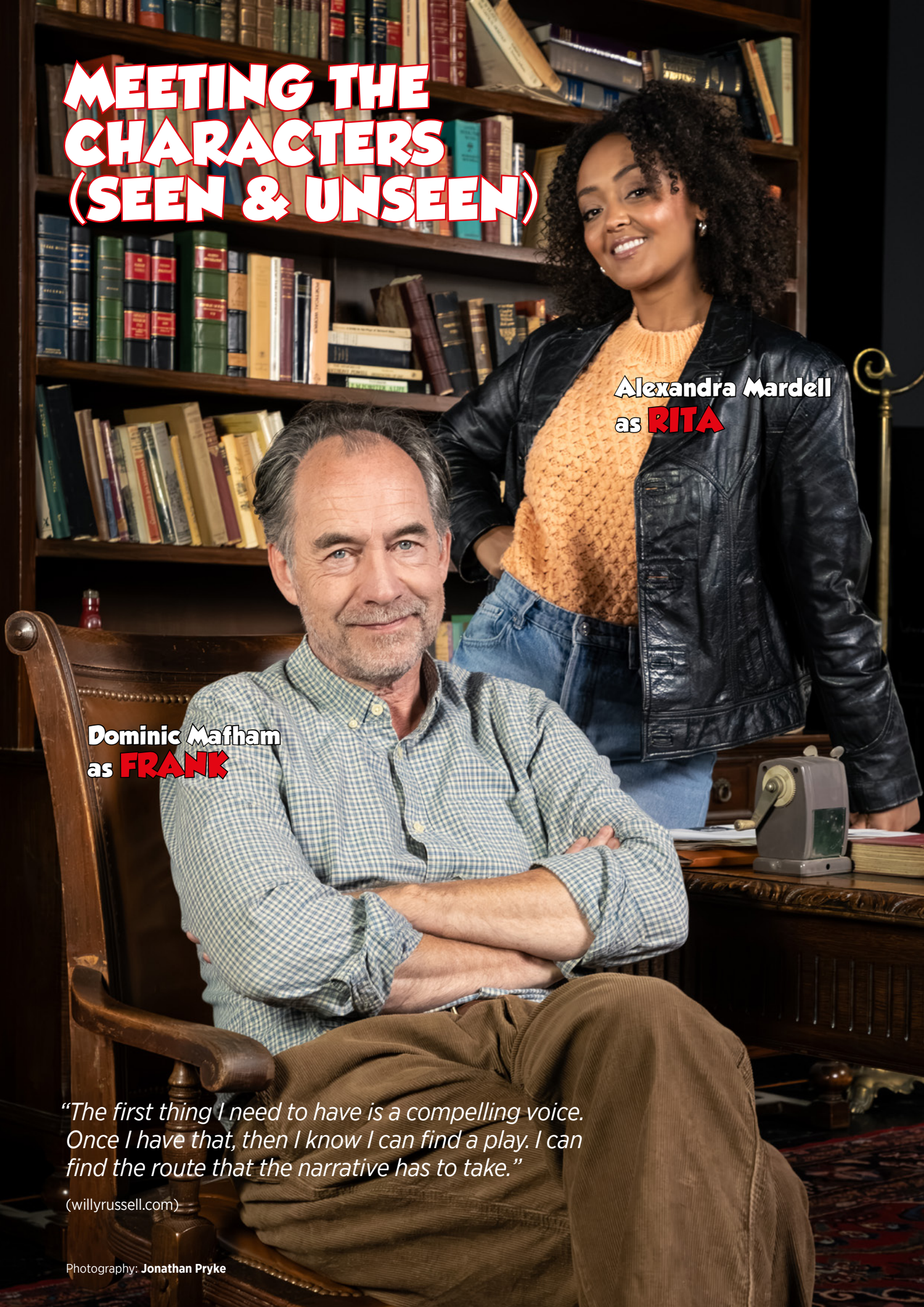
**Alexandra Mardell as RITA**

*When Russell was commissioned to write the screenplay for EDUCATING RITA, (1983) Columbia Pictures wanted to cast Dolly Parton as Rita and Paul Newman as Frank. Parton sent the script back and said she'd read it when it was translated into American!*

(Willy Russell and his plays. Gill. 1992 p100)

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# MEETING THE CHARACTERS (SEEN & UNSEEN)




*"The first thing I need to have is a compelling voice. Once I have that, then I know I can find a play. I can find the route that the narrative has to take."*

(willyrussell.com)

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# RITA

*"But I'm not a Susan any more, I've changed me name to Rita."*

Rita's real name is Susan White, a 26 year old hairdresser. At the beginning of the play, she establishes herself as a "needy but unconventional and unfocused would-be student," (willyrussell.com) and informs her Open University tutor, Frank, that she has chosen the name "Rita" after Rita Mae Brown, author of her favourite novel, RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE. The name reflects her desire to create a new identity through education and literature. Although she lacks formal qualifications, Frank quickly recognises her intellectual potential and Rita proves herself to be an enthusiastic and determined student; refusing to abandon her education despite her husband Denny's opposition, which ultimately contributes to the breakdown of their marriage.

As Rita progresses, she develops a close but ultimately platonic relationship with Frank and successfully completes her studies. Her growing confidence is conveyed when, in the play's penultimate scene, she changes her name back to Susan, telling Frank that she "dropped that pretentious crap". Rather than rejecting her past, Rita has become comfortable with her original identity. Her student friend Trish's attempted suicide also forces her to question whether education and the sophisticated lifestyle she once admired necessarily lead to happiness.

By the end of the play, Rita's transformation suggests that education has given her greater confidence, awareness and choice; rather than simply turning her into the middle-class person she initially aspired to become.

