

Our day out, russell



It's the mid 1970's: Britain is in economic recession, working practices are changing, many businesses are closing and numerous big employers are forced to shut down- including Liverpool's main industry- the docks...

Against this background of huge unemployment Willy Russell chronicles a school outing to Conwy castle with the school " progress class". The play is set many years ago; so subsequently not a lot of technology was around, and to teach was a difficult prospect. The play in my opinion is very realistic; due to the fact that most of Russell's plays and characters are based on situations which are drawn from real life experiences (mainly his). Although the stories are generally humorous, there is usually a hidden agenda as the characters tend to crave freedom from a deprived background. The play is partly a celebration for the life of teenagers in the 70's. Nevertheless by the end it becomes darker and unexpected.

These no-hopers from the backstreets of Liverpool are reminded of their depressing current situation and even bleaker future, leading to the stark realisation that a day out is about as much as they can expect. The cliff scene (scene 35) is significant, as it is the turning point in Brigg's personality. The entire atmosphere changes dramatically. The scene is critical in demonstrating how the characters react under pressure. While Mrs Kay becomes anxious, Briggs calmly strolls around, unwillingly searching for Carol, while in a foul mood.

However, Brigg's personality changes quite a few times throughout the scene: at first he is an " arrogant get" as usual, the next minute he is begging Carol and finally he is showing his kind, warm-hearted side (which

we would have never expected). At the start of scene 35, the atmosphere is very calm and peaceful in contrast to scene 34 where Mrs Kay was frantically searching. Russell starts off describing Carol standing alone. He describes the moment as a “fleeting moment of tranquillity”. Here he tells us she is at peace; the opposite of how she normally feels. The word “tranquillity” means: still, silent and it adds to the serenity of the setting.

Russell hints to the audience that something unexpected is going to happen. He does this when he describes the moment as “fleeting” which shows that it was a brief, short, temporary moment that will soon pass. Therefore the audience expect the silence to be disturbed. Willy Russell interests us in the characters of Carol and Briggs by showing us the contrast of personalities and difference in lifestyle between the two. The main difference between Carol and Briggs is that, Carol is from a deprived background while the teacher, Briggs, probably does not understand what kind of life Carol has out of school hours.

Russell uses a range of dramatic techniques to manipulate our response towards Briggs. The introduction we get of Briggs is very different to that of Carol's. In scene one, Les the lollipop man describes Briggs as an “arrogant get”. At this point, we are not aware that Briggs is the driver of the car.

In this way we immediately have an ugly impression of Briggs in our minds, before we actually get to meet him; we are forced into disliking Briggs and pressurised into thinking that he really is an “arrogant get”. Both characters, Carol and Briggs, shout most of their lines and speak in short exchange, in order to gain power over each other. As Briggs asks Carol questions, she

gives short, curt replies; for example- he asks her “ who gave you permission to come up here? ” Carol rudely replies” no-one” as she tries to gain control over him. Overall, this adds to the dramatic tension and rivalry created. The main themes in the play are power, Child-adult relations, deprivation and authority; the themes are demonstrated in numerous ways e.

g. in scene 35 Carol challenges Briggs authority and he is powerless to stop her. She says she wants to “ stay here, where it’s nice”. Here Russell uses dramatic irony, the audience know that Carol cannot stay in Wales but Carol does not know this. Furthermore, as she describes the place as “ nice”, we get the feeling that she has never visited a place like this before (probably because her family could not afford to) and that she thinks it is better than Liverpool. Therefore, the audience have a compulsion to feel compassion for Carol and to pity her, especially an audience of this era, as we are the ones who would have less of an idea of what it’s like to be in a situation like that of Carol’s.

Carol’s threatened suicide produces the climax of the day and almost brings out a change in Briggs’ attitude. On screen, Carol’s character is played as tense and disturbed which unsettles the audience as they start to worry about what will happen. The setting of the cliff-tops with the sea “ breaking on rocks” below adds to the danger created. Carol has tears in her eyes as she steps closer to the edge of the cliff.

We then get a shot of the crashing waves below her, which frightens us. What’s the most worrying is when Carol says what seem to be her last words- “ Sir, y’know if you’d been my old feller, I woulda been all right”.

From this Briggs gets a sudden realisation. He feels like he could have done something to stop this. It's shocking to both audiences (of now and then) that Carol's life is so unbearable. If Briggs was her father, she thinks she would have more opportunities ahead of her and more support.

It is a really corrupt view as it doesn't matter what her parents are like; if she is determined then what she achieves should be up to her and no-one else. In spite of this, the audience can now see the effect that Briggs straight-line teaching can also have a good outcome on the kids: pushing them a little further, making them achieve a little more. The stage directions after this tell us how petrified Briggs' is at this moment. It says how he " slowly hold out his hand", showing how weak and weary he has become. As she " moves to the very edge of the cliff" Russell tells us that " Briggs is aware of how close she is", hinting that he is obviously petrified.

I think its unbelievable how Briggs changes. Carol eventually reduces Briggs to begging. He pleads with her as he repeats the word " please". He desperately tries to get her attention and regain control. He takes what Carol says very personally. Earlier in the scene he says " just what are you trying to do to me? " As a " smile breaks across" Carol's face, the audience feel relieved and this breaks the tension.

She tells Briggs he should " smile more often". After this we feel glad that Carol is safe. Nevertheless, we gasp as Carol slips and nearly falls. The scene emotionally involves the audience in many ways forcing them to react. The last sentence in the scene tells us how " Briggs wraps his arms around her".

This is very uncharacteristic for Briggs. We are shown how caring and fatherly he can be and we are glad that there is a good outcome. Our day out is generally perceived as a social commentary, either to display the depressing past or as a message of hope, to give foresight into a future of possibilities. It also warns us about what can happen if we don't pay attention to our surroundings. In a way, it represents how history can repeat itself, for example the recession the world is in now and the recession in the 70's. It gives us an idea of what we can expect if we don't look after our money and savings and if we don't get a good job.

The play fits its context as a typical "play for today". "Play for today" demonstrated "single-drama's" potential to engage "mass audiences" with "artistic experimentation". The play has a desire to provoke the middle-class out of their "supposed complacency" and it does this well. The play is a deeply personal real-life story (Russell's life) dramatised in many ways. The plays explored "social and political issues". Our day out created much discussion about the value of educating "no-hopers".

Woven into the struggle of life are a number of other story lines; each of which displays many hidden messages. The character Briggs softens after a cliff-top confrontation with Carol. How he will behave after the outing is just one of the many questions posed by Russell's play: questions which stimulate much debate.