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SF PERUSALS

EDUCATING RITA

by Willy Russell

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EDUCATING RITA

First produced at The Warehouse, London, by the Royal Shakespeare Company, June 10th, 1980, and subsequently at the Picadilly Theatre with the following cast of characters:

FRANK	Mark Kingston
RITA	Julie Walters

Directed by Mike Ockrent
Designed by Poppy Mitchell

The action takes place in a first-floor room in a university in the north of England.

Time – the present

ACT ONE

Scene One

The early 1980s. A book-lined study/tutorial room on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the north of England.

There is a large bay window with a desk placed in front of it. There is also another desk or table covered with various books and papers. On one wall there hangs a print of Cabanel's The Birth of Venus.

FRANK, *who is in his early fifties, is standing holding an empty mug while pondering his shelves.*

FRANK Now where in the name of God... Eliot, Eliot...?

He goes to one of the bookshelves and starts to remove books. He's puzzled.

Eliot? Emerson? "E", "E", "E", Euripedes.

He goes to one of the bookshelves, removes a volume and peers into the space left.

No!

As he replaces books and moves to another section of shelving.

Dickens? No...surely not.

Removes a volume. Delighted.

Ah! Yes! Dickens – good old Charlie.

As he lifts out a bottle of scotch which has no more than about three or four fingers left in it; this he pours into his mug which he then raises in salute.

To dear Charlie Dickens, genius and keeper of the Famous Grouse.

As he drinks the telephone rings, startling him slightly. Hurriedly he replaces the now empty bottle and the books before taking a gulp of the scotch and answering the phone.

Julia, Juliaa! ...Well yes, obviously I'm still here... No Julie, I have not been smoking... I know I promised you. I'm late because I've got this Open University woman coming this evening haven't I? ...Tch... Darling I did tell you, of course I did... Well then you shouldn't have prepared supper should you? Because I said, darling, I distinctly recall saying that I would be late... Yes, yes I probably *shall* go to the pub afterwards – I shall no doubt *need* to go to the pub afterwards if only to mercifully wash away some silly woman's attempts to get into the mind of Henry James or Thomas Hardy or whoever the hell it is we're supposed to study on this course... Christ why did I take this on?

Yes darling, yes, I suppose I did take it on to pay for the drink... *(Sotto voce)* Oh for fuck's sake...just leave it in the oven... Julia, if you're trying to induce feelings of guilt at the prospect of a charred dinner you'd have been better cooking something other than a lamb cassoulet – because, my perfect poppet, gastro-cretin that I may be, even *I* know that cassoulet is impossible to overcook... Darling you could incinerate cassoulet, radiate it, roast it in the ovens of hell, napalm the bloody stuff and still it wouldn't be overcooked! ...Determined to go to the pub? When did I need determination to get *me* into a pub...?

There is a knock at the door.

Look, I'll have to go...there's someone at the door... Yes, yes... I...alright I promise...just a couple of pints... *(Sotto voce)* Four!

Further, more insistent knocking at the door. **FRANK** *calls in the direction of the door.*

Come in.

Continues on phone.

Absolutely darling, absolutely, nine at the latest, nine forty-five at the absolute outside, well ten-ish...yes...bye-bye...

Yes, I prom...alright. Yes, yes!

More knocking from the door.

Come in!

Back to the phone.

Absolutely darling, absolutely...yes...bye-bye...

Replacing phone.

Come in! COME IN!

The door swings open revealing **RITA.**

RITA I *am* comin' in aren't I? It's that stupid bleeding handle on the door. Y' wanna get it fixed!

FRANK Erm, yes. I erm... I er... I suppose I always meant to.

RITA Well that's no good, always meaning to, is it? Y' should get on with it. Because one of these days you'll be shouting "come in" and it'll go on forever and ever because the poor bastard on the other side of the door won't be able to "come in". An' you won't be able to get out!

FRANK And you are?

RITA I'm a what?

FRANK Pardon me?

RITA Why, what have y' done?

FRANK What have I *done?*

RITA I don't know! What have you done?

FRANK Look! Could you just tell me your name? Miss?