# FRANK

*"I'm a tutor, not a teacher."*

Frank, early fifties, is a university "tutor and failed poet" (willyrussell.com) who agrees to tutor Rita partly to earn extra money "to pay for the drink." Disillusioned with both his career and himself, he questions the value of teaching students he considers "appalling" and has become increasingly dependent on alcohol. When Rita arrives, he is initially intrigued by her intelligence but doubts whether he has the ability, or motivation, to develop her potential. Nevertheless, Rita insists that he becomes her tutor.

Their relationship develops into a warm but often challenging friendship. Frank proves to be an effective teacher, helping Rita develop academically, whilst also becoming increasingly emotionally attached to her. His romantic feelings are not reciprocated, and his growing frustration and alcoholism contribute to his decline. His drinking eventually leads the university to send him on a two year sabbatical to Australia.

Frank's relationship with Rita also exposes his own conflicted attitude towards education. Rita sees learning as a means of transformation and greater choice, but Frank has become cynical about the academic world he inhabits. In spite of this, he successfully prepares Rita for her examinations and plays an important role in her intellectual development. Ultimately, however, Rita's transformation forces Frank to confront his own lack of purpose and the limitations of the educational system he has become so disillusioned with.



# THE POWER OF THE UNSEEN CHARACTERS AND OFF-STAGE ACTION

One of the most distinctive features of EDUCATING RITA is that only **Rita and Frank** appear onstage, while other significant characters are referred to but never seen. Russell deliberately wrote the play as a two-hander, in a single-setting, keeping the dramatic focus on their tutor/student relationship.

Keeping characters such as **Denny**, **Trish**, **Julia** and **Rita's mother** offstage means the audience only encounters them through Rita and Frank's dialogue. They are therefore physically absent but dramatically and psychologically present; influencing the action without pulling focus from the central relationship. What remains unseen creates subtext, shapes character motivations, and builds dramatic tension.

The unseen world also creates a sense of a much larger social environment beyond Frank's study, representing the competing worlds Rita inhabits, including her working-class home, university life and the middle-class culture she is trying to enter. By leaving this world unseen, Russell encourages the audience to use their imagination and construct these characters and events for themselves, making them active rather than passive spectators.

Ultimately, the offstage world makes the play feel larger than its single setting, whilst allowing Rita's changing unseen relationships and experiences to drive her transformation. Frank's study becomes a meeting point between Rita's past and the new world she is attempting to enter, also a symbolic space where she can experiment with a new identity.
(willyrussell.com) (EDUCATING RITA, Russell. 2000)

## DENNY (UNSEEN CHARACTER)

**Rita about Denny:**
**"He said either I stop comin' here an' come off the pill or I could get out altogether."**

Although never seen onstage, Denny is symbolic of the stifling subculture in which Rita is trapped. His opposition to her continued education is presented as typical of Rita's social class. He wants what people of his class are supposed to want: a wife, a family, a decent job, and nights out at the pub. He is threatened by Rita's desire for a different life and burns Rita's books when he discovers that she has been secretly taking birth control pills. He issues Rita an ultimatum: quit the pills and the schooling, or quit the marriage.

## OTHER UNSEEN CHARACTERS who never appear on stage:

**JULIA** Frank's live-in girlfriend and former student. Julia is introduced via Frank in a one sided telephone conversation in the first scene.



**RITA'S MOTHER** Part of Rita's social circle and frequently accompanies Denny and Rita to the pub. Rita describes an episode to Frank in which her mother becomes drunkenly depressed at the lack of substance in their lives.



**TRISH** A fellow student who becomes Rita's "classy" roommate when Rita leaves her husband, Denny. Rita is deeply affected by Trish's attempted suicide towards the end of the play.



**TYSON** Nicknamed "Tiger" is a another fellow student who Rita befriends and whose presence in Rita's life sparks jealousy in Frank.



**OUR SANDRA AND HER MATES** Rita's social circle, (her sister in the film) who sing in the pub and highlight her sense of being an outsider. Rita tells Frank she feels like "an alien" trapped between two worlds.



**WOMAN IN THE SALON** One of Rita's customers that finds Rita's chat about Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's PEER GYNT fascinating.

# BRINGING UNSEEN CHARACTERS TO LIFE

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

To explore how Russell uses offstage characters to influence the action in EDUCATING RITA. Students will analyse textual evidence, use creativity and imagination to develop character interpretations, and consider how physicality, voice and performance choices can make an unseen character dramatically present.

### 1. Investigate the character

Using the information provided above as a starting point, select an unseen character from the play.

Use the text to gather evidence about:

- Their relationship with Rita or Frank
- Their background and circumstances
- Their personality and attitudes
- How they influence the action
- How other characters perceive them

### 2. Build the character

In your Actor Journal create a character study using drawings, photographs, magazine cuttings or online images to suggest the character's appearance and world.

Add actor notes covering:

- Physicality: posture, movement, gestures and use of space
- Vocal quality: pitch, tone, volume and accent
- Pace and rhythm: how they speak and respond
- Personality: habits, quirks and mannerisms
- Costume/appearance: what they might wear and why
- Motivation: what they want and what drives them
- Choose some short text from the play that you feel captures the character. If the character has no direct reported dialogue, create a short line that reflects their personality.

**NOTE: Director Cara Nolan asks the cast to imagine famous actors in the roles of the unseen characters, helping to give each character a tangible identity that can be referenced when exploring the play. Their pictures are then displayed on the rehearsal room walls. You could try casting these characters yourself!**

### 3. Put the character on their feet

- Work in pairs. Take turns being the actor and director.
- The director gives the actor the character study without explaining their interpretation.
- The actor must use the notes to interpret and create the character physically and vocally, then perform the chosen text.
- Encourage the actors to try several approaches and for the directors to offer supportive notes throughout.

### 4. Debrief and swap over

Discuss:

- What choices communicated the character most effectively?
- What was surprising about the interpretation?
- Did the character feel consistent with the evidence from the play?
- How might this character affect Rita if they were physically present?

