

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

Presents

SHIRLEY VALENTINE **a Comedy** **by Willy Russell**

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 12 November, 2020

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 9, 10 and 11 November

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours and Sunday at 14.30 Hours

Matinee Performances weekly either on Wednesday or Friday at 11.30 Hours

**The English Theatre of Hamburg
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The English Theatre will premiere the delightful comedy **SHIRLEY VALENTINE** on 12 November, 2020, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 9, 10 and 11 November. You can use the cover of this publication to advertise the play in your school or workplace. The text of the play may be obtained at <https://www.concordtheatricals.co.uk/> or www.amazon.com.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT:

Willy Russell was born near Liverpool in 1947. After leaving school at the age of 15 he became a ladies' hairdresser and ran his own salon until the age of 20 when he decided to go to college. After graduation he became a teacher and worked as a singer, writing and performing his own folk songs. He had begun writing plays while at college and his career as a playwright began to take off in 1971 with his first play **KEEP YOUR EYES DOWN**. In 1974 he wrote **JOHN, PAUL, GEORGE, RINGO ... AND BERT**, a musical about the Beatles which became a success, winning the Evening Standard and London Theatre Critics awards for the best musical of that year. In 1986 he wrote the smash hit **SHIRLEY VALENTINE** which opened in the West End in 1988 and went on to New York in 1990, marking Willy Russell's Broadway debut. The play won him the Olivier Award for the Best New Comedy and a Tony Award as well. Later it became a film with Pauline Collins playing Shirley Valentine. There are too many of Willy Russell's plays to mention here, but they include **BLOOD BROTHERS**, **OUR DAY OUT – THE MUSICAL**, **KING OF THE CASTLE**, **ONE FOR THE ROAD**, **STAGS AND HENS** and **EDUCATING RITA** which was produced at The English Theatre of Hamburg in 1985, 1992 and 2003. The Willy Russell Archive established in 2013 in Liverpool is a comprehensive representation of his work to date. It also illustrates Willy Russell's collaborative works, both written and musical.

ABOUT THE PLAY:

This witty, heart-warming play is a one woman show in which Shirley Bradshaw (maiden name Valentine), a bored middle-aged housewife, wants to rediscover her true self and begin to live again. Her grown children, Brian and Millandra, have left home so Shirley lives alone with her husband Joe. They lead ordinary lives, but Shirley is beginning to wonder if she has missed something in life. She feels that there is a lot of life in her that has gone unused. She and Joe seldom talk now, so when she cooks dinner and no one is around she talks to the kitchen wall about her thoughts and feelings, taking on the various personalities and voices of the people in her life. She tries to remember when life stopped being good and exciting, and she wonders what happened to the vibrant young woman named Shirley Valentine. It is not until her friend Jane invites her to spend a two-week holiday with her in Greece that Shirley begins to see that she might escape her hum-drum existence and experience life again. She accepts the invitation against her husband's wishes and flies with Jane to Greece. There she meets Costas, a seductive Greek tavern owner who makes Shirley feel alive again. She discovers people and places she's never seen before and experiences her true self again, the carefree Shirley Valentine. At the end of the holiday Shirley decides not to return to England. She will stay in Greece, the place that has brought to life all of her senses, the place where she has found peace and happiness. When her husband Joe travels to Greece to bring her home, she explains to him how she has changed and invites him to stay there with her.

Summary of SHIRLEY VALENTINE

Act I, Scene 1 *Shirley's kitchen*

Shirley Bradshaw is a 42-year-old woman who feels there is something missing in her life. Her daughter Millandra and son Brian are both grown and have moved out of the family home leaving Shirley alone with her husband Joe. They have made a life together in Liverpool, England, but somewhere along the way they became strangers to each other. Now they seldom talk. So, as she prepares the evening meal of egg and chips, Shirley addresses her thoughts and innermost feelings to the kitchen wall, taking on the personalities and voices of the people in her life. A glass of white wine which she has poured for herself from a freshly opened bottle keeps her company.

Shirley tells the wall that she misses her daughter Millandra who now shares a flat with a friend, Sharon-Louise. Her son Brian has taken up illegal residence in an unoccupied building. He claims he is an existentialist, but Shirley thinks he is a lunatic. She loves her children but lets them make their own way in life without interfering.

