



The Most Precious of Goods, Marylebone

Theatre review: A hellish Holocaust story that must be retold - 4*

Stripped-back, plain production makes this deceptively simple fable even more powerful

Samantha Spiro narrates the story in 'The Most Precious of Goods' (Photo: Beresford Hodge)

By **Fiona Mountford**

January 24, 2024 11:32 am(Updated 2:18 pm)

At the end of this week, the international calendar marks [Holocaust Memorial Day](#), a sober and vital time of memory and reflection. In honour of this comes a staging of a deceptively simple fable with profound depths of heart and humanity, as well as chilling accounts of the horrors of which people are capable.

[Jean-Claude Grumberg](#) may be a name unfamiliar on this side of the Channel, but he is a well-known author in France whose 2019 novel [La Plus Precieuse des Marchandises](#), from which this play was adapted, was a notable hit that is currently being turned into a film by the team behind 2011 Oscar winner *The Artist*. Grumberg's father and grandparents were all deported from Paris in the Second World War and died in [concentration camps](#), and it is this theme to which he returns continually in his writing.

Onstage cellist Gemma Rosefield plays startling bursts of music to underscore the shifting beats of the story (Photo: Beresford Hodge)

On a raised platform surrounded by leaves, our narrator ([Samantha Spiro](#)) sits in a cosy armchair. She has a large storybook open on her lap and, in warm and appealing tones, starts telling us of a poor woodcutter and his wife who live deep in a forest. So far so fairy tale, but on her daily

walks the woodcutter's wife sees a train, and "not a cheerful-looking train", that journeys through the forest. This train, we learn subsequently, is travelling from Paris to the "heart of hell" in Poland.

On this train are a young couple with their newborn twins ("Was spring 1942 the best time for a Jewish child to be born in France?"). Realising their deadly destination, the man throws one of the babies from the window. The woodcutter's wife, unhappily childless, picks her up and thus begins a quest for the survival of both. There is brutality ahead, but also remarkable kindness in the darkest of times.

[Nicolas Kent](#)'s production is perforce somewhat static, but the gentleness, poise and quiet sorrow of Spiro's richly engaging performance limits the detrimental impact of this. Onstage cellist Gemma Rosefield plays startling bursts of music to underscore the shifting beats of the story, and black-and-white video projections offer a changing vista of impressionistic backdrops.

Boards at the sides of the stage are covered with row upon row of long numbers, in sombre acknowledgement of the [tattoos on the arms of Jewish prisoners](#) in the camps. Incidentally, "Jewish" is a word that is almost never used here; the preferred term is "heartless ones".

This is a striking example of theatre stripped back to its simplest, but the power of the storytelling was such that my imagination filled with the characters of a fully realised, three-dimensional narrative. Some stories are so important that they need to be retold, time and time again.

To 3 February (mostpreciousgoods.com)

Link to review: [The I](#)

Arts review

THEATRE

The Most Precious of Goods

MARYLEBONE THEATRE,
LONDON

★★★★★

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Samantha Spiro gives a warm and engaging performance as the narrator **BERESFORD HODGE**

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To 3 February
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FIONA MOUNTFORD

FINANCIAL TIMES



Samantha Spiro in 'The Most Precious of Goods' © Beresford Hodge The Most Precious of Goods MARYLEBONE THEATRE, LONDON For years, director Nicolas Kent has pushed at the boundaries of theatre in a particularly quiet way. While artistic director at the Tricycle (now Kiln) Theatre in north London, he programmed whole days dedicated to weighty topics, discussed through multiple very short plays. He also mounted a series of forensic political dramas that reproduced, verbatim, excerpts from major public inquiries. His two most recent productions painstakingly distilled sections of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. Quietly devastating, these were superb examples of theatre as vital public witness-bearing. In a sense, *The Most Precious of Goods* is a successor to these: theatre as reflection and commemoration. Translated and dramatised by Kent from Jean-Claude Grumberg's bestselling 2019 French novella, it combines the cosiness of a fireside story with the horrors of the Nazi death camps. Samantha Spiro (who took over when actor Allan Corduner fell ill) settles herself in an armchair, opens a book and begins with the familiar "Once upon a time . . ." What follows is a solo performance (with music) that entwines fairytale settings and characters — a poor woodcutter and his wife, a babe in the woods — with the grim details of transportation and mass murder. One day, the woodcutter's wife, who yearns for a child, finds a small bundle thrown from one of the trains that speed through the forest and so is forever linked to the Jewish trainee surgeon and his family who are on that train, headed (though it is never named) to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She cares for the tiny infant, becoming a beacon of humanity amid unspeakable horrors. The fairytale charm of the storytelling is in constant conflict with the material it handles, which somehow makes the facts freshly disturbing. Spiro, accompanied on stage by cellist Gemma Rosefield, who enriches

the story with evocative snatches of melody, is a gripping storyteller. It's a curious evening: not quite drama, not quite reading. But it's quietly powerful and, in the final instance, about love. ★★☆☆☆ To February 3, marylebonetheatre.com

Link to review : [Financial Times](#)

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FINANCIAL TIMES

Thursday 25 January 2024

ARTS

Western where chaps and gals blur

THEATRE
Sarah Hemming

Soon Lucy Liu (Lee Braithwaite) has dumped the skirts and become plain Lou, the sheriff (Paul Hunter) has kicked the booze and slipped into silky skirts and Miss Lillian has fallen head-over-heels in love. Act one culminates in a riotous celebration of difference. Then the men return.

Josephine, who wrote *I, Joan* for Shakespeare's Globe, brings the same zesty wit to this fantasia (an RSC production), which has great fun crashing macho Western stereotypes up against queer culture. Bar brawls, shoot-outs and showdowns rub shoulders with cabaret and highly stylised performance. It is directed with tongue firmly in cheek by Josephine together with Sean Holmes.

In 'Cowboys', bar brawls, shoot-outs and showdowns rub shoulders with cabaret and stylised performance

It's both entertaining and purposeful, reminding us how myths such as the Hollywood version of the Wild West are coined, and then reframing them to include queer characters and a less binary world.

But after a while the show begins to unravel. Like many a take-out, it goes on for far too long. The narrative drifts and sags, the style begins to feel laboured, and the lack of nuance becomes more problematic as the production stretches on into its third hour. There's also a tendency to state what has already been shown through the action. It's a show that handles important themes with wit, warmth and invention. But serious pruning would improve it considerably.

To February 10, royalcourttheatre.com

centre are Leo (Paul Rider) and Shani (Nathalie Barclay), a Jewish couple who fled Nazi Europe and whose relationship is cracking under the strain. He drinks; she finds solace with wide-boy neighbour George (Timothy O'Hara). On the landing upstairs live Mrs Pond (Alix Dummore), suffering from PTSD, and her vulnerably needy 17-year-old daughter (Nell Williams).

They are all rattling along, unhappily but steadily, when Sammy, Leo's estranged teenage son from his first marriage, comes to stay. He brings a record player and hops, but also baggage of his own as he questions his faith. Things come to a head when Shani invites the rabbi round and a stifled tea party erupts into full-blown hostility.

Staged by Two's Company, it's a drama that hums with authenticity and Tricia Thorns, directing, achieves a grainy evocation of bomb-site-riddled postwar London. Hastings (who wrote the hit play *Tom & Viv*) expresses sharply too the tension between generations traumatised by war, but in conflicting ways. Leo wants peace and quiet; his son wants jazz.

But it's also very much the work of a young writer: rather clunkily constructed and awkward in its confrontation of ideas. The fractured style in part matches the damaged world that Hastings portrays, but even so, it's hard to pull off. The scenes involving Mrs Pond and her daughter in particular feel stilted and overburden a play already heavy with meaning. In the second half Sammy retreats into sullen anger – but to play and banter back.

That said, Eddie Boyce, in a professional stage debut as Sammy, invests the young character with vital vulnerability and brittle uncertainty. There are lovely performances too from Rider, as Leo, a man buckling under his experience, Nicholas Day as the bemused rabbi, and Sue Kelvin as a worldly-wise landlady.

To February 3, arcolatheatre.com

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The fairy-tale charm of the story itself is in constant conflict with the material it handles, which somehow makes the facts freshly disturbing. Spire, accompanied on stage by cello Gemma Rosefield, who enriches the story with evocative snatches of melody, is a gripping storyteller. It's a curious evening: not quite drama, not quite reading. But it's quietly powerful and, in the final instance, about love.

