

WILLY RUSSELL

Willy Russell's career spans more than four decades; born in Liverpool in 1947, he left school at 15, became a women's hairdresser, part-time singer/songwriter performing on the local folk scene, before returning to education and becoming a teacher

Whilst at St Katharine's College, Willy began writing drama and, in 1972, took a programme of three one-act plays to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where they were seen by writer John McGrath. Suitably impressed, McGrath recommended Russell to the Liverpool Everyman who commissioned the adaptation, *When The Reds...* -which was Willy Russell's first professional work for theatre.

Russell's breakthrough work, commissioned by Liverpool Everyman, "*John Paul George Ringo...and Bert*" transferred to the West End winning *Best Musical - Evening Standard and London Theatre Critics Awards*.

Alongside further stage works, *One For The Road* (1976), *Stags and Hens* (1978) Russell proved himself a gifted and accomplished screenwriter with television films, *Death of A Young Man, Daughters of Albion, Our Day Out and One Summer* all consolidating his reputation as a writer whose work could reach a wide audience without ever compromising the seriousness that lies at the heart of all his work.

Commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, *Educating Rita* is now a modern classic. Since its 1980 premiere and long West End run, the play has been translated and produced in almost every part of the globe garnering awards both for its author and for many of the actors who have played the roles of *Rita* and *Frank*.

Returning to the Liverpool Everyman in 1986, Willy Russell created the iconic *Shirley Valentine* which went on to an acclaimed West End run, earning Olivier awards for both its author, Willy and star, Pauline Collins, before transferring to New York for a highly successful Broadway run and a Tony Best Actress award for its star, Pauline Collins. Like the earlier *Educating Rita*, *Shirley Valentine* became an international hit with successful productions being mounted throughout the world.

Both *Educating Rita and Shirley Valentine* became highly successful feature films with Michael Caine, Julie Walters and Pauline Collins all winning Oscar Nominations for their respective roles, as did Russell for his *Educating Rita* screenplay.

Willy Russell's other worldwide theatrical success has been *Blood Brothers*, 'a Liverpoolian folk opera' about a pair of twins separated at birth and brought up in completely different environments. *Blood Brothers* won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Musical in 1983 and its 1987 revival saw over 10,000 consecutive performances during its 24 year West End run. Simultaneously, UK touring and international productions (including a 2 year run on Broadway) brought further critical and public acclaim.

Originally a celebrated TV film, Willy Russell's *Our Day Out* was first adapted for the stage in 1983 and rapidly went on to become one of the most widely produced plays of all time, its popularity still as strong as ever amongst professionals, amateurs, schools and youth theatres across the UK.

In 2010, Willy Russell (with musical collaborator Bob Eaton) developed *Our Day Out further* and created - *Our Day Out The Musical* . This modern musical retelling retains all the characters and plot of the original but with the action updated and a new score and lyrics. Productions in 2010 and 2011 at Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre drew huge audiences and rave reviews.

The critically acclaimed novel, "*The Wrong Boy*" was published in 2000 and translated worldwide.

In 2004 Willy Russell returned to his singer/songwriter roots, releasing his own album, *Hoovering The Moon* which he toured with Tim Firth ending at the Edinburgh Fringe, a unique mix of music and spoken word that became known as *The Singing Playwrights*.

In 2013, the Liverpool John Moores University established the **Willy Russell Archive** and it is a comprehensive representation of all his work to date.

Major UK and international productions of *Educating Rita*, *Shirley Valentine* and *Blood Brothers* are staged every year with 2017 marking the 30th year of the, *Blood Brothers UK Tour*

For the last few years, Willy has been quietly working on painting, developing his ideas and experimenting with line, colour and form. Willy's first exhibition, "Another Aspect" opened in Kirkby, Liverpool in the summer of 2017. This Autumn he will be exhibiting in London for the first time, "Seeing Better" will be at the Coningsby Gallery.

Willy Russell continues to be one of the most celebrated and widely produced writers of his generation with works regularly being produced throughout the world as well as in the UK

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