Shirley's main concern these days is taking care of her husband who will soon be home from work expecting her to have dinner on the table. She always said she would leave Joe when the kids grew up, but by that time she had nowhere to go. "You don't start again at forty-two," she tells the wall. She thinks men are lovely at first but after they marry you they become less attentive and more demanding. In a way they are trapped too, she thinks. "Marriage is like the Middle East—there is no solution," she says. Nevertheless, she doesn't hate men, not like her feminist friend Jane who divorced her husband after coming home one day and finding him in bed with the milkman. Jane is going to Greece for two weeks next month and wants Shirley to come with her. But Shirley has told Jane that Joe would never allow it. She says, "...he likes everything to be as it's always been." He would not agree to do the washing and the cooking if she and Jane were in Greece for two weeks. And he'd assume that they were just going there for sex.

But Jane wouldn't take no for an answer. She surprised Shirley by buying her a plane ticket to Greece so they could go together. Shirley is still not

sure she can go. She knows she will get a negative reaction from Joe, but her son Brian has encouraged her to go.

She recalls that in the past when she was still the single girl Shirley Valentine, she used to laugh a lot, and even after she and Joe were married they had fun together for a while. She knew what happiness meant. Now she wonders what happened after they made a home and raised their two children. She tells the wall she can't remember "when Shirley Valentine disappeared and became just another name on the missing persons list."

When Joe says he still loves her she knows he doesn't really mean it. As she continues cooking egg and chips she wonders why she doesn't take her friend Jane's advice and leave her husband for good. "I hate a life of talking to the wall...for more years than I can remember now. And I'm frightened of life beyond the wall," she admits. She stays where she is, she thinks, because she's terrified she will have no place to go. But she continues to dream about sunny Greece, the beautiful sea, the smell of honeysuckle and the taste of Greek olives and grapes.

Act I, Scene 2 *Shirley's kitchen*

Three weeks later Shirley has made a decision. She tells the wall she is planning to go to Greece with Jane after all. She has packed her suitcase and checked over and over again that she has her passport, tickets and money. She and Jane will take a taxi to the airport today at four o'clock. She hasn't told Joe about her Greek holiday because she knows he will make her feel guilty and try to talk her out of it. She's cooked all of Joe's meals for two weeks and put them in the freezer. Her mother has agreed to help Joe get along during the two weeks she is gone.

Shirley says that she finally made up her mind to go to Greece when Joe, expecting a steak dinner, saw that she had prepared only egg and chips. He refused to eat the meal and angrily shoved his plate across the table. It landed in Shirley's lap. Because of that she got up from the table, found a pen and wrote across the wall in big letters—GREECE. Joe was confused and wanted to know what that was. Shirley replied, "It's a place I'm going to." Joe responded, "If that's why I'm not getting' fed properly, because you're savin' up for a foreign holiday, you can forget

it.” All Shirley could do was to laugh hysterically at him until he gave up and walked out of the room. She then started making arrangements for the trip. She went shopping and bought warm weather clothes and a bikini to wear on the beach in Greece.

When she got home she found Millandra there. Her daughter announced that she hated her flatmate and had come back home to live. Shirley told Millandra she could not have chosen a better time to live at home again because now she would be able to take care of her father while she and Jane were enjoying a two-week holiday in Greece. Millandra’s reaction to this news shocked Shirley. She told her mother that two middle-aged women going to Greece was disgusting, implying that they were going there for sex. She phoned her ex-flatmate to say she was returning to live with her. At first Shirley was depressed by her daughter’s reaction. It made her feel old, unattractive and used up. Then she became angry. But before she could give Millandra a piece of her mind, her daughter had left.

Now, as Shirley thinks about why she is really going to Greece, she knows it is not for sex as her daughter imagines. “Sex is like Sainsburys—overrated,” she claims. No, it is not for sex that she is going to Greece, but rather it is for the excitement of not knowing what will happen, not knowing exactly what the place will be like or look like, and for not knowing for as long as she can remember what the days will hold for her.

Act II *A holiday resort in Mykonos, Greece*

Shirley has found a secluded section of shore, a place where there are no tourists. There is no kitchen wall to talk to, but she has found a large rock that will listen to her instead. She loves Greece she tells the rock. She and Jane had planned to do everything together, but Jane met a man on the plane who invited her to his villa, leaving Shirley alone to fend for herself. Jane said it was just for one day, but Shirley knew it would be a while before she saw her friend again.

Shirley tells the rock that she doesn’t really mind being alone. She is used to it, she says. But, when she was the only one at a table in the hotel dining room one night, a woman who felt sorry for Shirley invited her to join their group. To be polite Shirley agreed to join them, all tourists from Manchester. Because the woman, Jeanette, and her husband Doughie were so self-centered and talkative, Shirley

learned more about them than she wanted to know. When they started making insulting remarks about the Greeks and complaining about their holiday, Shirley angrily protested that the Greeks, after all, were the ones who invented the Olympics, and “...when the Greeks were building roads and cities the English were still running around in loin cloths.” When she pointed out to them that the tasty food they had on their plates was octopus they were shocked and vowed never to eat at that hotel again.

