



Talking to ... Willy Russell

Educating Rita & Shirley Valentine

▶ This is the first London revival of *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* since 1980, in the case of the former, and 1988, for the latter. It's not so much that the plays change, but that times change, and when times change the nuances change. The universality of the unspoken love story in *Educating Rita* is more evident now, and the pain of a teacher succeeding — because for a teacher to succeed, his pupil has to outgrow him — seems stronger. Thirty years ago the idea of a woman of that class with that voice appearing in the inner sanctum of a red-brick university was shocking. Now it's commonplace. The phrase “mature student” doesn't raise an eyebrow.

I had a say in casting both lead actresses. Laura Dos Santos, who plays Rita, was brought up in Liverpool so she has the language as part of her DNA. It's terrific to have Meera Syal on board as Shirley Valentine, as I can talk writer language with her. *Shirley Valentine* is a taxing marathon for an actor. I played her myself for three weeks in the original run in 1986 at the Liverpool Everyman, when the star, Noreen Kershaw, had peritonitis.

The openings of these plays — which I'll be going to — will be terrifying. If any little, tiny detail goes wrong, it will be amplified in my mind. I have to remember that the audience won't know. During *Shirley Valentine* last year at the Royal Court in Liverpool, the breakfast bar that Shirley was sitting at collapsed. Shirley collapsed with it. The audience thought it was part of the show. Actors can get round anything — although I hope nothing as dramatic happens this time around. Interview by Laura Silverman

Willy Russell achieved success in 1974 with his salute to his fellow Liverpudlians in *John Paul George Ringo ... & Bert*, but it was *Educating Rita*, four years later, that put him on the map. That's now revived at the Menier with Larry Lamb as the lecturer who finds himself less teaching than taught when he tries to deepen the minds of working-class women from Liverpool. It is playing with Russell's monologue about another Liverpudlian, Shirley Valentine, the housewife who leaves a humdrum life to find love on a Greek island. It's time Russell was seen as the deft, observant, humane and humorous dramatist that he is.

Benedict Nightingale
Menier Chocolate Factory,
London SE1 (menierchocolatefactory.com
020-7907 7060), from Thur