

## Features

# Primary school play brings the history of the Holocaust home



**Rollo Hoskyns-Abraham, Tom Coburn, Una Clay Wallers, Ella May, Zach May, Theo Stutchbury, Layli Koomen and Nara Matteu.**

**Photo: DAN MAY**

AMIDST of one of the darkest times in history, three men brought a glimpse of light into the lives of children being kept in concentration camps through the power of music and theatre.

Last week, the children of Whitfield Primary School put on a performance of *Brundibar*, originally a children's opera written by Jewish Czech composer Hans Krása and librettist Adolf Hoffmeister, after being moved by its meaningful message.

Written in Prague whilst the shadow of war hung over Europe amidst rising anti-Semitism

propelled by the Nazi party, Krása and Hoffmeister's *Brundibar* featured anti-Nazi symbolism, with themes of fighting against oppression and persecution at its core.

Whitfield's production was based on a later picture book with the same title by Tony Kushner, and illustrated by Maurice Sendak.

The story centres around two children Aninka and Pepi ek on their journey to find their sick mother milk, which the doctor said will cure her. Deciding to raise milk money by singing in the market square, the children come up

following year.

"Some of the older pupils have learnt, or are currently learning about the Holocaust and its part in history, so they understand the context of *Brundibar*," said parent and production volunteer Holly Clay.

"We explored with the children themes of persecution in workshops, but we brought it down to the level of bullying so put it into a context they understand.

"They also have learnt about some aspects of Jewish culture too, and seemed to really enjoy that."

Performed at Whitfield Parish Hall, 34 children from reception to year six took part in the production, but *Brundibar* himself, was played by head of the school's drama club and grandparent to three of Whitfield's pupils, Guy Pierce.

"I started the drama group two years ago. Having never worked with children of this age range before I wasn't sure what to expect, but they took to performing immediately," he said.

"It's been amazing to work with children who are so creative and willing to learn. I'm so proud of what they have achieved in this production."

Along with Guy and Holly, the show was built on the creative input from parents and volunteers from parents and volunteers Caroline Wagstaffe, Bill Pierce, Christo Wallers and Tim Rubidge.

"It was an ambitious performance, and a real community

project. Incredibly costumes, sets and music were all created by volunteers," said Tim.

"*Brundibar* encompasses an important message which should never be forgotten. It's a message of standing up for what is right."

Providing music throughout the performance were The Brundibar Band, made up Bill on the double bass, Caroline playing the flute, Oran Villiers-Stuart on the guitar and bouzouki, Jody Koomen on the bouzouki, and Christo, who learnt to play the accordion in only three months just for the production.

All the bands learnt traditional Jewish songs, which Christo then created original lyrics for.

Head of school, Katherine Ayre, described the performance as poignant, and said the story held "universal themes which are still relevant today".

Speaking at the performance, Katherine said: "Whilst it's amazing to watch our school's children shine on stage today, it is also important to remember those children in concentration camps who never got a chance to grow up." Thousands of children were executed in Theresienstadt, as was Krása himself on October 17, 1944.

His legacy however continues to live on through *Brundibar*, and in the hearts of the surviving original cast members and their relatives, who still meet with each other around the world to put on their own productions of the opera.