After dinner Shirley decided to go for a walk. She met a Greek tavern owner called Costas, whom Shirley later named Christopher Columbus because when they slept together that night he “discovered” how to make sex truly enjoyable for her for the first time in her life. He seemed genuinely interested in her and succeeded in making her feel alive and desirable again. Costas invited Shirley to come with him the next day for a boat ride. He would bring the wine and food. When he came to pick Shirley up, Jane appeared. She apologized for leaving Shirley alone for four days, and wanted to make amends by exploring the island with her. Jane thought that Costas was there for room service, but he soon made it clear to her that he was there to spend the day with Shirley on a boat at sea.

Jane was appalled. She warned Shirley not to go with Costas because “these Greek islanders...are just waiting for bored, middle-aged women...” Shirley was hesitant at first, but when Jane said that she might be in danger alone on a boat with the Greek, Shirley just walked past her and left with Costas. They had a wonderful time on the boat and even jumped in the water and swam around without any clothes.

In this beautiful setting Shirley tells the rock that she is beginning to wonder if anyone would even care if she never went home. She knows that she has not fallen in love with Costas, even suspects that he is a bit of a womanizer. What she has fallen in love with is the idea of living and finding Shirley Valentine again.

When the holiday was over and Shirley and Jane were at the airport to return to England, she asked her friend why there was so much unused life. Jane blamed it on men, but Shirley knew better. She knew that it was the same for Joe who she felt also had more life in him than he had used. After her dream holiday Shirley realized that “most of us die.....long

before we're dead. And what kills us is the terrible weight of all this unused life that we carry round."

When she and Jane were standing at the check-in desk, Shirley knew then that she was not going home. She turned and started walking out of the airport with Jane calling after her to come back. But she never looked back. She used her last money to catch a bus back to the hotel where she had been staying. There she saw Costas and heard him say to a woman tourist exactly the same nice things that he had previously said to her. Costas was shocked to see her back so soon, but she assured him she had not come back for him. She just wanted a job in his tavern. Three weeks later, she finds that she is happy with the job and gets on great with the customers, even the dissatisfied tourists. She has most days to herself and just works nights.

She tells the rock that her husband Joe phoned to say that she couldn't just run away from life. She told him that she has found new life and has no intention of running away from it. She explained to Joe that

she was not going back to England because the woman he wants back no longer exists.

Joe finally wrote her a letter to say he was coming to take her home, but Shirley still has no intention of leaving. Nevertheless, she is glad Joe is coming. She believes "he needs to feel the sun on his skin and to be in water that's as deep as forever, and to have his wet head kissed. He needs to stare out to sea and to understand."

Shirley told Costas she would sit at a table outside the tavern and look for Joe when he comes. She expects Joe will walk right past her without even recognizing her. But if he turns back and gives her a puzzled look, she will say to him, "Hello. I used to be the mother. I used to be the wife. But now, I'm Shirley Valentine again. Would you like to join me for a drink?"

CURTAIN

Study Questions

1. To whom or what does Shirley address her innermost thoughts and feelings?
2. What is Shirley preparing for dinner for her husband Joe?
3. Who invites Shirley to go on a holiday to Greece?
4. What does Shirley's daughter Millandra think about two middle-aged women going to Greece together?
5. What about Shirley's son, Brian? What does he think about his mother going to Greece?
6. Why doesn't Shirley want to tell Joe about her decision to go to Greece?
7. Who will take care of Joe while Shirley is gone?
8. How does Shirley finally inform Joe that she has left for Greece?
9. Who does Shirley meet in Greece that makes her feel alive and desirable again?
10. Who comes to Greece to take Shirley back to England?

Answer Key:

1. She addresses the kitchen wall. 2. Egg and chips. 3. Her friend Jane. 4. She thinks it's disgusting. 5. He encourages her to go. 6. She thinks he will make her feel guilty about going. 7. Shirley's mother. 8. She leaves a note for him on the kitchen table. 9. Costas, a Greek tavern owner. 10. Her husband Joe.

Interpretative Exercise

1. Discuss and/or describe in writing why Shirley goes to Greece and the positive effect it has on her.
2. What effect has visiting another country had on you or someone you know?
3. Comment on the feminism expressed by Shirley as compared to that of her friend Jane?
Is there a difference? How do you feel about feminism in general?
4. Do you think Shirley should stay in Greece and that Joe will stay there with her? Why or why not?