RITA Mrs.

FRANK Mrs? Mrs...?

RITA *shifts her attention to the painting as* **FRANK** *busies himself trying to find* **RITA***'s enrolment papers amidst the mess of papers on his desk.*

RITA It's nice isn't it? The picture; it's nice.

FRANK The Birth of Venus.

RITA It's very erotic.

FRANK Erm, well I...you know I don't think I've actually really looked at it for the past ten years or so but...yes I suppose it is.

RITA There's no suppose about it – look at those tits.

FRANK *again busies himself with the papers on his desk.*

Is it supposed to be erotic? Like, when he painted it, do y' think he like, like meant it to be a turn-on, y' know, sexually stimulating.

FRANK Erm...possibly...

RITA I think he did y' know. You don't paint pictures like that just so that people can admire the brush strokes do y'?

FRANK *(amused)* No. No, you're probably right.

RITA Because this was like the pornography of its day, wasn't it? It's sort of like Men Only, isn't it – this is the sort of thing they would have perved over in those days, isn't it? But back then they had to pretend there was nothing erotic

about it at all so that's why they made it religious didn't they? Do you think it's erotic?

FRANK I think it's very beautiful.

RITA I didn't ask you if it was beautiful.

FRANK No. I know. But the term "beautiful" embraces the many feelings I have about the picture; including the feeling that yes, it is really rather erotic.

RITA D' y' get a lot like me?

FRANK I beg your pardon?

RITA Do you get a lot of students like me.

FRANK Not exactly, no.

RITA I was dead surprised when they accepted me. But I don't suppose they would have done if it had been a proper university would they? It's different though isn't it, the Open University? I suppose anyone can get in can't they? D' y' think they must be desperate?

FRANK I…really couldn't say. I've not had much more experience of it than you have. In fact this is the first Open University work I've done.

RITA Oh great! I end up with a beginner!

FRANK No no, you misunderstand me; I work here at the university – I was just making the point that I haven't done this kind of extracurricular Open University work before.

RITA It was a joke!

FRANK I am a bona fide lecturer but with…

RITA A joke!

FRANK *(a beat)* Oh, a joke – "beginner", yes. A joke!

RITA You're like lightnin' you, aren't y'? So what y' doin' this for? D' y' need the money?

FRANK Actually I do as a matter of fact.

RITA I'm sorry.

FRANK What for?

RITA Bein' nosey.

FRANK Were you?

RITA I talk too much don't I? It's what I do, when I'm nervous.

FRANK Erm – would you like to sit down?

RITA No. Can I smoke?

FRANK Tobacco!

RITA What?

FRANK *(almost bashful)* A joke.

RITA Oh. You mean was I gonna whip out the wacky backy? I hate drugs. They just cover everything up. I hate them.

Producing packet of cigarettes and offering one to **FRANK.**

FRANK Ah ah... I'd love one.

RITA Well have one!

FRANK No, no really, I've given up.

RITA Everyone has. They're all afraid of gettin' cancer. But they're all cowards. You've got to challenge death an' disease. I read this great poem about fightin' death...

FRANK Ah, Dylan Thomas.

RITA No, Roger McGough! It was all about this old man who runs away from hospital and goes out on the ale. He gets pissed and stands in the street shoutin' an' challengin' death to come out an' fight. It's brilliant.

FRANK Mm. I don't think I'm familiar with the actual piece you mean.

RITA I'll bring y' the book; it's fantastic.

FRANK Good, good. That's very kind of you.

RITA Mind you, you probably won't think it's any good at all.

FRANK Why not?

RITA Because it's the sort of poetry you can understand.

FRANK *(not quite sure)* Ah. Yes. I see. So you think it's important then, that poetry should be understood?

Shrugs.

RITA Yeh. That's part of the reason I came here. Because there's loads that I don't understand.

FRANK You mean poetry? A lot of poetry you don't understand?

RITA *(beginning to move around and scan the books on the shelves)* Yeh. All kinds of things.

FRANK *(he watches her for a second or two)* Look, can I offer you a drink?

RITA What of?

