

Twentieth century drama assignment based on our day out by willy russell



In this assignment I am going to focus on the way that Willy Russell uses the story of a school trip to raise a number of points about the way society treats individuals. Before I do that, I will consider the social and historical background of Willy Russell. Willy Russell's own experience of education and the fact that he gained nothing from it and the inequality of opportunities are reflected in a number of his plays including 'Our Day Out', 'Educating Rita' and 'Blood Brothers'. He left school with no qualifications whatsoever.

He worked as a hairdresser for a while and he had a go at several other odd jobs. He also went to night school, gained an education and then trained to be a teacher. Willy Russell finally became a successful writer. Although it is a play about a school trip, Russell also deals with a range of issues including the inequality of opportunity; the failure of schools to develop pupils as in Mrs Kay's class and how difficult it is for individuals to change or break away from the expectations that society has of them.

He does this effectively by telling a story rather than lecturing the audience. The play is basically about a low ability class that is taught by a rather pleasant teacher called Mrs Kay. She tries to treat them as individuals instead as stereotyping them as rejects as Mr Briggs does. She knows that they aren't able to upgrade their education because of the people they are, so she treats them to a school trip to Wales for them to experience life outside of inner-city Liverpool. They don't know what it's like outside of their home town, because of their family background. The head teacher has a word with another teacher, Mr Briggs.

He volunteers to go with Mrs Kay so that he can keep an eye on her. Mr Briggs doesn't believe in what Mrs Kay is doing, he believes that the children are rejects and that there is no hope for them. He doesn't want them to be educated because he knows that they would just want the same as what they've got. Wealth and happiness. Mr Briggs shows that he is not too fond of the children throughout the play, up until the end where Carol tries to jump off the edge of the cliff and he befriends her and listens to her carefully.

He takes them to the fair and completely changes his attitude towards them. He seems to have enjoyed himself until he offers to develop the camera film and just crumples it up and throws it in his pocket. Russell uses two very different teachers in the play. I think he does this on purpose almost to suggest that individuals don't make much difference. Mr Briggs and Mrs Kay have very low expectations of the pupils, but the way they deal with them in turn is different. Mr Briggs treats them like dirt, like there is no hope in changing them.

He doesn't believe that they are real people because they are not as sensible as him. Mrs Kay treats them as human beings but she knows she can't change them so she does the best she can to make them happy and she wants them to enjoy themselves. They both fail the children in their own ways. Briggs fails them because he shouts at them all the time and he gives them less confidence, he doesn't treat them well at all.

He has no faith in them whatsoever. He fails them by not even trying. He gives them a bad perspective on life unlike Mrs Kay. Mrs Kay treats them as

normal people. She does this wholeheartedly as she tries to give them the best she can. She knows that they are not very intelligent.

Mr Briggs doesn't approve of the way Mrs Kay treats the children; ' Well... If the antics in her department are anything to go by...

! She always reminds me of a mother hen then a teacher. ' (Scene 2) Here, he is insulting and undermining Mrs Kay to the head master. It proves that he isn't pleased with the way Mrs Kay treats the children. Mrs Kay doesn't think very highly of Mr Briggs either.

She thinks he is boring and too harsh; ' Here comes Mr Happiness' (Scene 4) Here, she is talking about Mr Briggs; she is using sarcasm, saying that Mr Briggs is Mr Happiness. Mrs Kay is in her early forties and she is a much nicer person than Mr Briggs. She is caring, sympathetic, compassionate and understanding. Mrs Kay sees the best in pupils, she treats them as individuals. She has lower expectations of them and just wants them to have fun; I thought it would be a good idea if we called into the zoo for an hour. We've got plenty of time.

