

Playing for Time: Arthur Miller's play hits the stage

Arthur Miller's play about the female musicians who evaded death in Auschwitz has upset some of those it describes. Jessica Duchen explores the issues ahead of its first stage production in Britain

Published: 03 November 2005

"If we fall below a certain level, anything is possible."

In this line from Arthur Miller's *Playing for Time*, Alma Rosé implies that if her orchestra plays badly, they will be gassed. Rosé - a distinguished violinist, the daughter of the quartet leader Arnold Rosé and the niece of Gustav Mahler - was the conductor of the now legendary women's orchestra in Auschwitz. It was originally assembled to play marches for the prisoners as they were herded in and out of the camp to work, though its duties soon included entertaining Nazi officials. The orchestra's members had a relatively privileged existence within the camp's hellish microcosm, but the likelihood of death hung over their every moment. Survivors of Auschwitz who had played in this orchestra, including the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and the Parisian singer Fania Fénelon, later published memoirs about their experiences.

Arthur Miller wrote *Playing for Time*, based on Fénelon's book, as a television play in 1980. Next week it will be professionally staged in its theatre version for the first time in the UK, at the Salisbury Playhouse. The play is vintage Miller, homing in, like many of his other works including *The Crucible*, on an individual standing alone, and undergoing extreme dilemmas of personal conscience in the face of a system run mad. Its neglect seems extraordinary; perhaps the distressing content is partly responsible - productions in the States occasionally carry an advance warning to the audience about what they must expect.

But also, as the director, Joanna Read, points out, it's complicated to cast, requiring 24 women who can play musical instruments on stage as well as act. The Auschwitz orchestra consisted of a hotchpotch of abilities: alongside professional musicians were some who had played their instrument for only a

few months; and the combination of instruments was random. Fénelon was entrusted with making musical arrangements for their bizarre ensemble.

"We have found actors who can also play," says Read, speaking after a rehearsal, "and this morning they were playing too well! They have to sound thin, hungry and exhausted." Joanna Riding, as Fania, has to accompany herself from memory while she sings an aria from *Madame Butterfly*. "Playing the piano is the scariest thing I've had to do on stage," she declares. "No opera singer would dream of doing that."

Music, a passion for Miller yet one that appeared infrequently in his writing, is integral to the play's power. "When I first read it, I felt it was amazing in terms of its emotional scale and the musical content in that context," Read says. "I'm fascinated by the way Miller uses music to help us engage with a story that is almost too much to bear." The music feels incongruous, sometimes shattering. What could be more surreal than an official in such a place abruptly demanding: "Does anyone know how to sing *Madame Butterfly*?"

In the play, Fania and Alma face the necessity of saving their own and their colleagues' lives through the corruption of everything they hold most sacred: their music. All the women survive as best they can, their moral worlds gradually collapsing. Fania's friend Marianne barter sex for food. Alma lives for her music alone, insisting on the most rigorous standards among her players, even striking one of them for playing a wrong note. For her, it is art that matters, not its audience. But Fania finds herself in a spiritual abyss when she realises that her singing has moved Dr Josef Mengele. As Riding says, "It eats into her soul to have to provide the music she loves for these monsters."

"The others do what they can to survive. We've no right to judge anyone for what they do in order to stay alive." Read adds, "Miller is encouraging us to see that music transcends everything. It unites people whether you like it or not."

The character of Alma is painfully complex. On one hand, the rigour with which she handles her orchestra seems excessive under the circumstances; on the other hand, it is clearly Rosé's strength that imparted extra fortitude to the others and helped them to struggle through both physically and spiritually.

"In Fania's book, Alma does come over as a hard personality, but then so does Fania," Read says. "Alma's the woman who must keep the orchestra alive and she was responsible for many people being saved. Nobody was ever thrown out of that orchestra." For Riding, "the play shows a microcosm of racism and the petty jealousies and hatreds among the victims themselves. It's very human and there's not much room there for noble emotions. I think Fania wouldn't have lived if it had gone on longer; she found it difficult to hold on, and she didn't have the same survival instinct as some of the others."

In the end, it was Fénelon who came out alive and Rosé who did not. Her death from poisoning was once thought to have been murder by a female SS officer (as the play states); but a recent biography of her by Richard Newman, *From Vienna to Auschwitz*, has shown that it was probably an accident: botulism contracted from tinned food.

Playing for Time hasn't been without its controversies. Fénelon's memoirs have been called into question by some of her fellow survivors, especially the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who in her book, *Inherit the Truth*, wrote: "Contrary to the way in which we were portrayed in Arthur Miller's film, we were far from being a vindictive mob of unruly girls who stole from and betrayed each other at every opportunity. In spite of many differences in character and background, we were a very positive small community of people, sharing a miserable life and the prospect of a miserable end."

As for the 1980 television film, an outcry ensued over the choice of Vanessa Redgrave - a tall, blonde, outspoken, anti-Zionist supporter of the Palestine Liberation Organisation - to play the short, dark, half-Jewish Fania. Miller is said to have been in favour of her casting since she was the only actress willing to go to the extreme lengths of losing weight and shaving her head for the role. But Fénelon, apparently, would have preferred to see herself played by Liza Minnelli. Still, it's intriguing to discover that in Miller's autobiography *Timebends* (1987), in which he reflects frequently on the resonances of Judaism, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust through his life and work, there is not one mention of *Playing for Time*.

For the Salisbury team, such controversies are not something to dwell on when producing this claustrophobic, devastating play. "We can't put the Holocaust on stage," says Read, "and we can't make a travesty of it by making people shave their heads and starve. We're telling a story and being honest and truthful to the situation and the characters without glorifying it."

The story is quite harrowing enough without wallowing in its emotion. As Riding says, "I know we hear a lot about the Holocaust, but we have to keep telling these stories, we have to keep reminding ourselves and facing the horror of it, because we keep on making the same mistakes."

'Playing for Time', Salisbury Playhouse, 10 to 26 November (01722 320333); and Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, 29 November to 3 December (01483 440000)