

Theatre trip was a real education

HERE'S a good combination - Claire Sweeney, Matthew Kelly and Willy Russell. Two Lancashire boys, that's got to add up to success hasn't it?

I travelled to one of Britain's most beautiful spots, Malvern, the other day. Sadly it was raining the whole time, so I didn't really see or enjoy its beauty, except for the intimate theatre and me witnessing a new production of the classic, *Educating Rita*, which has proved to be timeless, especially with some tweaks from the writer.

It started its new life at the Chocolate Factory in London, a theatre which has launched so many wonderful productions that finish up in the West End.

Actors from all over the world queue up to play this venue and there's our very own Claire Sweeney, starring with Matthew Kelly in one of Willy Russell's classics.

Let me tell you first of all about Matthew. We've known each other only a short time but we just clicked. He's a magical man with a personality to die for.

His pedigree is quite frightening, born up the road from Liverpool in Urmston, Lancashire, where as a comic I've died a couple of times in the social clubs, but let's not go down that road.

He was a regular over the years at *The Everyman*, he hit the height of his career with an Olivia Award in 2003 for his portrayal of Lenny in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* which, by the way, was a text book at my school, so it's one of the few books I've read.

And of course let's not forget *Stars In Your Eyes, Tonight* *Matthew I'm Going To Be ...* That's got to be one of the all-time great catch phrases up there with Bruce Forsyth's nice to see you, to see you nice.

Recently we saw Mathew on TV in *Benidorm*, where he was a guest star, as a camp ballroom dancing instructor. I told him that was great and I loved the wigs he wore to which he informed me it was his own hair and it took him weeks to get that dreadful colour out.

Now Claire Sweeney, known to millions as Lindsey Corkhill, and as the late great Patrick Swayze's leading lady in a stage production of *Guys and Dolls*, her pedigree is also impressive.

I am delighted to say we have been friends for many years. I've watched her grow from a support act at *The Montrose Club* to a leading lady in several West End productions and of course starring all over the country in panto.

I did love her as a regular on

WHAT AN EDUCATION: Pete with Claire Sweeney and Matthew Kelly



Loose Women and I think she should be back there - and by the way any time she wants to do a 60 minute makeover on my house, she's most welcome, it's looking a bit tacky!

So there I was sitting in the theatre amongst strangers waiting for the curtain to rise, wondering what was in store. Could I be constructive about the production as my dear friend was in it?

Well I wasn't disappointed. This play explores the relationship between two opposites - a professor and a hairdresser who wants to better herself. The chemistry between these two people on stage is electric and they bring Willy Russell's words, wit, excitement and story to life.

I thought it might be long and boring. I was wrong it wasn't long enough. It left me wanting more.

The only real problem I had was the audience who were thoroughly enjoying it but were very sedate.

I've got quite a loud laugh and caused quite a stir - in fact I was holding back as everyone was looking at me. I wanted to stand up and shout it's a comedy, it's fun wake up, how many of you are Rita? How many of you want to scream and be who she is? You'll be pleased to know I didn't.

Willy Russell is a master with words and proves it time and time again, I can't get enough of his work.

In my mind this is a masterpiece delivered by two fine actors, the nearest *Educating Rita* is to coming to Liverpool is Bradford Alhambra, June 18-23. It is, in my opinion, well worth the trip up the motorway.

After the show I joined the company for a curry. Matthew and Claire are both very excited as they are going to the Edinburgh Festival this year with the play. It was then time for bed with a big smile on my face.

GOOD FRIENDS: Pete with Claire Sweeney and Matthew Kelly

