

THEATER REVIEW

Educating Rita, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Willy Russell's academic comedy. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Frank.....Ed Vaughan
Rita.....Marianne Timmons

Top of the class

Being presented at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through June 30 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$10-\$14. Call 823-1109.

'Rita' earns 'A' in play at Otterbein

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

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Otterbein Summer Theatre is celebrating its 30th anniversary as central Ohio's longest running summer theater. One can learn why this theater has endured and prospered by studying *Educating Rita*, which opened last night to a sold-out audience's laughter and applause.

Director Dennis Romer and two strong actors deliver a delightful production of a delightful play.

Willy Russell's modest comedy-drama has become a modern favorite because of two wonderful characters: Frank, an aging British professor, and Rita, a Cockney hairdresser who shows up periodically for private tutoring in his book-cluttered Northern England office.

Resemblances to *Pygmalion* are unavoidable — but Russell has updated George Bernard Shaw's turn-of-the-century comedy of class with contemporary insights and a telling attention to today's vernacular and subtler class differences.

What a pair. Rita wants to discover herself; Frank wants to forget himself. She has a hungry mind; he has an unquenchable appetite for liquor. She is young and naive; he is older and world-weary.

Frank is a has-been poet who has lost much of his enthusiasm for teaching literature. Rita has little else but enthusiasm. Gradually, and in amusingly unexpected ways, her vitality touches him, while his sophistication rubs off on her.

Ed Vaughan gives texture and depth to Russell's portrait of a middle-aged man near the faltering end of his liquor-soaked tenure. Frank's anguished final scenes convey genuine desolation.

A gold star to Marianne Timmons' lively Rita. Timmons makes every phase of Rita's evolving confidence and cultural awareness seem natural and unaffected.

Timmons (who played dominating Carlotta in Otterbein's *Phantom*) balances her joyful comedy with emotional honesty.

The British accents are apt.

Like Russell's *Shirley Valentine*, which also dramatizes the emergence of a feisty female, *Rita* offers an emotional affirmation of life and culture in the face of personal and social limitations.

Guest costume designer Mary Beth Robinson, an Otterbein grad, effectively mirrors Rita's development with ever-more-tasteful outfits that reflect the late-1970s era.

Even without the second act's William Blake references, one could say that Russell's play blends two *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

Experience has a lot to teach innocence. Yet, Russell wittily, wistfully demonstrates that innocence also has much to teach experience.

A triumph for an actor

A talented student actor is the best reason to see **Educating Rita**, Willy Russell's comedy about a woman who wants to learn her way to a better life.

Marianne Timmons is amazingly alive as Rita, an English hairdresser who's hungry to find out what life offers beyond curlers and dye jobs. From her Cockney accent to her aggressive stride to each well-placed smile, Timmons nails the role with a riveting performance.

It's Timmons's second triumph of the year, after winning howls of laughter as the scheming Carlotta in Otterbein's *Phantom*.

The only thing more astounding than Timmons's success as Rita is Equity actor

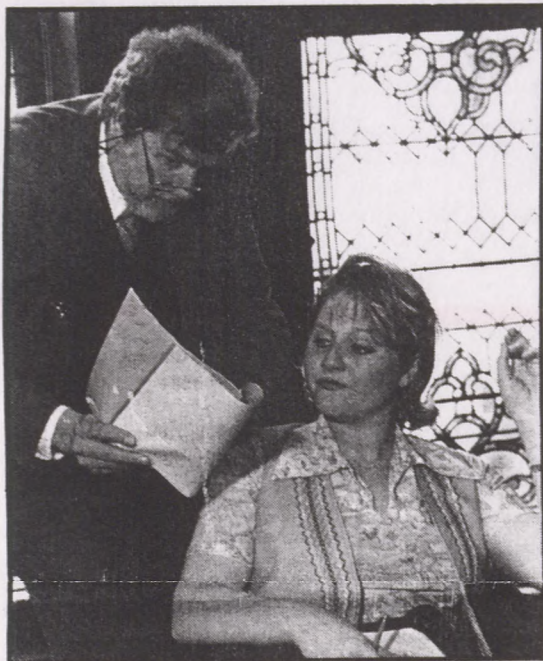
Theater

RICHARD ADES



ing, thanks to Timmons's passionate performance.

