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INGRID GRENAR  
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For their debut production Newmarket Stage Company chose Willy Russell's modern classic comedy 'Educating Rita' about the relationship between a working class girl and her Open University Lecturer. If you have never seen the play you may have seen the BAFTA Award winning film starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, which has made this story pretty well known.

Set in 1980's England we meet Susan, who introduces herself as Rita (Jodie Hillock), and her lecturer Dr. Frank Bryant (George Henare). Together they will go through a journey of friendship and self discovery.

When Rita first burst in to Frank's office she is full of beans and her fresh approach and unpretentious ways attract Frank to his 'Pygmalion' student.



*George Henare and Jodie Hillock as Frank and Rita*

As their relationship grows Frank becomes more fascinated by this bright, individual young woman who sees the world with child like enthusiasm but with adult wit. However Frank himself is disillusioned with his life, career and future.

Rita, frustrated and trapped in a dominating and controlling relationship with few choices, is following her dream to better herself. Frank, an upper middle class lecturer, is also in an unhappy relationship and is struggling with self doubt along with a drink problem.

Like most of Willy Russell's works this demonstrates strong themes around the British Class system but mostly it resonates friendship, self development, freedom and choice.

Both actors demonstrate a great range during the play. Frank's initial superiority gradually weakens as Rita's knowledge grows. The characters almost mirror each other as the power shifts over to Rita in the second half showing both characters crisis of confidence and struggles within their class.

The stage set looked perfect with old furniture within this messy academics office of organised chaos, strewn with books from the classics to the Britanicas, all providing the perfect hiding places for Frank's whiskey!

The first half of the performance was somewhat hampered by a chattering row in front so I feel that I didn't get fully immersed into the play straight away.

I enjoyed the pace of the play increasing as the relationship builds. The chemistry on stage was both passionate and poignant and I especially liked watching the control shift over to Rita.

Adey Ramsel's direction brings movement and energy and makes use of all areas of the stage allowing this two hander the vigor to hold it's audience. The sharp and witty script is a gift to actors that know what to do with it and Ramsel has chosen well here.

George plays a great frustrated academic with his confident tone showing a abundance of knowledge, whilst often wittily expressing his loss of enthusiasm for teaching. His subtlety in portraying Frank's sadness was particularly enjoyable to watch as he has great stage presence and very emotive facial features.

His strength of character coupled with layers of vulnerability was depicted perfectly. This struggling middle aged alcoholic academic is no easy ride on stage but you will still warm to him and like him despite his downfalls thanks to this strong performance. It really is an honour to watch one of New Zealand's great theatrical actors.

Jodie bounces, struts and jokes around the academic office engulfed by books. The script provides her with the playful and colourful dialogue allowing her many laughs.

Jodie brings energy and heart on her sleeve emotion to the stage, very much as she did in Silo Theatre's Tribes earlier this year. I feel that she especially excelled in the second half of the show. As with Frank, Rita is a straight talker but with many insecurities and Jodie was able to communicate her characters weaknesses and growth with skilful execution that feels honest and true on stage.

This is solid production showing off New Zealand's new and established theatrical talent. A great first choice and we look forward to seeing more from the Newmarket Stage Company.

Educating Rita runs from 23 Aug – 8 Sept at Newmarket's The Factory Theatre, 7 Eden St, Newmarket. To book see [www.iticket.co.nz](http://www.iticket.co.nz) or ph 361 1000. For further details

