

# British Theatre Guide

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## Playing for Time

Arthur Miller  
Sheffield Theatres  
Crucible Theatre  
12–31 March 2015

This production has to be seen for the remarkable, outstanding, brilliant performance by the ageless Sïan Phillips in the principal role.

A group of women with varying musical skills survive Auschwitz by playing in a small band / orchestra which entertains the camp commandants, including Josef Mengele (he of experiments on female inmates), which helps the Germans to cope with the stress of sending so many Jews and others to the gas chambers.

The orchestra is required to turn out on various grim occasions: to play cheerfully when less fortunate, ill-clad women are marched off to work in the harsh Polish winter, to accompany the many death marches and to provide a musical distraction for women in a mental ward (who surprisingly dance to the music) before they too are escorted to the extermination chamber.

Miller's play deals with all sorts of moral issues. Is survival more important than anything else? Is collusion acceptable when you look through a window and see lines of people arriving by train to be almost immediately selected for death? How does one hang on to a sense of humanity in such appalling circumstances? And how does music that delights fit into this bleak and cruel scenario?

Miller's play is based on Fania Fenelon's memoir *The Musicians of Auschwitz* (1977) and was written in 1980. The play does now seem to belong to a different era. It is inconceivable, given the profusion of films, books and TV programmes, especially recently, about the holocaust that anyone could be uninformed about events in the camps, but in opting to place the musicians' dilemma at the centre of the drama, Miller chooses a soft option which belies the horror of individual testimonies and photographic records, presented in all their grim reality in current exhibitions in London and Berlin.

The play is not powerful enough for its subject matter. I wanted Brecht's objectivity and unflinching realism. And Weill's harsh music.

However, despite my reservations about the play, this is an accomplished production. A splendid set from Ti Green is dominated by the train track leading to the familiar Auschwitz gate and adapted with lighting effects to present the transport in cattle trucks, the sleeping accommodation and the performance venue.

As well as Sïan Phillips's powerful acting performance and delightful, often unaccompanied, singing, the cast includes a group of talented young women, who can act, and also play a range of instruments, including piano, cello, violin, flute, drum and, most effectively in some numbers, the mouth organ. Much credit to Ginny Schiller (casting director) for finding them. It is satisfying to see a play with so many strong parts for women.

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)