Swap roles and repeat.

### 5. Journal Reflection

Record your discoveries in your actor's journal. Consider:

- What did the text reveal about this unseen character?
- Which performance choices helped bring them to life?
- What did you discover through putting the character on their feet?
- How does imagining the character differently affect your understanding of Rita or Frank?
- Why do you think Russell keeps this character offstage?
- How might their physical presence change the dynamic of the play?

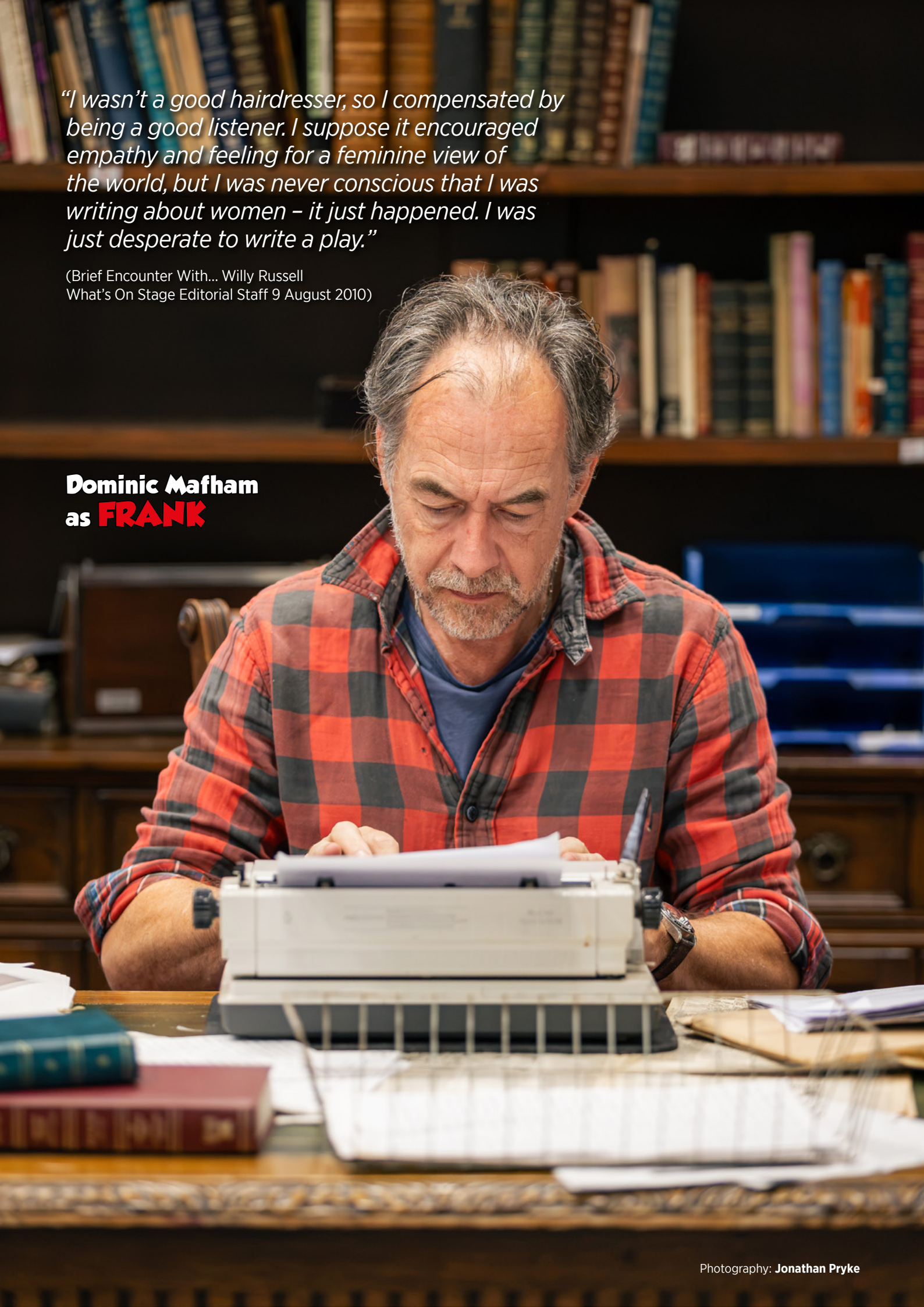
### Optional Extension

**Complete this sentence in your journal.**

"Although this character is never seen, their dramatic presence is important because..."

*"I wasn't a good hairdresser, so I compensated by being a good listener. I suppose it encouraged empathy and feeling for a feminine view of the world, but I was never conscious that I was writing about women – it just happened. I was just desperate to write a play."*

(Brief Encounter With... Willy Russell
What's On Stage Editorial Staff 9 August 2010)



**Dominic Mafham as FRANK**

Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# Themes and audience perspective

**A director staging Educating Rita today might encourage audiences to ask different questions from those in 1980**

This shift in emphasis reflects how the play has evolved. What began as a timely exploration of access to education has become a broader and enduring drama about identity, freedom and the choices people make in shaping their own lives.

## What resonated with audiences in 1980?

**Education as a new opportunity:** When the play premiered, the expansion of adult education was still relatively recent. Rita represented thousands of adults who wanted a second chance after leaving school with few qualifications. Many audience members recognised their own experiences or those of friends and family.

**Women's independence:** Rita's refusal to have children until she had discovered who she was challenged traditional ideas about marriage and motherhood. For many, this reflected the changing role of women in Britain following the Women's Liberation Movement and the widened availability, from 1967 onwards, of the contraceptive pill.

**Class and aspiration:** The play asked whether education could genuinely help someone move beyond the limitations of their social class. This question felt especially relevant during a period of economic uncertainty and changing employment opportunities.

## How modern audiences interpret the play

**Identity rather than education alone:** Today's audiences often see the play less as a story about getting a degree and more as a story about finding your own identity. Rita's struggle is not simply to become educated but to decide what kind of person she wants to be, ultimately to have choice.