To February 3, marylebonetheatre.com

The war has gone, for the characters in Michael Hastings' *Don't Destroy Me*, but its shadow lingers on. Informed by the writer's own experience, this 1956 play focuses on a handful of residents in a south London lodging house. At the

Top: Sophie Melville and Vinnie Heaven in 'Cowboys'. Above: Samantha Spiro in 'The Most Precious of Goods'

For years, director Nicolas Kent has pushed at the boundaries of theatre in a particularly quiet way. While artistic director at the Tricycle (now Kiln) Theatre in north London, he programmed whole days dedicated to weighty topics, discussed through multiple very short plays. He also mounted a series of forensic political dramas that reproduced, verbatim, excerpts from major public inquiries. His two most recent productions painstakingly distilled sections of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. Quietly devastating, these were superb examples of theatre as vital public witness-bearing.

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What follows is a solo performance (with music) that entwines fairy-tale settings and characters – a woodcutter and his wife, a babe in the woods – with the

perfectly balanced in intonation and timbres, but more Ravel than Mahler. After the intermission it was Bartók, orchestra violist Stanley Konopka's arrangement of the String Quartet No 3 for double string orchestra, and *The Miraculous Mandarin Suite*. Hearing the intimate mysteries of the quartet through a large ensemble was an uncanny experience, testament to the orchestra's excellence. The suite was the finest thing on the night, the energy meeting technique and colour to spark a fire. ★★★★★

The following Tuesday, the Philadelphia Orchestra and conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin nearly combusted with an intriguing programme of Stravinsky's 1947 revision of *Petrushka*, Kurt Weill's Symphony No 2 and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, in a special performance with pianist Marcus Roberts' Trio in the blues and boogie.

In *Rhapsody in Blue*, they were matched by Roberts, bassist Martin Jaffe, and drummer Jason Marsalis. Instead of the regular piano solo, Roberts and group filled those passages with extensive improvisations, the pianist taking short Gershwin's phrases and pouring in the blues and boogie. The orchestra's virtuosity was



Cowboys
Royal Court Theatre, London
★★★★☆

The Most Precious of Goods
Marylebone Theatre, London
★★★★☆

Don't Destroy Me
Arcoia Theatre, London
★★★★☆



Top: Sophie Melville and Vinnie Heaven in 'Cowboys'. Above: Samantha Spiro in 'The Most Precious of Goods'



Eddie Boyce, left, and Nicholas Day in 'Don't Destroy Me' – Phil Samson

Musical riches from turbulent times

CLASSICAL

Cleveland Orchestra
Philadelphia Orchestra
Carnegie Hall, New York

George Grella

"Fall of the Weimar Republic" is Carnegie Hall's in-season festival this year, running to the end of May. Musically, this may be the richest classical era of the 20th century, with dynamic mixes and advancements of styles that mirrored the social and political changes and conflicts in Germany's brief, and tragic, attempt at democracy between the wars.

The opening performance from the Cleveland Orchestra and conductor Franz Welser-Möst was a veritable tip

The Observer

The week in theatre: Northanger Abbey; The Most Precious of Goods – review

Orange Tree, Richmond; Marylebone theatre, London

Zoe Cooper's vivaciously queer take on Jane Austen will make readers and audiences think twice. And Nicolas Kent distils a Holocaust fable to its chilling bare bones



Susannah Clapp
[@susannahclapp](#)

Sun 28 Jan 2024 10.30 GMT

Nicolas Kent is the theatre's pre-eminent chronicler of 20th- and 21st-century catastrophe and reckoning

The Most Precious of Goods is above all an act of commemoration. Jean-Claude Grumberg's play, translated and directed by Nicolas Kent, was staged in the week of [Holocaust Memorial Day](#), which marks the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945. Grumberg's father and grandparents were deported from Paris in 1942 and died in the camps.

Samantha Spiro narrates this warning disguised as fiction, seated like a granny telling a bedtime story: "There was a woodcutter and his wife..." The far-away-and-long-ago folktale simplicity makes the clarity of its 20th-century events the starker. This tale of persecution, flight, death, love and asylum is centred on a Jewish baby passed by her father through the window of a train headed to a camp: she is taken in, sheltered and adored by a stranger.



[View image in fullscreen](#)

Samantha Spiro and cellist Gemma Rosefield in *The Most Precious of Goods*: ‘a warning disguised as fiction’. Photograph: Beresford Hodge

Kent, the theatre’s pre-eminent chronicler of 20th- and 21st-century catastrophe and reckoning, stages the fable in distilled form. Spiro narrates crisply, without emotive wobbles, occasionally running through her fingers a white embroidered prayer shawl. Alongside her, the cellist Gemma Rosefield emits touches of period detail, inner atmosphere and precise sound effects: a lullaby, a hint of the Marseillaise, the rattle of a train, eldritch gibbers from a sinister wood. Behind the two women are long columns of concentration camp numbers and black-and-white images: a briar-tangled wood, a line of railway tracks, footprints in snow. The monochrome is an indication of time, mood and a moral certainty. The evening is more rapt than urgent. Yet at the end there is a sudden swerve, as fairytale meets fake news. Is what she has told us true, Spiro asks? Of course not. All invented. There were of course no camps, no deaths.

The Most Precious of Goods ★★★

The Most Precious of Goods is at the Marylebone theatre, London, until 3 February

Link to Review: [The Observer](#)

Theatre

Under the bonnet

Zoe Cooper's vivaciously queer take on Jane Austen will make readers and audiences think twice. And Nicolas Kent distils a Holocaust fable to its chilling bare bones

Susannah Clapp



Northanger Abbey
Orange Tree, Richmond, Surrey;
until 24 February

The Most Precious of Goods
Marylebone, London NW1;
until Saturday

What a whirligig of talent there is in the Orange Tree's **Northanger Abbey**. Of all kinds: writing, acting, directing, skittering, parodying, excavating, bouncing lightly on ribboned shoes. Yet what eventual seepage of energy, not because too little is on offer but because too much is going on in too many directions – and for too long.

Zoe Cooper is not the first dramatist to unbutton Jane Austen's verbal bodice. Three years ago Isobel McArthur brilliantly lit up the stage by bringing class consciousness and karaoke to the Bennet family and their servants in *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of). Still, Cooper must be the first to queer the bonneted one on stage. She is not saying that Austen's early novel – usually thought of as the account of an ingenue's awakening and a satire on gothic fiction – is actually all gay, but responding to a particular thread of feeling. The vivacity of Tessa Walker's production shows she is on to something.

Three actors gender-jumble the action. Rebecca Banatvala mainly sticks to being heroine Catherine Morland – candid and appealing, with poke bonnet and wide, flashing eyes. AK Golding shifts in seconds

from being a pipe-smoking pater ("Harrumph") to a shrewd and shiny Isabella Thorpe (ix), one of those dodgy glamourpusses Austen paints with so much gleam, while ostensibly disapproving. She is more than plausible as Cath's love magnet: if anything, Cooper is softer on her than Austen is, turning a hectic, sentimentalised attachment to sexual attraction (no more than a kiss is seen, but there is talk of entwined limbs), Sam Newton has a particularly good time. At one moment he is Cath's mother, explaining she's going to nip up a precarious ladder to pick cherries, do some coppicing and "then I shall have a baby". At the next he is the unnerving sister of the supposed hero Henry Tilney: wandering around Northanger Abbey as hatchet-faced as Mrs Danvers, with cropped hair, a sugar-pink dress and an obsession with buckets.

Hannah Sibai's design multitasks as energetically as the characters. Piled-up cases serve as a carriage (a sulky Cath has to be prompted to bounce up and down to show the horses are moving); a table doubles as a bed (knocked on to demonstrate its softness); a model of Northanger Abbey, with turrets and fir trees, is whipped out of a trunk. Everything and everyone is on the move, changing, making themselves up. Heroine Cath eventually turns into the author of her own story.

There are eventually too many double-takes, with Cooper's underlinings and alternative outcomes overlaid on Austen's glinting satires: it is as if the action were being viewed while wearing specs on top of contact lenses.

'A particular thread of feeling': AK Golding (ix) and Rebecca Banatvala (Cath) in Northanger Abbey. Photograph by Pamela Ruth



The fleet pace slackens. Still, the important thing is the production's vitality. Cooper is particularly shrewd about the shadowy hero, also played by Newton, who displays such an astonishing interest in – almost obsession with – muslin: an early chat-up line has him worrying that Catherine's sprigged material may not wash well, then gently wittering that if it frays it could be made into a cap. Or a hankie. Or a cloak. You might think he was a girl.