FRANK Scotch?

RITA You should be careful with that stuff; it kills your brain cells y' know.

FRANK But you'll have one?

Going to the bookcase.

RITA Yeh. Alright. It'll probably have a job even finding my brain...

FRANK *(scratching his head as he ponders the bookshelves, thinking out loud)* Now now now...thinks, thinks... F, F, F, Faulkner, Fielding...ah, Forster... Forster!

As he pulls away a couple of volumes of Forster; leaving them on the table desk, he reaches in and takes out another bottle of scotch which he then takes across to the small table.

RITA *(silently gobsmacked for a second before—)* My aunty's got a drinks cabinet like that!

FRANK Water?

RITA Yeah okay.

Picking up one of the Forster volumes.

What's this like?

FRANK *(bringing the drinks across and looking at the book)* "Howards End"?

RITA Yeh. Sounds filthy doesn't it? E.M. Foster.

FRANK Forster!

RITA Forced her to do what?

FRANK *Forster*, E.M. Forster; and it's doubtful that he would have forced "her" to do anything. Edward Morgan Forster was a committed homosexual.

RITA Was he? Oh? So is that what his books about, being gay? With Howard?

FRANK Howard's not a character – Howards End is a house.

RITA Oh is it?

FRANK The book's about...but look, here *(handing her the volume)* borrow it. Read it for yourself.

RITA Okay. Thanks. I'll look after it. If I pack the course in I'll post it back to y'.

FRANK Pack it in? You've not even started yet. Why should you pack it in?

RITA I don't know. I just might. Might decide it was a stupid idea.

FRANK If you're already contemplating the possibility of "packing it in," then why did you enrol in the first place?

RITA Because I want to know.

FRANK *What*? What do you want to know?

RITA Everything.

FRANK Everything? That's rather a lot isn't it? Where were you thinking of beginning?

RITA Well... I'm a student now aren't I? I'll have exams to do won't I?

FRANK Well, yes, eventually.

RITA So I'll have to learn about it all won't I? It's like, y' sit there, don't y' – watchin' something like the ballet or the opera on the telly – an' y' just, y' know, call it rubbish because that's what it looks like, because y' don't understand – y' don't know how to see it – so y' just switch over or switch off an' say, "that's fuckin' rubbish".

FRANK You do?

RITA Yeh. But I don't want to. Because I want to be able to see it. An' understand. Do you mind me swearin'?

FRANK No, not at all.

RITA Do you swear?

FRANK When I need to, yes of course. I've never subscribed to the idea that there's such a thing as bad language – only bad *use* of language.

RITA See, the properly educated, they know it's only words don't they? It's only the masses who don't understand. But that's because they're ignorant; it's not their fault, I know that, but sometimes they drive me mental. I do it to shock them sometimes; y' know if I'm in the hairdressers – that's where I work – I'll say somethin' like "I'm as fucked as a fanny on a Friday night!" and some of the customers, they'll have a right gob on them just cos I come out with something like that.

FRANK Yes but in the circumstances that's hardly...

RITA But it doesn't cause any kind of fuss with educated people though, does it? Because they know it's only words and they

don't worry. But these stuck up ones I meet, they think they're royalty just because they don't swear. An' anyway, I wouldn't mind but it's the aristocracy who swear more than anyone isn't it, they're effing and blinding all day long; with them it's all, "I say, the grouse is particularly fucking lovely today although I'm afraid the spuds are a bit bollocks, don't you think?"

Sighs.

But y' can't tell them that round our way. It's not their fault; they can't help it. But sometimes I hate them.

Beat.

God...what's it like to be free?

FRANK Ah, now there's a question. Another drink?

RITA *(shaking her head)* Know if I'd got some other tutor I wouldn't have stayed.

FRANK *(pouring himself another)* What do you mean, another tutor?

RITA Y' know someone who objected to swearin'.

FRANK How did you know that I wouldn't object?

RITA I didn't. I was just testin' y'.

FRANK Yes! You're doing rather a lot of that aren't you?

RITA I can't help it. That's what I do – y'know when I'm nervous.