**Mental health:** Frank's dependence on alcohol and Trish's depression tend to receive more attention today than they did in 1980. Modern audiences are generally more aware of mental health issues and may view these characters with greater empathy.

**Authenticity:** Many viewers focus on Frank's warning that education should not replace Rita's individuality. This raises questions that remain relevant today: should education encourage independent thinking or conformity?

## Continuing relevance

Although the social context may have changed, audiences still recognise:

- the desire for self-improvement
- conflicts between family expectations and personal ambition
- the search for identity
- inequalities in access to opportunity
- the transformative power of learning



Helena Rimmer as cover RITA

**The meaning of EDUCATING RITA changes depending on the audience's own experience of education, class and gender.** While many of the play's themes remain relevant, audiences today often notice different aspects than those watching the original production in 1980.

| 1980 AUDIENCE | MODERN AUDIENCE |
|---|---|
| Rita's decision to attend university as a working-class married woman was seen as bold and unusual. | Adult education is much more common, so Rita's decision feels less radical, though balancing study, work and family is still relatable. |
| Many recognised the recent growth of the Open University and saw it as a symbol of new opportunities. | The Open University is well established, and audiences may instead think about online learning, apprenticeships or lifelong learning. |
| Traditional gender roles were still widely accepted, so Rita rejecting motherhood challenged expectations. | Audiences are more likely to view Rita's desire to choose her own future as a normal expression of independence, while recognising that similar pressures still exist for some women. |
| Class divisions were highly visible, and Rita's Liverpool accent immediately signalled her working-class identity. | Class remains important, but audiences may focus more on confidence, cultural capital and opportunity than on accent alone. |
| Frank represented the traditional university academic, whose authority was rarely questioned. | Audiences often see Frank as flawed and privileged, appreciating Rita's confidence in challenging him. |
| Many saw the play as optimistic because it reflected expanding educational opportunities. | Audiences may ask whether education alone is enough to overcome inequality, particularly given concerns about tuition fees, student debt and unequal access to higher education. |






Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# A UNIVERSITY OF THE AIR

The Open University (OU) was established in the United Kingdom in1969, following an idea developed by Labour politician Harold Wilson and championed by Jennie Lee, then Minister for the Arts. Wilson originally imagined a "University of the Air", using television and radio to bring higher education into people's homes.

Its first Chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, described its purpose as reaching people who had previously been excluded from higher education. In his inaugural address, he referred to the "great unused reservoir of human talent and potential" and famously stated that the principle of this new university was openness,

"open, first, as to people... open as to places... open as to methods... open, finally, to ideas."

The OU's founding philosophy was closely connected with educational equality and social opportunity. Jennie Lee argued that the OU should not provide an inferior form of education, stating that, "There can be no question of offering to students a makeshift project, inferior in quality to other universities."

The first students began studying in 1971, mainly through correspondence materials, television and radio programmes, local tutorials and other forms of distance learning. This made it possible for adults who were working, raising families or who had not followed the traditional route into university to gain higher education qualifications.

Today, the OU is mainly taught online rather than traditional lectures. It remains a major provider of distance and flexible higher education. It has helped more than two million students and continues to pursue its founding mission of making learning accessible to people who might otherwise find university difficult to access. (www.ou.ac.uk)

**The Open University is central to EDUCATING RITA because it explores:**

**Access to education:** The OU gives Rita, who left school with few qualifications, a realistic route into higher education, challenging the idea that university is only for the privileged. Associated with the phrase "earn while you learn," the OU was financially accessible and allowed Rita to continue earning a living while studying.

**Choice and self-improvement:** Rita chooses education because she wants to change her life and understand herself and the world differently. "if you wanna change, you've got to do it from the inside, haven't you, like I'm trying to do" (Rita Act 1, Sc.1)

**Class and opportunity:** Her experience highlights how class can limit educational opportunities, while the OU offers a way to cross these social boundaries. Rita's initial references to the "students on the lawn" explores her perception of class and her sense of being an outsider.

**Relationship with Frank:** Rita's OU course brings her into Frank's study, creating the central relationship through which Russell explores different attitudes towards education.

**Purpose of education:** Rita sees education as a means of transformation, while Frank is more cynical. Their contrasting views allow Russell to question whether education genuinely liberates people or simply teaches them how to enter another social and cultural world.

**Russell's own experience:** Rita's return to education reflects Russell's own journey after leaving school with limited qualifications.

*"I didn't set out to write an autobiographical play, but the parallels between Rita and me seem glaring now. I was a ladies' hairdresser. I left school with one O-level and went back to get the education I'd not had. It was in writing Educating Rita that I realised the power of political theatre with a small 'p'. So many people, particularly women, have told me down the years that it was seeing this play that made them set about achieving their own education. I always say to them: "You would have done it anyway."*

(willyrussell.com)