The 21st century swings easily into the 19th, sometimes overlapping in jargon: startlingly, in the novel Austen refers to the "delightful habit of journaling". *Northanger Abbey* may not tread the Empire line but it will make readers

Samantha Spiro and cellist Gemma Rosefield in The Most Precious of Goods: 'a warning disguised as fiction'. Photograph by Beresford Hodge

“It's as if the action were being viewed while wearing specs on top of contact lenses

and audiences think twice and hear better. Suddenly the heroine's longing for excitement does not sound merely like a wish for social life. On press night a sympathetic roar greeted her exclamation: "I find myself longing for BALLS!"

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Kent, the theatre's pre-eminent chronicler of 20th- and 21st-century catastrophe and reckoning, stages the fable in distilled form. Spiro narrates crisply, without emotive wobbles, occasionally running through her fingers a white embroidered prayer shawl. Alongside her, the cellist Gemma Rosefield emits touches of period detail, inner atmosphere and precise sound effects: a lullaby, a hint of the Marseillaise, the rattle of a train, eldritch gibbers from a sinister wood. Behind the two women are long columns of concentration camp numbers and black-and-white images: a briar-tangled wood, a line of railway tracks, footprints in snow. The monochrome is an indication of time, mood and a moral certainty. The evening is more rapt than urgent. Yet at the end there is a sudden swerve, as fairytale meets fake news. Is what she has told us true, Spiro asks? Of course not. All invented. There were of course no camps, no deaths.

Short

The Frogs

Royal & Derngate, Northampton;
until Saturday

The keynotes of the time are chaos, greed and corruption: drama is dying. Cultural commentators lamenting the state of theatre over past weeks? Yes, but also the setting for *The Frogs*, first produced in 405BC. Aristophanes's play has the quality of an oxymoron: its subject is literary criticism and yet it is considered to be one of the

greatest comedies of all time. This collision of seeming opposites is one of the things that make it a neat fit for theatre company Spymonkey, whose previous clown-theatre style productions have included the tragedy/blockbuster mashup *Oedipussy* and a hilarious, breakneck romp through all the deaths in Shakespeare's plays (*The Complete Deaths*). Here, they bring the ancient comedy to life by mocking it for not being "in the now".



'A classic comic double act': Toby Park and Aitor Basauri in The Frogs. Manuel Harlan

The great tragedian Euripides has died. Dionysus, god of drama, despairing of new writing, decides to go to Hades to bring him back to life. He takes with him his slave, Xanthias. The characters are a classic comic double act (played by Toby Park and Aitor Basauri). Along the way, they encounter a range of go's, monsters and other creatures (all variously embodied by company newbie Jacoba Williams in Lucy Bradridge's delirious costumes), as well as the titular frogs (an energetically tap-dancing community chorus). Writer Carl Grose follows the

structure of the original while cracking open spaces between scenes to reveal a present-day hinterland to the production. This is a crazy backstory, combining an improbable fiction and a true-life tragedy (one that mirrors Dionysus's quest). An awful lot is going on here: sometimes, too much at others, the action sags or feels forced. That said, under director Joyce Henderson, the juggling of broad comedy with genuine emotion is almost as engaging as it is audacious, and the actors' skilfully calibrated "overacting" real fun to watch.

Clare Brennan



The Most Precious of Goods review – a stark fairytale set against the Holocaust

David Jays

Thu 25 Jan 2024 11.14 GMT



Marylebone theatre, London

Samantha Spiro conducts listeners urgently through this horrifying story of a baby thrown in desperation from an Auschwitz train

Thu 25 Jan 2024 11.14 GMT

If writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, as the philosopher Theodor Adorno famously said, how about a fairytale? Can the consoling archetypes of a simple story address the Shoah? That's the challenge in this evening drawn from a 2019 novella by Jean-Claude Grumberg, a rapt piece of storytelling delivered by Samantha Spiro.

Spiro settles on a faded armchair, opens up a big red story book and begins: "Once upon a time." Here is a wintry forest, a childless woodcutter and his wife, a baby separated from her twin and raised as another's. It might all lead to happy ever after if it wasn't for the unyielding context. A train passes the forest, speeding French Jews to a concentration camp. The baby is flung from the train by her father in a desperate bid to save her. The woodcutter's wife must protect this most precious bundle against an antisemitic husband, snooping neighbours and callous military.



Translation and direction are by Nicolas Kent, best known for tribunal plays based on inquiries into Stephen Lawrence's murder, Bloody Sunday and the Grenfell Tower fire. They favour stark fact and plain staging: in a different key, this piece does the same. Beside Carly Brownbridge's stage design, strewn with dead leaves, silhouettes of bare trees are built from rows of serial numbers, like those tattooed on prisoners in the camps. The most theatrical flourish is the accompaniment by cellist Gemma Rosefield: her own music is sombre and spiky, but over-familiar melodies also stipple the piece.

Spiro, her voice crackling and confiding, her eyes beetle-dark with worry, conducts us through the tale with terrible urgency. She weaves together the naive tropes and bleak horrors of Grumberg's tale, from the wife radiantly welcoming the baby to the father's terrible action: "don't choose, don't think."

Spiro is leaving the stage when she turns back, as if responding to a question. Is this a true story? "No, not at all." How could this cruel parental decision and so monstrous a context be true: "no ash, no tears, nothing." A projection appears after the curtain call, detailing what happened to France's Jews and Grumberg's own family. You want truth? Here it is. At [Marylebone theatre, London](#), until 3 February.

Link to review: [The Guardian](#)



THEATRE | DOMINIC MAXWELL

The Most Precious of Goods: what happens when a star drops out

In this moving play, Samantha Spiro follows in the proud footsteps of understudies who step in — and step up

Dominic Maxwell

Sunday January 28 2024, 12.01am, *The Sunday Times*



*Whimsical: Samantha Spiro*BERESFORD HODGE

A

woman sits reading from a hardbound script on her knee. Is this, you wonder, one of those unfortunate yet perversely exciting instances of the show having to go on?

We know that Samantha Spiro (Sex Education, Grandma's House) stepped in at short notice to perform Jean-Claude Grumberg's Holocaust fable. We know she replaced Allan Corduner (Topsy-Turvy), who is recovering from pneumonia. And if you were there when, say, Noma Dumezweni replaced Kim Cattrall in the Royal Court play Linda with only a few days' notice in 2015, performing while clutching the script or consulting secreted bits of it around the set, you'll know that a sense of collusion between performer and audience on these occasions can outweigh any lack of polish.

The audience's disappointment when Sheridan Smith pulled out of Funny Girl in the West End for a few weeks in 2016 was countered by the thrill of seeing her understudy, Natasha J Barnes, make the role her own. She earned her standing ovations. So did Jessica Daley this month when she drove 150 miles to become the stopgap star of Evita at the Curve in Leicester. Not only had the lead been unable to perform, so had her understudy.

In pure showbiz terms, though, Spiro's sudden arrival has lower stakes. The plan was always for this to be an exercise in storytelling, text in hand, against a backdrop of a screen and grey images of trees. In human terms, however, the stakes could scarcely be higher. Grumberg's telling purposely mixes the whimsical with the plain-speaking in an attempt to make his story's awful events palatable as well as palpable.

*His novella has been translated into 20 languages since it was published in France in 2019. It uses the form of a fairytale; the forthcoming film version, by Michel Hazanavicius, the director of *The Artist*, is an animation. Yet Spiro knows that the tone can never be untethered, even if now and then she is asked to address us with a kind of Roald Dahl-ish jocular intimacy, reflecting on the nature of mawkish fairytales. Grumberg also gives her unfablelike references to the Red Army, a paediatrician and the Pioneer Corps. We find out at the end that Convoy Number 49, the number of the train the protagonist and his family has to take from Paris to Auschwitz, was also the real train that took Grumberg's father to his death in March 1943. Four months earlier his blind grandfather had been taken on Convoy Number 45.*



Gemma Rosefield plays alongside SpiroBERESFORD HODGE

That information is projected on the screen. Spiro's job is to stand at half a step's remove from such awful real-life detail. She does it with charm, pace and purpose. Performing on a platform ringed with leaves, dressed in storyteller's mufti of skirt, blouse and waistcoat, she alternates between telling of a woodcutter and his wife, who live and work in a Polish forest, and of the seemingly doomed French Jewish couple who pass by them confined in their goods train. In desperation, the father chucks one of their twin babies on to the snowy ground. The woodcutter's wife duly finds her. Will the baby survive? Will her parents? Will love conquer all? Grumberg knows fairytales can hold the awful and the hopeful in the same hand.

Nicolas Kent directs and translates with spare skill. A cellist, Gemma Rosefield, sits to Spiro's left, sporadically playing. Those grey trees turn out to be made of thousands of prisoner numbers. For all that, I can't pretend it's quite fully realised: would Spiro connect more directly with us without a script to look at? It's more than just reading out of a book, but less than giving it full dramatic life. Sometimes the characters aren't vivid enough to stop these 80 minutes from sagging.

