

A big bite at the BIG APPLE

PART 3



BRIAN READE on the show that defied the killer critics



Blooded but unbowed

● The public loves what the critics hated: Blood Brothers' has triumphed with Petula Clark and David Cassidy in the main roles.

I HAD seen many a Scouse woman blowing into Kleenex at the sight of the Dallas skyline, but I never thought I'd see classy, Ivana Trump lookalikes, dressed up to the nines, weeping into their hundred dollar silk hankies at the sight of the Pier Head.

Blood Brothers was on the rocks. Now the only rocks on show decorate the fingers of stylish dames being chauffeured the length of Manhattan to have a good old cry at this tale of two scallies, played against a huge backdrop of the Liverpool waterfront.

When it opened last April the blood was splattered the length of Broadway: "Bloody awful — Twin Reeks" screamed the New York Post, above an article whose message like a clutch of others was simple: "Limeys go home."

It would have been easy. It would have been logical. In the showbiz capital of the world the

rules are simple. When the critics destroy you, don't argue, just cut your losses and walk.

But something unheard of was happening. Audiences loved it. Every night they rose to their feet en masse. Word spread and it was nominated for six Tony awards. It won none, but the ensuing TV coverage gave its haunting songs precious coast-to-coast exposure.

And then producer Bill Kenwright pulled a masterstroke. He pumped 250,000 dollars into an aggressive relaunch and cast Petula Clark and half-brothers Shaun and David Cassidy in the main roles. Now the only red you'll see on this stretch of Broadway is on the critics' faces.

Doubled

Business has more than doubled, it nets 300,000 dollars a week, box office records at The Music Box theatre have been smashed, attendances are hovering at just under 90%, and the legendary Butcher of Broadway, critic Frank Rich, speaking on the radio a fortnight ago lavished praise on its revival.

Bill Kenwright, he said, is a lesson to every petrified producer who believes you live or die by the critic's sword: "He stuck at it, he found his audience and he's doing super. He is a lesson to everyone," said Frank. Rich praise indeed.

But then in New York the bottom line is bucks. And when your bank balance looks as fit as a butcher's dog, a butcher's cleaver looks as threatening as an iced-up water pistol.

"What has happened to Blood Brothers is phenomenal," said New York press agent Denis Crowley. "It is unprecedented that a show should more than double its audience four months into a run and it's unheard of for a show to receive a standing ovation after every single performance for six months."

"Blood Brothers has a special quality that appeals to New Yorkers. It's hard to define, it's just a magical piece of theatre."

Appeal it does. As Mary Tyler-Moore and Christopher Reeve-clones sipped cocktails at the interval, the praise flowed. They loved the songs, they loved the bits of humour that didn't fly over their

Artistic fulfilment . . . as a



● David Cassidy: "The Liverpool accent is incredibly musical."

HIS oh so perfectly-arranged features, oh so perfectly-white teeth and oh so perfectly-inneed-of-a-good-smacking face, was the face of the enemy.

It was the face that smiled out at you from every Jackie held under every Mum-scented arm you ever managed to get within cheese and onion flavoured breathing distance of.

At 13, no fanciable girl looked twice at the scruffy little, foul-mouthed, gobbing-over-everyone Scouse urchin on the back of the school bus. They were California-dreaming about the doors of The Partridge Family Bus closing on them and David Cassidy. That was where all life began and ended.

Well girls, eat your hearts out. Every smarmy, Sun-silk-smelling one of you. He hated it. Only now has your darling David reached true artistic fulfillment. And how? Playing a scruffy little, foul-mouthed, gobbing-over-everyone Scouse urchin, that's how.

"I can't think of another experience I've had in my entire professional life that has been so creatively satisfying and so successful," said David now 43, and playing the role of the seven-year-old down-at-heel scallywag twin Mickey.

And playing it extremely well. The accent, as David Coleman would say, is quite remarkable. Learning it was a labour of love. After one and a half hours he'd cracked it.

"The Liverpool accent is incredibly musical and beautiful, one of the most romantic I've ever heard. I never really thought about it before in my life. I got to know John Lennon very well, but the Liverpool thing went right over my head.

"In fact I've had to Americanise it. I can hear it so clearly and I have to tone it down. I've had notes off people saying it's too Liverpoolian."

And they don't understand some of the words. So instead of saying 'catapults' I say 'alingshots'. I can't avoid saying 'in the club' but they don't know what that means."

These are good days for David Cassidy after some very bad ones. He walked away from Cassidymania in 1974 after a London concert in which a 14-year-old girl died from a heart attack. The whole teeny-idol kick, he claims, left him feeling "emotionally stunned."

