Russell Willy

Willy Russell was born in Whiston, near Liverpool, England, to a shopkeeper and a warehouse worker. He left school at age 15 knowing he wanted to be a writer—a realization he recalled as "wonderful" but "terrible because how could I … a piece of factory fodder, ever change the course that my life was already set upon?" Russell worked in a warehouse and, at his mother's suggestion, as a women's hairdresser until deciding at age 20 to become a teacher. In 1969 he enrolled at Childwall College of Further Education, and from 1970 to 1973 he trained as a drama teacher at St. Katherine's College of Higher Education, Liverpool. Here he wrote his first play, *Keep Your Eyes Down* (1971), which was performed by St. Katherine's College at the 1971 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Russell had decided to become a playwright after seeing John McGrath's *Unruly Elements* performed in 1971 at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre. Several of his own plays were commissioned by the theater after McGrath saw *Blind Scouse* (1972), his trilogy of *Keep Your Eyes Down*, *Playground*, and *Sam O'Shanker*, performed at the 1972 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Russell wrote several one-act plays before winning the *Evening Standard's* and London Theatre Critics' award for Best Musical for *John, Paul, George, Ringo … and Bert* (1974), a story of the Beatles' ups and downs by a loyal fan named Bert. In one scene, a group of wheelchair-bound fans wait to be healed by the Beatles.

In *Breezeblock Park* (1975), about a young woman desperate to escape a meaningless life, Russell explores the theme of escape. He continues this theme in *Educating Rita* (1980), about a 26-year-old hairdresser who turns to her Open University tutor to help her improve her life through literature. *Educating Rita* was made into an award-winning film starring Michael Caine and Julie Walters, for which Russell wrote the screenplay.

In *Shirley Valentine* (1986), another stage and screen hit, the 42-year-old title character escapes from her life as a Liverpool wife and mother to an extended vacation in Greece. Shirley, who dreams of drinking wine "in a country where the grape is grown," speaks to her kitchen wall: "I hate a life of talkin' to the wall. But I've been talkin' to the wall for more years than I care to remember now. An' I'm frightened. I'm frightened of life beyond the wall."

Besides plays for stage, screen, and television, Russell has written musical scores for several films (including his own) and the musical *Blood Brothers* (1983), about twin brothers separated at birth and raised in different social classes. Russell published his first novel, *The Wrong Boy*, in 2011. Stephanie Merritt, writing for the London *Guardian*, argued that Russell's epistolary novel about a teenage misfit "swerves perilously close to sentimentality," but ultimately proves to be "a deliberately heartwarming tale" about the "exaggerated horrors of childhood and adolescence." A member since 1965 of the musical group the Kirbytown Three, Russell is also founding director of Quintet Films (London). He has been a writer-in-residence and a fellow in creative writing at colleges in Liverpool and Manchester, respectively, and in 1983 he was awarded an honorary M.A. by the Open University. Critic Edward Pearce writes that Russell uses "… a popular medium for a grave end. It is his genius to straddle two cultures and talk brilliant sense to both."

Further Information


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