And yet you still, like me, may find yourself tearing up by the close. First a fable, then a potent reminder of the power of love, then a potent reminder of the power of organised barbarism, it pulls all its strands together at the end. Great theatre? Maybe not. Yet I suspect its carefully odd mix of tones will live on in my head for a while.

The Most Precious of Goods

Marylebone Theatre, London NW1

★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Link to review : [Sunday Times](#)

had the same haircut that I had in primary school.

Technically the show was a competition, an opportunity for civil servants to take on the Gladiators in a series of challenges called Hang Tough and The Gauntlet, while inspiring children. But I knew the moment I saw Jonsson straddling this glowing pork loin on some faraway sunlounger that it was *Love Island* before there was *Love Island*: an opportunity to ogle hot oiled bods and thighs.

How the bodies have changed, though. In the 1990s the men were chunkier (steroids) and the women looked like Xenia Onatopp. Now there's a shape for every taste. Fury (a real star) is boxy and small: we're told she likes "rugby". Apollo, meanwhile, looks like he should be appearing in a Brat Pack film except he is 6ft 6in. The show hasn't changed much. The challenges are all familiar, although there was a new game last night: The Ring, in which the contestants must, er, touch a G-spot at the centre of a ring. But it's all the same helium high jinks and fun, and hugely watchable with bags of personality: there are silly captions such as "Giant has the same wingspan as an ostrich".

What has changed is the presenter. No gorgeous Ulrika, it's Bradley Walsh and his son, Barney. Who gave this gig to these two chaffering molluscs and their dire jokes? I couldn't watch them. I thought the whole point of *Gladiators* was that the presenters should be sports adjacent. But Barney is a creepy little child who looks like an insistent Victorian suitor/laughable Austen parson soon to be turned down by our heroine. I bet he couldn't run without vomiting. Did his father insist he came on with him?

On Apple TV+ there was *Masters of the Air*, an epic set in the Second World War. Now this was sumptuous. Planes crashed balletically in the air: the cast staggered under the weight of their luscious uniforms. How many sheep had been sacrificed to make Austin Butler's gorgeous flying jackets? One of them made him look like he was carrying a whole episode of *One Man and His Dog* round his neck.

Butler plays Bucky Barnes, a flying ace in the "Bloody Hundredth", a unit famous for their huge losses (177 planes) because they performed "daylight precision bombing" raids rather than attacks at night.

I'm new to Butler, who won an Oscar for playing Elvis – but here he is, playing Elvis yet again, sinking moodily into his bomber in a sweeping, impressive television series that looks as, increasingly, television does now: more like film than film.

I watched the first episode and loved it, then watched the second, and realised it was just the first episode all over again.

A crisis into a drama

In this moving play, Samantha Spiro follows in the proud footsteps of understudies who step in – and step up

Dominic Maxwell



The Most Precious of Goods

Marlybone Theatre, London NW1

★★★

A woman sits reading from a hardbound script on her knee. Is this, you wonder, one of those unfortunate yet perversely exciting instances of the show having to go on?

We know that Samantha Spiro (*Sex Education*, *Grandma's House*) stepped in at short notice to perform Jean-Claude Grumberg's Holocaust fable. We know she replaced Allan Corduner (*Topsy-Turvy*), who is recovering from pneumonia. And if you were there when, say, Noma Dumezweni replaced Kim Cattrall in the Royal Court play *Linda* with only a few days' notice in 2015, performing while clutching the script or consulting secreted bits of it around the set, you'll know that a sense of collusion between performer and audience on these occasions can outweigh any lack of polish.

The audience's disappointment when Sheridan Smith pulled out of *Funny Girl* in the West End for a few weeks in 2016 was countered by the thrill of seeing her understudy, Natasha J Barnes, make the role her own. She earned her standing ovations. So did Jessica Daley this month when she drove 150 miles to become the stopgap star of *Evita* at the Curve in Leicester. Not only had the lead been unable to perform, so had her understudy.

In pure showbiz

Whimsical

Samantha Spiro

terms, though, Spiro's sudden arrival has lower stakes. The plan was always for this to be an exercise in storytelling, text in hand, against a backdrop of a screen and grey images of trees. In human terms, however, the stakes could scarcely be higher. Grumberg's telling purposely mixes the whimsical with the plain-speaking in an attempt to make his story's awful events palatable as well as palpable.

His novella has been translated into 20 languages since it was published in France in 2019. It uses the form of a fairytale; the forthcoming film version, by Michel Hazanavicius, the director of *The Artist*, is an animation. Yet Spiro knows that the tone can never be untethered, even if now and then she is asked to address us with a kind of Roald Dahl-ish jocular intimacy, reflecting on the nature of mawkish fairytales. Grumberg also gives her unfablelike references to the Red Army, a paediatrician and the Pioneer Corps. We find out at the end that Convoy Number 49, the number of the train the protagonist and his family

has to take from Paris to Auschwitz, was also the real train that took Grumberg's father to his death in March 1943. Four months earlier his blind grandfather had been taken on Convoy Number 45.

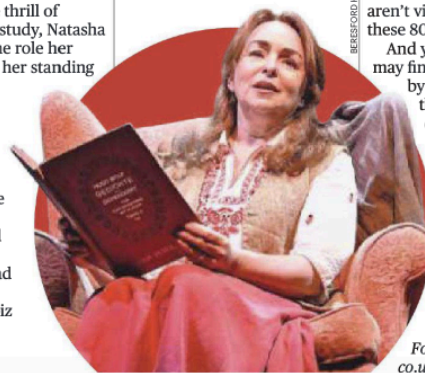
That information is projected on the screen. Spiro's job is to stand at half a step's remove from such awful real-life detail. She does it with charm, pace and purpose. Performing on a platform ringed with leaves, dressed in storyteller's mufti of skirt, blouse and waistcoat, she alternates between telling of a woodcutter and his wife, who live and work in a Polish forest, and of the seemingly doomed French Jewish couple who pass by them confined in their goods train. In desperation, the father chucks one of their twin babies on to the snowy ground. The woodcutter's wife duly finds her. Will the baby survive? Will her parents? Will love conquer all? Grumberg knows fairytales can hold the awful and the hopeful in the same hand.

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For tickets, visit thetimes.co.uk/tickets

“Spiro performs with charm, pace and purpose”



BERNARD JACQUE

The Most Precious of Goods at Marylebone Theatre review: a savagely bitter tale of the Holocaust

Produced to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, it's adapted by director Nicolas Kent from a novella by Parisian writer Jean-Claude Grumberg



SAMANTHA SPIRO. LEFT, AND CELLIST GEMMA ROSEFIELD IN THE MOST PRECIOUS OF GOODS AT MARYLEBONE THEATRE
BERESFORD HODGE



[NICK CURTIS](#)

At once savagely bitter and chirpily sweet, this show extracts a cruel fairytale from events of the Holocaust. From an armchair, Samantha Spiro (who took over when original actor Allan Corduner fell ill) reads us the tale of a father and a baby girl who survive Auschwitz at a terrible cost. Cellist Gemma Rosefield, seated on the other side of the stage, provides punctuating snatches of classical and Yiddish tunes and lullabies.

Produced to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on Jan 27, it's adapted by director Nicolas Kent from a novella by Parisian writer Jean-Claude Grumberg, who was born in 1939 and whose father and grandparents were murdered in extermination camps. If the sing-song cadences and simple repetitions of the narrative jar, the underlying message – that only love and a recognition of common humanity can save us – feels all the more urgent given the ongoing war in Gaza.

“Once upon a time...” begins Spiro, pitching us into the story of a poor woodcutter in a wartime forest, and his wife who longs for a child. Trains regularly pass through their corner of Poland, hands thrusting notes out of barred windows at the woman: but she is illiterate and can't read them.



SAMANTHA SPIRO

BERESFORD HODGE

The perspective shifts. In Paris, a Jewish trainee surgeon and his wife have been blessed with an adorable twin boy and girl while in prison in 1942. Before their first birthday the starving babies and their desperate parents are loaded into a train. Realising they're headed for death, and that his wife in any case can only nourish one child, he grabs the nearer of the two, bundles it in a prayer shawl, and drops it into the snow by the woodcutter's wife.

It's Sophie's Choice, but even more random and horrific. I won't spoil the further plot but suffice to say it shows how love can transcend centuries of inculcated prejudice, even when hardened by hardship. It also touches on the racking nature of survivor's guilt.