On the other hand, one aspect of the play that doesn't come across is the romantic feeling Frank is supposedly developing toward Rita, which may be reciprocal. Vaughan has to wake Frank up before we can take this side of their relationship seriously.



Good for laughs and an occasional lump in the throat: Marianne Timmons with Ed Vaughan in *Educating Rita*

INFO:

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Educating Rita* at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$12 today, \$14 Friday and Saturday, \$10 Sunday. 823-1109 (1 to 4:30 p.m. weekdays).

Ed Vaughan's lack of success as Frank, the professor who tutors her. Vaughan is one of the area's most gifted actors, but he barely seems awake during much of this two-person, two-act play.

While the alcoholic Frank is a burned-out poet and an uninspired educator, he should show some signs of life after Rita starts visiting his office, challenging him as a teacher and exciting him as a man. But little of that comes through in Vaughan's understated performance, which is further marred by an unconvincing accent.

Even if Vaughan's portrayal has improved since opening night (which is very possible), director Dennis Romer would still have another problem to deal with. Namely, the scene changes are too damn long.

Educating Rita is a series of cinematically short scenes, some only two or three minutes long. While the setting doesn't change, Rita's costumes do, to show that days or weeks have passed between her sessions with Frank. Loud classical music is played to fill in the gaps, but that only helps to spoil the mood. Fewer, or simpler, costume changes are the answer.

Despite the production's weaknesses, Russell's comedy still is good for laughs and an occasional lump in the throat. Rita's desire to better herself is often mov-

A religious experience

Shadowbox Cabaret is mining sacred ground for laughs this month with **Gods at the Box**, a show consisting of two premiere one-acts by New York playwrights. Neither is likely to become a classic of religious humor, but those in the right frame of mind may be blessed with a few chuckles.

David Patterson's *The Gate* concerns a recently deceased businessman (Matthew Hahn) who's anxious to discover the fate of his immortal soul. He's interrogated by a painter (David Whitehouse) who apparently is a stand-in for St. Peter.

The play generates lightweight mirth at best, sometimes at the expense of celebs such as Newt Gingrich and Shirley MacLaine. There are also jokes along the lines of this one, which follows the appearance of a supernatural

being disguised as a pizza delivery man:

Businessman: "What the hell was that all about?"

Painter: "Exactly."

All in all, this is pretty tame stuff. It's doubtful even Baptists will take offense (unless they're Gingrich fans).

Shadowbox's other one-act, Jacquelyn Reingold's *Creative Development*, touches on ancient mythology but is really about the theater.

A playwright with the suspicious name of Diane Isis (Mary Randle) tries to interest an agent (Tom Cardinal) in her latest work, but he wants none of it. It turns out he hates attending the theater, because, for one thing, you can't go to the bathroom until intermission. (Shadowbox, which sells beer, doesn't follow this rule.)

The comedy ultimately exacts a fitting revenge on the culturally challenged dolt, which should have all the playwrights in the audience cheering. Others will be mildly amused.

Original skits dealing with religion and mythology make up the rest of the show. The cleverest is *Pope Fiction*, a takeoff on everyone's favorite cult shoot 'em up.

In between the skits, of course, are the rock tunes. The singers are good, but the real star is lead guitarist Hahn, who has what amounts to a religious experience with his instrument. Several times, in fact.

INFO:

Gods at the Box will be presented at 8 p.m. today and Friday and 7 and 11 p.m. Saturday at Shadowbox Cabaret, 232 E. Spring St. Tickets are \$12, \$6 for students and seniors. Reservations recommended. 341-7448.