

Scene One (Review) 1st October 2010

Blood Brothers – The Play, Arena Theatre, Regent Centre, Christchurch

HAVING sobbed my way through countless productions of the musical version of Willy Russell's story, I was concerned that I would feel that something was missing in this 'straight' play – but far from it. It actually seemed that the storyline was stronger without being interrupted by songs, wonderful though they are.

The tale of the Johnstone twins is so familiar that an explanation of the plot is, I hope, unnecessary. Suffice to say that it is set in 1960s Liverpool – a fact well depicted by the costumes, various pieces of background music and some pretty impressive Scouse dialect. And the 'opening out' set, designed by Kate McStraw, worked a treat.

I understand that there were a number of enforced cast changes that made the rehearsal process somewhat complicated, but it certainly did not show in any way, and Bernard Dunleavy's production was absolutely superb.

The Narrator (an excellent, malevolent Peter Beebee) and 'Greek Chorus' were on stage throughout, the latter playing small roles -Eben Skilleter was particularly notable - as well as serving as scene shifters, while James Hoare (Mr Lyons) and Pete Griffiths (Sammy) made the most of their small roles.

Louise Thomas (Mrs Johnstone), Natasha Green (Mrs Lyons) and Jenny Trapp (Linda) all gave marvellous characterisations but it is, of course, the twins around whom everything centres and Tom Flood (Mickey) and Sam Stevenson (Edward) simply could not have been better, portraying both their child and adult selves to perfection.

The story, of course, culminates in the deaths of the brothers and is always a tear-jerker – but it is only fiction. Real life can be equally cruel and Friday night's performance was dedicated 'to the memory of Aidan O'Neill, a beautiful and passionate boy who will live in our hearts forever.' 12 year-old Aidan was tragically killed in an accident while on his way to school on Wednesday. His parents, Linsey and Steve, have long been involved in the local theatre scene and Aidan was beginning to follow in their footsteps. Earlier this year I saw him play the Mad Hatter in a production of Alice In Wonderland and it was clear that he had potential. Sadly that potential will not now be fulfilled.

Linda Kirkman