Though it sounds like a bedtime story in Spiro's warm, engaging recitation, the tale reeks of mortality and sorrow, offset by occasional gallows humour. The set comprises two panels depicting a forest of numbers – referencing those tattooed on camp inmates' arms – flanking a screen showing snowy trees and bleak constellations.

It's a largely static piece of work and a strange one. The juxtaposition of fairytale lyricism and the psychotic brutality of genocide is chilling and often disconcerting. But in writing this, I find it's made me think more deeply than most plays do. *Marylebone Theatre, to February 3; buy tickets [here](#)*

Link in review: [The Evening Standard](#)

The Most Precious Of Goods (Marylebone Theatre)

Verdict: Healing fable

Rating: ★★★★★ The Nazi Holocaust doesn't obviously lend itself to folk tale treatment. We tend to think of those tales as bed-time stories, not records of unimaginable horror. And yet Samantha Spiro's reading of Jean-Claude Grumberg's novella, written in the style of a children's fable, is a heart-warming vision of redemption, to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day tomorrow.



Samantha Spiro reading Jean-Claude Grumberg's novella



Samantha Spiro and cellist Gemma Rosefield

Translated from the French by director Nicolas Kent and performed with cello music played by Gemma Rosefield, *The Most Precious Of Goods* is the story of an old woodcutter's wife who rescues a starving baby after it is flung by its desperate father into the snow . . . from a train heading to a concentration camp.

The story's message — all you need is love — is a little trite, but the power of folk tales to heal and transform is not to be underestimated. Sitting in a big winged armchair, Spiro's reading did remind me of Jackanory on children's TV many years ago. But she, too, nurses the story's tender moments, which become the seeds of redemption. Kent's staging is respectfully solemn and Rosefield's cello adds longing to snatches of Bach and Chopin.

Link to review : [Daily Mail](#)

It's Friday! THEATRE

Austen fans be varned: it's grim up Northanger Abbey

JANE AUSTEN died in 1817, just before her early novel *Northanger Abbey* was finally published. Now she may be forgiven for dying all over again, thanks to the slow-motion muddle of Zoe Cooper's stage adaptation, which is touring to Bolton, Scarborough and Keswick after its run in Richmond.

It's probably to be expected that Cooper has given a cunning lesbian twist to the story of Austen's heroine Catherine, a young vicar's daughter determined to make her fantasies of gothic melodrama fit reality. And there are the inevitable side-swipes at the patriarchy,

which are more or less in line with Austen's take on the world. But Cooper could at least have just got on with it. Instead, the first 45 minutes of her script (and Tessa Walker's two-and-a-half hour production) are taken up with a caricatured representation of Cath's tomboy childhood in . . . Yorkshire (moved there from Wiltshire, perhaps to suit audiences during the northern leg of the tour).



Tomboy: Banatvala stars as Cath

When Cath — as we must now call her — does make it to the balls in Bath, minge in High Society and find herself falling for gold-digging Sapphist Isabella ("Iz"), we finally have some drama to engage with. There's also an upswing in the acting, which sets aside the burlesque and gets closer to the savvier wiles of Austen's wit. Walker's production, though, fails to immerse us in Cath's gothic fantasies and instead allows Hannah Silva's design to present a floor-to-ceiling shocking pink (in case we hadn't got that it's a "queer" take). Even so, all three actors have their moments. Rebecca Banatvala makes a spirited Cath. Sam Newton plays multiple roles, including Cath's dull fiancé who serves as a heterosexual beard. And there's something of Fiona Shaw's hauteur in A.K. Golding's Iz, an imperiously high-end lesbian with her eyes on a cash dividend. If only they'd focused on all that, it might have been more fun. Either way, it needs another title to acknowledge that they've driven a coach and horses through Austen's original, calling it *Wuthering Abbey* or *Northanger Heights* might also recognise Cath's relocation to Bronte country. ■ THE Nazi Holocaust doesn't obviously lend itself to folk tale treatment. We tend to think of those tales as bed-time stories, not records of unimaginable horror. And yet Samantha Spiro's reading of Jean-Claude Grumberg's novella, written in the style of a children's fable, is a heart-warming vision of redemption, to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day tomorrow.

Translated from the French by director Nicolas Kent and performed with cello music played by Gemma

If the entitled brats don't get you, the 90s tunes will

Cruel Intentions. The 90s Musical (The Other Place, London)
Verdict: Werdily inescapable ★★☆☆



Plotting: McCausky and Bravo are superb in nostalgic send-up

Daniel Bravo (nice name), her cad-dish step-brother Sebastian, whom she recruits to pop the cherry of chaste Abbie Budden's Annette (Reese Witherspoon in the movie). She wasn't banking on them falling in love. Then Sebastian has to decide the type of guy he wants to be. Cue Losing My Religion. Resistance is hopeless.

GEORGINA BROWN

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- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <p>TRACK LIST</p> <p>● Disc one — Frank Sinatra</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Come Fly With Me 2 The Lady Is a Tramp 3 One for My Baby (And One More for the Road) 4 You Make Me Feel So Young 5 I Got a Kick Out of You 6 My Funny Valentine 7 Chicago 8 Love and Marriage 9 Night and Day 10 I've Got You Under My Skin 11 Anything Goes 12 In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning 13 Makin' Whoopee 14 A Foggy Day 15 Nice 'n' Easy 16 How About You? 17 Wilchycoff 18 You're Getting to Be a Habit With Me 19 Nice Work if You Can Get It | <p>● Disc two — Dean Martin</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Go, Go, Go 2 That's Amore 3 Sway 4 Memories Are Made of This 5 Volare 6 Mambo Italiano 7 Standing on the Corner 8 How Do You Like Your Eggs in the Morning? 9 When You're Smiling 10 Come Back to Soreto 11 In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening 12 Return to Me (Ritorno a Me) 13 I Can't Give You Anything But Love 14 Besame Mucho (Kiss Me) 15 Arrivederci Roma 16 You Belong to Me 17 The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane 18 On an Evening in Roma 19 Sott' er Celo De Roma 20 Buono Sera | <p>● Disc three — Sammy Davis Jr</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Something's Gotta Give 2 That Old Black Magic 3 What Kinda Fool 4 Gonna Build a Mountain 5 Love Me or Leave Me 6 Hey There 7 Too Close for Comfort 8 A Lot of Love to Do 9 Come Rain or Come Shine 10 Birth of the Blues 11 Lonesome Road 12 Easy to Love 13 Just One of Those Things 14 New York, My Home 15 Frankie and Johnny 16 Someone Like You 17 Someone to Watch Over Me 18 Comes Love 19 The Thrill Is Gone 20 Begin the Beguine |
|--|---|--|

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Reviews, Theatre

THE MOST PRECIOUS OF GOODS



*A DARK STORY TOLD TO MAXIMUM EFFECT WITH THE
UTMOST SIMPLICITY*

There is something extraordinarily powerful about simple storytelling. Although Samantha Spiro, the narrator of this story is actually addressing a packed theatre, it felt like she spoke directly to me as she began 'Once upon a time...'

The tale she tells is not a fairy story, although it does begin with a poor woodcutter's wife finding 'the most precious of goods', a helpless baby. Rather it is an evocation of the Holocaust, of lives lost and lives saved, the latter thanks to what Brecht described as 'the temptation to do good', in his own moral fable *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, where another woman saves another.



The warmth of her voice belies the horrors in the tale she tells. The cosy armchair in which she is seated, wrapped in a shawl, stands on a cheerfully colourful rug, though the monochrome backdrop and side curtains are sober, sinister, even before you realise the numbers on the curtains evoke the numbers tattooed on the arms of concentration camp inmates. The screen behind her shows a spider-like tangle of snow-laden tree roots.

In an inspired coupling, Spiro is joined onstage by cellist Gemma Rosefield. Much of her music evokes Yiddish folk traditions, although this would have gone over the head of the woodcutter's wife, who daily visits a spot in the woodlands worked by her husband, where a goods train slows down at the same time each morning. A train packed with passengers, who often manage to thrust notes into her hands, although the illiterate and hungry woman hopes against hope for something she can eat or use to buy food. Until one day she gets rather more than she could expect: a quivering, grizzling bundle wrapped in a shawl that wriggles in her arms.



Given that the tale is from eminent French Jewish writer Jean-Claude Grumberg, whose father and grandparents were deported from Paris to the camps in 1942, it is not surprising that his story reveals that this is a Jewish prayer shawl. We, the 'onlookers' (so vivid is the narrative that I could indeed 'see' it all), know the bleak truth of the train's human 'cargo': those wartime goods

trains with their barred windows, bound for death camps, returning empty to collect a new live load.