' (Scene twenty one) She tries to give them the best experience outside of inner city Liverpool, so she takes them to the zoo. She is letting them see and do things that they wouldn't be able to normally. Mrs Kay proves to be a little naive though, when they're at the zoo and she asks Mr Briggs if he wants to go for a cup of coffee. ' I'm going for a cup of coffee. Do you want to join me? (Scene 22) Mr Briggs notes that he has to keep an eye on the children but Mrs Kay thinks that they'll be alright; Oh come on. They'll be alright'.

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(Scene twenty two) She doesn't realise that she's being naive, because the children then go and steal the animals. She is just too soft. Mr Briggs is in his early thirties. He is a hard man.

He is extremely strict with the children, which contrasts the way that Mrs Kay lets them do what they want. Mr Briggs thinks the children are rubbish and that they are underachievers. He has superiority over Mrs Kay because he is a man and he thinks he can boss her around. He treats the children differently by being very aggressive.

He can be very strict and he goes a bit over the top. Mr Briggs has even proved to be two faced when he tells Mrs Kay that he will develop the film but then he screws it up; 'Look, why don't you give it to me to develop?' (Scene 40) Here, he tears up the film and exposes it to the light, left ruined. He obviously doesn't want people to think he's soft. If I had been in this situation I would have only got a few pictures developed and left the ones out with me in them. Briggs is quite boring, he shows this when he is invited to the pub by the other staff and he turns them down to go home and do some marking; 'No..

. I'd better not. Thanks anyway. I've, um, lots of marking to do at home. Thanks all the same though.' (Scene forty one) He tries not to talk to the teachers much because he doesn't want to change his image in anyway.

In contrast to this though, throughout the rest of the play, he finds it hard to say no to Mrs Kay. In scene fourteen, the children are described as 'tumbling off the coach' they are a bit unruly. Mrs Kay sits in the garden and has a

drink whilst Mr Briggs in contrast is getting in a right stress. The tensions between the teachers come to a head when Carol goes missing.

Carol went away by herself because she loves Wales and she wants to stay there. She has seen a better side of life. Carol is used to the depravity of inner city Liverpool. Carol appeared to be a kind and enthusiastic little girl up until this part. She has totally given up on life and just supposes that she can stay in Wales where it is pretty; ‘ Why can’t I just stay out here, eh? Why can’t I live in one of them nice white houses an’ do the garden an’ that? ‘ (Scene 35) You start to feel sorry for her now; this creates emotion in the audience.

Briggs tells her to get down and come back to the group but she doesn’t respond to his orders. He seems quite taken aback; ‘ Pardon! (Scene thirty five) This is evidence that he is not used to this sort of thing. Carol is in control of Mr Briggs. He is inferior in this scene.

He is used to children doing as they are told, but Carol doesn’t. Mr Briggs tries to persuade her by using typical teacher talk; ‘ Now just you listen to me – I’ve had just about enough today, just about enough, and I’m not putting up with a pile of silliness from the likes of you. Now come on. ‘ (Scene thirty five) Here he is also being insulting towards Carol and it shows that he is stereotyping all people like Carol; ‘.. from the likes of you.

(Scene thirty five) However much Mr Briggs shouts, Carol will not listen because she has seen another life, this trip has opened up her eyes to the better life. Mr Briggs becomes wound up; the stage directions tell you that

Briggs stares back in impotent rage. Here, he shows that he doesn’t like to
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be disobeyed, but Carol is not at all scared of him. Carol points out to Mr Briggs that he hates her and all the other kids like her; ' I know you hate me.

I've seen you goin' home in your car, passin' us on the street. And the way y' look at us. You hate all the kids' (Scene thirty five) Briggs is amazed and replies with a question; ' What... makes you think that? Eh? (Scene thirty five) Here Mr Briggs becomes sympathetic.

I don't think he has realised that the kids know he hates them; he starts to be kinder and tries to listen to Carol. He gives her advice about schoolwork and puts a smile on her face; ' You're talking as though you've given up on life already. ' (Scene thirty five) The stage directions in this scene pay dramatic impact on what's happening. There are pauses to create atmosphere. At the beginning of the scene the stage directions are described in a really good way.

