

RESOURCE PACK

WILLY RUSSELL'S
BLOODTH
Brothers



Bill Kenwright Ltd 2003

**Written by and produced in association with Kate Smith,
on behalf of the Princess Theatre, Torquay**

Dear Teacher

“I have never seen a cast so emotionally involved in a production – they were real tears, and there were just as many in the audience. Executed beautifully with a strong cast... CAPTIVATING!” Wolverhampton Express & Star

Few musicals have received quite such acclaim in recent years as Willy Russell's extraordinary *Blood Brothers*. Scooping up no fewer than four awards as Best Musical and receiving a standing ovation at every performance since July 1988 in the West End, this show is deservedly “one of the best musicals of all time” (Manchester Evening News).

WILLY RUSSELL, now universally regarded as one of this country's leading contemporary playwrights, has shown through his approach that despite the demands of the marketplace, it is still possible to marry together social commentary and subtle characterisation with a story of immense broad appeal. His ground-breaking *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* provided case studies of plays which achieved a delicate balance of gritty social satire and deep felt-emotion.

Blood Brothers takes this a step further – breaking new ground through its ingenious appropriation of the genre of musical theatre. While the trademarks of Russell's work are clearly stamped on it, *Blood Brothers* draws on and explores the potency of the genre, which has so often been overlooked or ignored by many other musical writers.

“The show is remarkable... a disturbing tale that reeks of realism beneath the surface.” Bucks Free Press, Wycombe

We would strongly recommend *Blood Brothers* to any student of English or theatre studies as a stimulating complement to his or her coursework. We understand that *Blood Brothers* has been set as an examination text and we are delighted therefore to offer your students a further opportunity to familiarise themselves with the text, as well as the concept that *Blood Brothers* was written as a musical.

In the hope of providing an experience that is enriching and educational as well as enjoyable, we have enclosed a pack that we hope will be of use to you when discussing the show and some of the themes in the text. Please feel free to photocopy this pack for your students and utilise it in whatever way you feel appropriate.

With regards,

Marketing Manager



Blood Brothers background information

“You’ve never seen a musical like Blood Brothers. Every night of the week audiences stand and cheer. See it for yourself and you will understand why.”

New York Times

Blood Brothers premiered at the Liverpool Playhouse in January 1983, and continues its hugely successful West End run today. It continues to receive standing ovations night after night.

Willy Russell’s tale of two brothers considers class, fate and destiny, childhood and adolescence, surrogacy, superstition, humour and tragedy.

For students studying Blood Brothers for either English or drama, it is essential to acknowledge the fact that Blood Brothers was written as a musical for the stage. Blood Brothers is currently appearing both in London’s West End and throughout the UK on a national tour and would provide a highly enjoyable and stimulating complement to any student’s coursework, offering further familiarity with the text.

Willy Russell – Book, Lyrics and Music

Willy Russell is undeniably one of the country’s leading contemporary dramatists. His countless credits include Educating Rita and Shirley Valentine. Educating Rita, originally commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, enjoyed a two-year run in the West End and was made into a film starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters. Shirley Valentine also made the move from stage to screen in the enormously popular film starring Pauline Collins and Tom Conti.

Blood Brothers is directed by Bob Tomson and Bill Kenwright with designs by Andy Walmsley. Nick Richings is the lighting designer and Rod Edwards the production musical director.

So did y'hear the story of the Johnstone twins?

Described as a Liverpudlian West Side Story, *Blood Brothers* tells the terrible tale of two brothers separated at birth. Shrouded in superstition and sadness, it is a story of a class divide that breaks through blood and kin.

It is by chance – or fate – that Mickey and Eddie strike up a friendship. Mickey – scruffy and dirty, with a mouth to match, appears to be the polar opposite of Eddie – who is well-spoken, clean and 'knows all the words in the dictionary'.

The musical commences with an overture, and lighting that creates the atmosphere of the smoky city of Liverpool at night. The backdrop shows the many lights of the city turning on as the dark closes in.

