

British Theatre Guide

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The Paradis Files

Librettists Nicola Werenowski and Selina Mills, composer Erroll Wallen
Graeae in partnership with BBC Concert Orchestra and Curve Theatre
Crucible Theatre
11–12 May 2022

The Graeae Company, established 40 years ago, exists to "cultivate and champion the best in Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent on the UK and international stages".

It is this commitment that makes their current touring 'chamber opera', based on the life of the talented eighteenth century composer and pianist Maria Theresia von Paradis, such a moving, immersive and thrilling experience.

It is clear from the start that everyone involved in the production is equally valued for their contribution and part of an inclusive, accepting and wholly supportive network.

The evening starts modestly (this is not elitist opera) with each member of the small orchestra, the cast of talented singers and the two performance interpreters quietly introducing themselves. At the same time, the audience is introduced to the conventions (sign language, use of visual imagery, guided movement, a non-playing piano) which will not just support but become creatively immersed in the production.

The story of Theresia's life is compelling. Initially rejected at birth by her father who wanted a male heir and later by her mother when she became blind at an early age, Theresia endured the torment of brutal and ineffectual medical procedures before declaring herself content with her blindness and going on to establish a brilliant international career as a pianist and composer who ultimately set up school for the advancement of blind musicians.

When the orchestra strikes up and we hear the quality of the singers' voices, we enter the world of high class opera, Covent Garden or Glyndebourne, which appear in the cast biographies.

Bethan Langford is stunning as Theresia, beautiful, graceful, adept at moving without seeing, as sensitive and expressive in her physical performance as she is in her singing. In this she is supported and complemented by two other strong female performances, Ella Taylor as Gerda the Maid and Maureen Brathwaite as the Baroness von Paradis.

There is equally strong support from Ben Thapa as a lecherous Salieri and Omar Ebrahim as the usually absenting Baron von Paradis. Both men find opportunities for humour in their main roles and, along with Andee-Louise Hypolite and Ella Taylor, form the entertaining Gossips's Chorus, which provides light-hearted narrative and commentary to leaven the more serious aspects of the production.

In early discussions about how to structure the information about Theresia's life, director Jenny Sealy and librettist Nicola Werenowska decided to play down the grimness of the medical interventions to avoid presenting her as a victim. Instead, the emphasis is on acceptance,

forgiveness and reconciliation and Theresia's determination to succeed. Reconciliation with her mother is an important part of this.

Musical director Andrea Brown is a huge admirer of Errollyn Wallen's approach to composing a score, in this instance a musical style that creates atmosphere and is drawn from 18th century music (Mozart / Salieri) as well more recent and varied examples. The orchestra of four provide a rich tone and deal as well with comic interludes as with mood enhancing accompaniment.

This production is a thrilling and deeply moving theatrical experience. Bravo Graeae. If this is chamber opera, please give me more.

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)