

" ... Hare's remarkable performance piece ..."

by Charles Brousse

Marin Independent Journal, January 26, 2003



About midway through the ninety minute monologue that describes his 1998 visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, playwright David Hare recounts how he walked up a narrow, winding Jerusalem road to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Named Via Dolorosa because it is reputed to be the "road of sadness" that Jesus, burdened by a heavy wooden cross, followed on his way to death at Golgotha, it is a street like any other except for a few shops selling picture postcards and plastic crucifixes.

How strange, he reflects, that Christianity "which, like Judaism and Islam, was born here" has had so little enduring impact on the Holy Land when compared with the two other great monotheistic religions. Arriving at the Church, his wonder is compounded when he discovers that control over this place, which can't even be positively identified as the crucifixion or burial site, is fiercely contested by a half dozen religious groups, all of which identify themselves as Christian.

These are among the many contradictions noted in Hare's remarkable performance piece, currently being given its regional premiere by Berkeley-based TheatreFirst at a series of venues, beginning with the Islamic Cultural Center in Oakland (through February 1), progressing to the Berkeley Jewish Community Center (through February 16) and ending February 23 at A Traveling Jewish Theatre in San Francisco.

Hare, whose screenplay for "The Hours", dealing with the life of Virginia Woolf, is generally conceded to have the inside track for this year's Academy Award, went to the Middle East on assignment from London's Royal Court Theatre to gather material for a drama about the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, he wanted to satisfy his curiosity about the passionate beliefs that seemed to motivate the region's people so much more intensely and idealistically than the moral and political indifference found in smugly affluent modern Britain. They might be wrong, he reasoned, but at least they have a cause, a faith.

Quickly giving up the idea of creating a grand historical drama, Hare devoted his extended visit to traveling throughout Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, speaking with intellectuals, politicians, artists and plain folk about how they perceive their long and bloody inter-tribal struggle. Out of these conversations came the script for "Via

Dolorosa", which the playwright, though not a professional actor, performed to great acclaim in London and New York.

Simon Vance, who has appeared in many local theaters since he came to the Bay Area from England in the early '90s, is Hare's surrogate in the TheatreFirst production directed by Clive Chafer. Dressed simply in dark gray pants and an open-collared white shirt, working without sets, props, or any other visual or audio enhancement except basic light shifts, Vance paints a vivid word picture of unwilling neighbors paralyzed in their deadly embrace.

The story is replete with anomalies like the account of his visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Secular Jews complain bitterly about the special privileges given the more than 100,000 Orthodox religious students. Visiting a settlement, he marvels at its green lawns and swimming pools - a scene that is in such sharp contrast with the neighboring Arab villages, where women laboriously carry buckets of water to shanty homes. Beyond the obvious disparity, the sprawl is troubling. "They waited 2,000 years to come to the Promised Land and now they pollute it!" Yet, the settlers, buoyed by the 1967 Six Day War, are eager to expand across "the ancient Biblical lands of Judaea and Sumaria". Idealistic Zionism has become a squalid quest for more real estate.

In Gaza, reflective Arabs admit that their community lacks a coherent vision of the future and won't have one until Arafat's Palestinian Authority is reformed to promote democracy. For now, the only thing uniting them is hatred of the oppressor.

Eventually, Hare returns to London and drives up the Finchley Road, "passion receding up the tree-lined streets", to his home. In a way, it is his own Via Dolorosa of shattered hope about finding people unselfishly promoting a just cause – a bitter, but probably not unexpected irony that makes this quasi-documentary all the more powerful.