

British Theatre Guide

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The Child in the Striped Pyjamas

Noah Max

Brundibar Festival

Gosforth Civic Theatre

26–27 January 2024

Brundibar Festival, founded by Alexandra (Sasha) Raikhlina (formerly of Royal Northern Sinfonia) in 2016, returned this year from 20–28 January with events across Newcastle—it's a welcome part of our cultural life

The festival uses the arts to remind us that we have the power to shine a light in dark times and to highlight that genocide continues to occur across the world today. It is also a way to experience and learn about Jewish culture in the same way Newcastle celebrates other cultures.

I caught the second and final performance of *The Child in the Striped Pyjamas* playing on Holocaust Memorial Day at Gosforth Civic Theatre—a delightful, welcoming and 100% accessible venue close to Regents Centre Metro.

The Child in the Striped Pyjamas is based on the well-known book *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, which has sold 11 million copies globally, been made into a film and, less well known, into a ballet. This chamber opera is written by Noah Max and conducted by his father, Robert Max, and is clearly deeply personal.

It is a moving story of two children on different sides of the (concentration camp) fence, one a Jew and the other a child of a high-ranking Nazi. It's a universal story of separation, 'othering' and systemised barbarity.

The ensemble, placed upstage in a simple but effective set with sensitive lighting, consists of two violins, a viola, cello, clarinet and, surprisingly, a trumpet; the sound quality and balance is exceptional. Stylistically, it is often atonal with searing sounds and high-pitched violin mixed with intense bursts of discordant chords, such as when the Nazis greet each other; it's not an entirely easy listen. In contrast, act 2 starts and concludes with a beautiful lament on the cello, which is picked up by the clarinet and then further developed. The sense of oppression, however, tends to be unrelenting, except again in act 2 when the children reminisce / reimagine their play during the meetings at the fence.

The two children are sung by Noam Pnini, the German Child, and Eleanor Oldfield, the Jewish child. They have a strong chemistry and are well matched. It's particularly poignant that Pnini, a Jew, plays the German child. Their roles are taxing and the audience sits on three sides, which makes it even more challenging; they live up to the challenge. The German Nazi father is sung by baritone Jeremy Huw Williams, and the young Lieutenant Kofter is played aggressively and powerfully by tenor Xavier Hetherington. The ensemble consists of Kyra Humphreys and Alexandra Raikhlina on violin, Nathan Braude on viola, Gabriel Waite on cello, Dove Goldberg on clarinet and Imogen Whitehead on trumpet, fine musicians all, skilfully led by Robert Max.

The opera starts and closes with prayers sung in Hebrew and, though powerful and moving, I have reservations that this makes it less accessible for a broader audience.

This is a demanding work for everyone, including the theatregoer, and brings into relief complex questions. It is also an intense and beautiful experience; the sizeable audience was mesmerised—it's really worth seeing work like this. Thanks go to Brundibar Festival and Gosforth Civic Theatre for presenting and programming *The Child in the Striped Pyjamas*.

Reviewer: [Dora Frankel](#)