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 premièred 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.
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.
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
**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.

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**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.
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 Liverpudlian accent, suggesting the lack of a ‘proper’ education and implying a connotation of ‘commonness’.
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.