We are first introduced to Mrs Johnstone, who describes her experience of a half-hearted marriage and the arrival of her numerous children. It is with a bittersweet attitude of acceptance that she explains the moment her husband deserts her, the costs of living for which she has little means, and the news that she is expecting not one more mouth to feed... but two.

We see the contrast of social classes between Mrs Johnstone's home and the home in which she cleans, the home of Mr and Mrs Lyons.

Whilst the home of the Johnstones plays host to the constant clamour of childhood games and battles, Mrs Lyons is often alone whilst Mr Lyons is on business, in an impeccable house that suffers somewhat from a cold and sterile atmosphere.

Mrs Lyons desperately coerces Mrs Johnstone into passing one of the twins on to her, as the Lyons cannot have a baby of their own. Mrs Johnstone is hesitant, but is defeated by Mrs Lyons' persistency and her own desire for her child to have a good upbringing.

Mickey and Eddie's friendship appears as the consequence of childish fascination – Eddie sights Mickey as a kind of role model, as Mickey plays exciting games, which include shouting, spitting and swearing – something that Eddie has never seen before! Mickey in turn feeds off Eddie's enthusiasm and generosity, and 'educates' him in the laws of childhood friendships. The pair then confirm themselves 'Blood Brothers' – a moment of dramatic irony for the audience, who know that there is no need for Mickey and Eddie to certify their bond in this manner.



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The knowledge that the two have become playmates devastates the neurotic Mrs Lyons, who has provided for Eddie and nurtured him into a well-bred, middle-class boy. However, despite wanting the best for her son, she recoils at the idea of his interaction with other children – particularly the boy she knows to be Eddie's twin.

In a desperate attempt to keep Eddie to herself, Mrs Lyons persuades her husband to move the family away from the city. Humouring his wife, Mr Lyons concedes in the hope that his wife will return to her old self with a change of scene.

Eddie leaves with much reluctance, and a sad farewell to Mickey. Mrs Johnstone again puts on a brave face as she says goodbye to her son for the second time. We witness real tenderness between Eddie and Mrs Johnstone and this moment appears to show a more affectionate bond between Eddie and Mrs Johnstone than we have witnessed between Eddie and Mrs Lyons.

Soon after Eddie's departure, Mrs Johnstone receives news of a more optimistic nature. Her family are being relocated to a new housing estate out of town and this provides new hope of starting again for the Johnstones.

In the second half of the performance, we are reintroduced to the twins, who have become teenagers since we last saw them. Mickey is a typical teenage lad, keen on self-image and not really sure how to handle his feeling towards girls. Eddie has predictably turned into the young gentleman, excelling at school and the very model of a polite young man. However, when the two reunite after so many years, we see the exterior personalities fall away. Mickey is no longer concerned with whether he looks and sounds 'cool', and Eddie forgets his 'Serious Young Sir' persona in the excitement. The pair are immediately at home with each other once again.

The pair become inseparable – just as they were before – along with childhood friend Linda. Eddie gets into trouble at school for wearing the locket that Mrs Johnstone gave him upon their parting years ago, and surprises his teachers and mother by defying them and continuing to wear the locket.

After this incident, Mrs Lyons confronts Mrs Johnstone and accuses her of ruining her. In this scene we see Mrs Lyons losing complete control and revealing her possessive and obsessive nature in full. Here we feel great sympathy for Mrs Johnstone, and we realise that despite having very little money to offer her children, she is the more kind and reasonable of the two mothers.



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From this point onwards we notice a disintegration of events, the most pivotal point being Mickey's involvement with a shooting and his imprisonment. We see him plummet into depression and become reliant on medication. His childhood sweetheart – now wife – Linda suffers as Mickey becomes despondent and lifeless behind bars.

Life does not improve upon Mickey's release – he stays dependent on his pills and pays no attention to Linda who tries everything to get his life back to normal. She is given sympathy and warmth from Eddie – now so different from his twin. Eddie, who upholds a decent job and is as generous as he was in childhood, cares greatly for Linda, and it is their affair that brings the show to its tragic climax.

