

Review: TheatreZone soars with powerful 'Blood Brothers'

- By [CHRIS SILK](#)
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NAPLES — TheatreZone opened their production of powerful British musical "Blood Brothers" Thursday. In it, Mark Danni returns to the formula that delivered his greatest successes - stripped down shows that combine voice, music and movement to create a sweeping, soaring night of entertainment. "Blood Brothers" delivers on all counts.

"Blood Brothers," created entirely by Willy Russell, examines what happens to two fraternal twin brothers who are separated at birth and grow up unaware of the other's existence. One lives in poverty, the other in wealth - until they fall in love with the same woman. A production has been running continuously at the Phoenix Theatre in London's West End since Nov. 21, 1991.

"Blood Brothers" might seem a bit slow to fans coming off the zippy pace of tap-tastic "No, No, Nanette." The show meditates on the debate between nature vs. nurture - what causes people to be the way they are. Much of the power of "Blood Brothers" comes from its simple story - the well-acted scenes then get reinforced with moving visuals and music sequences.

The show eschews parts of the traditional musical structure in favor of multiple reprises that harken back to simple themes. There are no huge tap numbers here. Remember, it originated in 1988 in the West End - not on Broadway, where style often trumps substance. When characters in "Blood Brothers" sing - you're meant to listen.

Andrea McArdle, Broadway's original "Annie," makes her third appearance at TheatreZone in the central role of Mrs. Johnstone, the lower-class woman who gives up one of her sons for adoption. Unlike 2008's "Evita," where the sultry role didn't suit her personality, McArdle slips into the skin of downtrodden Mrs. Johnstone and find a broken, battered but noble woman inside.

Much of the power in "Blood Brothers" comes from the book scenes - and McArdle shows why she was able to carry a show when she was just a child. Whether letting a

grimace of pain wash across her face while another woman lifts her child from a carriage or coming face to face with the son she won't - can't - acknowledge, she pours her heart out onto the stage. And oh, that voice. McArdle get solos with the "Marilyn Monroe" and "Light Romance" numbers and leads the powerful "Tell Me It's Not True" that ends the show.

Broadway veteran Larry Alexander, in his sixth appearance at TheatreZone, shepherds the show along in the chameleon-like narrator's role. Given many of the "portent of doom" lines, Alexander (and his buttery voice) make it all look so easy. McArdle's daughter, Alexis Kalehoff does well as Linda, the girl caught between the warring brothers, but it's Lauren Wiley who carves a striking role out of not much at all as the brittle, scared and vulnerable Mrs. Lyons - who's desperate enough to take another woman's son.

Billy Sharpe (Mickey, the poor brother) and Shane Daniel Lord (Eddie, the rich brother) take the youths from ages 7 to 24; the characters are best friends, but don't know they're fraternal (not identical) twins. Though physically little alike, the pair work to match their mannerisms and have an obvious chemistry. Both understand comedy - scenes while they're young children bring plenty of laughs. Their side-by-side duet as their families move miles apart "Long Sunday Afternoon" might be the emotional high point of the first half.

The British origin might be one sticking point for Neapolitans. Beyond the varied range of accents, some of the dialogue (i.e. "dole" is welfare, "giro" is a slang term for unemployment) might be unclear to audiences not weaned on a diet of Britcoms. Sharpe's microphone also seemed to go out during the second half - exacerbating the dialogue problem.

Robert H. McRae and Chris Rich fashion a simple facade out of paint-splattered squares to serve as a set. It could be a street, it could be a building or a castle; it resembles a Tetris screen to me. Given the show's tragic ending - try not to think morbid thoughts about what the paint splatters might represent. The plainness of the design forces attention back toward the acting but does little to enhance to show.

Ever-reliable costumer Kathleen Kolacz delineates the class lines in this struggle as if with a permanent marker. She pulls out peacoats and prim navy blue frocks and

sweaters for the upper-crust cast, with faded prints and torn clothes for McArdle and Sharpe. Look for Phillip Watson's intricate lighting designs on the stage floor during some scenes - or the way he captures characters in shafts of light.

Savor the show, experience it, enjoy the comedy and relax into the majestic vocals. Listen for McArdle's wonderful voice or watch for Alexander's smooth, easygoing manner. Sharpe and Lord have great chemistry and the show builds to a crescendo in both halves. "Tell Me It's Not True" ranks as one of the most stirring moments in musical theater.

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