

**Review: Blood Brothers**

**By Dulcie Harrison**

***Blood Brothers* at Theatre Royal Plymouth**

Another massive musical graces our stage here at the Theatre Royal Plymouth, The Critically acclaimed *Blood Brothers*. *Blood Brothers* is one of the most popular British musicals of all time. Written by playwright Willy Russell and brought to the London stage in 1988 following its first showing here in Plymouth, reviewers have consistently praised the musical.

It really was so wonderful to be back in the theatre. Social distancing is no longer necessary within the auditorium, but it is great to see the front of house still encouraging safety and maintaining government guidelines. Before *Blood Brothers* started, the director came out and addressed the audience reflecting on the recent devastating shooting in Plymouth and the decision to not open on the Friday night as planned out of respect. He explained about the fact the show had gunfire, guns and scenes of death and allowed people to leave if they wished to without prejudice. Saturday matinee was their first show. We had a one-minute silence for those killed and those affected by the shooting which immediately united the Plymouth audience as we reflected on our tragic loss.

Sadly, the touching story of their unconditional and instinctive brotherly love is tarnished forever by tragedy. However, there are also light-hearted moments which are exactly what this otherwise heavy and gritty show needs. The 3-hour show, set in Liverpool in the 1950s, tells the tale of twin brothers, Mickey and Eddie, tragically separated at birth due to a mixture of poverty and a decision made in empathy and as Mrs Johnstone, who already had lots of children and no supportive husband, unfortunately couldn't afford to keep both of them. While pregnant, Mrs Johnstone manages to secure a job as a cleaner to the wealthy Mrs Lyons, while confiding in her boss that she is a struggling single mother with too many children already and now with the prospect of two more on the way, the wealthy Mrs Lyons takes advantage of this situation and proposes she has one of the children to raise as her own, as her and her husband cannot conceive.

She creates a superstition which will keep coming back to haunt the characters.

Through demographic and strange coincidences, the twins keep finding each other and spark a strong and deep friendship. As they grow older and lead separate lives-due to their class divides-they begin to experience parallel experiences such as suspension from school, falling in love with the same girl and events which miraculously lead them back towards each other, no matter how the mother's try to separate them throughout their lives... Fate always brings them back together.

Mrs Johnstone's character is emotionally charged throughout the show, as she displays the torture that comes from being forced to give a child away. She shows how her life is a whirlwind of broken promises, class struggles, inequality, and poverty, but how she tries her best to hold her head up and keep it together for all her children and socially within her neighbourhood.

Mrs Lyons keeps her wealthy and posh demeanour with her new son, but gradually becomes more and more paranoid and broken as she fears her son will find out the truth.

We watch the twins grow up throughout the show. Mickey is the twin brother who is brought up by his biological mother, Mrs Johnstone. We first meet him when he is seven years old. He is an energetic and excitable little boy. Mickey is close to his mother throughout the play and they have a good relationship. Mickey is outgoing when he first meets Edward and immediately accepts him as a best friend, despite their obvious differences. He grows into an awkward, funny teenage boy- facing those all too familiar and comedic teenage boy struggles and experiences.

As an adult, Mickey's young energy and optimism are destroyed by his experience of devastating unemployment and being unable to support his new wife, Linda, and their child. His harsh reality of adulthood leads him to become angry and jealous of Eddie. Getting involved with the wrong crowd and suffering the consequences and finally the heart-breaking and cruel struggle with addiction, Mickey becomes depressed, affecting his marriage with Linda and his self-esteem.

Edward is the twin taken away from Mrs Johnstone and brought up by the wealthy Lyons family. He is an only child and is the focus of his Mrs Lyons attention- as Mr

Lyons is often away due to work. We also meet Edward at the age of 7, who is warm and intrigued. When he meets Mickey, he is excited by his new friend's rebelliousness and freedom. He is drawn to Mrs Johnstone, who is very different to his own mother. He grows into a well-spoken, gentle teenager. He puts Mickey's feelings before his own, encouraging Mickey to ask Linda to be his girlfriend even though Edward has feelings for her himself.

When he is older, Edward is able to draw away from his overprotective mother and become more independent, spending as much of his time as he can with his friends Mickey and Linda. Finally he grows into a secure, unproblematic adulthood.

The narrator is a very interesting character. He is always speaking in some sort of rhyme or riddle and teaching the characters and audience some very important messages. His incessantly sinister narrative voice, playing the devil on Mrs Lyons and Mrs Johnstone's shoulder, constantly reminding them of what they have done, and watching over Eddie and Mickey until they meet their tragic ending.

The entire cast are able to play multiple roles believably, and the stage management have been amazing with their set designs. There is a simple set used throughout the whole show, with backdrops and props brought onto the stage for certain scenes swiftly and smoothly. It really captures what I imagine Liverpool to be like in the 1950s-1970s.

The devastating end scene, caused by a lack of understanding towards his wife and Eddie's relationship, a lack of understanding towards mental health and a desperation of feeling hopeless amounts into what can only be described as harrowing and shocking.

The cast, knowing how deeply affected Plymouth has been recently by the shooting, were clearly moved and some were even crying at the end as they took their bows.

The orchestra, amazing as always, carried the show beautifully with their enchanting music fit perfectly for every scene on stage.

I really would recommend catching Blood Brothers while it is here. The story is endearing and emotive, a mix of laughter and deeply sombre moments. A strong combination that captivates the audience and so deserves its standing ovation.