But in fairy-tale mode, we can guess that the one gift for which this woman longs is a child of her own, which her husband knows they cannot afford to raise. She knows little of Jews and their fate. She has been indoctrinated to call them 'the heartless ones', on whom she should blame all her woes. Now though, she finds she will fight for and on behalf of the longed-for precious gift of a baby girl.



Director Nicolas Kent, who is the son of a Jewish refugee from the Nazis, brings out the resonance of the story as we learn not only about the child, but about her family on the train and their unbearable choice. He intricately weaves the narrative strands and, against all the odds, the evening is filled with hope as well as threat; love and laughter as well as guilt.

As Spiro brought the tale to a close, I was spellbound enough to actually vocalise my response to a question she asked, as if it were addressed only to me as, in a way, it was... This pared down apparently simple monologue is one of the most effective Holocaust narratives I have ever seen on stage.

By Judi Herman

Photos by Beresford Hodge

Link to review : [Jewish Renaissance](#)



The Most Precious of Goods at Marylebone Theatre



24th January 2024

MICHAEL HIGGS

A stunningly beautiful tale, *The Most Precious of Goods* is a stage adaptation of Jean-Claude Grumberg's novella of the same name, translated from French by Nicolas

Kent. Set during WWII and the horrors of the Holocaust, it's a story about family and belonging, and the search for love in the unlikeliest of places.

It's refreshingly simple in its production, directed by Nicolas Kent and designed by Carly Brownbridge. The story is told by the narrator (Samantha Spiro), sitting on a comfy chair with a book in her hands and surrounded by foliage like on a forest ground. In the background, there are various scenic pictures: sometimes of a forest, sometimes close-ups of snow or of the trains that were used to transport Jewish prisoners to the concentration camps. To the right of the stage, there is a cellist (Gemma Rosefield), who plays snippets of pieces at various intervals, anything from Brahms and Kreisler to original music by Rosefield.

The tale centres around a poor woodcutter's wife somewhere in Eastern Europe, who discovers a bundled baby in the snow, cast out of a moving train in an act of desperation by a young Jewish father being transported to a concentration camp. The woodcutter's wife, who had always wanted a child, sees this as an act of God and takes care of the baby as if it were her own.

It's a masterfully written narrative and the translation is superb. It takes the form of a fairy tale, evoking a sense of magic about it. The words Nazis, concentration camps, Jews, etc. are never mentioned when the main plot is described – only when we get the Jewish father's side of the story does the audience discover directly what's going on. Spiro's delivery of the text is spot-on, maintaining an excitement that matches the flow perfectly. Calling *The Most Precious of Goods* a play might be a bit of a stretch, but that doesn't matter to the experience. It's a wonderfully written and told story that reminds us of events that should never be forgotten and is, as such, an easy recommendation.

★★★★★ *Michael Higgs*

Link to review: [The Upcoming](#)

NORTH WEST END UK

News, Reviews and Interviews from theatres across the UK

The Most Precious of Goods – Marylebone Theatre

24 January 2024

The staging is set in a leaf filled forest woodland, the feeling is sombre the audience full of anticipation of what this story has to unfold about the atrocities, war crimes on humanity, the deliberate genocide during World War 2, the German invasion. The story initially focusses on a young Jewish family, who are new parents of newborn twins, full of zest for life and feeling blessed with their two children, a boy a girl. It was spring, 1942 their life full of opportunity until, they were freshly extricated from their home in France and put on a train to somewhere! Unknowing of what was to come and what they would endure the family with others, cramped into small spaces, no food or water would share their anguish and realisations during this gruelling journey, as to their destination; the place we have come to know as the 'death' concentration camp in Poland, Auschwitz. Samantha Spiro narrates the story from her armchair with empathy sensitivity, engaging with the audience almost immediately. The Cello sounds tunes and riffs played beautifully by Gemma Rosefield add dramatic effect to the profound story lines of this beautiful narration of horror juxtaposition in real terms.



The wood cutters wife childless and full of hope would watch the trains go by and wave and wonder, 'so many trains so many people'. As she stood watching she saw something thrown from the train, a bundle in white cloth descending into the deep snow. A man pointing gesticulating to the woman to collect it; she ran she wondered what it could be. The Jewish man struck with desperation and despair, an act of love? Threw his daughter wrapped in white and gold cloth from the moving train into the snow below. The train continued on its journey and the family at that moment had lost one child to the holocaust.

This is where the story changes and the fairytale of hope and joy begin. The gift of life snatched from one parent and handed quite literally to another. As the narrator continues to share the lives of the woodcutter's wife and Rose with animation and ease it is easy to see that life was not easy and full of adversity. The simple set was perfect the black and white contrast against the stark cold woodland scenes is stark because the true emotion was embedded within the story. This play provoked thought and reflection and thrives in meaning in a week that remembers, Holocaust Memorial Day, 27th January, very poignant, and currently very political. Grumberg's story is brought to life by Kent in a way that is witty, with integrity and authenticity to the plight of the Jews at this time. The narrator asks, 'a true story?' How does it end? Just like most stories go and see and read it for yourself. Playing until 3rd February,

<https://www.marylebonetheatre.com/productions/the-most-precious-of-goods> Reviewer:

Michelle Knight Reviewed: 23rd January 2024 North West End UK Rating: ★★★★★ Rating:

Link to review: [North West End](#)



Review: The Most Precious Of Goods (Marylebone Theatre)

Review by Daz Gale



One of the greatest aspects of theatre is its ability to tell a story and that is at the heart of the latest production to open at Marylebone Theatre. Describing itself as “story-telling at its most profound”, *The Most Precious Of Goods* has nothing more than a narrator, a cellist and some imagery to convey this stage adaptation. A slightly different watch than the kind of show I usually go to, but would I find this stripped back narrative approach as captivating?

Jean-Claude Grumberg's best-selling French language novella has been brought to the stage, directed and translated by Nicolas Kent, carefully making sure to retain the power of the original words. *The Most Precious Of Goods* is set in Eastern Europe in winter 1943 as a poor woodcutter's wife finds a bundle thrown into the snow from a moving goods train. The goods on this train are people themselves and the bundle contains a baby, which she risks everything for to raise as her own. Two stories are read out – that of the poor woodcutter's wife and her newly found child, and that of the child's original family both before and after they gave up the baby. Told in a manner akin to a fairytale

is an inspired albeit unconventional approach. The subject matter is dark and disturbing at times, but the writing remains as if you are reading a classic fantastical story to a child. The impact of this is effective, with no bells or whistles required – just the powerful words which in turn paint a picture in our heads and remind us of the horrific circumstances of the Holocaust. As the tone shifts from more carefree and brief happier moments to the horrors that unfold throughout the reading, the end proves to be very powerful as the narrator debates with herself whether there is truth to the story at all in a thought provoking sequence.



At its best, *The Most Precious of Goods* is storytelling at its finest. A few unexpected laughs litter the story and its message of hope and humanity are something that feels very much needed in the world today. While its backdrop may be the Holocaust, coinciding with National Holocaust Memorial Day on Saturday 27th January, the essence of the story is one that can be transported anywhere, becoming instantly relatable no matter your own circumstances or family history. The words are gripping, the story is powerful and the message lingers in your head long after you leave the theatre. I can't recall an audience ever being so reluctant to leave after the show has finished before, glued to their seats in resolute silence as the story they have just watched leaves a lasting impact. Samantha Spiro stars as the narrator of the story – a rather last

minute addition after the need to replace Allan Corduner. A true star in every sense, Samantha ensured the audience hung on her every word as she maximised all of the emotion and gravitas of the story to give it a performance worthy of its writing. Utterly charismatic and captivating, she was marvellous to watch whether she was static in her seat reading from her book or pacing the stage. There may have been the odd fumble of a line, but that is to be expected given the last-minute nature of her casting, and she should be commended for stepping in so suddenly to give this story the retelling it deserves.



The only other person on that stage was Gemma Rosefield, a cellist who accompanied Samantha with music throughout the story – sometimes in the background as Samantha spoke, and sometimes filling the silence with atmospheric playing. This element added something different to the show, but was a great way to underpin the words of the story. Carly Brownbridge's design turned the stage of Marylebone Theatre into the forest the poor woodcutter's wife finds herself in, with a beautiful use of projected photography from Judy Goldhill creating a sense of poignancy in images that reflected the narrator's words. There are times in our history that should never be forgotten, with stories passed

down from generation to generation. As the number of people who were alive during the second World War ever decreases, stories like *The Most Precious Of Goods* are here to remind us of the tragic loss of so many people and keep their memory alive. A testament to the art and power of storytelling, this riveting and thought-provoking performance is a fitting example of why these stories are so important to be told, and the power it can hold when they are told as well as this.