# PLOT – TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

| TIME | SCENE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|
| January | Act 1, Scene 1 | Rita meets Frank for the first time and begins her Open University English Literature course. We learn about Franks drinking habit. |
| A few weeks later | Act 1, Scene 2 | Rita returns for a tutorial and feedback on her first essay. Rita quizzes Frank about his relationship with Julia. |
| Later | Act 1, Scene 3 | Rita struggles with her PEER GYNT essay. We hear that Denny, her husband, disapproves of her education. |
| Later | Act 1, Scene 4 | Denny burns Rita's essay and books. Rita suggests Frank and her go to the theatre to see THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST. |
| Later | Act 1, Scene 5 | Rita talks enthusiastically about MACBETH. Frank invites her and Denny to his dinner party. |
| Following week | Act 1, Scene 6 | Rita doesn't attend Frank's party because she feels she doesn't belong. She decides to continue her education after hearing her mother crying in the pub about "better songs to sing." |
| May | Act 1, Scene 7 | Rita has left Denny and is determined to continue studying. Summer break begins. |
| Summer | — | Rita attends summer school in London, becoming much more confident and independent. Frank spends time in France. |
| September | Act 2, Scene 1 | Rita returns from summer school. She has changed considerably and now has a new social circle and a new roommate, Trish. |
| Later in autumn | Act 2, Scene 2 | Rita becomes increasingly confident academically ...and has adopted a posh accent. Frank begins to feel threatened by her independence and appears jealous of Rita's friendship with Tiger (Tyson). |
| Later | Act 2, Scene 3 | Frank arrives drunk and reveals that his teaching has received complaints from his students. |
| Later | Act 2, Scene 4 | Rita has a new job and is becoming increasingly independent from Frank Frank gives Rita his poems to write a critical essay on them by the following week. |
| Later | Act 2, Scene 5 | Rita enthuses about Frank's poetry. Their relationship becomes strained. |
| Later | Act 2, Scene 6 | Frank, drunk, phones Rita about her examination. |
| Around Xmas | Act 2, Scene 7 | Rita has passed her exam and has transformed significantly. Frank is being sent to Australia on sabbatical. Rita prepares to move forward independently by choice. Frank gives Rita a dress and she gives Frank a haircut in return. |

# PASSAGE OF TIME IN EDUCATING RITA

The passage of time is an important structural and theatrical feature of EDUCATING RITA. Although the play takes place entirely in Frank's study/tutorial room, the audience experiences approximately one year of Rita and Frank's relationship. The play follows their regular tutorials as Rita develops academically and personally.

Russell's decision not to show every tutorial makes the audience actively participate in Rita's journey and transformation and we see the results of time passing, rather than watching every small step. The passage of time therefore becomes a dramatic device for exploring education, transformation, independence and the changing power relationship between the characters. (willyrussell.com)

## ACTIVITY/EXERCISE – PASSAGE OF TIME

(SEASONAL CHANGE – example exercise given in brief)

### The Passing of Time

**Learning Objective:** To analyse and apply theatrical techniques that communicate the passage of time.

**Starter:** List everything that changes between the beginning and end of the play (Rita's appearance, confidence, language, relationships, Frank's circumstances, seasons, and mood).

### Task

In groups, create a 60-second sequence that shows one year passing without using narration.

You may use:

- Lighting changes
- Costume adjustments
- Music or sound effects
- Physical movement and gesture
- Changes in voice or language

### Discussion Questions

1. Which technique communicated time most clearly?
2. How does the audience understand that Rita has changed?
3. What challenges arise when showing long periods of time on stage?
4. How might a designer support these changes through set, costume, or lighting?

### Optional Extension

Write a short director's note in your journal explaining how you would stage the transition from summer to winter in EDUCATING RITA.




Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# REALISM & NATURALISM IN PERFORMANCE

**Realism** aims to present recognisable, believable people and situations. Characters behave in ways that audiences might encounter in everyday life. The dialogue, relationships and problems feel socially and psychologically authentic.

Examples in EDUCATING RITA:

- **Everyday setting:** The play is largely set in Frank's university office, an ordinary academic workspace. The realistic setting helps establish a believable relationship between a tutor and student.
- **Natural dialogue:** Rita's speech is informal, humorous and influenced by her working-class background, while Frank initially uses more academic language. The contrast between their ways of speaking creates a realistic representation of different social backgrounds.
- **Realistic relationships:** Rita and Frank's relationship develops gradually. They experience friendship, frustration, conflict and dependence, rather than having a simple teacher/student relationship.

**Naturalism** is closely related to realism but places greater emphasis on the idea that people are shaped by their environment, upbringing, class and social circumstances. In performance, naturalism often requires actors to behave as though the audience is not there. The aim is to create the impression that we are observing real people rather than watching actors perform.

Examples in EDUCATING RITA:

- Rita's behaviour is influenced by her **working-class upbringing**, **marriage**, **job** and desire for education.
- Frank's behaviour is influenced by his **academic environment**, alcoholism and dissatisfaction with his own life.

**Observation:** Director Cara Nolan production is firmly rooted in naturalism. Look out for evidence in the actors' performances and try out the skills for yourself in the following exercises.




Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

# NATURALISTIC ACTING: A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

To explore a naturalistic approach to acting, we will draw on the work of two practitioners whose approaches encourage truthful, responsive and spontaneous performance:

### Sanford Meisner

How do I genuinely respond to my partner in the moment?

### Mike Alfreds

How can I keep my performance fresh, spontaneous and truthful each time I perform?

The following exercises offer practical ways to explore these questions and consider how they might inform your own acting practice.

## MEISNER TECHNIQUE EXERCISE ONE REPETITION – RITA AND FRANK

### What is the Meisner technique?

The Meisner technique, developed by American actor and teacher Sanford Meisner, focuses on actors responding truthfully and instinctively to their scene partner. A key principle is to "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances." Repetition exercises are used to encourage actors to listen and respond rather than plan their performance. Great preparation and discipline for naturalistic acting.
(masterclass.com)

### Learning Objective

To practice The Meisner Technique to explore the changing relationship between Rita and Frank through genuine listening and spontaneous reactions.

### Task

Put students into pairs. One plays Rita, the other Frank.

Begin with a simple observation:

Rita: "You're looking at me."
Frank: "I'm looking at you."
Rita: "You're looking at me."
Frank: "I'm looking at you."

Continue repeating the observation. Students should not try to act an emotion. Instead, they should focus, staying in the moment, on what their partner is actually communicating and allow their response to change naturally. This reflects the Meisner repetition exercise, where the repeated statement can change as the actors' sub-text and perceptions of each other change.

