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EDUCATING RITA

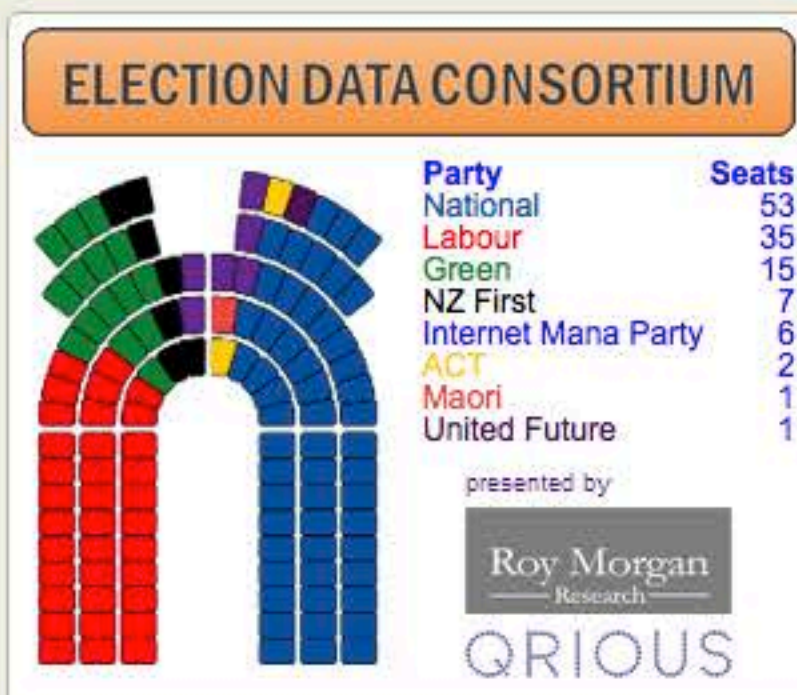
by Willy Russell
directed by Adey Ramsel
Newmarket Stage Company

at The Factory Theatre, 7 Eden Street,
Newmarket, Auckland
From 23 Aug 2012 to 8 Sep 2012

Reviewed by Joanna Page, 25 Aug 2012

The publicity leading up to Newmarket Stage Company's first production was impressive; how often does a brand-new company have a story published in a major paper weeks out from opening night?

It's a lot of pressure for the cast and crew and I was very curious to see whether *Educating Rita* would be worthy of the hype.



As it turns out the combination of a slightly dated but essentially timeless script by Willy Russell (*Blood Brothers*, *Shirley Valentine*), a clear vision from Artistic Director /Producer /Director Adey Ramsel, George Henare's mana, and the vibrant fresh style of Jodie Hillock's Rita means it's more than worthy. In fact, there should have been more hype.

Step into the Opera Factory Theatre in Newmarket and you're immediately transported to Dr. Frank Bryant's musty office on a Liverpool university campus. It's lived-in, almost organic and in dire need of a tidy – and I'd love to know where all the books came from. And here you stay for the play's duration. But time doesn't stand still.

Russell's story of a young working-class woman's quest to find happiness by getting an education she doesn't think she's worthy of still resonates. Hillock's portrayal of Rita is full of energy and life, and provides a stark contrast to Frank's world-weariness. Despite her accent taking a tiki-tour around the UK initially, once it settled in Liverpool, Hillock is brilliant.

Henare's Frank is endearing; despite his drink-related flaws and creative insecurities, you can't help but mourn his loss as Rita grows less dependent on him. Henare's subtle expressions contrast with Hillock's dynamic, no-holds-barred Rita. While she commands the audience's attention more, it's due in equal parts to her performance, Henare's expert ability to step back so his co-star can step forward, and the fact that Rita's character is such a contrast to the environment in which she finds herself.

Under Ramsel's direction the duo maintain a brilliant pace. Essentially the work is a series of vignettes. With the single setting the simplest way to separate them is with lighting changes and lightning-quick costumes changes (which must keep wardrobe co-ordinator Erica Byers on her toes). But in the hands of these professionals it is so easy to escape into the piece that you'll be disappointed when they stop for a 20-minute intermission.

Believe the hype. *Educating Rita* is well worth the journey and the ticket price.

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