Link to review: [All That Dazzles](#)

The Most Precious of Goods, Marylebone Theatre review - old-fashioned storytelling of an all-too relevant tale

An account of one family's near-destruction in the Holocaust given added strength by an uncluttered staging

by [Gary Naylor](#) Tuesday, 30 January 2024



“ Samantha Spiro’s reading brings the text to life with the minimum of different accents and visual characterisation ”

rating



Don't ever play this again, Sam: Samantha Spiro and Gemma Rosefield

Beresford Hodge

*As last week’s news evidenced, genocide never really goes out of fashion. So it’s only right and proper that art continues to address the hideous concept and, while nothing, not even Primo Levi’s shattering *If This Is a Man*, can capture the scale of the depravity of the camps, it is important that the warning from history is regularly proclaimed anew – and heeded.*

*With just a few bleak, snowy back-projections of Silesia’s woodland near Auschwitz (it was enough to chill my soul with memories of a visit 34 years ago) and a lone cellist (Gemma Rosefield) to accompany her on stage, Samantha Spiro (**pictured below**) reads us a story.*

*It's more Grimm than grim to begin with, but soon the **fairytale** morphs into a nightmare. The shadow of the trains, rolling over straight, unbombed railway lines with their cargo of "goods", falls across the narrative and we know where we are.*



*Soon to be released as a major animated movie, Jean-Claude Grumberg's **novel** draws on his family history of transportation to the **death camps**. There's a slightly uncomfortable coda that complicates the "truth" of everything we heard, but it's really just an underlining that the specific story is less important than its standing as an exemplar, not just for the millions of victims of the Holocaust. It also leaves us with the triumph of love that underpins the show's bittersweet conclusion.*

Twins are born in France, but their parents are rounded up and packed on to one of those terrible trains to take them to near-certain extermination. The mother can suckle only one baby, so the father takes the heartbreaking decision to throw the girl, wrapped in his prayer shawl, through the bars of the cattle truck's window into the snow, towards a woman who is the kid's only, slim hope.

The father survives through a combination of his job as a shaver of heads, but mostly iron will and dumb luck, and the baby survives through the love of the woman and the two men who, eventually,

find compassion in their hearts. We guess that these three, against all odds, will meet when the slaughter abates – and they do – but we cannot guess the outcome of that encounter.

Samantha Spiro's reading brings the text to life with the minimum of different accents and visual characterisation (I was reminded of a low key episode of the BBC's long-running children's programme, Jackanory). Crucially, she largely lets the words speak for themselves. That's a wise decision by director, Nicolas Kent, who also translated the work. There's plenty enough to grip the house in the unfolding tale, but the unfussy baldness of the staging creates the sense of a testament, a witness statement, a window on unknowable distress and fear.

Don't take my word for this sparse production's power to compel one's full attention. I saw a matinee attended by 50 or more kids aged about 14, all in uniform, all excited at the prospect of an afternoon out of school. "They're going to spoil it for everyone, scrolling through Insta and wriggling about," I thought to myself, as the lights went down on the 80 minutes all-through reading. But I was wrong.

Link to review: [The Arts Desk](#)



REVIEW | The Most Precious Of Goods, Marylebone Theatre



Written by Cathie

Disclaimer: Gifted tickets in exchange for an honest review

Please take note this production contains subject matter about the Holocaust.

This is a play unlike many you will find in London. Adapted into a play from **Jean-Claude Grumberg**'s devastating 'fairy tale' novella "The Most Precious of Cargoes", this story is a chilling reminder of the depravity humans are all too capable of. Less of an acted play than a re-enacted scene of childhood nostalgia as the narrator (**Samantha Spiro**) sits in a large armchair and reads the novel in warmly inviting tones. She is accompanied by the brilliant **Gemma Rosefield** playing cello throughout and together this dynamic duo has the entire audience completely spellbound in sorrow as we listen to their tale.

The story starts with an old woodcutter's wife living in the forests of Poland, who

longs for a child and after praying to 'the gods of the train' to give her a baby and one day they do. One of the best ways to showcase horror in media is through the eyes of the innocent and wizened though the old woman sounds, she shows us the heart stopping evil in Europe in 1943 through her innocence and fierce heart. The train is the cattle truck heading to the concentration camps, returning empty to gather more poor innocent souls for the 'hungry oven', and the baby they gave her was thrown from the train in utter desperation, as the hero attempts to ensure that at least one of his family will survive. The rest of the two unfold as the audience desperately wills the infant and old woman to survive every trial thrown at them.

Carly Brownbridge's design evokes the scene of the forest well. Stretching into the sides of the stage, the 'trees' are created by streams of numbers which somberly referenced the numbers tattooed onto concentration camp victims. These trees frame the raised dais at the centre of the stage, where the narrator's cosy armchair rests as they unfold the story with their incredibly nuanced voice. The final section is the large projector screen rising like a monolith above the stage. It displays a series of black and white photographs, many from the time the story is set, and these vividly deliver the key events of the tale into stark relief.

At 80 minutes running time, this play speedily moves along and leaves you desperate to find out what happens next. There is never a dull moment and the pacing is handled well. One of the most terrifying aspects of the play is that the horrifying events being retold to us by the narrator not only happened in 1943 but are still happening in some form around the world today. The characters, with their gruff kindness, desperation and bitterness are so like the people we pass unthinkingly on the street every day. It reminds us to be careful of thinking of others as 'heartless' and the importance of small acts of kindness changing everything around us. Considering that Grumberg's grandparents and father went through this same route described so vividly and were murdered in the camps makes the message this story is trying so desperately to convey hit that much harder. This was acknowledged at the ending of the play which had the audience so spellbound that it took a minute for everyone to

realise it had finished. This is a heart-rending beautiful adaptation of the French novella.

This play is running for only 2 short weeks until 3rd February 2024. It's short run coincides with Holocaust Memorial Day (27th January). If you want to understand more about hope, the resilience of love, how to retain your humanity in the face of evil and the fragile fight of hope against truly dark times then this play is for you.

☆☆☆☆

Link to review: [Theatre & Tonic](#)



Review: The Most Precious of Goods,

Marylebone Theatre



Delivered as a fairy tale narration, *The Most Precious of Goods* is a haunting narrative reminding us of the power of human love that existed despite the horror of the Holocaust.

How do you tell a story that's been told millions of times before without losing its impact? Well, in this case the answer is to take it back to the bare minimum: tell it as a fairy story, read soothingly by a storyteller settled in a big armchair, book in hand. Because the cosiness of the setting belies the horror of the picture painted by those innocent words. And when the audience understands what the story is referring to, the shock is palpable.

Written by **Jean-Claud Grumberg**, the novella ***The Most Precious of Goods*** is read by **Samantha Spiro** with feeling, engagement and love. Musician **Gemma Rosefield** intervenes at times, her mournful cello and occasional voice the perfect vehicles for the haunting nature of the Yiddish tunes required. The stage is strewn with autumn leaves and at either side two panels list numbers in the silhouette of trees, reflecting those tattooed on the arms of the prisoners in the German camps. The screen at the back displays pictures of snow-covered forests, reinforcing the desolation and sorrow of the scene.

Without giving too much plot away, there is a poor woodcutter and his wife desperate for a child. Sound familiar? This is 1943 and there are goods trains that run across their land which are boarded up. 'What goods do they contain?' wonder the starving pair. Food perhaps?! One day a small bundle wrapped in a Jewish prayer shawl is thrown from the train and it would appear their prayers have been answered. We follow the rest of the story from the perspective of the man that threw the bundle, the woman that picked it up and others that help or hinder their safety. Fairy tales are often allegories, so this feels a perfect mechanism to remind us of the horrors of the Holocaust. The method of slowly releasing information to the audience reminds us of the little information that those involved would have had.

This is a haunting, moving piece. I loved its simplicity which is borne out through words, music and staging. As Spiro addresses the audience at the end of her piece, she challenges them with the declaration that, of course, none of this true. And then the screens at the back of the stage fall away

leaving smart suitcases piled up. Never to be reunited with their owners. As the audience gets up to leave, a final screen shows the numbers of passengers on Convoy Numbers 45 and 49 from 1942 and 1943 respectively. 1778 passengers were on those two trains. By 1945 only 8 were alive. Who needs fiction with truth like this?