FRANK And how am I doing so far?

RITA *(noncommittal shrug as she crosses to the window)* Very good. Ten out of ten.

I love this room...this window. Do you like it?

FRANK What, the window?

RITA Yeh.

FRANK It's not really something I consider, apart from those occasions when I feel an overwhelming urge to throw something through it.

RITA Like what?

FRANK Oh, a student usually!

RITA *(amused)* You're bleedin' mad you, aren't y'?

FRANK Quite possibly.

Beat.

RITA Aren't you supposed to be interviewin' me?

FRANK Do I need to?

RITA I know! I talk too much don't I? I don't when I'm at home; I hardly ever talk at all when I'm there. But I don't often get the chance to talk to someone like you. Just tell me to shut up if I go on too much.

FRANK I wouldn't dream of telling you to "shut up".

RITA What does "assonance" mean?

FRANK *(laughing and spluttering his drink)* What the...

RITA Don't laugh at me.

FRANK No. No. Erm... I didn't mean... "Assonance". Well it's erm, it's a form of rhyme in which the corresponding vowels have the same sound but not the consonants that precede or follow the vowels. Now this can be slightly confusing because assonance can also be the use of identical consonants but with different vowels: erm, "killed/cold"..."draught/drift", "pin/pan", "gloom/gleam", "drink/drank"...

RITA *(involuntarily)* "Wink/wank".

Clasping a hand to her offending mouth.

FRANK *(delighted she's grasped it)* Yes, yes...that's right, that's right. Look, do you know Yeats?

RITA The wine lodge?

FRANK *(taking down a book from his shelves)* The poet! W.B. Yeats, Irish poet. Look, you see, here...

Showing her the relevant poem.

..."The Wild Swans at Coole" and here, you see, see how he's using really subtle assonance, rhyming the word "swan" with the word "stone".

RITA So...so "assonance" means, gettin' the rhyme wrong?

FRANK Well yes...yes, in a way, yes it does, it bloody well does, it means, 'getting the rhyme wrong,' but deliberately, purposefully in order to achieve a certain lyrical, almost musical effect.

RITA Oh. *(Sighing)* There's loads I don't know.

FRANK Well, erm... It's Mrs... White is it?

She nods.

But would you mind if I called you by your name, your first name?

RITA No.

FRANK So what is it?

RITA My name? Oh Rita.

FRANK *(surprised. Moving towards his desk)* Rita?

RITA Yeh.

FRANK *(alluding to the papers on his desk)* But it says here Mrs 'S' White.

RITA Oh that! Yeh that's just "S" for "Susan". That's my real name. I've changed it to Rita though. I'm not a Susan anymore. I've called myself Rita – y' know after Rita Mae Brown.

FRANK *(blank)* Who?

RITA Y' know Rita Mae Brown – "Rubyfruit Jungle".

With serious reverence.

Rita Mae Brown, she wrote, "Rubyfruit Jungle".

FRANK Ah.

RITA Have you not read it? It's fantastic. D' y' want to lend it?

FRANK Erm well perhaps one day I might erm...

RITA *(but it's too late because she is already pulling her well-thumbed copy from her bag and showing it to him)* And that's who I named myself after. 'Cos I just love that book. Do you wanna lend it?

FRANK Oh...um...well ah...

She presses it upon him.

RITA So what about you – what are you called?

FRANK Frank.

RITA Oh and were you named after someone?

FRANK Well not as far as I'm aware.

RITA Maybe your parents named you after the quality; y' know "frank", "frankness" – Elliot's brother.

FRANK What?

RITA Y' know – Frank Ness. Elliot's brother. Elliot Ness.

FRANK Oh! Elliot Ness. When you said Eliot I assumed you were referring to Tom – T.S. Eliot.

RITA T.S. Eliot? Have you read his stuff?

FRANK Indeed I have, every last syllable.

RITA *(impressed)* Honest?

A beat.

I've not half got a lot to learn haven't I?

FRANK Did I hear you say you were a ladies hairdresser?

RITA Yeh.

FRANK Are you good at it?

