

How I learnt to think like a woman

As *Rita and Shirley*, Willy Russell's two greatest creations, return to the stage, the playwright tells Jasper Rees why they ring so true

NO one understands escapism like Willy Russell. Either side of 1980, he wrote two plays about working-class Liverpool women in flight from a humdrum existence. In one, a young hairdresser seeks fulfilment through a literary education with the Open University. In the other, a middle-aged housewife has an island-holiday romance.

As films, *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* earned Oscar nominations for, respectively, Julie Walters and Pauline Collins. As plays, they have barely been off the stage in productions all over the world. The Menier Chocolate Factory is shrewdly reviving the pair in rep.

With new actresses – Meera Syal as Shirley and Laura dos Santos as Rita – will they still stand up? The omens are certainly good. In November, Melanie Chisholm, formerly known as Sporty Spice, joined the cast of *Blood Brothers*, the musical with words and tunes by Russell which has been parked in the West End for 20 years. The moving tale of brothers separated at birth reduced hardened critics to fresh pools of tears. No wonder Russell tells writers' groups to forget film and stick to theatre.

"I wrote *Rita* for £700 for 18 nights of performance in the Warehouse – now the Donmar," he says. "I wrote *Shirley* for £1,500 for a three-week run at the Everyman. I wrote *Blood Brothers* for Merseyside Theatre Company for £500 to play in schools in the Liverpool area. I don't sit down every time to make money. But if you get it right, a play will always make more money than a movie will."

Getting it right is the hard part. Although he claims not to write autobiographically, there's no point in discounting the circumstances of Russell's early life as the fuel for his success. He attributes, for example, his ability to inhabit the minds of female characters to a matriarchal upbringing after the war.

"Men worked three shifts a day.



My granny ran a mobile grocer's on the estate, and often women getting together don't think that the kids are listening. You aren't necessarily through your ears, but through your pores."

He had further exposure when he left school at 15 with one O level in English and became a ladies' hairdresser.

"I was a very bad hairdresser. The trade I managed to attract was because people could talk at me. Thinking back now, I was probably doing shampoos-and-sets for some women at the first stage of dementia. I can think of two or three. They would come in every week and tell me the same story about their husbands or the distant past. Some of that must have had a bearing on me later, at least feeling confident to write about women."

Russell, trimly bearded and dapper, is a personable presence. Just don't stick him in a roomful of blokes. "I can't do male company. It all becomes about the latest car: 'Did you really come down the A6?' It's about things. Put a group of women in a room and it's about what's in here." He points to his heart.

With *Shirley*, it was as if he was the ventriloquist's dummy from the moment she opened her mouth.

"I wrote the line, 'I like a glass of wine when I'm doing the cooking.' Then she turned around and said, 'Don't I, wall?' And at that moment the play was born. And you knew immediately that's how she survived. When I was writing her, I became witty. I remember when I wrote, 'He kissed me stretch marks', and then she suddenly said, 'Aren't men full of s---?' And I fell off the chair laughing. It wasn't as if I knew where I was going when I wrote that riff. I was just the conduit."

Russell made *Rita* a hairdresser because it meant he wouldn't have to research her job. He realised only 10 years later that the entire play might have been called "Educating Willy". At 21, he had gone back to do his O levels out of a sudden hunger to acquire an education. He joined a class of 16 year-olds.

"I was a Martian. They thought I was a CIA plant. This was in the

Willy Russell (above) and the film versions of 'Educating Rita', with Julie Walters and Michael Caine, and 'Shirley Valentine', which starred Pauline Collins

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days before 'mature student' was commonplace as a term. It had been playing for a long time when I realised it's just glaringly autobiographical. Had I been aware of it, that would have prevented me from writing."

He became a teacher, but within a year was writing professionally full time. His first big hit was a play about the Beatles, Premiered at the Liverpool Everyman in 1974, *John, Paul, George, Ringo and Bert* was, in effect, the first jukebox musical. The play fed on Russell's presence at the birth of Beatles, whom he reckons he saw at the Cavern up to 80 times.

"The first night I stood there and saw the Beatles, being in a stinking, sweaty club with the smell of rotting fruit and perfume mixed together, seeing these four geezers who didn't give a ---, you knew that the world had changed, that nothing could ever be the same. The example was there."

Years later he worked on an unmade script with Paul McCartney. At the time, he never came close to meeting them. "The nearest I got was I

remember John opened his Coke and spilled it over me and I apologised."

Of the Liverpool writers who emerged in the Seventies, Russell can be seen as a soft-centred McCartney to Alan Bleasdale's more abrasive Lennon. But the comparison with the author of *Boys from the Blackstuff* is overworked, he insists.

"Alan and I both say we are immensely different writers from Liverpool, are fairly tall men who once taught and have beards." Where Bleasdale slipped across to television, Russell stuck to the theatre. He doesn't feel he belongs on film sets. He was lucky enough to be there for the final scene of *Rita* when Walters's Rita, off to America, was bidding farewell to her whisky-sodden tutor Frank.

"I remember [the director] Lewis Gilbert saying to Michael Caine, 'Grab Rita and give her a' real full kiss.' I said, 'No, no!' In a story about unspoken romance, disaster was averted."

The Willy Russell season begins previews at the Menier Chocolate Factory, London SE1 (020 7907 7060), on Friday.