Both actors and audience can feedback their experience and observations on the exercise, referencing the changing relationship, status and dynamic between Rita and Frank.
(masterclass.com)

**Options:** Depending on time available:

**15-minute version**

3 mins – Explain technique5 mins – Repetition exercise
5 mins – Apply to Rita/Frank
2 mins – Reflection

**30–40 minute version**

5 mins – Introduce Meisner: listening, repetition and truthful responses
8 mins – Basic repetition exercise in pairs
10 mins – Apply repetition to Rita/Frank quotations
7 mins – Add movement, pauses, eye contact and proximity
5–10 mins – Perform and reflect on what felt most naturalistic
30–40 minutes is recommended, because actors need enough time to move beyond simply repeating lines and to explore subtext, authentic listening and the changing relationship dynamics between Rita and Frank.

## NATURALISM EXERCISE TWO

### Mike Alfreds – Different Every Night Introduction

Mike Alfreds is a British theatre director and acting teacher whose work focuses on giving actors greater freedom, spontaneity and truthfulness in performance. He developed his approach through decades of directing and rehearsal practice. His book DIFFERENT EVERY NIGHT: FREEING THE ACTOR was published in 2007. (nickhernbooks.co.uk)

Alfreds argues for keeping the text alive in performance rather than allowing actors to repeat a fixed interpretation. His approach can be understood as "disciplined improvisation": the script provides boundaries, but actors remain responsive to what is happening in the moment.

### Learning Objective

To explore Mike Alfreds' approach to naturalistic acting, encouraging actors to remain spontaneous and responsive rather than delivering a performance in exactly the same way every time.

## Tasks

### 1. Remove the fixed performance – 5 minutes

In pairs, choose a short section from EDUCATING RITA, such as Rita and Frank's first meeting.

Perform it once normally.

Then perform it again, but do not try to reproduce the previous performance. Try changing: pauses; movement; eye contact; vocal emphasis; reactions and timing.

The words stay the same, but the performance should develop differently.

### 2. Respond to the moment – 10 minutes

Perform the scene several times.

Each time, actors should:

- genuinely listen to their partner
- respond to what happens in the moment
- avoid pre-planning gestures or emotional reactions
- allow silence and hesitation
- explore different physical relationships with the space

For example, Rita might sit, stand, move around Frank's office or handle a prop differently each time.

## Optional Challenge

Perform the same scene three times for the class.

The audience feeds back what they notice and like to the actors

## Discussion and/or journal reflection

- How can performing "differently every night" make Rita and Frank feel like real people rather than characters repeating a rehearsed performance?
- Alfreds' approach encourages actors to avoid becoming mechanically predictable. Why is this particularly useful in EDUCATING RITA?

# PROXEMICS EXERCISE

Proxemics in theatre is the use of space and distance between actors to communicate relationships, emotions, and power. For example, standing close together can show intimacy, while keeping a large distance can suggest tension or separation.