RITA *(shrugs)* I am when I wanna be. Most of the time I don't wanna be though. They get on my nerves.

FRANK Who?

RITA The women, the customers. They never tell y' things that matter. Like, doin' a perm; well y' can't use a strong perm lotion on a head if it's been bleached with certain sorts of, y' know, cheap bleach. Because it makes all the hair break off y' see. But at least once a month I'll get a customer comin' in for a perm an' she'll swear blind that she's had no bleaching done; but I can tell! I can see it. But she swears to God; so y' go ahead an' do the perm and she comes out the drier with half an inch of stubble.

FRANK And are you able to do anything about that?

RITA Yeh. Flog her a wig!

FRANK Good God!

RITA The pensioners are the worst – they're dead vain y' know – it doesn't matter how old they are; so they'll never crack on if they're wearin' somethin' like a hearin' aid. So y' get your scissors an' start trimmin' away, next thing is, snip! Another granny gone deaf for a fortnight.

FRANK You sound like something of a liability.

RITA I am. But they expect too much. They walk into the hairdressers and expect to walk out an hour later as a different person. I tell them, I'm just a hairdresser, not a plastic surgeon. See, most of them, that's why they come to the hairdressers – because they want to be changed. But if you wanna change y' have to do it from the inside don't y? Know like I'm doin' ...tryin' to do. Do you think I will? Think I'll be able to do it.

FRANK Well that really depends upon you, on how committed you are. Are you sure that you're absolutely serious about this?

RITA I'm dead serious. Look, I know I take the piss an' that but I'm dead serious really. I am. I just take the piss because I'm not, y' know, confident. But I want to be. I want to know.

FRANK Everything!

She nods. He looks at her.

RITA What y' lookin' at me like that for?

FRANK Because I think you're really rather marvellous.

RITA For God's sake! Now who's taking the piss?

FRANK Don't you recognise a compliment?

RITA Oh sod off!

FRANK It's so long since I paid a compliment to anyone, I barely recognise it myself.

Forcing himself to change gear.

So! Come on; what I want to know is *why* – what is it that's suddenly led you to doing this?

RITA What, comin' here?

FRANK Yes.

RITA Oh it's not sudden. I've been realisin' for ages that I was... slightly out of step. I'm twenty-nine. I should have had a baby ages ago; everyone expects it – I'm sure my husband thinks I'm infertile. He's always goin' on about havin' babies. We've been tryin' for two years now; but I'm still on the pill! See, I don't want a baby yet. I wanna find myself first, discover myself. Do you understand that?

He nods.

Yeh. They wouldn't round our way. I've tried to explain it to my husband but between you an' me I think he's just

thick! No, not *thick*; blind, that's what he is. He can't see, because he doesn't *want* to see. If I try an' do anything different he gets a gob on him; even if I'm just reading or watchin' somethin' different on the telly he gets really narked. I just used to tell him to piss off but then I realised it was no good just doin' that an' what I should is try an' explain to him. An' I tried; I tried explainin' to him how I wanted a better way of livin' my life. For once he listened. An' I even believed he understood because he said he felt the same as me – but all he meant was he was fed up livin' on our estate so we should start saving and try and move out to somewhere like Formby. Formby! Jesus, even if it was a new house I wanted I wouldn't move out to Formby. I hate that hole. Don't you?

FRANK Mm.

RITA Whereabouts do you live?

FRANK Oh, erm up towards Southport.

She realises (cringe/grimace).

Can I offer you another drink?

Shakes her head.

You don't mind if I do?

RITA It's your brain cells.

FRANK All dead long ago I'm afraid.

But now any mirth/playfulness has evaporated from him. He drinks with a kind of grimness that has only previously been hinted at.

RITA When d' you actually, y' know, start teaching me?

FRANK What can I possibly teach you?

RITA Everythin'.

FRANK Everything.

A beat.