If I was the director of this play I would perch Carol on the edge of the stage, looking like she's about to jump. When Mr Briggs is searching, voices can be heard shouting for Carol and Briggs can be hovering centre stage looking for Carol. This is a great scene to make dramatic impact on an audience. There are so many ways that you could stage this scene but the best way to create atmosphere is for Carol to be crouching forward stage looking over the edge.

This also creates suspense. At the end of this scene the stage directions say how Mr Briggs has to move forward. ' Again, she moves nearer to the edge and then they look at each other'. This would be staged in a way that Carol would be cowering over the edge but also feeling confident that she's won

Mr Briggs over, she has her head raised high.

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This would create impact on the audience. Audiences may relate to this scene as being a father daughter moment. This incident has caused Carol pain knowing that she can't do what she wants and also knowing that she will never be able to achieve high goals in life because of who she is and where she is from. Willy Russell is trying to get across the fact that whatever Carol says or tries to do is not going to get her any further because of who she is.

All young people like Carol have no chance whatsoever of the good things in life. The odds are stacked too heavily against them. They are in such a situation that they cannot achieve any of their dreams. In this scene Mr Briggs shouts at first but then he starts to feel sorry for Carol and comforts her throughout this traumatic incident. Even Carol knows she can't do what she wants and it hurts but she realises that she just has to face the facts. This incident has great effects on Mr Briggs.

The immediate effects are obvious. Afterwards, he talks to Mrs Kay in a gentler manner and suggests taking the children to the fair. He has obviously seen Carol's side and feels extremely sorry for her. He wants to treat them to one last thing before they go home to inner city Liverpool. The changes in Mr Briggs after the incident are quite amazing, he goes from a harsh, nasty man to a gentle, and loving man.

He doesn't even shout at Carol and he also tells Mrs Kay that he has already sorted it out and not to bother with it anymore. He doesn't want Mrs Kay to worry and start having a go at Carol; ' It's all right, Mrs Kay. I've dealt with all

that. ' (Scene thirty six) In the cliff scene the stage directions say how Mr Briggs stretches out his hand to her.

This, he has never shown before. He tries to be sympathetic, and Carol responds well, she likes the way in which Mr Briggs has changed; ' Sir, sir, y'know if you'd been my old feller, I woulda been alright, wouldn't I? ' (Scene thirty five) Here Carol is saying that if she had come from a family like Mr Briggs', she would have been alright. Mr Briggs smiles with her. This scene is a very loving scene towards the end.

It is like a father daughter scene for Carol, and she now feels safe with Mr Briggs and shows him how safe she really feels by telling him that if he was her father she would have been fine. Mr Briggs shows his true kindness when he tells Mrs Kay that they're going to the fair; ' School, back to school? It's only early isn't it? Anyway, you can't come all the way to the seaside and not pay a visit to the fair'. (Scene thirty six) Now, we think that Mr Briggs has changed for the better but really the change doesn't last at all. In the last scene Briggs offers to develop the photos of their wonderful day out, but when he leaves Mrs Kay, Colin and Susan he proves to be some what two faced, as he screws up the film and exposes it to the light. Obviously Mr Briggs does not want the other teachers and pupils at school to see a gentler side to his normally stern character. It is very difficult for Mr Briggs to change, as he already has a very strong image around the school.

Everyone knows him as being quite an evil and rough man and he doesn't want anyone to think of him differently. He wants children to be scared of him. The final scene has a dramatic impact on the audience as it has a lot of

drama and suspense and you don't know what's going to happen. It makes you feel sorry for the other teachers and also Carol because Mr Briggs has betrayed her and Mrs Kay. Mr Briggs says he will develop the film but he just ruins it.