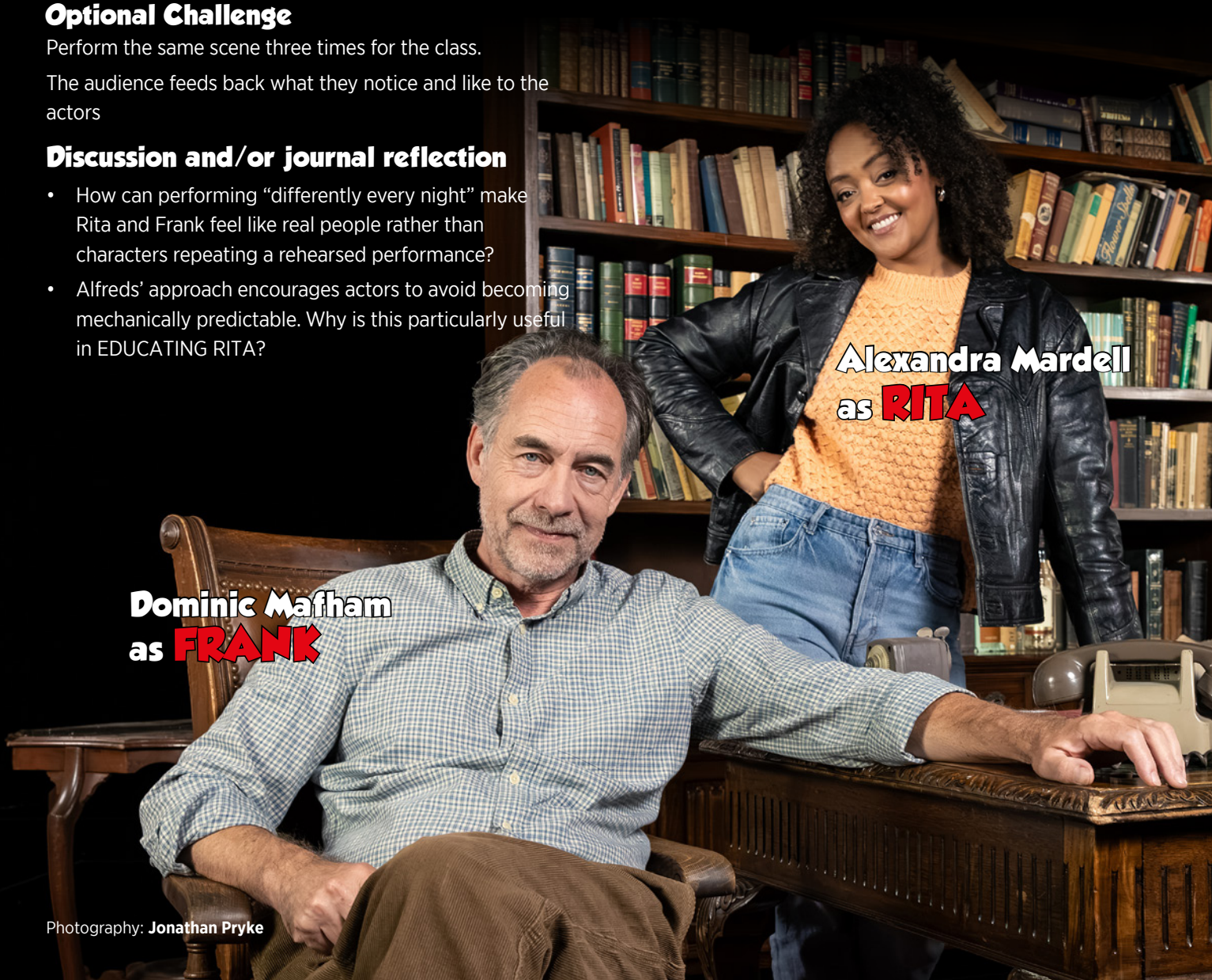
## Learning Objective

To explore how characters, relationships, social contexts, themes and objects influence Rita's identity and development in EDUCATING RITA. Actors will use their knowledge of the play and proxemics to physically represent the strength and nature of these influences and reflect on how Rita responds to them.

## Task

### 1. Create the space

Stand in a circle. Invite one actor to stand in the centre and represent **Rita**. For larger or less confident groups, two or three students can take on the role together. The actor(s) playing Rita should listen and respond **in character and on a feeling level** to the influences placed around them.




Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**

## 2. Identify what influences Rita

One at a time, students are given a character, context, theme or object connected to Rita. They enter the circle and decide where to position themselves in relation to Rita.

The closer they stand, the greater the influence or effect they believe they have on Rita. Encourage students to consider not only how much influence something has, but also **what kind** of influence it has.

Possible influences include:

- **Characters:** Frank, Denny, Trish, Rita's mum, Rita's clients.
- **Contexts and themes:** Liverpool, working-class culture, Rita's marriage, education and social mobility.
- **Objects:** the university lawn, Rita's burnt books, Frank's dress, hairdressing scissors, Rita's mum's song in the pub.

## 3. Speak the influence

Each actor enters the circle and says:

**"I am _____ and I affect you by _____."**

Rita responds in character, beginning:

**"I feel _____."**

Encourage Rita to respond physically as well as verbally, considering changes in posture, eye contact, distance and body language.

## 4. Build the picture

Continue until all actors have entered the circle. Once everyone is positioned, look at the completed image.

Discuss prompts:

- Who has the greatest influence over Rita? Why?
- Which influences are positive or negative?
- Which influences change as the play progresses?
- Are some influences more powerful because of Rita's class, relationships or circumstances?
- What does the physical distance between the characters and objects suggest?
- Does Rita control her own transformation, or are others shaping it?

## 5. Repositioning and analysis

Following the discussion, give the actors the opportunity to change their positions if their interpretation has changed.

Ask them to explain why they have moved and what this reveals about Rita's development.

## 6. Journal Reflection

Record the discoveries from the exercise in your actor's journal. Consider:

- Which relationship or influence surprised you?
- How did physical distance help you understand Rita's relationships?
- How does class influence Rita's choices and identity?
- Does Rita become more, or less, influenced by others as the play progresses?
- What did you change your mind about during the discussion?
- How could these discoveries influence your performance of Rita or another character?

### Optional Challenge

Perform a short improvised scene in a chosen character to present your analysis.

For example, in role as Rita, (starting with the words in bold) you may respond:

***'Through this exercise, I discovered that...*** *I'm not as close to Our Sandra as I thought I was...this makes me dead sad... well a bit, 'cos it's her doin'. She was the one who couldn't look me in the eye...cheek of her pretending she's got my back when she's just talking behind it. I know she is...I can just tell. I've known her too long not to know...*



# EDUCATING RITA – SOCIAL & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

EDUCATING RITA was written at a time of significant social change in Britain. Although the play is comic, Russell uses Rita's experience to explore **women's liberation**, **social class**, **access to education** and **changing expectations of what a woman might become**. Setting Rita within working-class Liverpool makes these issues particularly immediate. The play premiered in 1980, but its world is rooted in the social and economic changes of the 1970s.

Liverpool provides more than a geographical setting. The city was experiencing severe economic decline during the 1970s. The docks and factories that had traditionally provided employment were closing, contributing to unemployment and poverty. For a working-class woman such as Rita, this context helps explain why her desire for something beyond the expected path of work, marriage and domestic life is significant.

At the same time, Liverpool had a strong and distinctive cultural identity. Its artistic heritage included popular music, poetry and theatre, creating a contrast between the city's economic difficulties and its rich cultural life. This is important theatrically: Rita may initially feel that "culture" belongs to Frank's university world, yet she already comes from a city with an enormously rich popular culture of its own.
(EDUCATING RITA: STUDENT EDITIONS. Willy Russell. Methuen Drama – Bloomsbury 2023)
(EDUCATING RITA. Hodder Education Magazines 1Feb 2023)

## TIMELINE

**1948**
**Introduction of NHS**

**1950s**
**Rock n Roll reaches UK from US**

**1952**
**Death of King George VI**

**1953**
**Elizabeth II Coronation**

**1957**
**PM Harold Macmillan declares 'most of our people have never had it so good'**

**1960s**
**Wide social change and the beginnings of the 'permissive society'**

**1961**
**Contraceptive pill made available for married women only**

**1963**
**Please Please Me Beatle's first No1 hit and Beatlemania grips the nation**

**1965**
**Death penalty abolished**

**1966**
**England win the World Cup**

**1967**
**Abortion Act legalises the termination of pregnancies**

**1967**
**The point at which the contraceptive pill became much more widely accessible**

**1969**
**Divorce Reform Act and Neil Armstrong is the first man on the moon**

**1970s**
**Education reform act and introduction of comprehensive schools**

**1970**
**Germaine Greer publishes her book THE FEMALE EUNUCH, inspiring the women's liberation movement**

**1971**
**First students began studying at Open University**

**1973**
**Britain becomes a member of the European Union**

**1975**
**Equal opportunities Act**

**1979**
**Margaret Thatcher becomes first female Prime Minister**

(York Notes – EDUCATING RITA BY WILLY RUSSELL (Tony Rawdin) Longmann, York Press 2003)


"The basic premise – that education means choice – still matters today, the world over. And not just for women, but for all of us."
Julie Walters
Alexandra Mardell as RITA
Photography: Jonathan Pryke

# WHO IS EDUCATING ME?

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

To reflect on the people, experiences and influences that have shaped who I am, while considering how curiosity, empathy and openness to change influence my development as an actor and as a person.