Link to review: [Everything Theatre](#)

LondonTheatre1

The Most Precious of Goods at Marylebone Theatre

JANUARY 23, 2024 LAST UPDATED: JANUARY 24, 2024 4:14 PM BY [CHRIS OMAWENG](#)

A bleak story – it was, after all, set in the Second World War – it ebbed and flowed, depending on the level of imminent danger. But towards the end, the narrator (Samantha Spiro), who isn't the same as the author, makes a strong assertion. The 'all persons fictitious' disclaimer is fairly common when it comes to works of fiction, mostly to mitigate against possible libel action. But here, the disclaimer goes much further, going through the various aspects of the story, and emphasising that: "*None of this, none of this happened, none of this is true.*"



Samantha Spiro – *The Most Precious of Goods* – Marylebone Theatre – Photo credit Beresford Hodge.

It took me a while to get my head around that: I wondered what the writer, Jean-Claude Grumberg, was trying to achieve with a systematic demolition of the fairytale world he took the time and effort to create. But by bringing the audience back to reality, it is being asked to consider whether a hopeful Holocaust story could be realistic. Without giving too much away, this story is about as plausible as *War Horse* – that in all the millions of people displaced, millions of others fighting, millions of others dead, what is the credible possibility that two living beings, separated by war, would be reunited in this life? Close to nil. The difference with this story, however, is that it is aware of how ridiculously unlikely it is, even if there are real-world representational details, such as post-work drinks at a pub, and people in despair, wishing the war would just end.

This stage adaptation, if one can call it that, doesn't attempt to dramatize Grumberg's book. There are no costumes to speak of. Spiro's narrator does not adopt a wide range of different voices and accents for the various characters in the story. The set is made up of some old suitcases piled one on top of another, on either side of the stage, with a large screen in the middle, used to project various still images. Ultimately, though, this could be a radio play (if it hasn't been done already), especially with the music from cellist Gemma Rosefield, more than suitably atmospheric.

Spiro reads from a copy of Nicolas Kent's translation of the French novella, only addressing the audience and looking directly at them towards the very end. Despite the backdrop of war, the story is told in a calm and collected manner. A lot of the themes, such as love, loyalty and human resilience, have been explored many times before. But this story is particularly thought-provoking in the world in which we live today, its conclusions having far-reaching implications. Can anything we are told these days be

considered trustworthy without further investigation? I'm reminded of a post I once saw on social media: "*Question everything!*" Underneath someone had commented, "*Why?*"

This is deep-level thinking, and yes, one needs to be in the right frame of mind to fully appreciate a show like this, telling a story as heartening as it is horrific. A reflective and

admirably affecting production.  Review by Chris Omaweng

Link to Review :[London Theatre 1](#)



The Most Precious of Goods – Marylebone Theatre, London

Reviewer: Maryam Philpott



Writer: Jean-Claude Grumberg (Translated by Nicolas Kent)

Director: Nicolas Kent

Marylebone Theatre commemorates Holocaust Memorial Day with a dramatic reading of Jean-Claude Grumberg's 2019 bestseller *The Most Precious of Goods* translated by Nicolas Kent who directs it for the stage. This 75-minute performance focuses on the importance of storytelling bringing the tale to life through the vocal talents of the narrator Samantha Spiro with occasional musical accents from cellist Gemma Rosefield who find the humanity and hope in Grumberg's short story.

Packed onto a train in early 1943, a Jewish father makes the terrible decision to throw one of his baby twins through the bars where she lands at the feet of a woodcutter's wife. Believing this to be a gift from God, the woman cares for her, even convincing her sceptical husband to eventually love the child. But the war continues around them, and the girl's real father believes he will never see his daughter again.

Kent has done very little to alter Grumberg's story, allowing the original structure and approach to speak for itself as the story unfolds along two parallel tracks – that of the original Jewish family taken to a concentration camp and the woodcutter's happy family in pastoral France. These narratives intersect

throughout, and Kent uses music to facilitate the segues between them as cellist Rosefield generates tension and drama but also lullaby melodies that underscore points in the developing story.

The Most Precious of Goods has a parable quality in both Grumberg's writing and Spiro's reading, a story that feels both real and fantastical at the same time, taking place in the grim experience of the Holocaust and in the isolated and protected world of the French forest. Occasionally these two strands overlap, with violence and danger invading even the happiest of moments, but Grumberg also provides opportunities for optimism and recovery after the darkest experience of war.

Spiro's approach is engaging, using a variety of vocal tricks to maintain the pace of the story from character voices to shifts in emphasis, tone and delivery to suit the different plot requirements as well as the changing experience of both families across the months and years that Grumberg covers. Spiro is a particularly empathetic narrator, something which often imbues her performance style, and here draws the audience into the lives and needs of these connected strangers and the horrifying circumstances they are part of.

Director Kent applies a changing photographic backdrop selected by Judy Goldhill to prompt scene changes, but *The Most Precious of Goods* is not inherently theatrical. For the most part, Spiro remains seated in an armchair and reads the story from a bound book, occasionally standing or using a shawl as a prop, which makes it a little cosier than perhaps it should be. There is beauty and love in this story but also terrible deeds, bigotry and murder that demand a starker visual approach, but this is a hopeful tale for Holocaust Memorial Day about the kindness of strangers and the good that can come from evil.

The Reviews Hub Score:



Link to review: [The Reviews Hub](#)



THE MOST PRECIOUS OF GOODS Marylebone Theatre - 3.5*

LEST ANYONE FORGET..

Storytime! Before a tangled treescape Samantha Spiro sits with a book on her lap. Across the simple stage a few notes from Gemma Rosefield's 'cello settle us to listen. Like all stories for the youngest it begins with a poor woodcutter's wife in the forest, gathering twigs. But it's 1943, somewhere in Central Europe, and her husband works under orders from an occupying power. She has a romantic dream about the trains with slatted sides which run daily along the new iron

roadway: thundering creatures, godlike. She gazes, hears they are “goods trains”, reflects what wonderful things “goods” might be: imagined riches.

Far away another story unfolds: a French couple with newborn twins, hustled from home by gendarmes, fear the worst, are entrained. The wife can barely feed one infant with prison-shrunken breasts; desperately, in hope or despair, the father wraps the other in his prayer-shawl and eases it through the bars to fling it onto the snow. The woodcutter’s wife has always wanted a child and now, suddenly, picks up the most precious, most vulnerable of goods. She struggles to save the baby, feed it and reconcile her angry husband who has been told that the trains hold ‘a cursed race, people without hearts’

The novella by Jean-Claude Grumberg, translated and directed by Nicholas Kent, is a blend of stark Holocaust history and fairytale: oddly, I remember such fables from my postwar early-childhood in France, books for the young which acknowledged the camps and killings but yearned towards an imaginative humanity in victims: one ends with a young girl entering the gas chamber after a long ordeal of trains and starvation, to step into warm light and joy. Here, talking of the mother and twin baby at the end of their train journey, Grumberg simply says they were “liberated from the cares of this world to the gates of Paradise, as promised to the innocents”.

But the darkness is all there, unsparing. There is fear in the story of the imprisoned father forced to shave the heads of the doomed in camp; fear of the war-scarred, ugly angry firestorm hermit with whom the mother pleads for goat’s milk; terror in the woodcutter’s resentment of the child from the ‘cursed heartless people’. When the baby reaches a small hand out to him he relents, and there is heroic terror in his brave refusal to drink to the death of Jews and of the inevitable arrival of militia trying to take the baby, defended by his axe.

Spiro – who took over the role late because of illness – moves easily around, sometimes cradling the prayer shawl. She is a masterly storyteller, whether in gentle simplicity, cutting irony or raucously evoking an gang of oafish men drunk on wood-alcohol. Rosefield’s ‘cello gives ominous or peaceful notes, a train’s accelerating, a scream of witches, a Brahms lullaby, a Yiddish lament. It is hypnotic and beautifully pitched, the terrible lists of names alongside and the projections behind (woodland, rails, faces of the prisoners) adding but unobtrusive.

The story winds on, threatening a fairytale conclusion then fading to the possible; it laments the long wanderings of the displaced thousands after the Red Army and peace bring an end to the war. Lost people, “crowding from all the conquered capitals of the Continent”. In an ironic kick at the end the narrator shrugs “it’s a story, just a story, there were no camps, no trains, no chambers...”

I am glad to have happened to see it at a schools’ matinee, last preview: around me kids held in thrall, brought here as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day. There is giggling once or twice early on at the word “breasts”, but ever more silent, engrossed attention to Grumberg’s word-pictures of growing babyhood, sharpened axes, shorn hair sent to the conquerors as wigs “or mops”.

I think they got it, all right. I hope it reaches many more, and their elder siblings who might be tempted to shout “river to the sea” without thinking.

Box office. marylebonetheatre.com. to. 3 Feb



Link to review: [Theatre Cat](#)