

Blood Brothers *Willy Russell*



ThinkIT

Location

The play is set in and around Liverpool. How is this shown on an open stage with minimum scenery? How is the change from inner city (Act 1) to rural outskirts (Act 2) conveyed on stage? Willy Russell was born and brought up in Liverpool. How important is the setting or could Blood Brothers easily be transported to any other big city? How does the location of the play affect the **vocal** performances of the characters?

How can lighting, sound and other effects be used to help 'create' different locations (e.g. fairground, beach, cinema) in the imaginations of the audience?

The early eighties, when the play was first written and performed, was a period of high unemployment particularly in areas of the industrialized north. (Russell would have seen this in Liverpool particularly with the decline of the docks.) Crime levels increased and drug use was more common. Which sections of the play clearly illustrate this economic downturn?

Religion

Mrs Johnstone is staunchly Roman Catholic. How might an actress show this in her characterisation? (Professional productions show the family moving a portrait of the pope when they are relocating their belongings.) How might this strong religious belief affect the way the actress plays the scene where she has to swear on the Bible?

"and then if it should happen, that His Holiness flies in from Rome..."

Class

Social class is a constant theme throughout the play. How is it shown in the set? The costumes? The characterisation of the actors? It is a deliberate convention that the same actor plays both Mickey's and Eddie's teachers. How could he adapt his performance from playing the public school 'master' to Mickey's rather jaded Geography teacher?

How does the policeman respond differently to Mrs Johnstone and to Mr and Mrs Lyons when taking the boys home after their 'prank' in the park? How could an actor emphasise these differences? How are the life opportunities afforded to Mickey and Eddie affected by their social class?

"I wish that I could be like, wear clean clothes, talk properly like, do sums and history like my friend.

"I'm not sure I'd let him mix with the likes of them in the future."

Superstition

Superstition, fate, destiny, luck. How do these themes arise in the play? Do you believe in fate or destiny like Mrs Johnstone ("**you never put new shoes on a table**") or dismiss them as 'superstitious nonsense' like Mrs Lyons? Do you think that the playwright believes in fate? How many **superstitions** can you find mentioned in the play? How many of these have you heard of previously? Is superstition something you associate more with older people? Why do you think this is?

*"And do we blame superstition for what came to pass
Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?"*

Period

The play takes place over more than 30 years although the main characters are played throughout by the same actors. How could you show this in the set, costumes, characterisation? Research:

- the introduction of 'hire purchase' (the never never)
- 'catalogues' when, for the first time, families could acquire goods without having to pay for them 'up front' (often leading to increased debt)
- the Margaret Thatcher years, when the powers of the trade unions were significantly reduced. This period was when many inner city families were rehoused to the rural suburbs. (All of this helps to place the play within a social, cultural and political context.)

"When y'look in the catalogue an' there's six months to pay, it seems years away, an' y'need a few things so y'sign."

Marilyn Monroe

Marilyn Monroe was an iconic Hollywood actress of the 50s/60s. Although her image was of an incredibly glamorous lifestyle, the reality was quite different. Russell compares the lives/situations of his characters with that of Monroe at various points throughout the play. Where does he do this and to what effect?

"... and treats his ills with daily pills just like Marilyn Monroe."

Multi-roling

Other than the main characters, actors in Blood Brothers each have to play a number of different roles. Apart from minor costume changes, can you suggest how they can do this through their characterization (e.g. use of face, voice, body language, gesture, movement)?

Friendship

Even though they have been brought up very differently, Mickey and Eddie form a very strong bond on their first meeting. What obstacles are placed in their way to force them apart as the plot develops? ("**Mickey says smashing things. We're blood brothers aren't we Mickey?**") Linda acts as Mickey's protector throughout the play. As children, she defends him against the older kids (**Linda moves in to protect Mickey who is visibly shaken**), as teenagers, against their teacher ("**Take no notice Mickey, I love you.**") and when he becomes hooked on anti-depressant drugs, she tries to help him ("**I get depressed but I don't take those. You don't need those, Mickey.**")

Physical Theatre

"The setting is an open stage, with the different settings and time spans being indicated by lighting changes with the minimum of properties and furniture. The whole play should flow along easily and smoothly, with no cumbersome scene changes."

This being the case, how can the actors use physical theatre to create some of the images suggested? Particularly in the narration which conveys the passage of time between Mickey, Eddie and Linda being 14 and 18 e.g. the fairground.

Function of the Narrator

What purpose do you think the narrator serves (other than to tell the story) and how do you feel he should be portrayed on stage? How important is it that the other characters do not interact with him directly? In the recent stage production, the only character to make direct contact with the narrator was the actress playing Mrs Lyons in Act 2 where the character is beginning to lose her mind. She had fallen and the narrator reached his hand out to help her up, making direct eye contact. Why do you think this was?