Mickey confronts Eddie with a gun and the police arrive on the scene, along with Mrs Johnstone. Disregarding the superstition that Mrs Lyons imposed upon her years ago, Mrs Johnstone tells Mickey and Eddie the truth. Instead of being upset that he had not been told the truth, Mickey resents the fact that he was not the one who was given away to a wealthy family. In his anger, he shoots Eddie and is shot himself by the police squad.

Mrs Johnstone and Linda rush onto the scene and Mrs Johnstone holds the two brothers together. The last song, 'Tell Me It's Not True', creates a highly emotional atmosphere for the finale, representing the crescendo of the truth coming out. This helps us to reflect on the consequences of the characters' decisions, and the significance of the superstition mentioned earlier in the play.



Key Issues and Themes Within the Text

- Studying characters and relationships within the text
- Childhood and adolescence, considering ideas of heredity, friendship, background education, identity, etc.
- Nature or Nurture? Is your identity formed by the way you are brought up, or does it run deeper?
- The social class system
- Surrogate parenthood
- Superstition
- The voice of the author and attitudes within the text
- Consider the importance of social, historical and cultural contexts – what events have built a foundation for the time and place of the text?
- Also consider the concept that Russell constructed the text to be performed as a piece of musical theatre

Studying Characters and Relationships Within the Text

As you will already be aware, observing and discussing individual characters and their relationships with other characters is vital when gaining a thorough knowledge of a text.

Seeing the characters brought into realisation on the stage is an excellent way of gaining familiarity with these characters – and unlike many other film or stage productions, *Blood Brothers* has not been altered by the adaptation process, as it was written as a musical by Russell.

There are two main character relationships within the text where we can note a contrast between two characters. We of course see the immediate bond between Mickey and Eddie, and the notable differences between their separate upbringings. We also witness the turbulent relationship of Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons, and here we can compare and contrast two very different characters.

Mrs Johnstone and Mrs Lyons



A large part of the tension throughout the text hangs on the superstition that Mrs Lyons uses to trap Mrs Johnstone into silence; that should Mickey and Eddie discover their brotherhood, they will both die.

Throughout the play we see the huge contrast between Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone. At the beginning of the play, the Narrator describes Mrs Johnstone as 'the mother, so cruel' – but is this what we are led to think of Mrs Johnstone?



For instance, how do we react to the scene where Mrs Johnstone allows the boys to go to the cinema to watch the 'Swedish Au Pairs' film? We know that Mrs Lyons would not be as liberal. We see that Mrs Johnstone has a better understanding and acceptance of the fact

that young boys will be sexually curious and she does not try to suppress their curiosity. We see her as down-to-earth and the more approachable mother – she of course wins instant credibility with her two sons.

This moment is also an example that indicates that happiness during upbringing is not assured by social status or wealth.

Rather than viewing Mrs Johnstone as a cruel character, we tend to sympathise with her dilemma. We see her handle her house full of children with endless patience and tenderness. Despite being trapped by her social position and her lack of funds, she is down-to-earth and does not see money as the answer to all of her problems. We see her refuse money from the desperate Mrs Lyons –

MRS LYONS: Thousands... I'm talking about thousands if you want it, and think what you could do with money like that.

MRS JOHNSTONE: I'd spend it. I'd buy more junk and trash; that's all. I don't want your money. I've made a life here. It's not much of one maybe, but I made it.

In contrast, Mrs Lyons is very conscious of her social position and the above scene indicates that she sees money as a solution to the problems of Mrs Johnstone. Mrs Lyons is also portrayed as a cold woman who doesn't show much emotion. She is very over-protective of Eddie and fears his bond with the Johnstones. Later in the play this fear becomes more evident and she appears as a neurotic, obsessive character who appears to be losing control – this is evident when she attempts to attack Mrs Johnstone with a kitchen knife.

Mickey and Eddie



For the reader/audience, the delight of watching Mickey and Eddie's friendship blossom is the knowledge that they are brothers,

the fact of which they are unaware. This sense of dramatic irony is a point of humour throughout the play, but also a reminder of the superstitious curse that Mrs Lyons has inflicted – and the foreknowledge of what is going to happen.

