

Tales from the Front

by Lisa Drostova

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Via Dolorosa gives voices to Israelis and Palestinians who seldom make the evening news.



British playwright David Hare went to Israel tasked with gathering material for a period play set during the British Mandate of the '30s and '40s, and he came back with something very different. Hare, who wrote the play *Amy's View* and the film *The Hours*, was so affected by what he learned through his interviews of Israeli and Palestinian politicians, activists, and artists that he chucked his assignment and instead wrote a 95-minute monologue -- which he then insisted on performing himself, 206 times, although he hadn't acted since he was fifteen. As he wrote in *The Guardian* on July 13, 2002: "I had taken to the stage ... only because a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territory had left me despairing of any other means of conveying the vividness of my reactions except by direct address. I felt, for this one subject only, that I had no alternative but to stand in a theatre in person and forgo the playwright's usual convenient cover of hiring specialists to do the speaking for him." There's a humorous line at the beginning of *Via Dolorosa* to that effect when Hare says, "I usually try to get Judi Dench to do this sort of thing."

TheatreFIRST Artistic Director Clive Chafer wanted Hare to come over and do "this sort of thing" here, as part of a season themed around cultural diversity, but Hare had other commitments. So Chafer went ahead and hired a specialist -- actor Simon Vance, who'd already been in a Hare play (*Racing Demon*) -- to play Hare. It's an interesting sort of metatextual choice, having an actor play a playwright who had chosen originally not to have any actors involved in the telling of a particular story. But then, *Via Dolorosa* is not your typical play, or even your typical monologue. It's more of a travelogue, an expedition into a land where faith, history, and anger have as much to do with the topography as climate or geology. "Stones or ideas?" asks one of the people Hare interviewed. "Are we more concerned with stones or ideas? Are we where we live, or are we what we think?"

Via provides valuable insight into the thinking of inhabitants of one of the world's most troubled regions, and Hare is to be commended for bringing forth so many different viewpoints. When American media outlets limit their coverage of the Palestinian question to casualty figures and both sides' saber-rattling, we lose the subtleties, lose sight of the fact that along with intransigent settlers and women with bombs strapped around their bellies, there are Israeli soldiers refusing to serve, politicians trying to broker real peace agreements, and artists trying to forge bonds between Israelis and Palestinians through their work. Along with a group of Israeli settlers bent on protecting their detached split-

levels and a few artists, Hare introduces us to ex-Rabin cabinet member and human rights lawyer Shulamit Aloni. We also meet theater directors Eran Baniel and George Ibrahim, who attempted an ill-fated joint production of *Romeo and Juliet* (the Israelis played the Montagues, the Palestinians the Capulets; the latter group of players insisting that the final scenes where the families reconcile be cut). Opinions span a wide range, from Menachem Begin's right-wing son Benni ("give up land and you will not get peace") to the novelist David Grossman, who insists that "there will be a Palestinian state."

There's a lot of talk about Jewishness that's much different from the conversations American Jews might have. American Jews tend to wonder if their observance of dietary laws, what they name their kids, and the frequency with which they attend services are measures of their Jewishness. In Israel, the question has a very different flavor. "The Six-Day War destroyed our basic Jewishness," novelist David Grossman told Hare, speaking of the first time Jews ever fought to invade territory. "It's new, this idea that you have to own things, new and profoundly un-Jewish." The tension between secular and religious Jewry is also laid open like a pomegranate.

On the other side of the chain-link fence, some of Hare's respondents weighed in on the Arab image problem in the West, noting how poorly Arabs are treated in American films. "In the movie *Air Force One*, they [Arab terrorists] wanted the president," exclaims one. "Why would anyone want the American president?" he laughs. The play may have been written six years ago, but the same man's observation that Westerners think "the Arabs will be the ones that start the Third World War" hits very close to home, as we prepare to smash Iraq flat.

Via, which was written during the relatively calm period before the 2000 Camp David talks broke down and the second Intifada began, does feel a little dated in the optimism expressed by some of its characters. But that doesn't make it any less vital a document as the situation in the Middle East gets ever tenser; in fact, it's practically mandatory viewing for anyone grappling with one of the most painful questions of our time. As one character puts it, the relationship between Israel and Palestine is "as though a man has jumped out of a burning building," only to fall on someone and break their neck, later proceeding to break their arms and legs as well.

As a whole, *Via Dolorosa* is lucid and cerebral, but not particularly visceral. It's more educational than dramatic (although audiences who know nothing about the history of the conflict would be well advised to check out Professor Edward Said's *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, or anything that explains the Oslo Accords to which

Hare's interviewees often refer). Hare chose not to mimic his sources or invent stories to gussy up Via ("Why should we fabulate?" asks an actress who is giving up theater because it conflicts with her faith). Likewise, Vance tells the story of Hare's trip in an economical and open fashion, using accents when necessary to distinguish the different characters and little else; no props or costume changes. Were it more "dramatic," we would see more interactions like the one between director George Ibrahim and his excitable friend Hussein. Talking about a moment of Israeli violence, "I was shot!" Hussein gestures wildly. "We all know you were shot," answers George wearily but with affection.

Via, which could be terribly dull in its earnestness, is saved from talking-head documentary status by Hare's wit, as well as his discussion of his own internal journey, checking off his stations of the cross, as he works to comprehend the tragic rift between two peoples sharing the same "small brown anchovy lying on a schoolbook."