### Task

In her introduction to the play, Director Cara Nolan shares her hope that:

*"...this production reminds us that education extends far beyond classrooms or qualifications. It is about curiosity, empathy and the courage to keep growing. It is about allowing ourselves to be changed by books, by conversations, by art and by the people we meet along the way."*

Rita's education extends beyond the classroom. Frank teaches her, but Rita also teaches Frank. This exercise asks you to consider who and what has educated you.

### 1. Mindmapping

In your actor journal, create a mind map or list of your own "teachers". Think beyond school and formal education. Include:

- Family members
- Friends
- Teachers, tutors or coaches
- Colleagues
- People you have encountered briefly
- Books, films, theatre and music
- Social media or online creators
- Personal experiences
- Mistakes, challenges or failures

### 2. Stream-of-Consciousness Reflection

Choose one person or influence that has had a significant impact on you and ask yourself: Who or what was it? What did they teach me? How did I learn it? Did they intend to teach me? How has this knowledge changed me?

Write continuously for 5–10 minutes in your Actor Journal, beginning with:

"When I think about who has educated me, I realise..."

Don't worry about grammar, structure or making it sound polished. Follow your thoughts wherever they lead. Give yourself permission to write freely, without the pressure to hand in your work.

Consider:

- What am I curious about?
- What knowledge have I gained unexpectedly?
- What has surprised me?
- When have I resisted or rejected an opportunity to learn?
- Why did I reject it?
- How do I respond when someone challenges what I believe?
- Do I tend to question, challenge or passively accept information?
- What experiences have changed the way I see the world?



### 3. My Learning Style

Reflect on how you learn best:

Hearing — discussion, explanation and conversation

Seeing — demonstrations, images and performances

Reading/Writing — books, notes and written reflection

Doing — practical activities, experimentation and rehearsal

Take a test at https://vark-learn.com if you haven't done so already and reflect on the results: considering how this might affect the way you approach rehearsals, character work and feedback.

### 4. Partner or group sharing

Take a moment to prepare your answers to the following prompts and share with a partner, or the group.

Complete these sentences:

- Someone who has educated me is...
- Something I have learned that I didn't expect to learn is...
- A learning opportunity I have rejected is...
- Something I am curious about is...
- I want to find out more about _____
  I will do this by _____

### 5. Optional Journal Extension Task to Link to EDUCATING RITA

**Finish by considering: Who is educating whom?**

Does your reflection connect to Rita and Frank's relationship? Are there any parallels or just stark differences. Consider how both characters are changed by their conversations, challenges and experiences with each other.

*Educating Rita was originally a working title which Russell decided to keep. It is taken from the 'Educating Archie' radio show with Peter Brough where the ventriloquist is outsmarted by his dummy, a strange situation for a radio show!*

(Willy Russell and his plays. Gill. 1992 p.98)




Photography: **Jonathan Pryke**


"I hate research. I hate having to stop to research. If I don't know it in the belly there's no point in going out to research it because I'm not a journalist. So I'd loot my own past for necessary references in the play."
(theartsdesk Q&A: Writer Willy Russell. The Liverpudlian playwright on John, Paul, Rita, Shirley and Willy by Jasper ReesSaturday, 3 July 2010)
Tabitha Dodds
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
The Sound of Music
Photography: Jonathan Pryke

# READING AND REFERENCE LIST


**EDUCATING RITA** by Willy Russell
(notes John Shuttleworth) Pearson Education Limited 2007

**EDUCATING RITA** by Willy Russell
(notes Steve Lewis) Methuen Drama 2007

**THAT'S ANOTHER STORY** Julie Walters
Orion Books 2008.

**WILLY RUSSELL AND HIS PLAYS** John Gill
Countyvise Limited 1996

**WILLY RUSSELL PLAYS 1** Willy Russell
Bloomsbury Methuen Drama 1996

**WILLY RUSSELL PLAYS 2** Willy Russell
Methuen Drama 2016

**YORK NOTES – EDUCATING RITA**
by Willy Russell (Tony Rawdin) Longmann, York Press 2003


## Websites

**britannica.com**

**coursehero.com**

**masterclass.com**

**nickhernbooks.co.uk**

**open.ac.uk**

**ritamaebrown.com**

**vark-learn.co.uk**

**willyrussell.com**

## Articles


**Arts: And those who can, write plays**
The independent 23 Nov 1997

**Brief Encounter With ... Willy Russell**
What'sOnStage Editorial Staff 9 August 2010)

**Liverpool John Moores University**
Archive collection. (various)

theartsdesk Q&A:
**Writer Willy Russell. The Liverpudlian playwright on John, Paul, Rita, Shirley and Willy**
by Jasper Rees. Saturday, 3 July 2010


# EXTRA OPTIONS

## Frank's bookshelf

**Writers, playwrights and poets referenced in the play.**

**LITERARY REFERENCES IN EDUCATING RITA**
(coursehero.com)

William Shakespeare (c. 1564–1616)
**MACBETH**

William Blake (1757–1827)
**SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE**

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)
**THE SEAGULL**

E.M. Forster (1879–1970)
**HOWARDS END**

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906)
**PEER GYNT**

D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930)
**LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER**

D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930)
**SONS AND LOVERS**

Rita Mae Brown (b. 1944)
**RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE**

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