In the first half of the show, Mickey appears as a childhood ringleader, and a hero-figure for Eddie, who is in awe of Mickey's unrestrained energy. We watch as their natural bond unfolds, and as their inhibitions fall away, we notice that they appear more alike.

In contrast, we see Eddie becoming the role model towards the end of the show. We appreciate him more for his foundations – he holds a good job and is considerate of Linda when Mickey rebukes her. We see the brothers grow apart again, as Eddie prospers and Mickey faces imprisonment and falls into depression.

The Role of the Narrator

What purpose does the narrator serve? On stage he appears dressed in a black suit – this gives him a neutral status, as we cannot identify anything about his character. It gives him a sense of anonymity throughout the show, and the fact that the other characters do not acknowledge him gives him a ghost-like quality.



His main role throughout the show is to act as a constant reminder to us of the brothers' tragic fate – exemplified in the musical number 'Shoes Upon the Table', which is repeated throughout both acts of the show. It is also notable that

as the show commences with the scene of the finale, his attire is like that of somebody who is attending a funeral – and it seems that he is dressed for such an occasion throughout the entire play.

Childhood and Adolescence

Through Russell's depiction of childhood in *Blood Brothers*, we witness two brothers experience very different upbringings. The contrast between the two brothers, who meet and become friends, brings humour to the first half of the performance.

Eddie seems to have suffered from a lack of childhood, as even when we first meet him as a child, he is very adult in his mannerisms and is polite and contained. We sense that Mrs Lyons has been over-protective and has not allowed her young son to interact with other children in messy, noisy childhood games.

So it is with awe that Eddie learns from Mickey who is totally untamed; whilst Eddie rides his imaginary horse with the graceful air of a dignitary, Mickey's horse is wild and foaming at the mouth.

In *Blood Brothers* Russell explores the ideas of fate and destiny and creates dramatic irony through the audience's foreknowledge of the twins' grim fate, whilst the brothers remain ignorant of their demise. This accentuates the sense of childhood innocence in the first half of the performance.

We see Mickey and Eddie indulge in childhood games of gunfights, which we find more poignant as we already foresee their death-scene. This also brings a bitter taste of irony to Mickey's involvement in a shooting later in the play. This in turn leads to his incarceration, depression and the desperation in which he pulls a gun on his best friend and brother.

How much does the debate of Nature vs Nurture feature in Russell's depiction of the brothers? Do we think that an individual's identity is formed by the process in which they are nurtured, or raised, or does Russell suggest that heredity (nature) influences an individual's identity and ingrains a sense of belonging that runs back to your roots?

We see that Eddie has been nurtured into a well-spoken, middle-class boy, whereas his twin remains a working-class ruffian. However, when Eddie returns to the Johnstone household we see a change that suggests he is going back to his roots.

It is also possible to suggest that fate and heredity are working together to bring the brothers back together. The bond of their friendship disregards childhood fickleness and has a true air of sincerity.





Other Themes to Consider

Russell has intertwined many different themes and concepts to construct a piece of musical theatre that contains realism, emotion and a gripping plot.

Social Class

We have already acknowledged the importance of social class throughout the text, within the study of characters and their relationships, identity, and the experience of social class throughout childhood and adolescence.

In *Blood Brothers*, we see social class as a conflict, mirroring the battle between the two mothers. We also see Mickey and Eddie overcoming the class boundaries to secure a bond of friendship and affection.

On stage there are several indications of the class separation that cannot be made as apparent in the text. For example, the use of costume immediately causes us to make an assumption about each character. Eddie appears with his clothes neatly pressed – Mickey appears as if he has just been 'dragged out of a hedge backwards'.

On the stage, the accents can also be brought to life, again reminding us of the conflict between the classes. Eddie and the Lyons are well-spoken, traditional of the middle and higher classes – suggesting a good education and elocution lessons. The Johnstone family share a broad Liverpool accent, suggesting the lack of a 'proper' education and implying a connotation of 'commonness'.

Surrogate Parenthood

Again, we encounter the idea of 'Nature or Nurture?' Mrs Lyons tries her best to make Eddie her own, bringing him up the way she desires; however, Eddie still finds his way back to his roots. Mrs Lyons suffers a dreadful insecurity as a consequence of this, revealing herself as an obsessive and quite aggressive character.