It is quite an emotional scene, because you think how he could be so two faced to these people, especially a child. The way his character is as well also makes you feel as if he has betrayed you as an audience for acting so nice and then turning and stabbing you in the back at the end. He is a very sly man and the audience see this at the end and they feel as if they want to tell Carol and Mrs Kay exactly what he's done. Change is not only difficult for Mr Briggs; it is also hard for the children to change because of who they are. Willy Russell makes this message. He sends a message about changing and how you can't ever change the way you are because of who you are.

For example Mr Briggs comes from a wealthy background with a well paid job and he is educated well, and he is pretty arrogant and talks as if he's the best and as if no one is better than him. He treats other people that are not as well off as him badly because he thinks they aren't good enough. For example, the children that live in inner city Liverpool. They aren't very well off and they are treated wrongly because of this.

They can't change because of who they are. They are given a bad image of people who are educated and well off like Mr Briggs so they turn their noses up at it. They stay who they are also because of their family backgrounds. Their families give them a bad influence. Willy Russell is also suggesting that schools fail pupils. This is very true for Carol, because they don't give her the

chance or the time of day because they think she isn't good enough for an education.

There is also evidence that they haven't been taught how to talk properly to a teacher. In scene five Reilly and Susan speak inappropriately to Colin; 'Are you in love with her sir?' (Scene five) This is none of his business and he is cheeky. These children think they can do and say what they like because they haven't been disciplined enough. 'Sir's in love, sirs in love!' (Scene five) Reilly is being witty but it is unappreciated and Colin gets very embarrassed. If these children had been taught properly then maybe they wouldn't be taught in such a manner.

In scene thirty three Reilly torments Susan, and Colin gets defensive. This is also evidence for the children getting unruly and being failed by school; 'You comin' for a walk with me then, Miss?' – Reilly (Scene thirty three) 'Look. I'm warning you, Reilly' – Colin (Scene thirty three) Colin doesn't know what to do; he might be scared of him because he is a bit reckless and has a bad background. Reilly is lively, witty and likeable but school seems to fail to connect with his intelligence. He is portrayed as being quite thick, but actually there is something there and he's quite intelligent. None of the teachers realise this and they just focus on his bad points.

They fail him because of who he is. If he was from a wealthy background, they would treat him differently; 'Agh, ey, he is in love with y' though, isn't he, miss'. (Scene five) Here, Reilly is trying to fit in and get on with the teachers by being witty. Colin takes it all the wrong way though. Linda is a typical teenage girl; she has an attitude.

This is why teachers like Mr Briggs turn her away from education. On the bus in scene six, Briggs sees that Linda isn't wearing school uniform; 'What sort of outfit's that for a school visit?' (Scene six) Mr Briggs is not being realistic. It's not even a really big problem but he still makes a fuss about it. Mrs Kay never said anything about it so she might think she's not doing anything wrong. Her attitude towards Mr Briggs makes him angry though and that's why he fails to educate her; 'I don't care. I don't wanna see no crappy castle anyway'.

(Scene six) Mr Briggs doesn't like her attitude at all here and he gets in a stress for nothing. Russell has the little scene between Linda and Reilly on the way home because they make a great couple, we can imagine them as decent parents and yet the 'system' writes them off. They think that because Linda and Reilly aren't well educated and have no future that they would be bad parents; Willy Russell adds this scene to try and send a message that they would be alright as a couple and maybe even parents because they are well suited. The audience might like this scene and change their minds about the whole thing. It adds a dramatic impact to the play but also quite emotional and sends a direct message to people and their opinions about children like Linda and Reilly.

My opinion is that Russell is right in his opinion that school fails children like Carol, Reilly and Linda because they have no hope for them. I believe that if you give someone a chance they might be able to improve. Society hasn't changed. Everyone should be treated equally, and not everyone always has. There are better opportunities for school leavers nowadays though, no

matter what kind of education you have. You can go for further training or even start from scratch.

Many people are being considered now. Higher educated people have more of a chance though and are still much better off. This is what Russell is trying to say in this play.