

## Tales from the Middle East

by Leslie Katz

The Examiner, February 6, 2003

"Via Dolorosa" provides more insight and information into the ever-confounding Middle East situation than just about anything you'll read in the papers or see on CNN.

The East Bay-based TheatreFirst presents the local premiere of British playwright David Hare's award-winning monologue in which he tells the story -- and deconstructs -- a soul-searching trip he made to Israel and Palestinian territories in 1997.

Hare himself performed the play to rave reviews and rapt West End and Broadway audiences in 1999. Finding the piece relevant again after 9/11, Hare reprised the role last year, but declined TheatreFirst artistic director Clive Chafer's offer to do it here. (Among other things, he's working on the film adaptation for "The Corrections" and getting attention for his screen adaptation of "The Hours.")

But Chafer found an excellent storyteller in Simon Vance, a British actor with a similar age and background to Hare.

In a show that appropriately opened at the Islamic Cultural Center in Oakland (the play moves to Berkeley this week and then to The City), Vance gives a riveting performance as "the author," Hare, with no more than a chair for a prop and a white, open-collared shirt and slacks as a costume.

Yet Hare's story is anything but spare. Though he covers complex political, historical, intellectual and emotional ground, he presents it so straightforwardly it's provocative and illuminating rather than confusing.

He begins by explaining the original purpose of his visit to the region. Having been asked to write a play about the era of British rule immediately before the state of Israel was established, he carefully considers the opportunity. The writer of the play "Amy's View," he notes that a primary theme in his work is faith. It's appropriate, he says, "that the 50-year-old playwright should finally visit the 50-year-old state."

The setup becomes even more compelling. Americans and the English live in countries where "nobody believes in anything anymore." He's challenged by the fact that "Israel is a cause." His friends add their two cents: While writer Philip Roth points to "absolute lunatics" there, Israeli novelist David Grossman queries, "Are we courageous enough to internalize the idea of equality?"

Vance subtly takes on the qualities of the various people Hare describes, but never forces the characterizations. When he relates Grossman's contention that Israel's victory in the Six Day War in 1967 changed Israel's side of the conflict from one of ideas and faith to that of a "contemporary operations manual," it's positively chilling.

Once in the Middle East , Hare sees that he'll have to veer away from his original assignment, given the vivid contemporary "material" he's getting from visits with people in Israel , the West Bank and Gaza .

He meets Israeli theater director Eran Baniel, who participated in an Israeli-Palestinian production of "Romeo and Juliet" in which Palestinians played Capulets and Israelis played Montagues. Not surprisingly, it didn't go well. Later on, in Ramallah in the West Bank , Hare speaks with George Ibrahim, the producer for the Palestinians.

Perhaps the show's most frustrating (yet riveting) segment is Hare's visit to a Jewish settlement, a walled-off, Bel Air-like oasis where some 500 Jewish militants, guarded by 4,000 Israeli troops, live in suburban comfort amid the squalor of the former Arab territories.

Americans Danny and Sarah Weiss moved there because they "were tired of living in a place without spiritual values" and "they want to make a contribution." They and their fellow settlers call attempts at peacemaking in Oslo "a great betrayal."

Hare doesn't agree with their "subtly insane dialogue" and is glad to leave, anticipating a visit with Benni Begin, Menachim Begin's right-wing son, who says, "You give up land and you get insecurity." ("It's a profound, daunting pessimism," Hare observes.)

A meeting with Haider Abdel Shafi, the popular Palestinian politician, in impoverished, overcrowded Gaza doesn't evoke optimism on the other side, either. Shafi says there will be no peace process until Palestinians undertake the "most urgent task" to reform themselves.

At first, Hare is scared when he meets Palestinian historian Albert Aghazarian, a commanding, boisterous man who tells invigorating parables about the Jews and the Arabs' endless strife. (He compares Jews to a man who jumps from a burning building, and Palestinians to the man on whom the jumper lands.)

Time comes for Hare to reflect on his own background, so he follows the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem , the road on which Christ walked to his death. "It winds unimpressively," Hare says, noting that Christianity comes in "a sporting third" in this most sacred corner of the world.

Of course, Hare remains an outsider. But his thoughtful, humanistic and honest reporting, and his open-minded approach to people on all sides of a seemingly insoluble problem, make the trip down "Via Dolorosa" an exhilarating, enlightening, one-of-a-kind theatrical experience. Don't miss it.