Throughout the play we view the idea of surrogacy as a dangerous concept. We see from the very beginning that Mrs Johnstone is reluctant to give away her own child, and in turn we witness Mrs Lyons' manipulative nature as she coerces Mrs Johnstone into parting with her son.

We know from the beginning that Mickey and Eddie's separation is going to end in tragedy, so we always foresee their parting as a bad idea. Despite this, we are encouraged to question the ethic and moral issues surrounding the idea of surrogacy.

Superstition

The superstition imposed upon the play by Mrs Lyons – that should either Mickey or Eddie discover that they are one of a pair, they both will die – becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – we are reminded constantly of this curse by the Narrator's repetition of the song, 'Shoes Upon the Table'.

How does the theme of superstition affect the pace of the text/play?





Author and Structure

It is important to be constantly aware of the voice of the author. However, it is also important to remember that it is not just the attitudes of the author that we must take note of.

- We must acknowledge attitudes in the text – not necessarily those of the author, but a spectrum of attitudes represented by different characters.
- There are also our own attitudes to the text. It is important to be aware of how the text makes us feel and what our opinions are.
- And as has already been mentioned – we must listen to the voice behind the text – the voice of the author.

‘Russell’s undoubted achievement is to have brought to prominence the authentic voice of Liverpool, with its driest of dry wit, glimpses of pathos and indefatigable humanity.’ Martin Cinnamond ‘Atlantic City’s Likely Lads’

How does Russell create an awareness of social, historical and cultural contexts and influences in the text?

Russell uses the iconic status of Marilyn Monroe as a kind of timeline that parallels the rise and fall of events. At the beginning of the play, Mrs Johnstone is younger and as yet without an extensive family; she compares herself to the young rising star of Marilyn Monroe. Towards the end of the performance, Marilyn Monroe’s demise reflects the sad change in events within the play.

The reference to Marilyn Monroe also suggests an era for the play – the late 1950s, early 1960s. This helps us to become familiar with the text and the play, as we already have a knowledge of the era. This means we can also gain an understanding of the stigma and boundaries that surrounded the social classes at that time.

We must also take into account the economic climate of the time – in the second half of the performance, Russell targets unemployment. Liverpool has been home to one of the highest levels of unemployment in the developed world, with over 25% of the workforce out of a job, and it is important to consider this when discussing Russell's depiction and own views of class and unemployment.

Of course, it is vital to remember that Willy Russell is a Liverpudlian himself, and his experience of the social, historical and cultural high and low points will be first-hand. It is with this knowledge that he creates a gritty depiction of 'real life' in the city of Liverpool.



With this in mind, look at how Russell views class. What does *Blood Brothers* tell us about these views? Consider the fact that we have already discussed conflict within the text.

Russell, despite being male, does not show great support of the father figures within *Blood Brothers* and instead shows more sympathy for the role of motherhood and the notions of tenderness and nurturing. Mr Lyons plays a relatively small part in the show, often away on business, whilst Mr Johnstone appears at the beginning of the performance as a womaniser who leaves Mrs Johnstone in the lurch with children in tow.

In regard to parenthood and brotherhood, can we assume that Russell views the bond of brotherhood to be inseparable, and that nature and truth will out?

Final thoughts...

Some texts will provoke the reader to question or challenge their own attitudes and assumptions – for instance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* questions racist attitudes. In the present day, prejudices towards race, class and gender are not widely accepted – however we can understand that this was not the case, even in our recent past. We are not as restrained by class boundaries in modern society, but we can still understand the conflict of the different social classes.

Through *Blood Brothers* Russell encourages us to challenge the assumption that money = happiness. We sympathise with Mrs Johnstone and grow to understand that despite her background and lack of money she is the better parent. This challenges any assumptions that suggests wealth would afford a better, happier upbringing.

Throughout *Blood Brothers*, the audience's sympathy lies with Mrs Johnstone – we know that she gives her own son away, but we see that it is with good intentions, and despite her lack of money and her numerous children, we feel she could give Eddie a happier, more loving childhood.