Depression

As fame drifted away depression set in and soon he'd gone through two failed marriages and five years of psychoanalysis.

He married again, has a two-year-old son and is very much back in demand. And Blood Brothers has given him a new lease of life: "The role is a *tour de force*. If you grasp the joy and sentiment and delicious love of life the character has, it's wonderful. I'm so grateful to Willy Russell."

"It's exceeded everyone's expectations. I ran into Al Pacino on the street today and he said he'd seen the play and thought I was great. That is 100 times more important than what any critic could say, because I respect Al as an actor."

It has brought him closer to his half-brother Shaun, who plays his affluent twin in the play.

"Ironically there are many parallels in the roles. Our socio-economic backgrounds are similar to the characters we play. I was not as poor as the character Mickey but I lived in a very ordinary, working-class town with



Box office records have been smashed at The Music Box theatre.

Vidal Sassoon gel, but most of all they loved David Cassidy.

I'd been prepared to be thrown out of the theatre for howling at this one. It was bad enough hearing David Jason in The Bullen Boys strangle all life out of a Liverpool accent and bury it somewhere between Waterford and Wolverhampton.

Surely Cassidy's would go missing somewhere between Los Angeles and Lost Property? No. His stab at Scouse was extraordinarily good, shining amongst a cast of fellow Americans who inevitably ended up sounding like that Irish Chief O'Hara in Batman.

English rose

That was acceptable, but English rose Petula Clark's impression of Eastenders' Dot Cotton meets Emmerdale's Annie Sugden wasn't. Still the audience didn't mind. It went down a storm triggering off a five-minute standing ovation and three curtain calls.

And as the crowd poured on to the street and the hoity-toity poured themselves back into chauffeur-driven limos, the words Willy Russell and genius were heard to collide in more than a few mouths.

Below me was Wall Street, behind me Times Square, in front of me was Broadway and above me was a huge poster of the Liver Building.

And the thought of those narrow-minded, misguided Merseysiders who constantly attack Liverpool's dramatists for dragging their beloved city's reputation into the gutter, made me laugh long and hard into the New York night.

Scouser

my mum while Shaun was raised in a well-to-do environment.

"Willy Russell is a fabulous writer. He writes about the kind of family my father's from, and like a lot of Liverpudlians I'm of Irish descent."

David looks set to leave the show in the New Year, but says he will be permanently grateful for the role and to Bill Kenwright in particular: "It's because of Bill's tenacity and commitment that we're doing so well."

But he has one big fear: "Willy's coming to see me in the next few weeks when I just know my Liverpool accent will probably sound awful!"

EMPIRE'S PURRRING WITH SUCCESS

Cats' bookings top £1m before it even opens

By Joe Riley, arts editor

THANKS a million, Merseyside. That's the early Christmas message from delighted Empire Theatre bosses.

They revealed that the hit musical Cats will open with an incredible £1m in the bank from ticket sales.

The show, starring former Olympic ice skating gold medalist Robin Cousins, starts a record-breaking three-month run next Wednesday.

Today Sam Shrouder, operations director of Apollo Leisure, which runs the Empire, pulled a Christmas cracker which proved that the theatre's box office tills are already jingling all the way.

Pantomime

"We'll open to more than £1m, which is fantastic," he said.

"Once again, the people of Merseyside have shown that if you give them the best, then they will turn out to support you."

But Mr Shrouder added: "Pantomime will probably be returning to the Empire next year."

The 98 performances of Cats, scheduled until February 12, will make it the longest-running show in the theatre's history.

But even if it packs audiences in until the final night, the run cannot be extended, said Mr Shrouder.

Meanwhile, the Playhouse is also doing a musical - Annie, which opens on December 16.

Vauxhall lay-offs warning in pay row

CAR giant Vauxhall today warned it will lay off workers if they vote for industrial action over pay.

Bosses also hinted they could switch to recognising just one union as workers at Ellesmere Port start an overtime ban tomorrow.

The 2,000 Transport and General Workers Union members rejected a "final" offer of 2.5% this year with 3% next year plus a 1% lump sum.

Action

But Vauxhall said workers at its Luton plant and Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union members at Ellesmere Port had not voted.

Ford workers in Halewood, Bridgend and Swansea today voted to accept a 2.5% raise this year and 3.5% next autumn.

Fame school decision

PAUL McCartney's Fame School is expected to gain approval for major redevelopment plans.

It was feared the delays could hold up the £15m project and jeopardise grants worth millions.

The building, which McCartney and fellow Beatle George Harrison attended, is to be the new home of the Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts.

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