I'll make a bargain with you, Yes? I'll teach you everything I know…but if I do that then you must promise never to come back here…because there's nothing here for you! You see I never… I didn't want to teach this course in the first place; allowed myself to be talked into it. But I knew it was wrong and seeing you only confirms my suspicion. My dear it's not your fault, just luck of the draw that you got assigned to me; but get me you did. And the thing is, between you, me and the walls I'm really rather an appalling teacher. Most of the time that doesn't really matter – appalling teaching is quite in order for most of my equally appalling students. And the others manage to get by despite me. But you, young woman, you are quite, quite different; you are seeking a very great deal indeed; and I'm afraid I cannot provide it. Everything I know – and you must listen to this – is that I know absolutely nothing.

A beat.

Added to which I don't like the hours of this Open University malarkey, intolerably bloody unsocial – when the sun's gone over the yardarm my dear I really should be in the pub! I can be really a rather good teacher when I'm in the pub. Four pints of weak Guinness and I can be as witty as Wilde, as pithy as Swift, as illuminating as…well! I'm sorry. There are other tutors – I'll make all the necessary arrangements and no doubt the college will be in touch.

RITA *slowly turns, collects her things and goes to the door. She goes out, closing the door behind her.*

Suddenly though the inner door handle is being furiously turned as **RITA** *tries to get back in. However, it being that door, it won't open again. We hear frantic and repeated knocking.*

RITA *(offstage throughout the following)* Let me in… open this door…let me back in…open the door.

FRANK *(calling)* Go away!

RITA Wait a minute…open this door…listen…

FRANK I've told you, I don't *want* to teach you. Why come to me?

RITA Because you're a crazy mad piss artist who wants to throw his students through the window. An' I *like* you.

And the door finally gives. **RITA** *enters.*

Don't you recognise a compliment? And when I come back next week I'm gonna bring my scissors an' give you a haircut.

FRANK You are not coming back next week.

RITA I am! An' you're gettin' your hair cut.

FRANK Oh I don't think so.

RITA I suppose you wanna walk 'round like that do y'?

FRANK Like what?

Turning back just before she exits.

RITA Like a geriatric hippy!

Exit.

Blackout.

Scene Two

__FRANK__ is stood by the window, looking out. He glances at his watch and then peers out of the window again. He goes across to the bookcase, removes a few volumes and stares in at the bottle of scotch. For a moment he is tempted. But he resists and replaces the books. Walking away from the bookcase he goes to the window and looks out again. Glances at his watch once more. And then, changing his mind again:

FRANK Oh sod it!

He heads for the bookcase, pulling out books as he looks for the bottle. Only, as he does so he becomes aware of a noise. He turns and realises that the door handle is being turned. Quickly replacing the books he moves towards the door, hesitating and then suddenly pulling it open to reveal __RITA__, oil can in hand.

RITA I was just oilin' it for y'. Well I knew you'd never get around to it.

Handing him the can as she brushes past him and enters the room.

Y' can have that.

FRANK Oh! *(Dubious)* Thank you.

He watches as she wanders around the room.

RITA What y' lookin' at?

FRANK Do you never just walk into a room and sit down?

RITA No. Not when it's a room like this. I love it.

A beat.

How d' y' make a room like this?

FRANK I don't *do* anything.

RITA Ah! That's the secret.

FRANK There is no secret. I just moved in. And the rest just sort of...happened.

RITA Yeh, that's 'cos you've got taste.

A beat.

I'm gonna have a room like this one day; there's nothin' phoney about it; everything's in its right place. It's like wherever you've put something down...it's grown to fit there.

FRANK You mean, it's a mess!

RITA Well yeh. But...but it's like...it's like it's a lovely mess.

FRANK Well... I suppose that over the years it might have acquired a certain patina.

RITA Yeh. That's what I meant. That sounds like a line from a romantic film doesn't it? "Over the years your face has acquired a certain patina".

A beat.

You haven't been drinkin' have y'?

FRANK Erm...well, since you ask no...as a matter of fact.

RITA Is that because of me? Because of what I said to y' last week?

FRANK What? You think where so many others have failed, *you* have reformed me!

RITA *(moving to the window)* I don't wanna reform y'. You can do what you like. I love that lawn. It looks the way I always imagined somewhere like Eton or Harrow or one of those

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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