Poor plot makes for bad blood in Russell's insipid 'Brothers'

BY TOM VALEO
Daily Herald Theater Critic

Willy Russell knows how to write a play. He demonstrated that with "Educating Rita" and "Shirley Valentine," a pair of charming character sketches that are a bit sentimental, to be sure, but not sickeningly sweet.

So what was he thinking when he wrote "Blood Brothers?" This musical, completely written by Russell (script, lyrics and music) is sure to make you gag or groan — or both — for when it is not unbearably precious it is absurdly melodramatic.

Let's consider the preciousness first.

The story is about twin boys separated at birth. Their mother, Mrs. Johnstone (played by Petula Clark) already has five children and has been abandoned by her husband. To support herself she cleans the house of a wealthy couple who cannot have children.

When Mrs. Johnstone discovers she is pregnant with twins, she agrees to give one of them to the woman she works for, which means one will grow up in poverty, the other in luxury.

Despite the difference in their social standing, the boys end up living close to each other. They become playmates, with the rest of the first act taking place when they are 7 years old. That means that the two brothers, Mickey and Eddie, played by David Cassidy and Tif Luckenbill, must act as though they are 7 years old. They spit and fire cap guns at each other, try out naughty words and, of course, cut their thumbs and smear the blood together to become blood brothers.

Now, having adults play children is always risky. Either they end up looking ridiculous or they become tiresome.

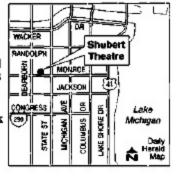Cassidy and Luckenbill manage to do both. With their inane shenanigans they manage to extort a few nervous titters from the audience, but after an hour of their prancing, skipping and playing one longs for them to grow up.

When they return in the second act, they are 14, and the playwright apparently felt obligated to demonstrate that the boys have become interested in girls. Mickey ogles a girlie magazine; Eddie joins him at a Swedish porn film, and they both develop an interest in the same leggy neighborhood girl.

By the time these boys reach the age of 18, they have turned the play into a cute-fest.

But this is a *melodrama*, one so overblown that a caped villain twirling his mustache would be perfectly at home.

Instead of such a villain, however, Russell provides a narrator who speaks in rhymed couplets: "It was one day in October when the rain was coming down, it was one day in October when someone said the bogeyman was in town."

To make the narrator, played by Mark McGrath, sound more forbidding, the directors, Bill Kenwright and Bob Tomson, add a bit of reverberation to his voice, making him sound a little like the

early Elvis.

Obviously the purpose of this play is to show how drastically upbringing affects the development of children. Here you have twin boys, similar and perhaps identical in genetic endowment. Yet one grows up to be a respected town official while the other ends up unemployed.

That message may seem perfectly obvious, but Russell is taking no chances — at the end of the play he has the narrator intone, "do we blame superstition for what has come to pass? Or do we blame something that we know as class?"

The plot is insipid, the lyrics are innocuous and the music is bland and repetitive, but the production at the Shubert Theatre has a cast of outstanding singers. Petula Clark's voice is still clear, powerful and thrilling. Cassidy and Luckenbill are both smooth and practiced singers who harmonize beautifully. And McGrath, as the narrator, lets loose at times with all the fierce intensity of a rock singer.

If only Russell had given them something worth singing about.

Shubert Theatre — Daily Herald Map